

World Literature and World History

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Abstract:

From the very beginnings of the discipline in the middle of the nineteenth century, the study of world literature has been part and parcel of Comparative Literature. However, for most of the time, what was meant by “world literature” within the discipline of Comparative Literature was largely restricted to European literature, and usually even to only some major European literatures. In this sense, the study of world literature effectively “worlded” the world according to Europe’s, or by extension the West’s, vision of itself and of the world it commanded until recently, and as reflected also in the world histories written during the same period. As of the end of the twentieth century, and accelerating as of the turn of the millennium, the study of world literature, and of world history, has been “worlding” the world differently, following changing geopolitical circumstances. In all this, China plays a major role.

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To anyone working in the field of literature it is no secret that since the turn of the millennium there has been an increased interest in the study of world literature. Suffice it to think of Pascal Casanova’s *La République mondiale des lettres* (1999, translated into English as *The World Republic of Letters* in 2004), Franco Moretti’s essay “Conjectures on World Literature” (2000), followed by many other essays on the same subject now collected in his *Distant Reading* (2013), and David Damrosch’s *What is World Literature?* (2003), to simply mention the three works that have had most impact. Damrosch has also been the chief editor of the six-volume *Longman Anthology of World Literature*, the first edition of which appeared in 2004. The chief competitor to that Longman anthology now is the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, a much updated and expanded version, again in six volumes, of a long-running Norton anthology that since the 1950s, and under various titles, had covered something that passed for world literature until roughly the end of the twentieth century. I say “had passed for world literature” because in essence the term then merely covered European literature, mostly ancient Greek and Roman, and also Italian, Spanish, French, English and German literature, with a minute sprinkling from some other “minor” literatures. In its new dispensation “world literature” aspires to make good on its global ambition, as testified most evidently by the two anthologies I just mentioned. Why was there this turn-around? And what are we to expect from the study of world literature in the near future? These are the questions I want to address.

It is commonplace to credit Johann Wolfgang (von) Goethe (1749-1832) with the invention of the term *Weltliteratur* or world literature in one of his conversations with his amanuensis Johann Peter Eckermann (1792-1854) as recorded by the latter in his *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens* (1836-148, *Conversations with Goethe*). In fact, though, Goethe, because of his enormous reputation throughout Europe, only gave the term the wide currency it subsequently gained. The term itself was already used some fifty years before Goethe ever used it by August Ludwig von Schlözer in his *Isländische Litteratur und Geschichte* of 1773, when he said that “Es giebt eine eigene Isländische Litteratur aus dem Mittelalter, die für die gesammte Weltlitteratur eben so wichtig, und größenteils außer dem Norden noch

ebenso unbekannt, als die Angelsächsische, Irrländische, Rußische, Byzantinische, Hebräische, Arabische, und Sinesische, aus eben diesen düstern Zeiten, ist.” (Schamoni 289). (There is a proper Icelandic literature from the Middle Ages, which for the totality of world literature is as important, and beyond the North just as unknown, as are the Anglo-Saxon, Irish, Russian, Byzantine, Hebraic, Arabic, and Chinese literatures from these same dark times). To illustrate the haphazard knowledge his contemporaries had of Icelandic literature, but in fact all of the literatures he had just enumerated, Schlözer uses the fictional example of a Chinese visiting Europe buying specimens of various kinds of European writing, and upon his return to China keeping these in a closet where many years later they are discovered by another Chinese who on the basis of these scant and really coincidental materials goes on to construct what he thinks of as “European” literature. That Schlözer here singles out China is no coincidence. Schlözer was not primarily a literary historian, but a general historian, who had written, or would write, on Swedish, Russian, and Dutch history, but also on the history of trade in the time of the Phoenicians, and on world history, even producing an introduction to world history for children in 1779. And his interest in China was undoubtedly spurred by the then more general interest with European philosophers in that country. That interest, in turn, followed from these philosophers’ more general concern with world history, or with what the Germans called *Weltgeschichte* and the French *histoire universelle*. The birth of *Weltliteratur*, or world literature, then, is closely linked to the study of world history. Goethe, although as far as I know he never mentions Schlözer, was undoubtedly familiar with the discussions on *Weltgeschichte*. He knew some of the main actors in that discussion, such as the German philosopher Herder, personally. In fact Goethe had arranged for Herder to receive an appointment at the court of the Duke of Weimar, where Goethe himself lived. Beyond this, though, discussions on *Weltgeschichte* and *histoire universelle* simply formed part of the intellectual climate of Goethe’s era. In these discussions China played a central role. It is also important to note that Goethe’s very first remarks on *Weltliteratur* were inspired by his reading of a Chinese novel in translation. So let us now have a look at what were the thoughts on world history as they circulated in Goethe’s time.

Until the eighteenth century China plays no, or at best only a very minor part in world histories by European historians. In his *Histories*, written in the early fifth century BCE, it was Herodotus’ intention to record the past of all peoples and regions known to him, in essence Greece, the Mediterranean, Persia, Egypt, and North Africa. The latter he saw as part of Asia, as his world had only two continents: Asia and Europe, with Europe to the North and Asia to the South of a line running from the Pillars of Hercules, or Straits of Gibraltar, through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, and the Black and Caspian Seas. In Herodotus’s view the two continents were surrounded by water, although he was unsure of Europe’s far northern parts. Although Herodotus claimed to have travelled through many of the regions he described himself, and to have gathered information from travellers, merchants and the like eyewitnesses, especially what he reported about the more peripheral regions of his world smacks more of legend and fantasy than known fact, although of course here too he may have been reporting what he heard from, or read with, others.

Diodorus Siculus, or Diodorus of Sicily, in the first century of our Common Era wrote a forty-volume *Ἱστορικὴ Βιβλιοθήκη* or *Bibliotheca Historica* in which he drew on the work of many earlier historians to trace the history of the world as known to him from the mythical beginning, over the Trojan War and the reign of Alexander the Great, to the time of Julius Caesar. Herodotus and Diodorus saw history as primarily driven by the ambitions of rulers, and the resistance this provoked, with Herodotus often interpreting the career of such rulers as following the pattern of Greek tragedy, with hubris leading to a final fall.

The medieval chronicles, both in Western Europe and the Byzantine Empire, mostly just listed dates and events devoid of a narrative framework, and put everything in a Christian context. In fact, this is still the case with the eleven-volume *Histoire Universelle* (1626-1630) of Théodore Agrippa d’Aubigné (1552-1630) and the *Discours sur l’histoire universelle* (1681) of Jacques Bénigne Bossuet (1627-1704), with the notable difference that d’Aubigné writes in defense of Protestantism and Bossuet of Catholicism.

Things change in the eighteenth century. Of course, by then Europe was well aware that there lay a mighty empire far to the East. After all, the Mongol conquest of much of the Eurasian continent, including

forays into Eastern Europe and the establishment of the Golden Horde Khanate in what we now know as Russia, had brought “China” almost frighteningly close. Marco Polo had brought back fabulous tales about the land and court of the Great Khan, and Catholic missionaries had been traveling China for some centuries already, some of them rising to important positions at the imperial court. Yet the eighteenth century saw an increased interest in China because of some specific circumstances.

To begin with, as Peter Frankopan states in his recent *The Silk Roads*, “in the 1680s, the Qing Court in China lifted its restrictions on foreign trade, leading to a surge in exports of tea, porcelain and Chinese sugar” (Frankopan 270). So, he argues, “the late seventeenth century marked the start of a new era of contacts between Europe and China” (Frankopan 270). Frankopan notes that these contacts “were not confined to commerce.” “The mathematician Gottfried Leibniz, who developed the binary system, was able to hone his ideas thanks to texts about Chinese arithmetic theories sent to him by a Jesuit friend who had gone to live in Beijing towards the end of the seventeenth century” (Frankopan 270).

At the same time, though, Europe was rapidly arriving at a world view in which it saw itself as superior to the rest of the world. So even while acknowledging the existence, and also the antiquity, of parts of the world beyond Europe, European thinkers were at the same time setting up these “other” societies and civilizations as negative counterparts to their own. This, of course, is at the heart of Edward Said’s critique of “orientalism,” which in the eighteenth century starts to emerge as a field of knowledge and a discipline.

Montesquieu (1689-1755) in his celebrated *De l’Esprit des Loix* (1748, *On the Spirit of the Laws*), Part III, Books XIV through XIX, attributes the superiority of Europe over Asia and the other continents to the former’s being blessed with a temperate climate facilitated by a particular geography, leading to a Europe marked by a zest for liberty while Asia is ruled by despotism. And in Chapter XXI of Book XXII, which itself features in Part IV, Books XX through XXIII, addressing the relationship of the Law to various aspects of Commerce and Trade, Montesquieu ascribes the then still relatively recent rise of Europe in the world to the increase of commerce of the European nations with the world beyond Europe following the voyages of discovery: “La boussole ouvrit, pour ainsi dire, l’univers” (Montesquieu 641, the compass, so to speak, opened up the world).

Voltaire, in the introduction to his *Abregé de l’Histoire Universelle depuis Charlemagne, jusques à Charlequint* (1754, *Survey of World History from Charlemagne to Charles V*), partially follows in Montesquieu’s footsteps when he states that:

ma principale idée est de connoître autant que je pourrai, les moeurs des Peuples, & d’étudier l’Esprit humain. Je regarderai l’ordre des Successions des Rois & la Chronologie comme mes guides, mais non comme le but de mon travail. (Voltaire s.l.)

(my principal idea is to know in as far as I can the customs of the various peoples and to study the human mind. I will take the succession of kings and chronology as my guide, but I will not make them the goal of my work.)

But just as he intends to set the (hi)story right as to the only relative importance of Princes and Potentates, he also immediately does the same with regard to Europe’s place in the history of the world:

Avant de considerer l’état où étoit l’Europe vers le tems de Charlemagne, & les debris de l’Empire Romain, j’examine d’abord s’il n’y a rien qui soit digne de mon attention dans le reste de notre Hémisphère. Ce reste est douze fois plus étendu que la Domination Romaine, & m’apprend d’abord que ces monumens des Empereurs de Rome, chargés de titres de Maîtres et Restaurateurs de l’Univers, sont des témoignages immortels de vanité & d’ignorance, non moins que de grandeur.

Frappés de l’éclat de cet Empire, de ses accroissemens & de sa chute, nous avons dans la plupart de nos Histoires Universelles traité les autres hommes comme s’ils n’existoient pas. La

Province de la Judée, la Grèce, les Romains se sont emparés de notre attention; & quand le célèbre Bossuet dit un mot des Mahométans, il n'en parle que comme d'un déluge de Barbares. Cependant beaucoup de ces Nations possédoient des Arts utiles, que nous tenons d'elles: leurs Pays nous fournissoient des commodités & des choses précieuses, que la Nature nous a refusées; & vêtus de leurs étoffes, nourris des productions de leurs terres, instruits par leurs inventions, amusés même de les jeux qui sont le fruit de leur industrie, nous nous sommes fait avec trop d'injustice une loi de les ignorer. (Voltaire s.l.)

(Before looking at the state in which Europe found itself at the time of Charlemagne, and the ruins of the Roman Empire, I first examine whether there is nothing worth my attention in the rest of our hemisphere. This rest is twelve time larger than what fell under Roman rule, and the first thing it teaches me is that the monuments of the Emperors of Rome, carrying the titles of masters and restorers of the universe, are the immortal witnesses of vanity and ignorance, no less than of grandeur.

Struck by the success of that Empire, of its growth and fall, we have in the major part of our world histories treated other people as if they had not existed. The province of Judaea, Greece, and the Romans have gotten all our attention; and when the famous Bossuet says one word about the Muslims, he only talks about them as a flood of barbarians. Yet many of these nations had useful crafts, which we inherited from them: their countries gave us commodities and precious things, which Nature had withheld from us; and clothed in their fabrics, fed by what their lands produce, taught by their inventions, entertained even by the games that are the fruit of their diligence, we have too unjustly made it into a law for us to ignore them.)

True to his intention, Voltaire in the first twenty-six pages of his work discusses China, and in a further twenty-eight pages he turns to India, Persia, Arabia, and “Mahométisme” or Islam.

Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), whom I mentioned earlier as a personal friend of Goethe, published the four parts of his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Humankind) from 1784 to 1791. Part I in five books discusses the physical conditions of the earth we inhabit, the realm of plants and animals in relation to Man, a comparison between animals and Man, the specificity of Man, and the spiritual powers ruling the realm of Man. Part II in another five books discusses the organisation of the world of Man in the various regions of the earth, the influence of climate and geography on Man, the various forms of human life this has caused, the role of language and religion, and the various traditions about the creation of the earth and Man. Perhaps surprisingly for a theologian and minister, and notwithstanding the fact that in his “Vorrede” he had dedicated his work to God, in the final chapter seven of his tenth book, “Schluß der ältesten Schrifttradition über den Anfang der Menschengeschichte,” Herder gives short shrift to Biblical and other religious traditions. If indeed there has been such a thing as the Flood, Herder says, and Asia in particular for him uncontrovertibly bears witness to such an event having happened,

Allenthalben am Urgebürge der Welt bilden sich nach der Überschwemmung Völker, Sprachen und Reiche, ohne auf die Gesandtschaft einer Familie aus Chaldäa zu warten; und im östlichen Asien, wo der Ursitz der Menschen und also auch [421] die stärkste Bewohnung der Welt war, sind ja noch jetzt offenbar die ältesten Einrichtungen, die ältesten Gebräuche und Sprachen, von denen dieser westliche Stammbaum eines spätern Volks nichts wußte und wissen konnte. Es ist ebenso fremde, zu fragen, ob der Sineser von Kain oder Abel, d.i. aus einer Troglodyten-, Hirten- oder Ackerkaste abstamme, als wo das amerikanische Faultier im Kasten Noah gehangen habe. der feste Mittelpunkt des größten Weltteils, das Urgebürge Asiens, hat dem Menschengeschlecht den ersten Wohnplatz bereitet und sich in allen Revolutionen der Erde fest erhalten. Mitnichten erst durch die Sündflut aus dem Abgrunde des Meers emporgestiegen,

sondern sowohl der Naturgeschichte als der ältesten Tradition zufolge das Urland der Menschheit, ward es der erste große Schauplatz der Völker, dessen lehrreichen Anblick wir jetzt verfolgen. (Herder 420-21)

(Everywhere in the oldest part of the world after the flood we find peoples, languages and empires without their waiting for the arrival of a family from Chaldaea; and in East Asia, where lies the origin of Man and where the majority of men on earth lived, we still find the most ancient institutions, the oldest customs and languages, of which our Western tribe of a later people knew nothing and could know nothing. It is just as strange to ask whether a Chinese is a descendant of Cain or Abel, that is to say whether he originates from a caste of troglodytes, hunters or farmers, as it is to ask whether an American skunk hung in Noah's cupboard. . . . the fixed centre of the largest continent, ancient Asia, has been Man's first place of abode and has remained so through all the earth's revolutions. It is not because it emerged first from the deeps of the sea after the flood, but because both according to natural history and the most ancient traditions it is the urland of Man, that it became the first great theatre of humanity, upon which to cast our eye, as we will now do, will be most instructive.)

Consequently, then Herder, like Voltaire before him, in the first of the five books making up Part III of his work proceeds to address the history of China. Further chapters deal with "Kotschinchina, Tongking, Laos, Korea, die östliche Tatarei," and Japan, Tibet, and "Indostan," concluding with some "Allgemeine Betrachtungen über die Geschichte dieser Staaten" (General remarks on the history of these states). The twelfth book treats the history of "Babylon, Assyrien," and "Chaldäa, Meder und Perser, Hebräer, Phönizien und Karthago, Ägypten," and concludes with "Weitere Ideen zur Philosophie der Menschengeschichte" (Further ideas on the philosophy of human history). Only then does Herder turn to Greece in his thirteenth book, followed by a book on the Etruscans and Romans, and finally a book on how "Humanität," an attitude of "Menschlichkeit" or "humaneness," is the ultimate goal of humanity, a state characterized by "Vernunft und Billigkeit" (Reason and Justice). Part IV, again in five books, discusses the history of various ethnic European groupings, Christianity, and developments in Europe during the Middle Ages and up to the Renaissance. Herder had a further Part V planned, which he never completed, and which followed the course of history up to his own present. The final book, number 25, was to present "Die Humanität in Ansehung einzelner, in Verhältnis zu der Religion; in Rücksicht der Staatsverfassungen, des Handels, der Künste, der Wissenschaften. Das Eigentum des menschlichen Geistes. Sein Wirken überall, auf alles. Ausichten." (Humanität with regard to the individual, in relation to religion; with an eye to state institutions, commerce, the arts, the sciences. As the property of the human mind. How it affects everywhere, everything. Prospects for the future.)

In the same year 1784 in which Herder published Part I of his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) expressed much the same ideas in his short essay "Idee einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht" (Ideas on universal history from a cosmopolitan perspective). Starting from the assumption that Nature and Providence have created Man to a specific purpose, Kant in a number of logical steps or "theses," argues that (Thesis Five) "The greatest problem for the human race, to the solution of which Nature drives man, is the achievement of a universal civic society which administers law among men." Just as the free will of individuals need be checked by laws that ensure that no man's free will hamper that of his fellow men, so too "In a league of nations, even the smallest state could expect security and justice, not from its own power and by its own decrees, but only from this great league of nations, from a united power acting according to decisions reached under the laws of their united will." Thesis Eight reads, "The history of mankind can be seen, in the large, as the realization of Nature's secret plan to bring forth a perfectly constituted state as the only condition in which the capacities of mankind can be fully developed, and also bring forth that external relation among states which is perfectly adequate to this end." Therefore, Kant concludes, "This gives hope finally that after many reformative revo-

lutions, a universal cosmopolitan condition, which Nature has as her ultimate purpose, will come into being as the womb wherein all the original capacities of the human race can develop.” Thesis Nine, then, posits that “A philosophical attempt to work out a universal history according to a natural plan directed to achieving the civic union of the human race must be regarded as possible and, indeed, as contributing to this end of Nature.” (Kant s.l.)

In many ways, Montesquieu’s ideas on the influence of climate and geography, as also taken up by Herder, and Herder’s and Kant’s teleologies of “Humanität” and “Weltbürgerlichkeit” or world citizenship under a world federation of nations come together in the *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (1837, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*) of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). For Hegel, history, in accordance with Providence, strives to attain absolute “Geist” or “Spirit.” “Given this abstract definition,” he argues in his Introduction to the *Vorlesungen*, “we can say that world history is the record of the spirit’s efforts to attain knowledge of what it is in itself” (54). At the beginning of his essay on “The natural context or the geographical basis of world history” appended to the Introduction, Hegel distinguishes between what he calls the frigid and torrid zones, and the temperate zone. In the former, he claims, the life of the intellect and of reason are well-nigh impossible. It is the latter that is the natural home of these things, and given the difference in available landmasses in the northern and the southern hemispheres it is the northern part of the temperate zone that ‘must furnish the theatre of world history’ (Hegel 155). Given the other natural features of this northern temperate zone, moreover, it is the north-western part of Europe that must play the main role on this stage. “The Orientals,” Hegel posits,

do not know that the spirit or man as such are free in themselves. And because they do not know this, they are not themselves free. They only know that One is free; but for this very reason, such freedom is merely arbitrariness, savagery, and brutal passion, or a milder and tamer version of this which is itself only an accident of nature, and equally arbitrary. This One is therefore merely a despot, not a free man and not a human being. The consciousness of freedom first awoke among the Greeks, and they were accordingly free; but, like the Romans, they only knew that Some, and not all men as such, are free. ... The Germanic nations, with the rise of Christianity, were the first to realize that man is by nature free, and that freedom of the spirit is his very essence. ... the penetration and transformation of secular life by the principle of freedom, is the long process of which history itself [is made up] ... World history is the progress of the consciousness of freedom – a progress whose necessity it is our business to comprehend. (Hegel 54)

It is these general remarks “on the different degrees of freedom – firstly, that of the Orientals, who knew only that One is free, then that of the Greek and Roman world, which knew that Some are free, and finally, our own knowledge that All men as such are free, and that man is by nature free – supply us with the divisions we shall observe in our survey of world history and which will help us to organize our discussion of it” (Hegel 54-55). In a further appendix to the Introduction, “The Phases of World History,” Hegel then sees as “the goal of world history” that “the spirit must create for itself a nature and world to conform with its own nature, so that the subject may discover its own concept of the spirit in this *second nature*, in this reality which the concept of the spirit has produced; and in this objective reality, it becomes conscious of its subjective freedom and rationality. Such is the progress of the Idea in general; and this must be our ultimate point of view in history” (Hegel 208-209). Hegel saw this Idea as most fully realized in what he calls “the Germanic world” (Hegel 206), which for him comprised what today we call Western Europe. Given that he also saw the State as the ultimate result as well as guarantor of “this reality which the concept of the spirit has produced” it has often been assumed that his view of world history singled out Prussia, the state of which he himself was a citizen, as the embodiment of what he called the “Geist seiner Zeit” and therefore as the provisional culmination of world history. This is certainly the way Hegel’s philosophy of (world) history was interpreted by the proponents of German unification under Prussian leadership not long

after Hegel's demise, and how it has been appropriated by (sometimes extremist) German nationalist movements thereafter. In fact, such a transformation of Hegel's views of (world) history fit the wave of nationalism washing over Europe after the upheavals of the Napoleonic era under the aegis of Romanticism. As a consequence, most historiography as of roughly the 1830s for the longest time was concerned with national history rather than world history.

If in the eighteenth century, starting with Montesquieu, then, we find that world historiographers consistently include China in particular in their considerations, we also notice that in general this happens as a foil to European history, which almost invariably is presented as superior and more advanced because it is seen as more dynamic. Voltaire, for instance, maintains that "le corps de cet Etat subsiste avec splendeur depuis plus de 4000 ans, sans que les lois, les moeurs, le langage, la manière même de s'habiller aient souffert d'altération sensible" (Voltaire 2, the main body of this state for more than 4000 years has existed with great splendour, without noticeable changes to its laws, customs, language, or even its ways of dress). And even if Voltaire credits the Chinese with having invented many of the techniques and appliances commonly used in Europe in his own time, he also consistently downgrades the use the Chinese themselves have made of these inventions: "La Boussole, ainsi que la Poudre à tirer, étoit pour eux une simple Curiosité" (Voltaire 15, the compass, like gun powder, for them was simply a curiosity). In contrast, suffice it to remember Montesquieu's remark that for the Europeans the compass opened up the world. Voltaire explains the "peu de progrès" (lack of progress) of the Chinese from on the one hand their "respect prodigieux" (prodigious respect) for tradition, and on the other hand the complexity of their writing system. Hegel, some seventy years after Voltaire, apparently still shares the latter's opinion when he posits that "the character of the *Far East*, and of the Chinese empire in particular" is that "it cannot change itself by its own efforts" (Hegel 198). China, then, is presented as Europe's "most other 'Other':" ancient and immutable China as the antithesis to modern and dynamic Europe.

When Goethe in conversation with Eckermann on 31 January 1827, then, remarked that he found the characters in the Chinese novels from which he first gathered his ideas on world literature to be not so different from those in European novels, his own included, even while this may have corresponded to Herder's and Kant's ideas on *Humanität* and world citizenship, he also seems to have gone against the grain of the more general thinking about China as it obtained in contemporary world history theories. Likewise, although Goethe is always credited with having put *Weltliteratur* on the map of literary studies, from a world history study point of view his intervention, as my reference to Schlözer indicates, was rather belated. And of course his insistence on the coming of an age of world literature was almost immediately after his death belied by a focus, first in Germany and then around Europe, on national literatures and the writing of histories of national literatures. If world literature entered into the picture at all it was always as the lesser term when compared to some national literature. As just one illuminating example, though there are plenty more, we may point to Richard Moulton's 1911 *World Literature and Its Place in General Culture*, in which he defines "world literature as "Universal Literature [by which he means the sum total of all literatures] seen in perspective from a given point of view, presumably the national standpoint of the observer" (Moulton 6), a scope he somewhat later enlarges to "the English-speaking peoples" (Moulton 9). If we replace Moulton's "English-speaking peoples" with "Europeans," this more or less remained the perspective from which to study world literature until almost the end of the twentieth century.

In the meantime, and as I have had occasion to argue elsewhere, the Eurocentric view of world literature particularly with an eye to Chinese literature, has been duly corrected, at least in intention, in the two major world literature anthologies I mentioned earlier, the Longman and Norton editions. As I argue in another paper, it has also been corrected in the comparative approaches to world literature practised for instance in Alexander Beecroft's *Authorship and Cultural Identity in Early Greece and China* (2010) and Wiebke Denecke's *Classical World Literatures: Sino-Japanese and Greco-Roman Comparisons* (2014). For another example we may turn to Karen Thornber's *Empire of Texts in Motion* (2009), in which she traces how Japan served as hub for the spread of European literary influences, especially from France,

throughout East Asia, and particularly through Korea and China. However, and that is the point I want to make, even these more recent views on world literature in one way or another still start from the national literature approach that has been the rule since roughly the middle of the nineteenth century, and which implicitly also created the very possibility for the birth of comparative literature. I would here want to argue for yet another approach to world literature, and as with the very beginnings of world literature I will first look at what is happening in the field of world history for cues. Again, China here plays a major role.

Until the end of the twentieth century in world history as well, an essentially Eurocentric view remained dominant. Even if H.G. Wells *Outline of History* (1920) or Arnold Toynbee in his twelve-volume *A Study of History* (1934-1961) paid much attention to non-Western civilizations, they invariably saw Western civilization as the culmination of history and the world's inevitable future. Western civilization remains the focus even with Oswald Spengler's famous prediction of its end in *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (1918, *The Decline of the West*). In contrast, William Hardy McNeill (1917-) purposely called his own 1963 world history *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community*, a title that speaks for itself when it comes to its position on human history. Closer to our own times Immanuel Wallerstein in his three *Modern World System* volumes (1974-1989) posits the unity of the world's economic system (and in its wake, or concomitant with it, also other systems such as the military and political ones), as of the sixteenth century, at its core Western Europe, a semi-periphery comprising the rest of Europe, and a periphery containing the rest of the world, all in a relationship of exchange. These exchanges can be charted according to volume, intensity, kind of products, and so on. Moretti adopted a world systems theory approach, along with concepts from evolution theory, in his *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900* (1998) in which he charted the trade in books, translations, ideas, forms, genres, styles, and motifs in Europe, as well as in his later writings on world literature. Using Wallerstein's own world system theory André Gunder Frank arrived at very different conclusions from Wallerstein in his *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (1998) in which he argued for the centrality of the axis China-India in the world economy and hence world history. Lincoln Paine in *The Sea and Civilization: A Maritime History of the World* (2014) and Peter Frankopan in *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (2015) illustrate the importance of China in a global network of trade and communication ante-dating by far Wallerstein's world system. Robert D. Kaplan, who in a 2012 volume titled *The Revenge of Geography* argued for the importance of geography in geopolitics, in 2014 published *Asia's Cauldron*, in which he locates the South China Sea as the nexus of future world politics. As I have suggested elsewhere, such views on world history might call forth a world literature that is not oriented towards a comparison of national literatures but that studies what Walter Benjamin, and after him Mads Rosendahl Thomsen in his *Mapping World Literature* (2008), referred to as a "constellation" comprising, to stay with our focus on China and its "world," works by Marco Polo (the *Travels*), the sixteenth-century Portuguese poet Luís Vaz de Camões (the *Lusiads*), Joseph Conrad (his tales and novels set in the Indonesian archipelago and the China seas), the Dutch early twentieth-century poet J.J. Slauerhoff (poems, novels, stories set in China), the Italian twentieth-century novelist Italo Calvino (*Invisible Cities*, modelled after Marco Polo's *Travels*), and the Portuguese contemporary novelist Gonçalo M. Tavares (*Uma viagem a Índia*, modelled after Camões), all of whom wrote about what we used to call the "Far East," in the widest sense: going there, getting there, trading there, failing there and getting lost there, and do so in a densely woven web of intertextuality.

But other constellations are possible, following other approaches to world history. John Robert McNeill, the son of William Hardy McNeill, in 2000 gave *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World*. In a similar vein, Robert B. Marks in 2015 published the third edition of his *The Origins of the Modern World: A Global and Environmental Narrative from the Fifteenth to the Twenty-First Century*. A good example of a world literature study along ecological lines is Karen Thornber's *Ecoambiguity: Environmental Crises and East Asian Literatures*. In fact, Thornber is picking up on a number of recent developments in world history with books planned on *Global World Literature*

and Health: Moderating Expectations, Negotiating Possibilities, Climate Change and Changing Cultures, Leprosy, Culture, and Global History, and Networking Literatures: East Asia and the Indian Ocean Rim.

And there is Jürgen Osterhammel with his *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (2014 I English, German original in 2009), which adopts a truly global perspective on all aspects of life during the nineteenth century. More piece-meal approaches can be found with Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (2014), and many more such books dealing with specific commodities or products. But one could also think of even more general works such as Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (1999) or Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (2011). Asking "what is world history?" Paine in the Introduction to his *The Sea and Civilization* gives the following answer: "world history involves the synthetic investigation of complex interactions between people of distinct backgrounds and orientations. It therefore transcends historians' more traditional focus on politically, religiously, or culturally distinct communities seen primarily in their own terms at a local, national, or regional level" (Paine 4). Replace "world history" with "world literature" and you have a marvellous programme for the future of a discipline!

In fact, this is exactly what Christopher Busch argues in a piece called "Areas: Smaller than the World, Bigger than the Nation," in the American Comparative Literature Association's most recent Report on the State of the Discipline. Busch calls for "the pursuit of new (or renewed) geographies that go beyond the nation but resist the centrifugal pull, the temptation, of the world." One way of transcending the nation is via Gayatri Spivak's "critical regionalism," at term she used in her 2007 *Other Asias*, which looks at units larger than the nation, linked in what Spivak in her *Death of a Discipline* volume of 2003 still called a renewed form of "area studies." Busch proposes a redefinition of "area" to comprise the continental (hemispheric America, Europe), oceanic (The Pacific Rim, Transatlantic), imperial (Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian), linguistic (Sinophone), and commercial (the Silk Road). In another piece in the same Report Christian Moraru takes the idea of "world literature" to its logical conclusion by arguing for a "planetary" versus a "global" literature, whereby he ascribes an ethical dimension to the former, concerned with safeguarding the planet earth entrusted to humanity, as opposed to the indiscriminate global commercialism threatening this planetarity. That China, and hence Chinese literature, stand to play a prominent, and most likely a determinative role in all this is beyond doubt.

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