


Chinese Literature's Route to World Literature

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Abstract: In his article "Chinese Literature's Route to World Literature" Hongtao Liu argues that Goethe's theory of world literature based on the conflicting and unifying values of cosmopolitanism and localism has fueled Chinese literature's desire to join world literatures. Proposed by Zhenduo Zheng with the notion of the "unification of literature" at the beginning of the twentieth century and developed in the 1980s, the "global elements of twentieth-century Chinese literature" in the twenty-first century, this notion remains a feature of Chinese literature's global trajectory. Liu argues that although experiencing a number of transitions, China's pursuit remains relevant and translation remains a significant route for Chinese literature to join the spaces of world literatures. He also posits that other routes such as regional world literature and world literature in Chinese are gaining in importance.

Hongtao LIU

Chinese Literature's Route to World Literature

Translated from the Chinese by David Z. Dayton

In Goethe's theory of world literature published between the years 1827 and 1830, two main ideas are expressed: 1) world literature is an integral part of the ideal of cosmopolitanism, which would allow the various national literatures to gradually break down their state of separatism and instead through a combining of their influences form an organic whole and 2) world literature is the space where national literatures' intrinsic value can be revealed. This is to say that at the moment of world literature's conception the idea already contained the values of both cosmopolitanism and localism. These two values are contradictory and yet are united, demonstrating global aspirations while also expressing local scenes. In the last two hundred years, however, the internal tension formed between these two contradictory yet united values has predicated the appeal of the idea of world literature (see, e.g., Hoesel-Uhlig; Sturm-Trigonakis, "Goethe's").

Goethe's concept of world literature arrived in China in the first few years of the twentieth century when it was utilized among scholars as one of the discourses on Chinese literature's global development. At that time, China had just experienced its transition from a dynastic empire to a modern national republic and its national and global awareness were steadily growing thus laying the groundwork for the conceptions of "Chinese literature" and "world literature." Zhenduo Zheng (郑振铎) was China's earliest scholar to theorize world literature systematically. In 1922, he published the article "文学的统一观" ("A View on the Unification of Literature") in which he argued that although there are differences between literatures arising from locality, nationality, time period, and style, literature's foundation in a universal form of humanity allows it to possess a global unity, which is, precisely, world literature. Although basing the unity of world literature on a universal form of humanity was not unique to Zheng, under the backdrop of the May Fourth Movement (1915-1921) this concept of world literature reflected the yearning within China's "New Literature" movement to establish connections with foreign literatures that would grant the elevated vantage point of "humanity" from which scholars could contemplate the direction of the national literature's development. In the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, China's concept of world literature experienced two major changes of course as it first adopted the Soviet concept of world literature and second began to increase the eastern cultural dimension of world literature.

Following the policy of reformation and opening in the 1980s, Chinese literature began to revive and joining the world became seen as an important route towards this revival. In 1985, the collection edited by Xiaoyi Zeng (曾小逸) entitled *走向世界文学—中国现代作家与外国文学* (Stepping into the World Literature: China's Modern Writers and Foreign Literature) was published. Reflecting on the last twenty-five years, the volume's most important contribution has been its utilization of this phrase made popular during the first wave of China's reformation and opening *走向世界* ("stepping into the world") to raise the proposition "stepping into world literature." In the extensive introduction to the volume, Zeng designated four periods of global literary development based on the historical development of the forms of literary exchange and the structural totality: 1) the epoch of the formation of national literatures through the process of exchange among regional and local literatures, marked by internal exchange and independent development, 2) the epoch of the birth of the totality of world literatures through the exchange and convergence of modern national literatures, marked by exchange between national literatures and the commingling of the literatures of the East and the West, 3) the epoch of the development of world literature through the continuing exchange and convergence among national literatures toward their unification within the totality, marked by the process of exchange informing all literary work, and 4) humanity's future epoch of a united world literature.

This discourse of "stepping into world literature" demonstrates the significant influence exerted by Chinese scholars in the 1980s and 1990s and how they sparked the intense movement in China to enter into the space of world literature. Yet, the actual content of Zeng's edited volume is scholarship on the foreign literary influences on China's modern writers (especially from Western literature) such as the influences on the writing of Lu Xun, Mao Dun, Ba Jin, Guo Moruo, etc. The content and the form

of Zeng's introduction determined there to be a dependent relationship between the types of literatures: literature that is seen to be stepping into world literature can only be literature that has accepted foreign influence, i.e., using the foreign "advanced" literature to reform the backwardness of Chinese literature. After 1949, Chinese literature experienced seventeen years of unidirectional influence from Soviet "pioneering" literature and then suffered the harmful isolation from the world caused by the ten-year period of the Cultural Revolution. When China re-opened in the 1980s, Chinese literature was forced to break out of its insular drive for self-sufficiency and enter world literature. Learning from, borrowing, and appropriating foreign literature's "advanced" experience was described as the necessary path for Chinese literature's development. Scholars discussed and debated the successful aspects of modern Chinese literature, but focused their attention on the immediate problems facing contemporary Chinese literature and by extension Chinese society's development.

Upon entering the twenty-first century, Chinese literature's mode of dependence and unidirectional influence when establishing links with world literatures began to be called into question. These questions were raised, for example, in Sihe Chen's (陈思和) editor's note to the Special Issue "20 世纪中国文学的世界性因素" ("The Global Elements of Twentieth-century Chinese Literature") in the journal *Comparative Literature in China*. The purpose of the discussion was to attempt to resolve the problem of the decreasing effectiveness of comparative literature's methodologies when researching questions of influence. As Chen pointed out, "In the twentieth century when Chinese literature entered into the cultural framework of the globe, its previous isolated stance was disrupted, as if the cultural waves from the four corners of the earth all at once came crashing down on China's shores. Under this flood of influences, the success of the previous methods of researching influence fell into a state of stagnancy because its methods were based on researching the network of cultural exchanges in isolation" ("在 20 世纪中国文学进入一种世界性的文化格局时, 原有的封闭状态被打破, 代之以八面来风的外来文化思潮冲击。在这样一种'泛影响'的场境中, 原先在研究封闭形态的文化交流关系中应付裕如的影响研究方法, 却反倒无从施展了" [31; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are by Dayton). Because of this situation Chen argued that research methods "required deconstruction and subversion" ("需要解构和颠覆" [31]).

Functioning as the strategy and framework for "deconstruction and subversion," Chen and others pointed to the necessity of substantiating "the prominent position of Chinese literature within literary connections," which he addressed specifically as "Chinese culture's formation of a unique aesthetic appreciation within its own social movements (including global influences) that has developed in tandem with world culture and has now obtained a synchronous position with it. With its own unique presentation it has entered into the ranks of world literature and enriched its content. From this position, we see that the former dualistic structure of 'World - China' (as well as influencer - influenced) no longer holds value because China now has equal standing with other nations' literatures and world literature is being constructed in common" ("中国文化在自身的社会运动 (其中也包含了世界的影响) 中, 形成某些特有的审美意识, 它们或许与世界文化的发展取得同步的姿态, 并以自身的独特面貌, 加入世界文学的行列, 并丰富了世界文学的内容. 因此, 既有的'世界-中国' (即影响者-接受者) 的二元对立结构不再重要, 因为, 中国是在与其他国家的文学在对等的地位上, 共同构建起'世界'文学" [31]). Chen defined this commonality as the "essence of globality" and accentuated the view that "the realization of Chinese literature's modern awareness is the key ... in terms of understanding Chinese literature's modernization over the last century," to generating "entirely new forms of understanding": from his perspective, these new conceptions can even help to reformulate "the concept of modernity created by the West in our unconscious minds" ("我们潜意识中由西方制造的现代化概念" [31]).

From today's point of view, the significance of this discussion has already surpassed the scope of a discussion of comparative literature's methodology. Under China's growing global influence, it has steadily improved and spurred the nation's increasing confidence. In the 1980s, the concept of "stepping into world literature" cast Chinese literature as the "orphan" outside of world literatures, a role to which its stature and quality were relegated and made dependent upon. In contrast, the discourse of "The Global Elements Twentieth-century Chinese Literature" emphasized Chinese literature's subjective position by seeing Chinese literature as a participant in world literatures, i.e., a member of the family of world literatures, as many of the essential elements of globality contain intrinsically localized production and creation. Therefore, Chinese literature has been placed on equal footing with other cultures' literatures and has become one of the constituents of world literature.

In 2009, with the support of the Confucius Institute's headquarters, Beijing Normal University

began to implement "The Project of the Communication of China's Literature Overseas" which included the founding of the English-language journal *Chinese Literature Today*, the publication of the book series *Chinese Literature Today*, and the holding of international conferences on the communication of China's literature overseas. These three activities have been carried out as part of the country's strategy to place Chinese literature on the world stage and received widespread attention from scholars in China and abroad. These kinds of activities and governmentally supported policies could not have been imagined twenty or even ten years ago. This is a symbol of the current relationship between Chinese literature and world literature: having experienced the developmental modes of "grasping" (*wo na* 我拿) and "possessing" (*wo you* 我有), it has now begun to change to "contributing" (*wo gei* 我给). This also suggests that Chinese literature has acquired enough confidence to influence other cultures' power and is working to project this influence by making world literature more "Chinese."

In reflecting on the history of the Chinese concept of world literature, one becomes aware that although there have been significant shifts from idealism to realism, from cosmopolitanism to localism, from import to export in the theories of Chinese literature's connections to world literatures, "becoming world literature" has been a constant pursuit throughout its existence. Chinese culture's consequent surge "into the world" and theories of world literature which contrast with ideas current within international academia have formed an intriguing juxtaposition between China and the world. Pascale Casanova in her *The World Republic of Letters* described world literature as the power of European literature (although the focus of the argumentation is on French literature) to expand uninterrupted, gradually dominating and assimilating Asian, African, and US-American literature in a process of unification. According to this concept, modern literatures issuing from cultures late to development are positioned in the peripheral areas of the literary world-system (on this, i.e., the drawbacks of Eurocentrism, see e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári). Ironically, however, these literary texts thus can only be the products of "Westernization." Stephen Owen realized this imbalance within world literature's development early on. In his article "The Anxiety of Global Influence: What is World Poetry?" published in *The New Republic* in 1990, he utilized a discussion of the poetry of Bei Dao to reflect on the dominance of the West in the discourse of world literatures and the harm that this causes. In his article published in *Modern Chinese Literature* in 1994 entitled "Chinese Literature in the 'World' Literary Economy" Andrew Jones echoed Owen's point and stated that Goethe's explanation of world literature was steeped in Orientalist rhetoric emanating from imperialism. Therefore, to reduce the obstacles to Chinese literature joining the world, they suggested that scholars should tear down the high walls surrounding the discourse of world literature.

Since Goethe's articulation of the concept of world literature, it has consistently been seen as the path of refinement for national literatures and literature's highest level of achievement. In our era of globalization, the myriad collection of literary awards and the institutions which bestow them such as critical prizes, book rankings, literary festivals, scholarly conferences, and book fairs (and especially the Nobel Prize in Literature) brought national literatures squarely into the space of world literatures, which consequently transformed into a competitive arena. This phenomenon has been described by scholars abroad as a kind of "politics of recognition" (see Zhang, Yingjin). For a number of reasons including the institution of literary criticism being perpetually controlled by only a select few, the award winners selected being even fewer in number, and the awards granting the highest material benefits also being the awards that grant the greatest fame (and this fame then also providing greater publishing opportunities and book sales as well as exponential benefits for the writer), the competition over gaining recognition has become inordinately fierce. The result has been that writers have begun to follow and become trapped in speculation about the newest trend or direction in literature. Once a type of literature has been determined to receive the highest awards, writers line up to imitate the writer's style. And as the institution of literary criticism receives the most influence from the West, it is non-Western writers who most wish to enter into this space of world literature. Idealizing the West has become a nightmare that provides the responsible parties with excuses and the writers with tremendous pressure. For example, film director Yimou Zhang's 1987 film adaptation of Mo Yan's novel, *Red Sorghum*, received the Golden Bear award at the Berlin Film Festival and later was critiqued in this way. These are the same reasons that Owens and Jones proposed to tear down the walls constructed around the discourse of world literatures and throw out the previous rules of the

game. But how can one truly escape from this perpetual dilemma? In practice, the methods that Owen and Jones suggested have not been effective. They did not recognize how deeply embedded the developmental mode of "stepping into the world" has become within modern Chinese literature and could not estimate the intensity of the desire to have the literature of a particular culture be displayed in the space of world literatures after its process of development. In the era globalization it would, of course, be impossible to again close borders and turn back to self-production, self-consumption, self-promotion, and self-advocacy. Participating in global competition is natural and unavoidable and countries and literatures follow this same path. So I ask, how can Chinese literature become world literature?

Translation is the primary path for national literature to become world literature. David Damrosch defined world literature as "the elliptical refraction of national literatures" and "writing that gains in translation" (281; with regard to this especially in terms of translation into English, see, e.g., Wang <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2336>>; for a counter argument see Eoyang, e.g., <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2349>>). The importance of the first definition is that it invokes a public space for world literatures. National literatures do not become world literature organically, but must instead refract like a ray of light through the values informed by languages, cultures, time, space, etc., which as the second focal points in the space become hybrid and symbiotic literary works. The theory of "elliptical refraction" shows that there is a natural process of contortion and transformation which texts experience in translation, but that this is the necessary cost of transforming a national literature into world literature and in the end will enhance the original texts (however, this is complicated especially with regard to "small literatures," see, e.g., d'Haen <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2342>>). The various translation theories propagated after the 1970s have dealt with the questions of the independence of the translated text from the original and the translated text's value from many perspectives and localities. All of this research derives from world literature's conception and inspiration. Damrosch's definition can be said to similarly have been derived from translation theory and has produced a significant contribution to the theory of world literature. The Nobel Prize in Literature recently being awarded to Mo Yan further substantiates Damrosch's theory (on Mo Yan's work in English, see, e.g., Duran and Huang). The appearance of a large number of revisions and changes in his texts translated by Howard Goldblatt has already been accepted as valid by most scholars (see, e.g., Du and Zhang <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss1/8>>; see also Chen, Thomas). If we hold to the position of the authenticity of the original work than these translations are only derivatives and secondary to the original. However, if we view them from the perspective of world literature, the possibilities these translations manifest are not limited to deficits and alterations. They demonstrate equally the collisions and dialogue between two cultures. The possibility of grafting and the rebirth of texts in another language holds great potential for Chinese literature.

Yet, at the same time we must recognize that entering the space of world literatures through translation includes factors which can limit literature's further development. Elements such as the readers of translations, the market, etc., are ultimately determined by the complex relationships of international politics, economics, and culture, and determine reception. In China there is a massive volume of foreign literature translated every year to Chinese. In comparison, how many Chinese texts are translated into other languages? Furthermore, how many outstanding translations are produced? I am not optimistic that there will be better answers to these questions in the near future. If we are all to crowd together onto the single plank of translation following Damrosch's ideas and think that the road to world literature can be only this precarious route, then this is clearly a mark of our limited vision. Becoming world literature is not limited to the path of translation: there are at least three other paths worth considering that Chinese scholarship and governmental policies have consistently overlooked. The first is regional world literature. For example, Karen Laura Thornber's "Rethinking the World in World Literature: East Asia and Literary Contact Nebulae" is a valuable study on the notion of East Asian literatures as world literature: Thornber argues that because of the advantages of occupying the so-called "point of origin," Western literatures became central, while Latin American, African, Asian, and other "minor" regions' literatures were positioned on the periphery. Thornber posits that this discourse on world literatures must be dismantled and replaced by research on world literatures that possess a more multidimensional understanding of literature, culture, and nationality.

Thornber investigated the shared milieu of modern East Asian literatures including the literature of Mainland China, Taiwan, Japan, and Korea through processes of assimilation, adaptation, rejection, parody, resistance, loss, and finally transformation, as well as strategies of interpreting, adapting, translating, and intertextualizing informed by these processes, to point out how these *nebulae* of literary contacts have formed a mutually independent but common corpus of literatures. Thornber's analysis of the effect of internal exchanges between literary works in non-Western regions helps to reconceptualize the ideas of "local" and "global" and helps world literatures to find a way out of Eurocentrism.

The second path to world literature is through "world literature in Chinese." The proposal and application of the concept of "world literature in Chinese" is to demonstrate world literatures' Chineseness and is an effective strategy to allow Chinese literature to affect world literature. "World literature in Chinese" denotes the border-crossing and regional exchanges within and between languages and literatures and is an application of the framework originating in the concepts of "world literature in English," "world literature in French," "world literature in Spanish," etc. It contains not only the globalization of Chinese literature, but also the Sinification of world literature. The Chinese language provides a robust foundation for this concept as it includes not only Mainland Chinese literature, but also Taiwan literature, Hong Kong literature, and the literature of overseas Chinese. Their roots are in Chinese language and its culture, but they have spread their branches in a variety of places in the world creating an array of unique scenes. In her book *Visuality and Identity: Sinophone Articulations across the Pacific*, Shu-mei Shih proposed the concept of the "Sinophone" which she defines as "a network of places of cultural production outside of China and on the margins of China and Chineseness" (4). Literature produced within this network can be said to participate in "world literature in Chinese." Eng-Chaw Tan's seven volume edited collection *Selected Works of ASEAN Modern Chinese Literature* has recently been published and serves as a clear marker of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) nations' world literature in Chinese. In addition, world literature in Chinese from Anglophone North America and Europe have become the source of many impressive works. It must, of course, be recognized that world literature in Chinese has not yet achieved the global reach of world literature in English, but that we look forward to this achievement.

The third path to world literature is through Chinese world literature. This is a world literature that is bound by the connection of shared heritage, such as Jewish world literature, African world literature, etc. The concept of Chinese world literature refers to the body of writers from China or who possess Chinese heritage who write in the national language of their resident country, e.g., Chinese British literature or Chinese French literature, etc. Currently, Chinese American literature has the greatest influence. Writers such as Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston, Frank Chin, Xiaolong Qiu, Ha Jin, etc., have all had significant impact on this literature. For the countries in which these writers reside their work has become a Chinese contribution to national literature, but from the perspective of heritage, they have also become an important part of the globalization of Chinese literature. Historically, the English-language work of writers such as Lin Yutang and Eileen Chang have been seen as a part of US-American literature. In the contemporary era of multiple heritages, the increasing universality of mixed-ethnicity, and increasing normality of transnational immigration, there is no need for us to shut these works out of our cultural sphere (on this, see in particular Dagnino; Sturm-Trigonakis, *Comparative Cultural*). A subsection of the third route "Chinese world literature" is world literature within the global sphere of Chinese culture. This refers to the shards of Chinese literature and culture which exist within foreign cultural spaces. The two previous forms of world literature all manifest as actual texts and all have complete works. However, this form of the Chinese contribution to world literature does not take the form of independent or complete works. This form, instead, inhabits works outside the spaces influenced directly by Chinese literature and culture and yet makes-up an integral part of the works. Thus, these works have also become vessels of Chinese culture. The influence of Chinese literature and culture on many cultures' literatures is widespread in the world, such as in East Asia, Europe, and also the Americas.

Within the work of a large group of US-American poets and writers including Ernest Fenellosa, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Wai-lim Yip, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Rexroth, John Milton Cage, Gary Snyder, Robert Bly, W.S. Merwin, Robert Hass, etc., elements of Chinese literature and culture are expressed and have come to constitute the

research focus of transpacific poetics. "Trans-Pacific Poetics" differs from traditional research on influence in that it withdraws from a singular focus on the narrowly defined concepts of textual influence and cultural sources and explores texts instead from the multiple angles of ethnography, translation, intertextual travel, etc., allowing a uniquely comprehensive study of the dialogues, imaginings, intersections, and intermingling of the different localities contained within the work of these US-American poets and writers. The aim is to reveal the contours of the West especially the ways in which Chinese culture has been injected into US-American literature by helping it to form its own unique qualities distinct from its roots in European cultures and literatures. In this type of world literature, Chinese culture's integration with foreign cultures has been deep, its influence has been the most lasting, and it has made one of the most significant contributions. As it is the desired final outcome of the promotion of Chinese literature abroad, it recently has received significant attention.

In conclusion, world literature ought to be understood as in the plural as world literatures: there are numerous forms of world literature and each one of them is significant. What we must do is work to strengthen the vitality of the corpus of Chinese literature by allowing it to grow its global impact through a multitude of paths thus allowing its significance as part of world literatures to be more fully appreciated.

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