

Pheng Cheah. *What is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2016. ISBN 9780822360780. 397 pp.

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In the historical context of capitalist globalization, the hegemonic rule centered on Europe is the Greenwich time of the world, putting other regions under its rule and cutting the globe into unequal areas in the form of a world map in order to achieve control over the world. Pheng Cheah holds that capitalism's control over the world is actually to spatialize time.

For Pheng Cheah, contemporary world literature theory seeking to establish a spatio-geographical category literary exchange to analyze literary works across national borders tends to define the world as part of the circulation of commodities, so that world literature will become part of the transnational market, and analyze literature in the context of capitalist globalization through a spatialized lens. Of course, Pheng Cheah acknowledges that there is some legitimacy in understanding world literature in the framework of cross-border literary circulation, and that contemporary world literature theory's focus on periphery literature is also conducive to breaking the Eurocentric perspective. But the drawback of this is that it equates the world with capitalist globalization, i.e., the global market creates the world and this view places literature in a passive position, thus limiting the scholarly understanding of the relationship between capitalist globalization and literature.

“Auerbach emphasized that Weltliteratur was governed by two principles. First, it presupposed the idea of humanity as its rational kernel. Second, Weltliteratur has an irreducible temporal dimension” (Cheah 24-25). By comparing Auerbach's account of world literature with the mainstream theory of world literature today, it can be found that the essential feature of contemporary world literature is its spatial expansion and its value is mainly considered through the production, circulation and acceptance of literature which is limited to a purely spatial dimension. At the same time, contemporary world literature theory makes an attempt to keep a certain distance from politics and turns a blind eye to the power relations discussed by postcolonial theory, which directly leads to the failure to explore world literature

from the perspective of postcolonial countries. Therefore, Pheng Cheah is fiercely critical of contemporary world literature theory represented by Damrosch, Casanova, and Moretti.

Pheng Cheah considers that Damrosch's view of circulation as a process that enhances the value of world literature fails to account for the relationship between world literature and global culture, while the transnational circulation of world literature compresses the world into a spatial entity, making it impossible for world literature to be independent from the global political and economic contrast of power (Cheah 30-31). Casanova, on the other hand, argues that although the core and periphery of world literature represent an unequal political relationship, literature, with a degree of relative independence, is not entirely impeded by political hegemony. According to Pheng Cheah, the relative autonomy of the political and economic power of world literature is weak, unable to break through the political and economic structure of reality (Cheah 36).

Moretti's view of world literature focuses on the study of market forces and the analysis of "trees" and "waves" as the internal law of the development of world literature. Thus, despite Moretti's suggestion of a direct causal relationship between literature and social forces, literature, manipulated by external forces, becomes part of the world market, that is to say, "A work of world literature merely acts by reflecting and refracting the stronger primary social forces operative within it and to which its form corresponds via a natural symbolic relation" (Cheah 33). In Pheng Cheah's opinion, Moretti's discussion of world literature based on Bourdieu's sociology is bound to weaken the cosmopolitan power of literature, reducing it to a social force that takes the market process as its criterion.

Through the analysis of the mainstream thinking of contemporary world literature theory, Pheng Cheah deems that contemporary world literature theory has neglected two basic issues: one is the question "What is a world?" while the other is "literature's causality in relation to the world" (Cheah 37) which also prompted Pheng Cheah to trace back to the philosophical concept of the world in order to reconceptualize the meaning of the world. Pheng Cheah's concept of the world is mainly derived from four main philosophical theories: idealism, Marxist materialism, phenomenology and deconstructionism which, in his view, "are opposed to each other, but do not cancel each other out" (Cheah 191). Hegel emphasized the important role of violence in world history. Materialism analyzes the alienated world created by the capitalist global market to distinguish it from the real world. Both Heidegger and Derrida stress the importance of time in the constitution of the world. Arendt underlines that human intersubjective practical

activities create the world. According to Pheng Cheah's interpretation of the world by idealism, materialism, phenomenology and deconstructionism, it can be seen that the four theoretical perspectives together reinforce the argument that the world is temporal rather than spatial, and that contemporary world literature theory interpreting world literature from a spatialized perspective is to articulate world literature from a perspective of capitalist globalization. Pheng Cheah believes that although one of the major aims of contemporary world literature theory is to decentralize and focus on periphery literature, this world literature theory is still an echo of capitalist globalization, weakening the worldly forth of literature.

According to Pheng Cheah, the literature of the postcolonial South is committed to creating an alienated world different from the colonial world and capitalist globalization, so as to construct its own national identity. The aspirations of the colonial zone were not only to eradicate poverty and hunger, but also to embark on a path of independence and autonomy rather than relying on imperialism. Therefore, the literature of the postcolonial South has a special connection with the normativity of world literature. Based on this, Pheng Cheah presents his four points of reflection on world literature.

First, the writing in heterotemporality competes with the globalized world of capitalism. Second, as the nation is an indispensable part of the world, the world in world literature transcends the mutual opposition of cosmopolitanism and nationalism. Third, is to break away from the monolithic imperial discourse of developmentalism and to view the pluralistic world shall be viewed from the perspective of dynamic contestations by getting rid of the monolithic imperial discourse of developmentalism. Fourth, "world literature must also exemplify the process of worlding, or in the current argot, performatively enact a world" (Cheah 210-212).

To understand Pheng Cheah's four points of reflection on world literature, it is first necessary to understand the linear control over postcolonial regions by capitalism and its destructive effects. By analyzing colonial history and literary texts, Pheng Cheah argues that capitalist globalization imposes control and destruction on postcolonial regions mainly through three means.

One is to exert control over the colonized area over time. For example, the development of the global sugar industry was accomplished by the time control over the people in the colonized areas. The sugar industry planted sugarcane according to the season and time, and assigned slaves different jobs according to their age and gender under a whole set of production processes, forming an industrial configuration of production that removed slaves from primitive agricultural

production and prevented them from allocating their time based on their individual will, so that capitalist globalization obtained the control over people in time. This industrial model, which has revolutionized the social structure of post-colonial regions, persists today and has revolutionized the social structure of post-colonial regions.

The second is to stabilize the existing globalized order on the grounds of development. Pheng Cheah argues that although the colonial era no longer exists, tourism has reinforced the social order of the colonial era in the form of another variant. First, tourism repeats the broader neocolonial model of economic dependence in which postcolonial economies are driven by foreign capital investment and raw agricultural exports, becoming a tool for Western capital to make profits. Second, tourism is characterized by racialized social hierarchies in which postcolonial people become cheap workers for foreigners. Third, in order to expand their market share, social elites in the post-colonial regions became regional agents of the former colonial countries, promoting the former colonial culture in order to establish ties with the former sovereign countries, thus attracting more capital and tourists to the country, which is to the detriment of the post-colonial regions' construction of their own national cultures. Finally, post-colonial tourism covers up the living situation of the post-colonial regions with a false marketing strategy.

Third, in the name of cosmopolitanism, ignoring the actual situation in the post-colonial region undermined the social order of the post-colonial region. In *The Hungry Tide*, the transnational environmental movement intervenes in India's environmental problems in order to protect the natural ecosystem, with the aim of wilderness conservation, resulting in the displacement of people in the Sundarbans. Pheng Cheah likewise analyzes the humanitarian disasters caused by contemporary humanitarian aid. Set in Mogadishu, the novel *Gifts* critically exposes the dehumanization of the Somalians by humanitarianism and the political, social and economic devastation caused by the various "gifts" of aid from northern countries and international NGOs.

When analyzing postcolonial fiction, Pheng Cheah employs the concept of heterotemporality, which, in contrast to capitalism's linear temporal control of the world, seeks to escape from capitalist globalization's control of the postcolonial region mainly through the following three ways. One is to trace the pre-colonial history so as to construct one's own national identity. In *No Telephone to Heaven*, the heroine, Claire, is a Jamaican and English mixed-race person who is always ashamed of her Jamaican origin, which she deliberately conceals, receiving a

British education. However, when she returns to her hometown estate, in close contact with the guerrillas, she seems to return to the pre-colonial way of life, a kind of living environment different from capitalist globalization. This primitive and unsophisticated traditional style builds upon Claire's identity as Jamaican nationality.

The second is to create a new world by revolution, but this approach is often unworkable and ends in failure. Both in *No Telephone to Heaven* and *State of War*, revolutionary narrative is an important part of resistance to colonial or authoritarian rule. Although the revolution as heterotemporality writing expresses the determination of national self-determination and the efforts to build a national identity, and is committed to building an ideal society independent of the Western colonial system, the authors of the novels obviously disagree with violent means. In the end, the revolutionary movements often go to extinction, while the national spirit of resisting colonial oppression is inherited as an important part of the national culture.

The third is to create a social system different from capitalist globalization with a cosmopolitan moral practice, i.e., to transform the world with an ethical-political vision. In *The Hungry Tide*, although the untouchables are expelled from the land where they have lived for generations, they construct a temporary social form based on human love, which enables people to help each other and work together to resist the threat of hunger, and to survive tenaciously in a harmonious social order. The novel *Gifts*, however, aims to construct a model of life that is different from that based on the commodity economy. Marcel Mauss points out in *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*: "Things still have sentimental as well as venal value, assuming values merely of this kind exist. We possess more than a tradesman morality. There still remain people and classes that keep to the morality of former times, and we almost all observe it, at least at certain times of the year or on certain occasions. The unreciprocated gift still makes the person who has accepted it inferior, particularly when it has been accepted with no thought of returning it" (Mauss 83). The characters are linked together by mutual giving and helping, forming a world in the story. This kind of mutual help to those in need, is different from the logic of thinking in a commodity economy and will not insult their dignity. In such a harmonious world we see a different Somalia than the one reported in the West.

Pheng Cheah's view of world literature, differing from the mainstream contemporary world literary theories based on globalization, departs from the world literary theories governed by market circulation to construct his own view from

the perspective of the post-colonial South that expresses the efforts made by the post-colonial regions to escape from their marginal status, build national cultures, and embark on the road to independence and autonomy. The concept of “world literature” since proposed by Goethe, contains a kind of imperialist discourse, influenced by classical thought. Goethe believed that “We must not give this value to the Chinese, or the Serbian, or Calderon, or the Nibelungen; but, if we really want a pattern, we must always return to the ancient Greeks, in whose works the beauty of mankind is constantly represented. All the rest we must look at only historically; appropriating to ourselves what is good, so far as it goes” (Damrosch 20). It can be said that Goethe, while elaborating upon the concept of world literature, has clarified the hierarchical order inherent in literature. According to Damrosch, the works of European travelers, based on Orientalist discourse, have exerted an influence on the creation of this concept. Thus, the concept of world literature was born with an imperialist perspective (Goethe 42). Although he saw the phenomenon of literary inequality, Brandes set an extremely high threshold for world literature and denied the role of translation, thus unconsciously strengthening literary hegemony. Auerbach is keenly aware that the formation of the present standardized world is posing a serious threat to cultural pluralism with cultural monism. Although the theoretical constructions of world literature represented by Damrosch, Casanova and Moretti are to some extent based on the logic of the market, they all oppose the phenomenon of literary hegemony, revise the earlier concept of world literature, and make efforts to decenter world literature from theory and practice. From this point of view, the efforts of decentering world literature theory are consistent. Pheng Cheah’s greatest innovation lies in his thinking about the concept of the world, forming a circulating literary reflection distinct from capitalist globalization, and exploring the normative power that literature can exert on the world. However, from another point of view, blindly negating market forces and emphasizing the specificity and worldly power of postcolonial Southern literature can neither change the weak position of postcolonial Southern literature, nor change the fact that students are not interested in postcolonial Southern literature in Pheng Cheah’s teaching of postcolonial literature. Therefore, for all its flaws, the global market is a real driver of the construction of cultural pluralism. At the same time, the worldwide power to reshape the cosmopolitan power of literature solely in terms of English literature and Western philosophical concepts is also flawed, as Emily Sibley points out, first, Pheng Cheah only analyzes English postcolonial literature and barely avoids the issue of language and translation, which is a kind of invisible imperialism; second, when expounding upon the concept of the world, Pheng Cheah

focuses only on the European philosophical tradition, while many contemporary Western scholars have extended their vision beyond the Western tradition in their interpretations of the world and literature (Sibley). Of course, we cannot completely reject Pheng Cheah's academic achievements on this basis, and the study of world literature detached from the global capital market deserves the consideration and attention of every researcher.

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