

**Flair Donglai Shi and Gareth
Guangming Tan, eds. *World Literature
in Motion: Institution, Recognition,
Location*. Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag.
2020. ISBN 9783838211633. 532 pp.**

Teh Tian Jing

(Beijing Normal University)

It has been nearly 20 years since the seminal work, David Damrosch's *What is World Literature* (2003), marked the beginning of world literature as a contested field of scholarly debate, and the study of world literature has certainly come to an important moment of critical self-scrutiny of paradigms. In the intervening two decades, world literary studies have gradually become institutionalized—with a group of scholars claiming to be engaged in the study of world literature, with the establishment of academic journals around the world (especially in Europe and the United States) that address the field of world literature studies, and with graduate programs and summer schools devoted to world literature as a major. As the study of world literature becomes more and more institutionalized, it has had significant benefits in helping us to deepen our understanding of the global circulation of literature in the modern period: how “regional” writers have become international writers, and how local literary texts become globally circulated literature. Paradoxically, however, on the one hand, scholars of world literature tend to be obsessed with questions like “what is world literature?” A great deal of theoretical debates has revolved and continuously developed around this topic, but not much work has been done to test the epistemology of “world literature” in actuality. On the other hand, institutionalization could be a double-edged sword. Scholars of world literature around the world, especially from “peripheral” regions, seem to have gradually internalized the concept and began to look forward to how the literature of their regions can truly become “world literature,” and hence actively putting the concept into practice. For instance, some scholars have consciously embarked on translation and literary dissemination projects. In such a way, scholars claiming to study world literature can be categorized into at least three groups: first, those who treat world literature as a critical problem, a

systematic tool, or a theoretical framework for examining various phenomena of literary interdisciplinarity, interculturality, and intertextuality; the second group treats world literature as a literary class that is unquestionably clear, pre-existing, and more “advanced” and appealing than national literature. They actively explain “What is considered to be world literature?” and “Does world literature have distinctive features? If so, what are they?” and start teaching “world literature” after the institutionalization of world literature as a learning object. The third kind, with an idealistic or pragmatic attitude, treats world literature as a utopian endeavor to reduce international conflicts and symbols of peace, or sees world literature as a concept beneficial to the international visibility of national literature. They, hence, strongly advocate world literature or act as a “practitioner” of world literature through academic work and intellectual side products (such as translation work). With various approaches to interpreting and debating world literature by scholars from different positions, world literature as a field has gradually developed a rift and ossification that makes it difficult to exchange thoughts, leaving them to express each in their own way. The key culprit of this crisis is that scholars have hardly ever problematized “world literature as a field” and treated it as an object of study that deserves serious examination.

The two distinguished editors of *World Literature in Motion*, Flair Donglai Shi and Gareth Guangming Tan, have acutely identified such considerations which have led to the manifesto of critical world literature studies (13-16), following the ideas put forward by Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen. Within critical world literature studies, Shi and Tan have drawn a clear distinction between “World Literature” and “world literature,” which are often confused with the notion of whether world literary scholars are referring to “world literature as a subject” or “world literature as an object” (14). The former comes in the form of questions such as “*How* certain literary texts come to be regarded as world literature,” while the latter is best exemplified when a professor in a world literature class lists a bibliography of world literature by asking, “*What* kind of literary texts are considered world literature?” However, it is undeniable that distinguishing between the two is not an easy task, as both editors have stated: such a separation can be difficult to envision or maintain because the latter (“World Literature”) is a meta-language in relation to the former (“world literature”), the conceptual boundaries of which in turn depend on this very meta-language (14). Yet, this is precisely what contributes to the crucial significance of proposing such critical world literature studies.

As has been discussed earlier, many scholars who contribute to the study of

world literature are often keen to answer the question with “yes” or “no.” In other words, the debate is more confined to world literature rather than World Literature, thereby resulting in a variety of typologies on world literature proposed by different scholars. Among such works, none is better recognized than David Damrosch’s canonical definition of “all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin,” (Damrosch 4) and “world literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading” (Damrosch 281). Meanwhile, key discussions of World Literature include Pascale Casanova’s (2004) French-centered “Republic of World Literature,” Franco Moretti’s account of the systemic world of fiction through the digital humanities (the so-called methodology of distant reading), and Shu-mei Shih’s (2004) study of the “technologies of recognition” dictated by the West in the process of classifying non-Western literature as world literature (18-19). The anti-world literature opposition tends to be more directed at World Literature rather than world literature. Critics such as Haun Saussy are concerned that World Literature may reduce “all language and literature departments to subsets of the English department” (22), while Emily Apter frets about the fact that World Literature tends “to homogenize and erase the linguistic and cultural identity of literary texts” (23). Meanwhile, the most significant contribution of *World Literature in Motion* is that it puts into effect what Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen have called the claim that world literature should be “investigated in its actuality” (7). Through sociological approaches, ranging from archival data, book covers, and prize analyses, a solid research work on the problematic consciousness of World Literature has been made, responding to the mechanisms of postcolonial world literature in a resounding manner, and revealing the intricate relationship between world literature, postcolonial literature, and national literature.

World Literature in Motion contains 15 essays divided into four sections: “Postcolonial Institutions,” “Recognition through Literary Prizes,” “Minor Locations” and “Translations beyond the Anglophone.” As can be discerned, the first three parts of this edited volume deal primarily with World Literature (as does the fourth part, in fact). It focuses on the various entanglements between postcolonial and world literature at the time of the period of decolonization. Through various concrete examples of materiality (as opposed to literary textuality), it brilliantly exposes how - and in what form and by what means - postcolonial literature was adopted into world literature. Some of the chapters also illustrate the ripple effects that occur when some postcolonial writers and literary works are adopted into world literature: in exchange for international prestige, non-Western writers may well need to comprehend their sense of agency (30), the international

marketplace to label writers or to homogenize writing from a certain geographic region (e.g. African Writing), which can cause travail for writers. In particular, I consider the third section, “Minor Location,” to be a riveting part of this book. Again dealing with the tensions between postcolonial and world literature, it focuses on how Western-dominated languages, media, and international translations have had a beneficial or destructive effect on local/regional literature, such as how the BBC radio programme of the British Empire has shaped Anglophone Caribbean literature (345-375), or how two literary prizes holding different ideological forces contributed to the inability of Mauritius’ literature to truly become the center of the literary world (289-313).

Although translation is certainly an important route to the study of World Literature, within the framework of critical world literature studies, the final section of this edited volume, “Translations beyond the Anglophone,” makes a greater contribution, I assume, to the reconfiguration of world literature imaginary. It provides an important and non-negligible affirmation of the view that “world literature is in plural” (Liu) through four explicit case studies. In other words, globally circulated literature — or the so-called world literature in motion — is not necessarily entangled between the West and the postcolonial discourses, but also takes place in the Third World, or in other worlds more broadly. Thus the text (author, theory) responds positively to and revises Franco Moretti’s view that “movement from one periphery to another (without passing through the center) is almost unheard of” (35). In two decades of world literary studies, a large part of the research has focused on a certain established and singular imaginary of world literature: the “equation between world literature and the global anglophone market for literary publishing” (35) (or the earlier francophone world) and thus on the division of the “world literary class.” However, as we can find in the last section of this book (e.g. Yan Jia’s study of Chinese-Indian literary relations during the Cold War or Kim’s study of translational circulation of world literature from a minor location by *Kuunmong*), the so-called periphery and center are in fact not static but moving concepts that vary according to the different world literary circles. Even some of the chapters in this section further deconstructed the inevitability of the existence of centers and peripheries in the global exchange of literature: there is no distinct or discernible center within the periphery in the process of circulation. This means that the dynamism of the dichotomous concept of periphery and center is now being questioned. This also partly responds to the viability of Shu-mei Shih (2015)’s so-called “relational comparison” as a methodology.

From the development of the theoretical framework, the groundbreaking

attempts in methodology and the intellectual promise in excavation of new research objects, *World Literature in Motion* is a breakthrough in the study of world literature and World Literature. This is even further compounded by the compact and logical structure of the edited book and the above-average quality of each article. A comparable edited book is rare to find in recent years. For me, it reminds us that the study of world literature should not be confined to theoretical discourse, but should actively contribute to the production of more concrete case studies, so as to review, revise, and initiate a new understanding of world literature through the new and complex issues and phenomena uncovered by these different case studies. Despite the fact that I find this edited volume fascinating enough, if I were to say something about its flaws (i.e., something that critical world literature studies can work on in the future), I would like to raise the following two concerns:

1. Just as *World Literature in Motion* has shown, our understanding of world literature is mostly modern in origin. The circulation of literature in the modern age is backed by various modern ideological forces, be it Western modernization, global capitalism, neoliberalism, or the Cold War competition, which led to forming different “world literature” circles as we can see today. Nevertheless, our appreciation of the circulation of ancient literature is particularly meager. It is not always convincing to examine the global circulation of ancient literature in the context of present-day World Literature. As far as critical world literature studies are concerned, there are at least two tasks that ought to be carried out to correspond to world literature and World Literature respectively. First, what is ancient world literature—can the concept of ancient world literature be justified? Or is world literature/World Literature merely a reflection of the modern age? Has ancient world literature influenced modern world literature? If so, how did it come to shape modern world literature? Second, by what means has ancient world literature developed? In this way, from the methodological standpoint, perhaps in addition to sociology, it is more appropriate to audaciously introduce and explore ancient world literature by combining methodologies such as archaeology and philology.
2. Much of the current paradigm of world literary studies is based on the continental imaginary, including either cartographic literary material exchanges or the spatial hypothesis behind the theoretical construction of world literary systems. The understanding of islandic or oceanic literary circulation has not been particularly clear so far. Would it be more in

line with the reality of world literature to envisage the inclusion of the connection and imagination of oceanic space in the discussion of world literature theory? We might be able to discover a new path out of the theory of world literature based on the continental imagination that has never been discovered for making local literature world literature. I have seen the absolute potential of this approach in some of the chapters of this book. Thereby, I propose that there is a necessity to pioneer oceanic, islandic or archipelagic world literature.

Overall, I would genuinely recommend this significant and indispensable edited volume to all scholars interested in World Literature. For scholars of world literary studies, this is a must-read recent work.

Work Cited:

Casanova, Pascale. *The World Republic of Letters*. Trans. M. B. Debevoise. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004.

Damrosch, David. *What is World Literature*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003.

Liu, Hongtao. "Chinese Literature's Route to World Literature." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*. 17.1 (2015).

Shih, Shu-mei. "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition." *PMLA* 119.1 (2004): 16-30.

_____. "World Studies and Relational Comparison." *PMLA* 130.2 (2015): 430-438.

Author Profile:

Teh Tian Jing is a graduate student in Comparative Literature and World Literature at Beijing Normal University. Ranging from regional imaginaries, literary multilingualism, postcolonial inequality to migratory identities, his current research interest lies in theories of world literary studies, Sinophone studies, mobility studies, sensory studies, with comparative and interdisciplinary methods, to call attention to how minorities, migrant and indigenous peoples in Sinophone Asia and island southeast Asia continue living historically, culturally and politically with post-(cold)war Asia connection.