

**Geopolitics as a Code for World
Literature: Theo D’haen. *World
Literature in an Age of Geopolitics*.
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Jiang Haitao

(Beijing Normal University)

Before Theo D’haen appropriated the term “geopolitics” for the title of his new book, *World Literature in an Age of Geopolitics*, geopolitical reasoning had long been one of the most inveterate mentalities of world literature studies to the extent that the pervasion of argots such as core, periphery, and semi-periphery even suggested a sort of lexical inflation in the field. However, it was D’haen who, in this volume, developed an integral geopolitical narrative of world literature in which geopolitics as a manifest code for the interpretation of world literature is decidedly foregrounded. Then, as D’haen’s first conspicuous narrative strategy, a powerful indication of a crucial and yet obscure causality between the contemporary international politico-economic landscape and the particular episteme of world literature features in the title, for which anyone who is not committed to the reflectionism of mediocre Marxist should notice that the critical relationship remains unexamined throughout the whole book. Still, economic determination could be inferred from the views that the recalibration of the world economy featuring “the spectacular rise of China following Deng Xiaoping’s 1979 Opening Up policy and its market-economy reforms” affects “the way we do comparative literature and specifically world literature” (D’haen 136) and that “the worldwide proliferation of Confucius Institutes” (46) signals Chinese reorientation of the map of world literature “with in the foreseeable future” (10). As a result, the reason why the easygoing translation of an economic map into a literary one barely needs any additional conceptual mediation (see 7), which might be, indubitably, illuminated by the political unconscious of late capitalism justifying everyday correspondence between the economy and culture with the disintegration of the latter’s semi-autonomy, remains unexplained in the titular frame of geopolitics which is so privileged in the volume that it cannot find any alternate subordinate narratives

for further demarcation. After all, the implications of ‘an age of geopolitics’ need to be clarified against the contemporary theoretical pedigrees underlining varying branding of the historicity of our epoch, which is also important for the further delineation of the relationship between the studies of world literature and geopolitics.

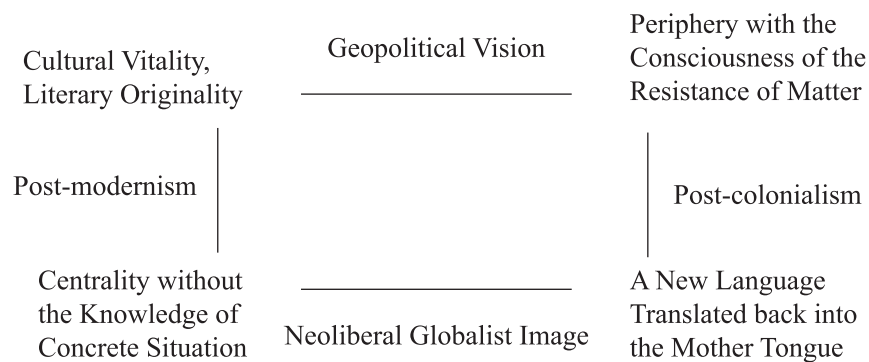
Let us consider the issue of geopolitics first. Geopolitics, as a vital perspective for arguments over international struggles centering upon their most intensive form, namely, the political struggles, in the think-tank circles as well as mass culture, originating at the end of the nineteenth century (Heffernan 27–30), bears with itself a rich heritage of the twentieth century, which crystallizes different modalities of worldwide contentions with their respective historicity. Most of the major concerns of D’haen over “an age of geopolitics,” such as the worldwide marginalization of Europe attributed to the overwhelming hegemon of US, “novel” perspective on intra-Europe relations with reference to the outside political wrangles, and the further stratification of the status of European states under the same pressure, perhaps beyond his expectations, also constituted the basic horizons yielding initial impetus for the emergence of the term “geo-politics” as a loosely defined perspective on “the complex relationships between geography and politics at a variety of spatial scales from the local to the global” (Heffernan 27–30). Besides, geopolitics is best known for serving the expansionism of fascism during World War II and, therefore, fall partly silent in disgrace since then, which, in a way, obscures the fact that it was also deployed by the anti-communists in the liberal camp who were anxious to spotlight the red alert on a global scale and the anti-dogmatists in the socialist camp as well as in the pan-left intellectual societies in the West who were intent upon developing a more realistic perspective on revolutionary mapping (see Sideway; Tuathail; Claval). In addition, since geopolitics is always related to the geographical basis of political problems that emerge from the relations between nations, the pertinence of geopolitics in the neoliberal context is testified not only by B. Anderson’s commitment to the reflection of the ideological origin of nationalism for which the Sino-Vietnamese war in the ebb tide of socialism indicated the primary problematic but also by regional wars following up in succession throughout the neoliberal period so far. In brief, the century-old tradition of geopolitics is, with no doubt, an energetic one, but also, as demonstrated above, an underlying one without any opportunity to mark an epoch and instead embodied in one or another technical agenda for the leading ideologies. Thus, in D’haen’s case, when the geopolitical perspective has been developed into plain codes as a formal narrative which is also an ideologeme labeling the epoch, its connotations

cannot be appropriately denoted by the aforementioned geopolitical tradition. Rather, the overtones are only for contemporaries of D'haen.

Nevertheless, the alteration of neoliberal international order from the 2000s to the 2010s, with the subprime crisis of the US as its turning point, offers a basic premise for the discussion of rationales behind the geopolitical figuration of the recent political conditions. The reflection upon Sino-US rivalry as one of the focuses of international relations in the volume could be captured as follow: the position of political, military, economic, and cultural hegemon of the US in the world, “after 9/11, the Anglo-American-led invasions and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan and their disastrous fall-out, the economic crisis of 2008, the Trump years in the U.S., and the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020” (9), must be open to question; “the concurrent rise of ‘the East’, in the first instance China, but with India close upon its heels” is bound to “‘re-orient’ the world, and hence also world maps, including the map of world literature” (10). In a sense, the age of geopolitics simply means the waning of the global dominance of the US. However, as the anti-globalism and postcolonialism, let alone the more specialized theses such as the Dependency Theory, pursue the same aim, why did one stick to a geopolitical story? One reason is that as a European comparatist, D'haen intended to promote a European vision of global mapping for which the equilibrium between the outdated hegemon of the US and the rise of the “global south” is definitely favorable for either the former or the latter equally exclude Europe from development resources (see 158–161). It is not to say that the underlying self-concern is unreasonable. On the contrary, it is quite reasonable, at least, but not at all because D'haen expressed genuine appreciation for Asia's rise. Besides the admirable good faith in a fairer world, there is even unexpected humbleness, which may undervalue the real power of Europe over international affairs. Anyway, the point is that geopolitics functions as a beneficial tool for Europe only if it is presented as anti-essentialist discourse, not unlike Damrosch's “detached engagement with world beyond our own place and time” (Damrosch 281), presupposing a communal reading of neoliberal milieu in which the age of geopolitics is supposed a neutralized temporal space of fair politico-cultural contentions, splitting all the stable connections between the signifier and the signified in the international ideological arena, which could be more apprehensible if one contrasts the geopolitical discourse with the postcolonialism and anti-globalism. Significantly, a vulgar-Marxist political judgment on the intention of D'haen is not relevant at all to our review here. Instead, as will be noted below, the annulment of the particular ideological signifying arcs is a crucial point by which a positive interpretation of D'haen's geopolitical model could be attained even though

it is not without any conditions.

For reflection upon the ideological tint of a neutralized literary world mapping, one could recall Emily Apter’s critique of Damrosch’s circulation model of world literature whose unavoidable English-tropism as “return of repressed” block its own universalist prospect. In fact, the representational crisis bothering Damrosch and many other comparatists had not better to be reckoned as a specific topic for translation studies but also as one symptom of a bigger theoretical issue for the broader domain of humanities and social sciences whose well-known symptoms include the crises of representative democracy, the anarchist chaos of minor-identity politics, the discussion about “the society of the spectacle,” and even the inspiring “African” dominance of French champion team in the FIFA world cup of 2018 (see Beydoun). It goes without saying that Fredric Jameson’s theory of postmodernism is one of the most influential explanations for the crisis in literary studies. Furthermore, the crisis of postcolonial representation, which tries to fix itself by turning to the “the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre” (Ashcroft et al. 38), has also been highlighted by A. Ahmad, who detailed the western ethnic-minority intellectual’s defunct representation of the third world and Jiang Hui 蒋晖 who regarded the postcolonialism as an ideological project proposed by US to substitute for the socialist cultural project which could be partly evidenced by the initial publication of *The Empire Writes Back* at 1989 which is the eve of the disintegration of the Eastern European socialist regimes as well as the Soviet Union. Thus, one could, in this case following Fredric Jameson, draw a semiotic cube concerning the four narratives of literary world mapping we have, namely, geopolitics, postmodernism, postcolonialism and the neoliberal globalism (see Figure 1).



(Figure 1. In this cube, four narratives occupy the four straight sides and their attributes take the four corners. It should be noted that every two attributes sharing a diagonal relationship are semantically opposite. Since each narrative possesses two attributes, the narratives respectively taking opposite lines have opposing

meanings. Then, supposing there is no geopolitical vision, the combination of “literary Originality” and “periphery” is quite impossible.)

For the geopolitical narrative D’haen promoted, the most important elaboration focus is the periphery of Europe in a world dominated by the American hegemon and the South-south cooperations, and “the great risk is that European literature will become meaningful to the world only in the past tense, as a has-been, or, [...] as a sort of museum to be appropriated piece-meal by more powerful and in the long run more affluent parts of the world, even to be rebuilt in the image other parts of the world have of Europe, adulterating whatever is ‘genuine’ in the old continent with simulacra fashioned in the imaginations of non-Europeans to the point where Europe, and its literature, become frozen in a time of nostalgia and a playground for newer and more relevant imaginations elsewhere with the power to truly move the world” (161).

It should be noted that the major reason for the marginalization of “the old continent” distinct from the inherent antinomies hidden in the modernization of postcolonial zones which need a new language, to wit the language of the center, to be translated back into the mother tongue, appears simply a misfortune, an effect of geopolitical vicissitude in the long run of development competition, having nothing to do with the European cultural capital itself. In fact, despite “the end of Western-dominated history” (see 157), it remains a serious possibility “for Europe to posit itself as mediator between the American West and the Asian East, not to insist on an immutable identity but to adapt to changing circumstances,” providing Europe makes every effort to pursue its own “soft power,” which means “playing to advantage Europe’s remaining cultural capital as the source of theory while making sure that whatever emanates from the old continent as theory is not inevitably filtered through U.S. academe” (161). In this manner, the geopolitical narrative shuns the representative crises of post-colonialism and post-modernism simultaneously. As we all know, one difference between post-modernism and post-colonialism is that the former features the literary originality and cultural vitality in the first world and the latter, as mentioned above, foregrounds the appropriation and reconstitution of new language from the center. Besides, their another distinction, according to Fredric Jameson, can be comprehended by Hegel’s master-slave relationship that only the slave, i.e. the peripheral subject, knows “what reality and the resistance of matter really are” and the master, i.e. the first world with its latest postmodernist spectacle worsening its own representational crisis but retaining its historical truth, is condemned to “the luxury of a placeless freedom in which

any consciousness of his own concrete situation flees like a dream” (Jameson 85). However, the geopolitical vision of “the old continent” surprisingly connects the peripheral location which could drive the general representational crisis off and the abundance of cultural production whose originality and vitality is out of question, and in this case, its opposition is exactly the neoliberal globalist image critiqued by Apter wherein the subject, dazzled in the omnipresent commercialization of local languages, confronts cultural barrenness and knows nothing about the concrete conditions around the world simultaneously. Thus, the geopolitical narrative relieves itself of the nightmare that always haunts other literary world mappings in the age: when the cultural production appears vigorous, the representational plausibility of consciousness falls into a shadow of the doubt; when the representational crisis disappears, the cultural production have to appropriate the language of the other, then the representational crisis would come back at the production level as “return of repressed;” under the extreme circumstance, the cultural subject and the production share the representational crisis side by side.

Now, it seems that the geopolitical vision of Europe solves the representational dilemma, except that there are two problems for the explanation: first, Jameson’s theory about third-world literature has confronted so many critiques that its own plausibility is dubious; then, the geopolitical vision is only an imaginary resolution of the real dilemma, which means that whatever happens the contradictions, in reality, are still the same, and the postmodernist dizziness for Europeans has not been eliminated. However, the two problems could be handled together. In a sense, Jameson’s theory about third-world literature aimed at the contrast between the postmodernist commercialized spectacle in the first world and the cultural production of the revolutionary century in the third world, which, in the conventional sense of the term, has disappeared nowadays and, therefore, must tackle its own aggravated representational crisis emerging from the proceedings of neoliberal reform. One contemporary neoliberal subject must have been accustomed to the microscopic interconnections of the first world and the third world, which might indicate the generalization of the second world (designated here according to Maoist as the semi-periphery capitalist zones), but also suggest widening gaps between the different blocks inside every small town. And only in this condition, the European cognitive mapping, or its geopolitical analysis of cultural mapping, could work out generally, yet it should also be noted that it only works out partially because the cultural logic of postmodernism still functions powerfully, though the third-world representation becomes also routinely visualized for the moment. Accordingly, in the European case, the representational crisis is alleviated to a fair

degree but not eliminated, which is illuminated by the fact that, at least, for the literary world mapping, geopolitical totality is only partially apprehensible.

More precisely, distinct from the comparatist predecessors like René Etiemble and Albert Guérard, who held an idealist view of the world literature universalized to embracing all the literatures around the world, D'haen's geopolitical examinations of the nearly realized all-embracing world literature implies a new episteme resembling difficult relations between the six sides of a Rubik's Cube: one local geopolitical vicissitude could bring about an unexpected effect upon another zone; at the general level, one geopolitical change on the planetary scale could produce an unintended consequence for a local environment, and vice versa. Indeed, it is an application of the postmodernist principle to world literature study for which the ungraspable totality could be measured in the following cases D'haen highlighted: in the US-American academic world, "many selections from Iberian Spanish literature serve to illustrate some other major text or issue related to Latin American," demonstrating the reversed "center-periphery relationship between the colonial mother country and the colonies" which "is twisted in the interest of and through the mediation of a third Party, in this case the U.S." (56); with a second thought, since there is always continental-internal inequality between several western European countries and the rest of Europe (see 159), the Iberian Spanish case is also an example of the exacerbation of inequality for the minor players of Europe when there are more players competing with each other for the limited exposure in literary world mappings whose universalization was initially supposed a promotion of equality; one more positive case is that although the low countries have never featured prominently in the discussions with European or world literature, the recent increased interest in Chinese history and culture results in a new academic interest in the Dutch literature as "Europe's primary entrepôt for information about Asia," which not only recognizes its "considerable significance for understanding early modern European culture generally" but also "change the perception of Dutch literature's weight in world literature terms" (150). In this way, the unpredictable side effects of geopolitical vicissitude on the varying scales seem to mirror the sophistication of a neoliberal world, which blends the first-world and third-world identities so that cognitive mapping can be pursued only if the status of accidental parameters gets acknowledged in advance.

For many Chinese comparatists, the most intriguing characteristic of D'haen's narrative is the overt subjectivity of Europe, which a contemporary western scholar tends to deny in order to claim a universal standpoint. In my opinion, D'haen's attempt is really commendable because only when a Westerner puts their

subjectivity positively into the world that they are trying to study, a non-Westerner like me could feel a real spiritual connection with them and picture that we live in one same world. In some senses, a natural pursuit of universalism is a message of peace, but a paranoid preoccupation with universalism might be a symptom of a formidable subjectivity, which is bound to return later. And I think it seems exactly the meaning of the aphorism that D'haen wrote down at the end of his book: "to be of the world and about the world in order to become a meaningful part of the world" (162).

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Author Profile:

Jiang Haitao is a PhD candidate at the School of Chinese Language and Literature, Beijing Normal University. His research interests include world literature studies and the intellectual and academic history of comparative literature. E-mail: h.t.jiang@foxmail.com