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Articles

From Earth's Quakes to Soul's Shakes: Ecological Trauma of Women in the Novels of Sichuan Writers A Lai and An Changhe

Ling Wang

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Abstract:

This article employs an ecological trauma theory to examine literary representations of seismic catastrophe in post-Wenchuan earthquake (2008) fiction. Focusing on two Sichuan authors who witnessed the catastrophe, it analyses the gendered dimensions of environmental devastation and recovery trajectories in A Lai's 阿来 *Yun zhong ji* 云中记 (In the Clouds, 2019) and An Changhe's 安昌河 *Duanlie dai* 断裂带 (Fault Zone, 2013). The study commences with a critical review of Wenchuan earthquake literature scholarship, establishing theoretical intersections between ecological trauma discourse and seismic narrative construction. Textual analysis reveals that A Lai's work embodies an animistic ecophilosophy and portrays ecological recovery through the female character's reintegration with both human community and nature. An's novel, conversely, exposes the complex socioecological environment of rural Sichuan and explores the multiple traumas shaping the female character's ecological resilience. The comparative examination posits that contemporary Sichuan writers articulate an eco-cosmological view predicated on deference to natural law and recognition of anthropo-ecological interdependence. By engaging with the ecological trauma experiences of marginalised women, the study identifies a tripartite recovery paradigm encompassing psychological reconstitution, communal reintegration, and environmental reciprocity. These insights advance theoreti-

cal discourse within disaster literary studies, simultaneously proposing innovative methodological frameworks for the analysis of ecological trauma narratives.

Keywords: ecological trauma, Wenchuan earthquake narrative, eco-recovery, female protagonist, Sichuan writers

Introduction

Chinese mythology, with tales such as "Jingwei Filling the Sea" (精卫填海),[1] "Houyi Shooting the Suns" (后羿射日), "Yu the Great Controlling the Waters" (大禹治水), and "Yugong Moving Mountains" (愚公移山), illustrates how Chinese civilisation perceived and interacted with the forces of nature. They serve as a testament to the enduring human spirit to understand, utilise, and sometimes reshape the natural world for survival and prosperity. Nevertheless, juxtaposed against these tales of mastery are the harsh realities of natural disasters, which reveal humanity's vulnerability.

China is situated at the intersection of the Pacific Rim's seismic belt and the Eurasian seismic belt, where seismic fault zones are highly developed. The country experiences frequent, intense, shallow, and widely distributed seismic activity, making it highly susceptible to earthquake disasters. Statistics indicate that approximately 35% of the world's continental earthquakes of magnitude 7.0 or above occur in China. In the twentieth century, out of the 1.2 million global deaths caused by earthquakes, 590,000 occurred in China. Between 1900 and 2007, mainland China experienced 70 earthquakes of magnitude 7.0 to 7.9 and six earthquakes of magnitude 8.0 or above (Zhang 577). Behind these stark figures lie countless lives threatened by these natural disasters. Sichuan Province, located in the mountainous region of southwestern China, frequently experiences significant seismic activities due to the uplift of tectonic plates. The most impactful event was the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, which was one of the deadliest and most devastating natural disasters in recent Chinese history.

On 12 May 2008, an 8.0-magnitude earthquake struck Wenchuan County in Si-

1 My translation. Hereafter, unless otherwise stated, all translations into English are my own.

chuan Province, resulting in over 69,000 deaths, 374,176 injuries, and 18,222 people reported missing. After the Wenchuan earthquake occurred, the extensive media coverage and the deepening rescue efforts plunged the entire nation into a state of mourning. Seismic events, with their overpowering, unpredictable, and profoundly destructive impact on human material civilisation, have sparked critical reflections. In contemporary Chinese literary narratives, seismic disasters have emerged as an important focus of disaster literature and prompted a surge in the genre's popularity in literary production and study.

This article investigates the attention to and portrayal of nature-induced trauma in contemporary Chinese literature, with a particular focus on narratives and literary works related to the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake. Drawing on definitions and applications of ecological trauma theory, this study identifies earthquakes as a tangible and formidable type of ecological trauma. By analysing and interpreting these narratives through the lens of ecological trauma theory, the article illuminates the broader implications of these catastrophic events. To provide a detailed analysis, the article centres on two earthquake novels: *Yun zhong ji* 云中记 (In the Clouds, 2019) by Tibetan writer A Lai 阿来 and *Duanlie dai* 断裂带 (Fault Zone, 2013) by Han Chinese writer An Changhe 安昌河.

Both authors, who hail from Sichuan Province, experienced the brutal earthquake and participated in the post-disaster relief efforts. Their novels reveal the destructive impact of catastrophic events on human health and society, as well as the indirect psychological challenges these disasters pose. Their works explore different ecological concepts and paths to ecological restoration. Notably, as male writers, their works critically theorise the intersection of gender and environmental vulnerability in ethnic minority contexts. Special attention is given to the complex, enduring, and heterogeneous ecological trauma experienced by young female characters in these novels.

This study identifies three interconnected pathways of ecological recovery in these female characters: personal growth, community integration, and environmental interaction. The analysis reveals how these Sichuanese writers articulate a distinct ecological consciousness through their narratives and demonstrate both respect for natural laws and an understanding of human-environment interdependence. By examining literary representations of ecological trauma and restoration, the research highlights literature's unique role in environmental discourse and its capacity to address ecological crises through narrative means.

The Wenchuan Earthquake-Related Narrative and Study in the Chinese Context

In contemporary Chinese literature, a diverse range of works explore the theme of earthquakes, with a large proportion of focus on the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake. The Wenchuan earthquake has received "immediate" and widespread attention due to extensive news coverage, an inclusive and empathetic societal environment, and the development of social media (Zhang Xi 93). Chinese writers express their concern for the Wenchuan earthquake through various literary forms that include reportage, poetry, novels, and essays.

Poetry stands out as the most prominent form of literary expression following the Wenchuan earthquake, with its timeliness, rapid response, and fervent emotion (Xie 32). Many poets vigorously illustrate the positive aspects of human nature and portray nurturing familial relationships, mutual assistance among compatriots, and the unity of government and the masses. For instance, in the poetry collection *Gan tian dong ti: Wenchuan da dizhen shige jiyi* 感天动地：汶川大地震诗歌记忆 (Touching Heaven and Earth: Poetry Memories of the Wenchuan Earthquake, 2008), accolades are given to mothers sacrificing for their children, teachers sacrificing for their students, soldiers risking their lives for rescue efforts, commoners donating money and supplies, and volunteers rushing to disaster areas (Dong 15). Subsequently, reportage literature and documentary works were published, including Zhu Yu's 朱玉 *Tiantang shang de yunduo* 天堂上的云朵 (Clouds in Heaven, 2008), Guan Renshan's 关仁山 *Gandong tiandi: Cong Tangshan dao Wenchuan* 感动天地：从唐山到汶川 (Touching the Heavens: From Tangshan to Wenchuan, 2008), and He Jianming's 何建明 *Cheli Sicheng: Beichuan ji shi* 撤离死城：北川纪事 (Evacuating the Dead City: Beichuan Chronicles, 2009). Reportage literature swiftly responds to the Wenchuan earthquake and vividly depicts the harrowing and tragic nature of the disaster with a strong sense of realism. (Peng and Zhang 249).

After the initial surge of the post-Wenchuan earthquake poetry, there was a shift towards novel writing, with over sixty novels published following a relatively long period of creative conception. For instance, Ge Dui's 歌兑 *Chelie* 坼裂 (Cracked, 2010), Qin Ling's 秦岭 *Touming de feixu* 透明的废墟 (Transparent Ruins, 2011), Zou Jin's 邹瑾 *Tian ru* 天乳 (Heaven's Milk, 2014), Li Xianyue's 李先钺 *Wo zai taohua mianqian kaifang* 我在桃花面前开放 (Peach Blooming Before Me, 2017), and Zhong Zhenglin's 钟正林 *Shan ming* 山命 (Mountain Life, 2021). Among these, A Lai's *Yun zhong ji* focuses on the living conditions of ethnic minorities in response to the development of modernisation and emphasises a strong ecological awareness of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature. An Changhe's

Duanlie dai meticulously describes the developmental changes in rural Sichuan from before the Great Tangshan earthquake (1976) to after the Wenchuan earthquake. It explores human psychological struggles and social interactions in the face of disaster. Although these two works do not feature women as the main characters, they both depict the contrasting experiences of female supporting characters before and after ecological trauma. The strength and intensity of this contrast make the women in these works the primary focus of this analysis.

The above overview of literary works on the Wenchuan earthquakes highlights two distinct characteristics of the contemporary Chinese earthquake narrative. Firstly, in terms of genre, contemporary Chinese earthquake literature demonstrates a developmental pattern that begins with poetry, dominated by reportage and documentary literature, and gradually transitions to fiction. Secondly, novels related to the Wenchuan earthquake focus on themes such as individual psychological trauma and growth, the development and challenges faced by minority regions, the complex experiences and psychological trauma of vulnerable groups, and the exploration of ecological and social construction. These works provide a broader platform for detailed earthquake narratives and character development. The creation of the novels goes beyond the narrative of political preference and social responsibility to incorporate post-earthquake realities and social issues. Novels therefore provide fertile ground for examining these issues via textual analysis.

In addition to the immense creative enthusiasm and literary achievements in contemporary Chinese literature regarding the Wenchuan earthquake, research and criticism in earthquake literature are also flourishing. Scholars have increasingly concentrated on works that explore the thematic depth, narrative techniques, and cultural significance of earthquake literature. It has led to a growing field of study that highlights the importance of such literature in understanding and commemorating the human experience of natural disasters. Building on the current research on Wenchuan earthquake literature, this article categorises the study into four key aspects.

The first aspect is theme-based research on earthquakes as part of natural disasters. For instance, Gao Mingyue integrates trauma theory to illuminate emotional expressivity in narratives centred around catastrophic events (123), while Zhang Tanghui explores the psychological impacts of natural disasters like earthquakes and the SARS epidemic (167). The second aspect involves analysing the characteristics of Chinese earthquake literature and the value of specific literary works. Scholars such as Ding Liuli, Zhang Siyuan, Wu Xueli, He Shaojun, and Song Binghui provide separate interpretations of A Lai's *Yun zhong ji*. They discuss various

aspects such as spiritual healing and the reconstruction of Tibetan rural life. Additionally, Zhang Yiting, Chen Jinxing, Yang Sen, Song Binhui, Liu Chengyong, and others have explored the trauma healing process and ecological consciousness in A Lai's works from the perspective of trauma studies and national identity recognition (130). The third category summarises and synthesises the narrative discourse patterns in Wenchuan earthquake literature, with a primary focus on the compilation of literary works post-earthquake. Peng Xiuyin and Zhang Tanghui note the diversity and social redemptive function of Wenchuan earthquake literature, despite its standardisation and embellishment (248). The aesthetic perspective research on earthquake and disaster literature constitutes the fourth category. Fan Zao and Jia Fei argue for a focus on the artistic aspect of contemporary disaster literature to achieve broader aesthetic innovation (172). Zhang Siyuan analyses the aesthetics of fear, sublimity, and homecoming in *Yun zhong ji* (95). Their works indicate a shift in disaster literature research to literary qualities and the aesthetic function of literature, rather than merely social functions or theoretical constructs.

These four categories of studies have inspired and provided feasible models for the analyses in this article, particularly in applying trauma theory and conducting close textual examinations. Trauma theory, in this context, refers to the framework used to analyse the psychological and emotional impact of traumatic events on individuals and communities. Its defining characteristics include the exploration of memory, representation, and the long-term effects of trauma. By incorporating ecological aspects into trauma theory, the analysis emphasises the interconnectedness between human experiences of trauma and environmental factors, enriching the study by considering the symbiotic relationship between humans and their environment. The next chapter will provide a detailed conceptualisation of ecological trauma and its interaction with earthquake narratives. In this article, ecological trauma theory is specifically applied to understand how the selected texts depict ecocrisis and its impact on individual experiences. The two selected novels, written post-earthquake, depict individual trauma, minority survival, and human-environment symbiosis, thereby aligning with ecological trauma theory. The analyses of these novels aim to fill the gap in ecological trauma studies.

Conceptualisation of Ecological Trauma and Its Interaction With Earthquake Narratives

Ecological trauma is an interdisciplinary concept that encompasses both the tangible environmental damage and the intangible psychological effects on individuals and communities. As the world faces unprecedented environmental challenges,

more and more attention has been paid to ecological crisis and environmental damage in literary works. Understanding and using the concept of ecological trauma to analyse literary works is crucial to the development of literary trauma research and helps foster resilience, promote healing, and chart a sustainable path forward. Moreover, the psychological impact of ecological trauma, characterised by its long duration, destructive nature, and significant individual differences, affects the normal lives of survivors. Due to the randomness of natural disasters, the psychological resilience of individuals or groups varies depending on their roles, leading to different degrees of psychological trauma (Lowe et al. 2). Consequently, post-traumatic stress disorder has become a common psychological illness, with natural disasters often causing severe and complex mental health issues, especially with recurring traumatic responses (Raise-Abdullahi et al. 1).

Nevertheless, the term "ecological trauma" or "eco-trauma" is not explicitly defined in a singular manner. Scholars from different disciplines touch upon the concept of ecological trauma and its implications, particularly in the realm of psychology. American psychologist Tina Alice Amorok presents the concepts of "eco-trauma," "eco-being," and "eco-recovery of being" (28). From her perspective, eco-trauma refers to the deep and lasting damage inflicted upon ecosystems, often resulting from human interventions and threatening the survival of humans in return (29). This raises the question: Can seismic events be categorised under ecological trauma, given their natural origin yet profound impact on ecosystems and human societies? It is undeniable that earthquakes are a type of natural disaster. While there is no empirically established direct causal relationship between human activities and seismic events, it is imperative that research encompassing various aspects of earthquakes, including literary narratives, acknowledges the complex interplay between human beings and the natural environment. The interplay bears heightened significance following the earthquake, in which secondary calamities need mitigation and rehabilitation and reconstruction processes are required.

This perspective is in line with the findings of social scientists, such as Shannon Doocy, Maria Mavrouli, and Shuo Wang, who discuss the impacts of natural disasters on human populations and illuminate aspects in relation to mortality, injury, and displacement (Doocy et al.). These scholars' research also explores how earthquakes affect public health and highlights their significance as ecological traumas, and examines the psychological aftermath of such events (Wang et al.). The multifaceted interplay of geographical factors, religious beliefs, cultural dynamics, historical legacies, and prevailing social norms invariably forges a symbiotic connection between earthquakes and distinct societal cohorts. Consequently, from the

aspect of both psychology and social science, the seismic occurrence emerges as an unequivocal exemplar of one of the most overt manifestations of ecological trauma. This perturbation not only leaves an enduring imprint on the collective psyche but also engenders indelible trauma within specific cultural milieus and literary representations that underscore the seismic event's profound ecological ramifications.

From trauma theory, the interpretation of contemporary Chinese earthquake narratives presents an essential issue for discussion. Many scholars have positioned trauma as a pivotal motif within contemporary Chinese literary and cultural analyses. Among these are influential scholars like David Der-Wei Wang, Ban Wang, Yomi Braester, Michael Berry, and Karen Laura Thornber. Their investigations scrutinise the reinterpretation and representation of historical trauma within the realms of Chinese literature, cinema, and mainstream culture. Some of them also express concerns about environmental issues. For instance, Karen Thornber's concept of ecoambiguity explores "the complex, contradictory interactions between humans and the environments with a significant nonhuman presence" (1). She argues that the ambiguous combination of human actions and non-human processes has altered the world's ecosystems, which makes global environmental crises inevitable (2). Her perspective provides a dialectical approach to discussing ecological awareness in contemporary Chinese literary earthquake narratives.

Ecological trauma theory effectively explains the indelible harm caused by extreme ecological events to both the Earth's ecosystem and the human psyche, thus providing theoretical insights into traumatic narratives in disaster literature. However, as a branch of trauma theory, ecological trauma theory is not sufficiently integrated with literary and cultural studies in China. This study redefines the ecological trauma narratives of Sichuan writers who experienced the Wenchuan earthquake. By analysing their works, the study reveals the complex and contradictory interplay between literature, personal ecological trauma experiences, and environmental crises. This perspective of ecological trauma theory not only aids in understanding the ecological dimensions of contemporary Chinese literature but also emphasises how it reflects and responds to trauma in the context of environmental crises.

The two novels selected for analysis differ in popularity and critical reception: one is widely acclaimed for its ecological writing about ethnic minorities, while the other, written in the Sichuan dialect and focusing on the rural ecological environment of Sichuan, has yet to receive extensive discussion in domestic and international literary circles. Both novels focus on marginalised groups, presenting different ecological viewpoints that merit comparative study.

Furthermore, this study focuses on the ecological trauma experiences of young female characters in these two novels and their paths to ecological recovery. It proposes a tripartite model of ecological trauma recovery—self, social, and environmental—emphasising the importance of self-awareness and self-redemption in the process of ecological trauma recovery. The two female characters, who have experienced complex ecological traumas, inevitably confront the relationship between ecological disasters and the maintenance of natural and social ecosystems in their healing journey. As Amorok states, ecological trauma represents collective harm experienced by eco-beings within both "a cosmological and an experiential realm" (29). Ecological trauma is related to social values, post-disaster policies, ethical and religious beliefs, and family concepts. This necessitates exploring therapeutic possibilities in the ecological domain. In the novels, women not only encounter profound fear of death and acute perception of pain during earthquakes but also endure emotional damage and social abandonment as members of vulnerable groups in Chinese patriarchal society. Therefore, a female-centred research perspective can explore the intersection of gender and environmental issues by examining the roles of women and nature as the 'other,' which enriches the discourse on ecological trauma.

1. Ecological Trauma in *Yun zhong ji*: The Contradictory Modernity of Ethnic Minorities

A Lai, a prominent Tibetan writer from the Gyarong Tibetan ethnic group (嘉绒藏族) that inhabits the Aba Prefecture, Sichuan Province, has established himself as a versatile and prolific figure in contemporary Chinese literature. His literary works span over three decades, encompassing diverse genres such as poetry, short fiction, novels, and essays. A Lai's work, particularly his novel *Chen'ai luoding* 尘埃落定 (Red Poppies, 2000),[2] has received critical acclaim, including the prestigious Mao Dun Literature Prize (茅盾文学奖). His writing often investigates the complexities of Tibetan life and culture and offers ecological perspectives on social changes in the Tibetan region. The narrative style of A Lai blends traditional Tibetan elements with modern literary techniques and creates compelling and culturally rich stories.

Ten years after the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, as a survivor who experienced the earthquake and participated in the rescue, A Lai completed the novel, *Yun zhong ji* against the background of the destructive earthquake. The story takes place in Yunzhong, which translates to "in the clouds," a Tibetan village on the western Sichuan Plateau that has existed for thousands of years. The earthquake killed more

2 The English title of the book was translated by Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-Chun Lin.

than a hundred people in the village, while the threat of potential landslides forced villagers to move to new government housing in the plains below to mingle with Han Chinese. The novel discusses the resilience and transformation of the Tibetan villagers as they confront the realities of loss and change. It stands as a poignant reflection on the themes of survival, cultural identity, rural modernity and the human spirit in the face of adversity. Building on the discussion of A Lai's special animistic ecological perspective, the following sections will further analyse the ecological trauma experienced by the young Tibetan woman Yang Jin in the aftermath of the earthquake. By examining the profound changes in her life and the impact of modernisation on her psyche, the analysis aims to elucidate the pressures and challenges faced by ethnic minorities, particularly minority women, as a result of ecological crises. Through a close reading of *Yun zhong ji*, this article argues that the author's depiction of how environmental issues intertwine with cultural customs, beliefs, and social norms contributes to a better understanding of the complex relationship between ecological and cultural issues in Chinese society.

1.1 The Animistic Ecological Perspective in A Lai's Earthquake Narrative

The concepts of equality among all living beings and the animistic belief that all things possess a spirit are ecological principles prominently reflected in many of A Lai's works. In his literary works, A Lai consistently integrates these themes to show the interconnectedness of existence and the intrinsic value of every entity in the natural world. This philosophical stance not only enriches his narratives but also provides a profound commentary on the need for ecological balance and ethical considerations in the face of modern environmental challenges. In *Yun zhong ji*, every entity is imbued with spirit and divinity. The ancient cypress tree, sacred mountains, irises, larks, deer, and horses of Yunzhong village are depicted as remnants of natural divinity. These elements enhance the mystical beauty of the village and represent a modern legacy of nature's sacredness.

The history of Yunzhong village unfolds through the memories of the village shaman, A Ba. Over a thousand years ago, their nomadic ancestors settled in this lush, naturally bountiful area. Adherents of the Bön religion revered mountain gods and nature. Be that as it may, over centuries, some indigenous communities assimilated with other residents, altering their beliefs, abandoning traditions, and even exploiting natural resources for profit. The change led to a division in the village, with only a few remaining in their ancestral homes, albeit influenced by modern education and societal development. The earthquake shattered the last vestiges of their resistance, rendering their ecological environment unsuitable for pastoral life. They

were compelled to leave their village and fully adapt to modern life.

From the pre-earthquake impact of modernisation on this ancient Tibetan village to the catastrophic disruption of their settled lifestyle, the narrative of A Lai transitions from the sorrow and helplessness of disaster to the theme of rebirth from the ruins. Yunzhong village, having endured the earthquake, emerges under nature's sculpting hand with vibrant vitality. The transformation begins with various plants reclaiming the land. Abandoned farmlands gradually become occupied by wild grasses, chrysanthemums, and willows. Subsequently, animals manifest their presence in a miraculous manner. Notably, deer—a species typically restricted to zoos in modern China—are now observed roaming freely. Finally, the human element is embodied in A Ba, who voluntarily returns to Yunzhong village. Living in a state of contented inaction, he finds joy in this existence, where humans and nature coalesce into a harmonious ecological landscape. Having faced the merciless disaster, A Ba returns to the village with a heartfelt appreciation for its current state, free from the shadow of death, where all life flourishes (A Lai 240). In *Yun zhong ji*, the ecological perspective that all beings are spirited and equal permeates throughout. The protagonist, the priest A Ba, upon returning to the rejuvenated ruins, not only heals his own trauma but also consoles the surviving villagers through a series of religious ceremonies honouring the deceased and pacifying the spirits. Tina Amorok also agrees with innate animism. She acclaims that, 'Ecological worldviews effectively peel back the layers of modern civilization's alienation from nature and animals and from the intimate facts of both our interdependence and our natural impulse toward interspecies reverence and communion' (29). A Lai's narrative, through the story of A Ba, allows readers to witness the healing power of nature

The earthquake's destruction of Yunzhong village's ecological environment and the rapid advancement of material society posed substantial challenges for the survivors. These challenges encompassed not only the trauma of the earthquake, the loss of loved ones, and physical injuries but also the conflicting feelings of nostalgia for their old life and anticipation for their new one. A Lai investigates how commercialism has redefined urban-rural relationships and its implications on traditional values. A Lai's narrative transcends mere depictions of the Tibetan environment, culture, and history. His work not only highlights the environmental and cultural upheavals faced by ethnic minorities but also contributes to further discussions on ecological justice and cultural resilience in the face of modernisation.

The eco-traumatic experiences of Yang Jin serve as a poignant case study for examining the effects of forced rapid development on agro-pastoral ways of life. By illustrating Yang Jin's journey, A Lai underscores the tension between preserv-

ing cultural heritage and adapting to modernity. The subsequent section explores the challenge faced by ethnic minority females as they navigate the complexities of ecological disruption, eco-trauma and cultural preservation amidst the pressures of modernity.

1.2 Yang Jin's Journey: The Two Returns in Eco-Trauma Recovery

In *Yun zhong ji*, the Tibetan girl Yang Jin plays a minor role within the grand narrative of the earthquake and its unique ecological perspective. Unlike the protagonist A Ba, her narrative arc is less central, yet it serves as a poignant vehicle for exploring ecological trauma through concise and evocative portrayals. Prior to the earthquake, Yang Jin leads an idyllic existence in Yunzhong Village, residing harmoniously with her parents and younger brother. Her passion for dance, cultivated through years of training in traditional ethnic dance forms, embodies her aspirations for artistic expression and her dream of performing on a grand stage. However, the seismic catastrophe irrevocably alters her life. Her family perishes beneath the rubble, and a collapsing beam severs her leg, leaving it precariously attached by mere tissue. The simultaneous loss of her family and the destruction of her dance ambitions plunge her into profound despair, nearly extinguishing her will to survive. Trapped beneath the debris, she repeatedly implores her rescuers, "I want to die, my whole family is dead, I want to die. My leg is broken, I can never dance again, I want to die" (A Lai 330). In a harrowing act of desperation, she severs her own injured leg, only to be discovered by military personnel, airlifted to a metropolitan hospital, and subsequently treated. With societal support, she embarks on a new phase of life, albeit one marked by profound physical and emotional scars.

Despite the narrative's brevity in depicting Yang Jin's ordeal, it effectively encapsulates the multifaceted adversities faced by a young woman grappling with ecological trauma and its enduring repercussions. Although the loss of her leg renders her physically impaired, Yang Jin attracts the attention of an art management company, which seeks to transform her into a symbol of resilience—a female dancer with disability who has triumphed over the earthquake's devastation. The company imposes stringent demands on her physical appearance, exploiting her striking visual contrast of beauty and disability to garner public sympathy and commercial profit. Under the company's sponsorship, Yang Jin undergoes rehabilitation and eventually performs dances on television using a prosthetic limb. This demonstrates her determination to transcend her circumstances and achieve her artistic ambitions in an urban setting, albeit through unconventional means.

Yang Jin's post-earthquake journey includes two returns to Yunzhong village,

the site of her ecological trauma. Her initial return is organised by the company, which employs drone footage to document her performance amidst the ruins of her former home. This staged performance is designed to elicit emotional resonance and enhance her appeal in an upcoming dance competition. The text explicitly delineates the company's calculated orchestration: "At this moment, the drone is still in the sky, its camera wide open. The girl's performance in front of her home's ruins is also designed; she must stand there, desperately restrain her sorrow, and then finally lose control, collapse, and cry on the ground" (A Lai 331). Despite the meticulously planned nature of the event, Yang Jin's emotional turmoil and traumatic memories overwhelm her, which culminates in her fainting beside the ruins. In this moment, she disregards the camera's presence and finds solace in the natural environment of Yunzhong village and the comforting embrace of its villagers. Her transition from unconsciousness to a rare, peaceful sleep underscores the enduring connection between her identity, the community, and the environment. However, upon awakening, she is compelled to confront the contractual obligations imposed by the company, which necessitated her departure from the village and the instrumentalisation of her trauma for competitive gain.

Within the framework of commercial consumerism, Yang Jin's journey exemplifies a dualistic reality. On one level, the financial and material support she receives enables her to pursue her personal and artistic aspirations. On another level, her identity is commodified, with her status as a female orphan, her act of self-amputation, and the juxtaposition of her beauty and disability becoming marketable attributes. The exploitation has severe implications for her mental health, as it intensifies her trauma rather than facilitating true healing. As Arthur W. Frank observes in his analysis of illness and trauma narratives, the commercialisation of personal suffering often perpetuates cycles of relived trauma, impeding authentic recovery (101). Yang Jin's experience vividly illustrates this dynamic, underscoring the complex interplay between resilience, exploitation, and the enduring impact of ecological and personal catastrophe.

Yang Jin's second return to Yunzhong village occurs at a critical juncture in her life, marked by deteriorating health and an almost unsustainable existence. During the dance competition, Yang Jin struggles to find her rhythm in dance again as "she falls ill with a fever and nightmares, reminiscent of her difficult recovery in the rehabilitation centre. She is hospitalised, delirious, and longing for a home she no longer has" (A Lai 375). Frequently tormented by nightmares, as if trapped in ruins, "Yang Jin finds herself voiceless in her dreams, as if her throat is gripped by a giant grey hand" (A Lai 374). This state renders her daily life and competition participa-

tion nearly impossible. Eventually, Ultimately, Yang Jin returns to the newly constructed community where earthquake survivors have been resettled. Reunited with her former neighbours and those who shared the earthquake experience, they sing ancient songs together, mourning the lost Yunzhong village.

In the context of a consumer culture dominated by a commodity economy, nothing is beyond exchange. Under economic principles, even the disasters and traumas people experience can be commodified and sold as stories. Conversely, amidst her beloved ones, "She rhythmically sways her body to the song. Rhythm, rhythm, she has found the rhythm of her life's dance" (A Lai 382). The words, "sways her body to the song" are a poignant depiction of her reconnection with her cultural roots and the collective memory of her community. This moment symbolises her gradual healing and the restoration of her identity, which has been fractured by the traumatic experience of the earthquake. From her initial return driven by commercial motives to her subsequent initiative and voluntary return to the community, Yang Jin's experiences align with Judith Herman's theory of trauma and recovery. The theory outlines a progression from active self-awareness and the confrontation of trauma to reintegration into the community and the formation of emotional connections. It underscores the significance of self-help efforts and community engagement (Herman 90-97). Upon her return to her familiar natural environment and social network, Yang Jin experiences a sense of inner peace and solace.

Yang Jin's transformation also embodies A Lai's concept of animistic ecology, a philosophical perspective that venerates the interconnectedness of all living beings. Her psychological well-being and recovery from eco-trauma are intrinsically linked to her proactive attempts to escape commercial exploitation, as well as her reintegration into the rural community inhabited by ethnic minorities and the natural environment that began to recover after the earthquake. The juxtaposition of the traumatic effects of the earthquake and the exploitation of women through commodification and objectification brought about by modern consumerism underscores a critical commentary on the disruptive forces of contemporary life. Her return highlights the unique experiences of eco-trauma from a female perspective and the attempts at ecological recovery following the awakening of self-rescue awareness.

The multifaceted nature of individual responses to ecological trauma reflects the complexity of human experiences in the face of environmental crises. Understanding these diverse responses is crucial for developing effective strategies for ecological restoration and personal healing. The upcoming section of this study focuses on An Changhe's *Duanlie dai*, which tells the story of a girl from rural Si-

chuan experiencing an ecological crisis following an earthquake and embarking on a journey of self-redemption and resilient growth. A detailed analysis of this novel provides a profound insight into the self-redemptive power manifested by women amidst ecological crises, as well as the influence of compound ecological trauma on individual development.

2. Forged by Adversity: The Eco-Trauma and Self-Rescue of Qin Sihui

In contrast to the idyllic and pastoral life depicted in the Tibetan village of *Yun zhong ji*, an ethnic Han, An Changhe presents a starkly different portrayal of rural life. His narrative, although infused with a profound reliance on and affection for nature, reveals the bitter, indifferent, and even cruel aspects of village life in South China. In the 1970s, born in An County, Sichuan, An Changhe left school early due to poverty and became a child labourer in a Shanxi coal mine. After experiencing life-and-death situations while working, he returned to his hometown to farm, teach himself to write, and eventually work as a reporter and editor at the county television station. His literary works poignantly capture the painful experiences of his childhood in the countryside, as well as the trauma encountered during his formative years.

Unlike A Lai, An Changhe remains a relatively unfamiliar name in both Chinese and international literary circles. Currently, there is only one monograph and few articles on his novels in mainland Chinese academia. Nevertheless, An Changhe is a prolific writer who has authored over ten novels, four of which have been adapted into films, with two already released. Through his extensive oeuvre, comprising over three million characters, An Changhe has constructed a unique depiction of Sichuan's rural landscape, encapsulated in the triad of *Qin cun*秦村 (Qin Village), *Tu zhen* 土镇 (Tu Zhen), and *Ai cheng* 爱城 (Love City). In this landscape, the enduring themes are suffering, hunger, interpersonal strife, overt and covert conflicts, and the pervasive darkness of human nature, all permeated by death (Guo and Wang, 22). Rather than expressing nostalgia for the simplicity of rural life and nature, An Changhe's narratives convey a raw aversion to rural suffering.

Scholars argue that An Changhe's earlier works discuss themes of moral ambiguity and existential turmoil, but in his more recent writings, An Changhe grapples with reconciling individual ethical dilemmas with societal questions (Guo and Wang, "Journeying through human darkness" 49-50). *Duanlie dai*, situated in the later phase of An Changhe's literary career, exemplifies this thematic evolution. It leverages the seismic metaphors of two earthquakes to unfold familial conflicts and grievances entrenched in personal ambitions and societal pressures. Through the

narrative arc of *Duanlie dai*, An Changhe not only describes the development and change process of intergenerational estrangement caused by earthquakes but also presents the impact of intergenerational trauma on the next generation. The thematic exploration ultimately culminates in themes of personal liberation, self-redemption and spiritual elevation, which reflect An Changhe's profound engagement with the human condition and the quest for a harmonious socioecological environment. Furthermore, Qin Sihui's journey of self-redemption is a central theme in the novel, which showcases the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. Through Sihui's story, An Changhe explores themes of endurance, resilience, and the pursuit of meaning in a challenging and unforgiving world.

2.1 Intergenerational Trauma and Socioecological Disparities During Two Earthquakes in *Duanlie dai*

As one of An Changhe's representative works, *Duanlie dai* portrays life in Qin Village, located in the Longmen Mountain Fault Zone of Sichuan Province, southwestern China. Against the backdrop of this geographical feature, the novel describes a society rife with violence, desires, and contradictions through the experiences and emotions of its villagers. Central to the narrative are the complicated relationships among the villagers, who face various survival and moral dilemmas. These include multifaceted emotional entanglements such as family bonds, friendships, love, hatred, loyalty, and betrayal. The narrative of *Duanlie dai* focuses on the stories of two rural families, the An and Qin families. The story begins with the national frenzy and upheaval surrounding earthquake prediction following the 1976 Tangshan earthquake and traces the experiences of the An and Qin families. It continues through to the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake, capturing the experiences of the second generation of these families. By linking these two major seismic events, the narrative spans over thirty years and records the life experiences of two generations. This period signifies China's shift from a relatively isolated and closed sociopolitical and economic environment prior to the Reform and Opening Up (from 1978) to a more inclusive and ecologically harmonious development paradigm in the new millennium.

Duanlie dai employs distinctive dialects that authentically capture the socioecological transformations within Sichuan's rural landscape. The novel vividly depicts the typical social landscape of the Sichuan countryside at the time of the Tangshan earthquake, which concentrates on aspects such as the community's response to frequent geological disasters, the collective agricultural practices, the challenges of poor material and spiritual life, and the persistence of traditional social concepts.

The first generation of the two families depicted in the novel comprises the witnesses of the Songpan Pingwu earthquake (in Sichuan) and of the following Great Tangshan earthquake in the same year. They endured the tense political environment and stringent ideological control during the Great Tangshan earthquake. Government directives on earthquake prediction, prevention, and other measures related to the Tangshan earthquake were perceived as prohibition that disrupted normal agricultural and daily activities. They faced the deaths of relatives and friends, loss of property, and the threat of secondary disasters such as mudslides and landslides after the earthquake. These experiences left indelible trauma that affected their lives for years to come, even impacting the next generation. For example, in the story, Qin Fengtai, the patriarch of the Qin family, gains status and income by building sturdy earthquake-resistant houses and becoming the local earthquake predictor in Qin Village. Yet, this also makes him many enemies, and he is eventually murdered. The ongoing threat of earthquakes and his death deal a double blow to his children. Meanwhile, the An family suffers severe consequences from living in an outdoor earthquake shelter for an extended period. The wife develops serious gynaecological issues affecting her reproductive health. After much difficulty and religious devotion, they finally conceive a child, whom they regard as a lifeline for their future and place immense family pressure on the next generation. Although the descendants of the Qin and An families did not face direct life-threatening dangers from the earthquake, their lives were overshadowed by the severe impact the earthquake had on their parents. Their experiences not only resonate with the preceding discussion in this article on whether earthquakes can be classified as ecological trauma triggers but also underscore that the psychological trauma, family environment, and social attitudes following the earthquake collectively form the root of ecological trauma. The eco-trauma experience of the second generation in the novel also provides an interpretation of intergenerational trauma.

In the science of medicine, intergenerational trauma is defined as "a discrete process and form of psychological trauma transmitted within families and communities" (Isobel, Goodyear et al. 1100). It occurs "when traumatic effects are passed across generations without exposure to the original event' (Isobel, McCloughen et al. 631). It can be passed down through attachment relationships where the parent has endured relational trauma, profoundly affecting individuals across their lifespan and making them more susceptible to additional trauma. In the novel, intergenerational trauma is conveyed through the depiction of the earthquake as a devastating ecological disaster affecting the two generations. The profound fear that the first generation experienced due to the earthquake inevitably influenced the second gen-

eration during their upbringing. This trauma is transmitted in various ways, such as psychological distress, altered family dynamics, and changes in social behaviour. The fear and anxiety of the first generation become internalised by the second generation, which leads to a pervasive sense of vulnerability and instability. The novel illustrates how trauma can transcend immediate physical and temporal boundaries, shaping the experiences and identities of subsequent generations. Through its narrative approach, the enduring legacy of natural disasters is poignantly depicted.

While the ecological environment may eventually recover, with houses being rebuilt and natural resources regenerating, the psychological wounds left by an ecological crisis are far more difficult to quantify. The physical restoration of the environment cannot erase the deep-seated trauma experienced by individuals who have lived through such disasters. Moreover, the lingering effects of such trauma can alter community dynamics, disrupt social cohesion, and influence cultural narratives. The memory of the disaster becomes a collective experience that shapes community identity and resilience. The next section will focus on the growth journey of Qin Sihui as she navigates the ecological intergenerational trauma inherited from her parents and then her own eco-trauma. The analysis of Qin Sihui's story will illustrate how an eco-traumatic experience can simultaneously hinder and fortify an individual's psychological fortitude.

2.2 The Ecological Resilience in the Transformative Journey of Qin Sihui in *Duanlie dai*

Duanlie dai provides a comparative portrayal of the second-generation rural inhabitants whose lives have undergone considerable advancements both materially and spiritually when contrasted with the relatively backward and feudal conditions prevalent in the 1970s. These individuals have gained access to better education and have grown up in more favourable environments. Despite these improvements, they remain considerably constrained by the persistent threats of natural disasters and enduringly conservative social attitudes. The dichotomy illuminates the ongoing struggles within rural communities, where progress is uneven and often hindered by entrenched social and ecological challenges. The narrative highlights the plight of women, who form a particularly vulnerable segment of this population.

The character Sihui, the fourth child in the Qin family, exemplifies the challenges faced by these women. Sihui's early life is overshadowed by an arranged marriage to An Wen, even before her birth. An Wen is perceived as a divine figure who is supposed to change the lives of both the Qin and An families. She is seduced by An Wen to engage in sex, which leads to an unintended pregnancy and severe

social stigma. The author describes the impact of this event on Sihui as follows: "She became very thin, very thin, as if she had died once" (An 150). However, to protect An Wen, she falsely claims to have been raped, resulting in her and her family's dishonour within the village. With the support of her teacher, Sihui relocates to continue her education, only to face further abuse and exploitation by the headmaster's mother and a local gangster. In a tragic turn, she accidentally causes the death of the headmaster's mother during a confrontation, which the gangster helps cover up. With this "help," she is able to sit for the university entrance examination and gain admission on one hand. On the other hand, this placed her under the long-term control of the gangster, which stripped her of her freedom. Choosing to study geology, Sihui returns to her hometown after graduation. She proposes relocating the county seat to avoid future seismic risks, but her suggestions are dismissed due to political interests. Despite her young age, she has already endured many hardships, and her future remains uncertain.

The character Qin Sihui presents a poignant life trajectory, deeply marked by various types and degrees of complex trauma. Firstly, Sihui's upbringing is profoundly shaped by intergenerational trauma, which originates from her parents' deep-seated fear of earthquakes. As her father is an earthquake forecaster, Sihui's childhood is spent in makeshift shelters in the wilderness, a precautionary measure against potential seismic threats. Her father's frequent absences further exacerbate the family's instability, leaving them without adequate care and forcing Sihui to assume excessive household chores and farm work to support the family. This premature burden of adult responsibilities results in a childhood marred by persistent anxiety and an overwhelming fear of natural disasters. Although none of Sihui's relatives perishes directly due to the earthquake, her father's death shortly thereafter compounds the family's grief. The psychological and practical pressures inflicted by the earthquake undoubtedly intensify the family's hardships, reinforcing Sihui's conviction that earthquakes are the root cause of her family's misfortunes and deepening her dread of such catastrophes. Sihui is compelled to confront not only her own fears but also the unspoken and unresolved emotional burdens inherited from her parents. These specific experiences illuminate the origins of Sihui's tragic early life and underscore the profound impact of intergenerational trauma on her development.

Furthermore, Sihui's trauma is compounded by the oppressive gender norms perpetuated by the patriarchal society in which she lives. Her parents arrange her marriage to An Wen before she is born, believing him to be the "chosen one" who will deliver the family from post-earthquake suffering and poverty. Under this ar-

rangement, An Wen's personal preferences and reputation are prioritised over Sihui's autonomy. That leads her to endure humiliation during high school and nearly forfeit her opportunity to attend university, all to safeguard An Wen's standing. In other words, Sihui's trauma is multifaceted, yet these experiences are often eclipsed by her pervasive fear of earthquakes, which intertwines the pivotal moments of her life with seismic events. Shortly after the proposal to relocate the county was rejected, her hometown was devastated by the Wenchuan earthquake. Under the dual influence of intergenerational and gender-based trauma, Sihui experiences this ecological trauma, further entrenching her struggles within a broader context of societal and environmental upheaval.

Following the earthquake, Sihui is confronted with the overwhelming devastation of the natural disaster, which ultimately becomes a catalyst for her to defy her predetermined fate. Drawing on her professional expertise, she actively engages in the reconstruction efforts of her hometown. By the end of the novel, the immediate devastation begins to subside, a new county seat is under construction, and the local community exhibits signs of renewal. There is even a suggestion that Sihui and An Wen might reconcile and rekindle their relationship. However, in an unexpected and pivotal turn of events, Sihui chooses to confront a long-buried mistake from her youth—the accidental death of the headmaster's mother—and voluntarily surrenders herself to face legal consequences. This decisive act marks a profound moment of self-identity and redemption, as she confronts her inner scars with newfound resilience. Through this courageous act of accountability, Sihui not only seeks atonement but also achieves a sense of inner peace, symbolising her journey towards self-redemption and emotional healing.

From the perspective of eco-trauma theory, Qin Sihui's experiences illuminate the interconnectedness of environmental disasters and personal trauma. An Changhe uses the term "fault zone" (*duanlie dai* 断裂带) as a double entendre to express both the geological changes caused by the earthquake and the psychological fractures experienced by Sihui after her eco-trauma experience. As Sihui says in the novel: "I have studied the fault zone for so many years, yet I never discovered the major fault zone within my heart" (An 311). Sihui's story accentuates the compounded oppressions faced by women in a patriarchal society. She is constrained by familial, societal, and political systems, which parallels the damage inflicted on natural ecosystems by human activity. Eco-trauma, as discussed by Anil Narine, often elicits three primary responses: initially, an attempt to confront it, which may falter due to its overwhelming nature; secondly, a tendency to disavow it; and thirdly, an effort to derive meaning from it as a coping mechanism. Importantly, the meaning

derived may not align with the actual causes of the trauma (Narine 5). Sihui's experience of ecological trauma encapsulates all these reactions and underscores the complexity of responses to overwhelming stimuli.

Faced with the immediate aftermath of the Wenchuan earthquake, Qin Sihui confronts her fears head-on. The novel details the female character's internal struggle and gradual realisation of her strength. This process of confronting and overcoming her trauma stresses the dual impact of ecological trauma. On one hand, it highlights the profound and lasting psychological damage such events can inflict. On the other hand, it reveals the potential for personal growth and empowerment that can arise from facing and overcoming such adversities. Influenced by intergenerational eco-trauma, she proactively studies seismology. After experiencing eco-trauma firsthand, she courageously confronts her past mistakes. Her development exemplifies a progressive understanding of eco-trauma and serves as a direct confrontation and positive response to the dual oppression of nature and society. Through Qin Sihui's story, *Duanlie dai* illustrates how the shadow of ecological trauma can loom over generations, influencing their mental and emotional well-being. Yet, it also emphasises the capacity for recovery and resilience, suggesting that individuals can find strength and courage within themselves, even in the face of overwhelming fear and uncertainty.

Compared with Yang Jin in the previously discussed novels, although both suffered misfortune due to earthquakes, Sihui's ecological trauma differs from that of Yang Jin. Yang Jin finds herself lost in the rapid process of modernisation and commercialisation following the aftermath. Sihui finds this catastrophe a source of strength for her to confront her shattered life and face the traumas of her youth. Her newfound strength can be seen as a form of ecological resilience, where the traumatic experience leads to personal growth and a reconfiguration of her identity in relation to the natural world. Sihui's journey enriches the study of young female characters dealing with eco-trauma induced by earthquakes. Her experience challenges the notion of women as passive victims of environmental catastrophe and social oppression; instead, she is portrayed as an active agent of change who reclaims her agency in the face of adversity. This duality not only enriches the narrative but also provides a positive perspective on the human capacity to endure and grow from ecological catastrophes.

The complexity and individual heterogeneity of harm caused by earthquakes, as captured by the two novels, offer a deeper understanding of ecological trauma. Ecological trauma, exemplified by Yang Jin's linkage to commercial consumerism exploitation and Qin Sihui's association with patriarchal gender discrimination, tran-

scends mere natural disaster-induced injuries and represents a tightly interwoven series of complex harms. It is a series of compounded traumas initiated by natural disasters, intertwined with social ecology and emotional ties unique to each individual (Morganstein and Ursano 1). Through the depiction of ecological trauma in the novel, it is clear that the treatment of ecological trauma also faces critical challenges. This process demands an integrated examination of multiple facets within the social ecology framework. In other words, it involves not only understanding the environmental impact but also recognising the interconnectedness of social systems and individual experiences (Metin Başoğlu et al. 396). The earthquake narratives of A Lai and An Changhe prove that addressing complex ecological trauma requires comprehensive restoration strategies encompassing psychological, natural, and social aspects to ensure holistic healing and recovery. Consequently, the tripartite approach—from the awakening of self-redemption awareness within individuals, to proactive integration into community environments, and finally to respecting and participating in natural restoration—can be seen as these Sichuan writers' exploration of effective pathways for ecological recovery.

Conclusion

Earthquakes are often seen as hostile and alien forces that threaten lives and disrupt communities from an anthropocentric perspective. However, ecologically, they are natural geological processes that play a crucial role in the Earth's dynamic system. This duality is powerfully illustrated in A Lai's *Yun zhong ji*, where the author resists the urge to portray the earthquake as an apocalyptic event or to express fear and hostility towards nature. Instead, A Lai's characters face the disaster with dignified acceptance and show empathy and a protective instinct towards the natural world as it begins to recover from the catastrophe. A Lai encapsulates this sentiment in the book's epigraph: "The great earthquake is merely the Earth's geological construction, not an act of enmity towards humans. The great earthquake causes suffering for people, for without the Earth, they have nowhere to turn" (1). Without the Earth, we have nowhere to turn.

The significance of earthquakes in the works of those Sichuanese writers goes beyond their depiction as ecological disasters and the existential struggles of humanity. Whether through the portrayal of earthquake scenarios, the documentation of disaster memories, or the focus on modes of resistance and post-disaster reconstruction, all these efforts converge on a fundamental question: how should humanity repair itself and its relationship with nature in the aftermath of an earthquake? Sichuanese writers, represented by A Lai and An Changhe, engage deeply with eco-

logical issues and examine the elusive dynamics between humanity and the natural environment. This engagement is evident in the literary works discussed above: the lament for the lost harmony between humans and nature in *Yun zhong ji* and the chronicling of rural transformation alongside a critique of developmental ideologies in *Duanlie dai*. These literary explorations reflect an inquiry into how to construct a harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world—a theme that has become increasingly urgent in the context of today's ecological crises.

The research of earthquake literature naturally leads to a re-examination of the human-nature relationship. Although they experienced the apocalyptic scenes of the earthquake themselves, these two Sichuan authors do not attribute any blame to nature itself. From the perspective of ecological trauma theory, the earthquake narratives of Sichuanese writers demonstrate a profound respect for natural laws, an understanding of nature's inherent fluctuations, and a deep appreciation of the interdependent relationship between humans and the environment. Only through such understanding can individuals find the inner strength to accept the Earth's occurrences with objectivity and fairness. The laws of nature are influenced by human activities, which in turn constrain human development. It is important to recognise that the earthquake itself is not inherently worthy of glorification. Therefore, simply documenting the disaster and recording the collective memory of human suffering is insufficient. The true response to earthquake lies in the search for inner spiritual strength and the exploration of ways to restore both human existence and ecological balance.

Additionally, the two Sichuan authors have been particularly active in exploring pathways for ecological trauma recovery, particularly through the portrayal of marginalised women who serve as emblematic figures of this healing process. The exploration of ecological trauma recovery in their female characters reveals that effective ecological recovery calls for a threefold path: self-redemption, community integration, and interaction with the environment. Despite the diversity observed in the characters and authors, they all converge on a common theme: the spirit of self-rescue. Whether it is Yang Jin rebuilding community connections or Sihui confronting her inner conflicts, each character demonstrates efforts to rebuild relationships with themselves, others, and the natural world. As Amorok articulates, "When humans are forcibly torn from their family, culture, and land, a violent disruption and deficit in the realm of Being—individually, collectively, ecologically, and spiritually—are created" (31). Addressing this deficit requires proactive efforts to reconstruct these relationships across personal, collective, ecological, and spiritual dimensions.

As Karen Thornber asserts in her book, "Literature has the power to move us

profoundly as it exposes how people dominate, damage, and destroy one another and the natural world" (4). Contemporary Sichuan authors represented by the two writers have played a crucial role in bringing these stories to the forefront. The two authors have experienced earthquakes so they focus on them, write stories about them, and explore the possibilities of ecological restoration. Their works not only recount the personal tragedies of these young female characters but also serve as a critical lens through which broader societal issues are examined, such as gender roles, social expectations, and ecological environment. Thornber claims further: "Stories have the capacity to awaken, reinforce, and redirect environmental concern and creative thinking about environmental futures" (5). These stories created by the Sichuanese writers offer a commentary on the human condition in the face of nature's uncontrollable forces, as well as on the societal structures that can either exacerbate or alleviate the suffering of the vulnerable. Moreover, portraying earthquakes as both natural and social phenomena highlights the intricate relationship between human societies and the ecosystems they inhabit. Their perspective challenges and broadens traditional views of the environment and humanity's role within it and offers a deeper understanding of our interconnected world.

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Becoming-Animal in Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*

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Abstract:

This article explores the phenomena of "becoming-animal" of three protagonists in *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, namely, Mother, Third Sister, and Birdman Han. Becoming-animal is much preferred to the idealized humans because of the novelist's larger cosmology of animals, as influenced by historical, literary, and philosophical sources. Mo Yan's cosmology of animals is a crystallization of the Chinese philosophy of *ren* (仁) and provides an instructive solution to the theoretical dilemma between animal and animality studies in the Western academic world.

Keywords: Mo Yan, becoming-animal, philosophy of *ren*, animals

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Big Breasts and Wide Hips marks the acme of Mo Yan's artistic creations. This first mainland Chinese Nobel Prize Laureate for Literature even informs readers in an interview: "If you like, you can skip my other novels, but you must read *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*. In it I wrote about history, war, politics, hunger, religions, love, and sex" (Mo, "My Three American Books" 476). In the novel, Shangguan Jintong, the eighth child of a patriarchal family, narrates the vicissitudes of his Mother ranging from the 1930s to the 1990s in a village in Shandong province. Under the constant family pressure of producing a male heir, Mother gave birth to seven successive daughters and finally had a baby boy (Jintong) whose father was a Swedish priest. Among the seven sisters, Third Sister falls in love with Birdman Han, who can understand the avian language and communicate with birds. When her fiancé is captured by the Japanese to work as a forced laborer in a mining camp, Third Sister becomes Bird Lady. Birdman Han fortunately escapes from the camp and hides himself in the woods of Hokkaido for thirteen years. In the latter half of the novel, Jintong becomes a parrot trainer in the years of Chinese economic reform

and prosperity. The family saga recapitulates the development of new China. The publication of Mo Yan's most representative work, however, immediately kindles great controversies among scholars. On the one hand, *Big Breasts* is labeled a tedious repetition of the "my grandpa says" narrative technique (Lou 64), a "counter revolutionary novel" with "pornographic descriptions" (He 233), a violent breach of "historical realism" and "an artist's bottom-line conscience" (Chen 49). On the other hand, critics vehemently defend the book. *Big Breasts* challenges the rigid stereotype of "either a good or a bad guy" in Red Classics and explores the complexity of human nature (Yi 699), becomes "the greatest novel ever produced since the birth of new Chinese literature" for its superb artistic structure, grand epic narration and profound philosophical reflection (Zhang, "On *Big Breasts and Full Hips*" 70), and ushers Chinese literature into a new era of artistic height (Lu 234). Specifically, Qinghua Zhang acclaims the novel as "the masterwork of new historicism in prose" (Zhang, "Mo Yan and the literary trend" 40). David Wang also reads "the Literary World of Mo Yan" as a series of neohistorical movements "from paradise to outhouse," "from official history to unofficial history," and "from subject to body" (487-492). Likewise, Hongtao Liu interprets the novel as a regression from grand nationalism narration to local colorism (Liu 31). However, Douwe Fokkema argues differently: Mo Yan has "protracted [a] family quarrel" into national history (Fokkema 153). What fascinates Fokkema is the author's "exuberant fabulation" and "metalinguistic commentary," which constitute unique features of Chinese postmodernism and make it distinguishable from the European and American versions (Fokkema 153). Ning Wang reads postmodernism in China as Chinese writers' conscientious responses to the confrontation with Western influence (Wang 905). Rong Cai interprets *Big Breasts* from the perspective of the problematic national identity of the Chinese: the difficulty of integrating the traditional Chinese cultural self with the modern Western technological other (Cai 108). Similarly, Howard Goldblatt reads Jintong's "oedipal tendencies and impotence" as "a regression of the human species and a dilution of the Chinese character," but he underscores the theme of "a failed patriarchy" (Goldblatt xi). Along with this feminist reading, Shelley Chan argues that Mo Yan moves from the Fatherland of *Red Sorghum* to the Motherland of *Big Breasts* to delineate "the suffering body of female protagonists" that becomes both the "object and agent of writing in the author's reconstruction of history" (Chan 497).

Despite the number of diverse critical voices, few scholars pay attention to a prominent feature of the book: animals. In fact, Mo Yan even says that "because of my childhood experience, whenever I am going to write, animals rush to my mind

immediately" (Mo, *New conversations* 370). Therefore, an investigation of the animals found in *Big Breasts* will deepen our understanding of Mo Yan's larger cosmology of the world and his contribution to the current theoretical debate on animal studies in the Western academic world.

The human-animal relationship in *Big Breasts* is intriguing. In the long history of evolution, human beings gradually distinguish themselves from animals and become the center of the earth. Language, as a water-shedding milestone in the evolutionary process, bespeaks the intellectual superiority of human beings to nonhuman animals. In other words, animals and humans square off from opposite poles with the purpose of marginalizing animal others to establish the human self. Mo Yan challenges these binary oppositions and presents some thought-provoking scenarios for readers to ponder over the relationship between human beings and animals. In the 1980s, Shangguan Jintong was employed as the director of the Eastern Bird Sanctuary. Here the birds were trained to speak human language. When Jintong arrived at the sanctuary, he "was greeted by a 'Good Morning' from a black mynah on a golden perch. The bird ruffled its feather as it 'spoke.'" More than that, the bird even gave him some individualized attention. "'Shangguan Jintong,' the mynah bird said. 'Shangguan Jintong.' The bird's greeting shocked and elated him" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 492). Language is traditionally regarded as an exclusive possession of human beings, but here the birds in the novel demonstrate amazing linguistic capacity. Furthermore, the bird's pronunciation is of "Pure Oxford English," a marker of refined English gentlemen. If the birds' linguistic capability to imitate human language is amazing, then their ability to speak "Pure Oxford English" goes beyond imitation. "Oxford English" epitomizes an acme of Western civilization and symbolizes a tantalizing dream for many English learners who are not able to speak in this prestigious accent even after many years of assiduous practices. Birds' linguistic competence challenges the anthropocentric assumption of animal inferiority. This point is further reinforced. These avian creatures can even do translations, another highly intellectually linguistic game. One of "two mynahs dressed in red jackets and little green hats" announced "Ladies and Gentlemen, how do you do! The second mynah translated into fluent English. Thank you for honoring us with your presence. We welcome your precious advice—more translation" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 497). If the birds' ability to speak human language evinces their intelligence, then their adroit applications of language to appropriate contexts reveal animal creativity.[1] Apart from language, the birds have also learned other pleasing arts, such as

1 To be more accurate, the birds do not actually translate different languages. However, the author endeavors to instill this impression in the readers' minds.

dancing and singing. "A flock of well-trained wild chickens performed a welcoming dance" in the courtyard, and they purposefully diversified their dancing patterns, "paring off as couples one minute and spinning in the air the next, in perfect cadence with the music" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 497). The singing of the birds takes on the full appearance of a ritualistic performance. A hill mynah first gave a brief introduction, "today I'm going to sing a historical song, which I respectfully dedicate to Mayor Ji." Language is seamlessly fused into its pragmatic situations. Then "ten canaries hopped out onto the stage to sing the opening bars in their lovely voices." After this initial warm-up, "the hill mynah began to rock as her voice rose in song" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 497).

While animals are endowed with linguistic competence to conduct a series of important ritualistic actions, Jintong, one of the protagonists in the novel, is deprived of language and reduced to the level of the animal. The Eastern Bird Sanctuary's sole purpose of employing Jintong is to sexually trap female Mayor Ji. Linguistically, Jintong is tongue-tied, a sharp contrast to the fluently speaking birds; psychologically, his preoedipal attachment to maternal breasts bars him from normal social activities; socially, his criminal record becomes a stain in his life. Therefore, his only value lies in his physical or animal feature: he is a good-looking hybrid. And he is trained as a parrot to repeat certain fixed phrases. "Lianlian put Jintong through the sort of day-and-night training that Parrot used on his birds, instructing him on what a powerful woman likes to hear" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 494). Then Jintong "*parroted* the exact words Geng Lianlian had coached him to say" to Mayor Ji to win her affection and consequently a financial loan to Bird Sanctuary (Mo, *Big Breasts* 495). The juxtaposition of the fluent birds and a dumb human being jeopardizes our accustomed assumption of men's linguistic superiority. Mo Yan goes a further step and metamorphoses Jintong into a peacock, echoing the famous Chinese classic of Chuang Chou's transformation into a butterfly. After his frequent interactions with these birds, Jintong dreams he actually becomes an animal. "He finally fell asleep, and almost immediately dreamed that peacock feathers had grown on his body. Fanning his tail feathers, like a gorgeous wall, he saw thousands of little dancing spots" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 492). He even speaks in bird language. "He complained to them in peacock-talk" when the workers "grabbed a handful of his colorful tail feathers and pulled" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 492).

Many scholars, such as Howard Goldblatt, Shelley Chan, and Rong Cai, contend that Jintong is not a sufficient example to illustrate the relationship between human beings and animals because of his salient oedipal attachment. And Jintong is merely a foil to build up the image of the hero in the novel: Mother. These critics

are partially justified in epitomizing Mother as the image of an idealized human being. Mother went through many political upheavals in China: the Japanese invasion, Chinese Civil War, starvation period, Cultural Revolution, and Opening Up and Reform. Despite constant political conflicts, Mother endures all the hardship and holds together the big family with an adamant belief: they are all my children, regardless of their political ignominy. She becomes the person closest to the idealized human in the story. With her "big breasts and wide hips," Mother represents the suffering of all Chinese, and consequently their strong will to survive and passionate love of life. "Dying's easy; it's living that's hard. The harder it gets, the stronger the will to live. And the greater the fear of death, the greater the struggle to keep on living" (*Big Breasts* 416). However, Mo Yan does not intend to make an idealized figure of her. "In the first six chapters, I have built up a great image of a classic mother: patient, generous, selfless, devoting, tolerant, like the Earth," Mo Yan explains to an interviewer, "but after the seventh chapter, readers find the noble mother image suddenly collapses" (Mo, *New conversations* 100). In the place of an idealized human being, Mo Yan creates another type of character: becoming-animal.

"Becoming-animal," as a Chinese literary concept, can be traced to Chuang Chou. In the well-known metamorphosis story, Chuang Chou transforms himself into a butterfly in a dream. "Once Chuang Chou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Chuang Chou." Upon his awakening, Chuang Chou has a philosophical reflection the relationship between animals and human beings. "Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Chuang Chou. But he didn't know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou." Master Chuang abandons anthropocentric certainty about arrogant human identity and comes to realize the sovereignty of animal subjectivity. Instead of simply interpreting it as a human dream, Chuang Chou equally accentuates the agency of the butterfly who was "dreaming he was Chuang Chou." Therefore, in his corporeal entity, Chuang Chou discovers the interaction and coexistence of human beings and animals. "Between Chuang Chou and a butterfly there must be some distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things" (Chuang 49). Chuang Chou's dream of "becoming-animal" does not only stay on the level of philosophical speculation, but also has physical concretizations. The King of Chu sends two officials to invite Chuang Chou to administrate the state. Chuang Chou responds to their invitation with an interesting example. "Now would this tortoise rather be dead and have its bones left behind and honored? Or would it rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud?" With this animal illustration, Chuang

Chou decides to become an alive tortoise who can "drag [his] tail in the mud" (Chuang 188). Irving Goh is insightful in pointing out the interesting relationship between the Way and animal philosophy. However, Goh interprets "becoming-animal" in Chuang Chou as a strategy to disappear "from totalizing politics" in the quest to "escape the capture of life by politics, to reclaim life as it is without the demands and limits imposed by politics" (Goh 118). In fact, becoming-animal, this paper argues, is more than a political strategy and it ushers men to go beyond anthropocentrism and to explore the posthumanism relationship between human beings and animals. In other words, becoming-animal deterritorializes the human subject and opens an enclosed self to dynamic changes. In this transformation, both the human being and the animal have retained their initial entities, but also become something else. Their means of communication are no longer monopolized by linguistic signifiers. The certitude of human subjectivity fades away and man embraces animal other onto his self. In spatial proximity with animals, human beings renounce their hubris and dominance and become symbiotic with animals.

Mother concretizes such an example of becoming-animal. "Don't worry about me. Your mother is like an earthworm—I can live wherever there's dirt" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 416). Beyond the metaphor, she even physically imitates birds' regurgitation. One evening, Mother rushed home from the commune mill where she worked. She ran straight to the water-filled basin, "where she fell to her knees, grabbed the rim with both hands, stretched out her neck, opened her mouth, and threw up. A bowlful of still dry beans gushed out." She caught a breath, and "her neck thrust out and her shoulders hunched down, as her body reacted to the spasms deep down inside. Once the retching had been spotted, she reached into the water and scooped up the dried beans" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 439). In the years of starvation, Mother has to "steal" beans from the working mill to save her hungry children. Like birds who employ regurgitation to feed their young, Mother swallows the beans, hides them in her stomach, rushes back home, and expulses the food to feed the famished toddlers. "Now I'm used to it, and all I have to do is lower my head…your mother's stomach has turned into a grain sack" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 440). In becoming-animal, Mother saves her ravenous children from death.

The becoming-animal of Mother enables the survival of the family, and the becoming-animal of Third Sister expands her life into a larger realm than human beings. After Birdman Han was seized away, Third Sister became Bird Fairy. She "got up off the *kang*, barefoot, [and] shamelessly tore open her blouse." After getting rid of the thin clothes of civilization, she became a bird. First, she moved like a bird: "She jumped up into the pomegranate tree," and then "she leaped acrobatically

from the pomegranate tree onto a parasol tree, and from there to a tall catalpa tree. From high up in the catalpa tree she jumped down onto the ridge of our thatched roof" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 147). This series of flying movements was so "amazingly nimble" that the narrator of the story thought "she had sprouted wings" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 147). Apart from her movements, she even takes on birds' habits. "She began pecking at her shoulder, as if preening feathers. Her head kept turning, as if on a swivel; not only could she peck her own shoulder, but she could even reach down and nibble at her tiny nipples" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 147). Furthermore, her physical appearance resembles that of a feathered vertebrate. For the narrator, "she'd transformed almost completely into the Bird Fairy: her nose had hooked into a beak, her eyes had turned yellow, her neck had retreated into her torso, her hair had changed into feathers, and her arms were now wings" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 223). The becoming-animal of Third Sister breaks down the symbolic order and deterritorializes her human subjectivity. When language and law no longer define the human subject, Third Sister opens herself to embrace new possibilities of being in the dynamic world. She learns to speak in "a twitter voice" and no longer relies on linguistic signifiers. "My third sister opened her mouth in a wide yawn, her eyes still closed, and replied in a twittering voice somewhere between bird and human speech, making her words nearly impossible to understand" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 149). Therefore, "Third Sister had already entered the avian realm: she thought like a bird, behaved like a bird, and wore the expression of a bird" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 148). In this avian realm, Third Sister learns to communicate with birds and think like birds. The new mode of cross-species becoming enables her to go beyond the enfolded human subjectivity and build up a rapport with avian animals in a symbiotic coexistence. Thus her sense of self is enlarged and enhanced.

Becoming-animal for Third Sister means departing from the realm of human beings and following the animal. Birdman Han also consolidates this transition. Captured and forced to labor in a Japanese coal mine, Birdman Han decides to escape. He runs away from the camp and into the Japanese woods. Ridding himself of all the traces of civilization, Birdman Han lives completely alone in the wild forests in Hokkaido for thirteen years and merges himself with nature. Isolated completely from human society, Birdman gradually sheds the decency of a human being. His hair becomes over one meter long, and continues to grow wildly. His "clothes" of haulms are tied by a long soft cane around his waist. He has learned to compete and live with animals in the wild habitat. "Like a wild animal, he has declared his own territory in the woods. A pack of wolves in the neighborhood were in dread of him,

and neither did he have the guts to provoke them" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 176).[2]

After some time, Birdman decides to climb out of his cave and confront the wolves with primitive force. He becomes another animal for those wolves. The whole scenery is purposefully presented from the male wolf's perspective. "The wolf has never seen such an animal as the one who had just crawled out of the cave. He was a tall animal. His body was covered with rustling yellow squama, his head was surrounded with black hair, his eyes were shooting rays of green light. He howled toward the wolf." Birdman departs from human subjectivity and becomes an animal. At first, they just gaze at each other at a far distance, contemplating the possible methods of outwitting the other. Gradually, the wolf takes aggressive actions to demonstrate its dominion over the area. Mo Yan's portrayal of the wolf is very significant. In the anthropocentric model, the wolf has two complementary functions. For the Japanese government and villagers, the wolf is a threat to the domesticated animals (public property) and represents economic destruction, so it must be destroyed. As an escaped refugee in a completely different country, Birdman is like an animal in a natural wilderness. Such animals are often rendered as compassionate companions who both suffer from and are mistreated at the hands of civilized or social citizens. However, in *Big Breasts*, the animal is neither an economic sabotage nor a sentimental mirror to Birdman; it goes beyond anthropocentrism and gains its own independent agency.

The wolf, instead of being the other in anthropocentric codes, becomes the agent of its will. "Moving just a few steps toward the wolf, he had a closer view of the animal: inside its broad and firm mouth, its saw-like white teeth were glittering with terror, its long narrow lips were like gleaming rubber gaskets." The detailed description of the wolf's physical appearance accentuates its subjectivity. "He hesitated and paused. Moving neither forward nor backward, he was conscious of the consequences." Very different from the anthropocentric assumption of animals as creatures short of rational thinking, the wolf in this context is intelligently calculating "the consequences" of its alternative actions and predicting the possible reactions of its opponents. In this natural wilderness, anthropocentrism fades away, and nonhuman agents become co-constitutive. Humans and their wild counterparts "work through the interactions of a complex and widely dispersed network of ac-

2 The section of Birdman Han's experiences in Japanese woods is omitted by Howard Goldblatt, which is supposed to appear between section 2 and 3 of Chapter Six in the English version of *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*. Therefore, the quotations of Birdman are from the original Chinese work and translated by the author of this article. For more information, see Mo Yan, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe, 2012).

tants, both human and other-than-human" (Armstrong 196). Stripped of his human subjectivity, Birdman copies the behavior of his animal counterpart. "In the stalemate, the wolf howled; he followed it and howled, only longer and harsher. The wolf bared its teeth; he also bared his teeth, drumming his knife on his stick. The wolf performed a mysterious ritual dance under the moonlight; he also shook his 'clothes' of haulm, and leaped back and forth in a happy way, and found more joy in it." From these primitive communications, each learns about the other and comes to respect the other. "From the eyes of the wolf, he found a trace of compromise and then friendship" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 177). After that, he becomes "the neighbor of the wolf." During his thirteen years of living alone in the forest, he has learned to coexist with his wild partners in a respectable way but loses the faculty of language. "He felt some alien stuff filling in his throat. To speak a word, he had to stretch his neck like a bird. Between the broken words, he uttered some weird non-human noise" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 173). His tongue seemed petrified and could not utter a human sound, instead "what cried out from his mouth was wolf howls" (Mo, *Big Breasts* 178). The loss of language, the most typical indicator of human intelligence, suggests Birdman's departure from human beings. Mo Yan is very subtle in handling this significant issue. He implies Birdman's nonconformity with the anthropocentric concept of human beings, but he saliently demonstrates that Birdman, in his process of "becoming-animal," learns a new way to coexist with animals. On the one hand, Birdman retains human wisdom in his smarter imitation of the wolf. He duplicates the wolf's howling "only longer and harsher," and he repeats the wolf's threatening gesture but adds some more intimidating detail of "drumming his knife on his stick." On the other hand, Birdman strips civilization away and actually becomes an animal, and then he is able to foster "friendship" and become "the neighbor of the wolf." In short, Birdman goes beyond the narrow scope of anthropocentrism, opens himself to the prospect of "becoming-animal," and embraces cross-species communications. Therefore, Birdman, along with Mother, Third Sister, becomes a new prototype of human beings in Mo Yan's novel. A question naturally emerges: Why does Mo Yan replace the traditionally idealized human beings with the protagonists featured with "becoming-animal"?

Historical context provides a potential answer to the question. After the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the major literature trend in mainland China in the late 1970s and early 1980s was Scar Literature or Literature of the Wounded. One of its primary goals was to reflect on the Red Classics. The heroes in those "model theatrical works" are always selfless, noble, virtuous concretizations of exemplary humans. In contrast to the "moral superiority of 'I' characters" in "Maoist literary

works," Mo Yan represents mediocre characters with "petty and strange qualities. Thus Mo Yan has redefined the value of being human and recalled his own ability to imagine desire" (Wang D. 493). For Wang, Mo Yan's redefinition of human value lies in the shift from "the repressed desire" to the assertion of "the spectacle of desire" (Wang D. 493). His argument is partially justified. In fact, Mo Yan is more interested in testing human beings in their surrounding environs: *Red Sorghum*, *White Cotton*, and *Red Woods* are about how things have defined human subjectivity, *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* and *Frogs* investigate the tentative relationship between human beings and animals.

Apart from historical context, the influence of literature on Mo Yan also deepens our understanding of his portrayal of "becoming-animal." In interviews, Mo Yan constantly mentions two great sources of influence upon his writing: Wu Cheng'en and Pu Songling. Wu's masterpiece of *Journey to the West* is fundamentally a human-animal story. For Mo Yan, "Monkey King is half about humanity and half about animality; so is Pigsy" (Mo, *New conversations* 370). The free traversal between human beings and animals enables characters to go beyond anthropocentrism and view the world from a nonhuman perspective.

The concept of "animal-becoming" is further reinforced in *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, the masterpiece of Pu Songling. In the fictional world of Pu, it is much easier for a human being to start an emotionally intimate and intellectually profound conversation with an animal than with another human being. Both Pu and Mo Yan live in Shandong Province, the middle part of China, and Mo Yan regards Pu not only as his townsfolk but also as his mentor. The similar climate and living conditions in rural areas provide the authors with a similar intellectual environment. During long and cold winters in Shandong Province, telling stories became a major pastime for villagers. When other writers "were reading books with eyes" during their childhood, Mo Yan says, "I was also reading; but I was reading with ears" (Mo, *Reading with ears* 55). Mo Yan's lonely teenage years nourish his close relationship with animals. After his dismissal from primary school at the age of eleven, he worked as a farmhand until he was seventeen. During these sensitive and romantic years, he "has spent much more time with cattle and sheep than with human beings" (Mo, *New conversations* 375). To drive away his sense of frustrations and failure, he develops the habit of "talking to the animals, who listen to him very patiently and respectfully" (Mo, *New conversations* 480) and of "singing to birds in the sky, to the frogs in the ditches and lakes" (Mo, *New conversations* 375). Thus, Pu's colloquial style of "supernatural talk" immediately fascinates him very much. In a dream, Mo Yan asks for advice about literary creations. "Master Pu fished out

a Chinese brush from his clothes, and threw it to me, 'scribble whatever you like.'" Pen in hand, Mo Yan "bent down on his knees and kowtowed thrice" (Mo, "Learning from Pu Songling"). This ritualistic ceremony between master and apprentice in Chinese tradition underscores the fact that Mo Yan identifies himself as a literary descendant of Pu, and his writing is a nodding or salutation to his master. His *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* is about a man's constant reincarnations into different animals: a dog, a horse, a monkey, a cow. It is a rewriting of Pu's story, a direct tribute to Master Pu.

Beneath the literary influence of becoming-animal is the philosophical idea of *ren* (仁). *Ren* primarily refers to the concept of connection, or the circulation of liquid-like energy, such as love, sympathy, etc. According to Zhu Xi, plants, animals, and human beings all originate from the same material (air), and all are initially connected (Zhu 299). Because of this Primordial Cord, human beings can feel the sufferings of animals and can perceive the bliss of flowers. For Confucius, the circulation of *ren* is only confined to human beings, which is called "benevolence." Chuang Chou has expanded the circulation of human empathy to animals and the surrounding myriad things. The self for Chuang Chou is not an enclosed entity but a dynamic process with constantly self-changing things (Chuang 36-39). *Ren* first enables a human being to overcome isolation and disconnection with others and establishes "a relational human 'becoming'" (Ames 121). Soon a radiating personality follows, ready to absorb the changing environment of human beings and myriad things. In other words, humans, animals, and things are interconnecting with each other on an equal footing, and each becomes a key element in defining others' dynamic and relational identities. This is fundamentally different from the Western concept of animal studies.

Mo Yan's cosmology of myriad things provides an Asian perspective to the current debates in animal studies in the Western academic world. "Animals become human friends," Mo Yan informs an interviewer, and "everything in nature has its will and life, and coexists with each other on the same earth. Like forever green mountains, the human-animal friendship will be eternal" (Mo, *New conversations* 371). In addition to animals, he points out emphatically that "plants also have their psychological activities and wills" (Mo, *New conversations* 370). Behind Mo Yan's concept of animals and plants is Chuang Chou's philosophy of "the equality of things," another metamorphosis of *ren*. To arrive at the status of equality between plants, animals and humans, Chuang Chou proposes an indispensable step: "I lose myself/me" (Chuang 36). The "me" refers to the "social I," the anthropocentric I constructed by human knowledge and values. In other words, "I" must unlearn and

de-culturize myself and forget the accumulated human knowledge, at least temporarily, so that "I" can gain a fresh understanding of human relationships with the surrounding things. This vantage point becomes the measure and defining key of one's selfhood.[3]

This concept of *ren* becomes an antidote to the paradox of animal studies in the Western academic world. There are two major conflicting camps. The first group is animal studies. Opposing the use of "metaphoric animals" to assert human subjectivity, Susan McHugh advocates animals as "companion-species" of an independent agency (McHugh 491). Likewise, when Marianne Dekoven makes eye contact with animals, he finds they "return the gaze of the knowing looker" (Dekoven 366). David Herman also argues for the animal autonomy of "Umwelt Exploration" in the narrative representation of nonhuman experiences (Herman 174). In their unreserved advocation of animals' autonomous agency, these scholars cut off animals' relationship with human beings. If animals did have radically independent agency from their civilized counterparts, human beings would have little or no concern with animals and therefore cease to pay attention to animals. Michael Lundblad has a very convincing counterexample. Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* was first published in 1859 but was not pervasive in the United States until 1909, when Sigmund Freud translated "Darwinist constructions of 'real' animals to 'animal instincts' within the human psyche" (Lundblad 498). Thus, Lundblad appeals to the shift "from animal to animality studies" to emphasize "the history of animality in relation to human cultural studies" (Lundblad 500). Cary Wolfe also acknowledges the inevitable anthropocentric transition from "'out there,' among the birds and beasts" to "'in here' at the heart of this thing we call human" (Wolfe 572). Jeffrey M. Peck defines in explicit terms the purpose of animality studies to reveal "the epistemological structures that organize how we know, how our knowledge gets transmitted and accepted" (Peck 51). This returns us to the starting point of the controversy: animals, deprived of their own subjectivity, become the other to define humanity in our epistemological hierarchy. This is the very target of animal studies. Also, to understand animals, we have to condescend from human hubris, and that implicitly denies that animals are the agents of their own will.

Mo Yan's large cosmology provides a possible solution to this self-contradictory

3 Quan Wang makes a detailed analysis of this transforming process of "I lose myself/me." Wang argues that the process of forgetting is a progress of going beyond anthropocentrism and into a posthumanism world of "the equality of things." For more information, please refer to "A Comparative Study of the Subject in Jacques Lacan and Zhuangzi," especially pp. 256-58.

status. On the one hand, it acknowledges the difficulty of getting rid of the ingrained influence of anthropocentrism. The "I" has to constantly practice "I lose myself/me," so that "I" can forget the socially constructed "me" to have a fresh understanding of human relationship with the surrounding things. It also admits the differences among individuals. Some people might occasionally lose the social I (me), others might frequently forget anthropocentrism, and very few others can permanently stay in touch with things. And the purpose of "I lose myself/me" is to arrive at the status of equality between things. When we finally quarantine ourselves from anthropocentrism, we will have a new understanding of ourselves and surrounding things: both things and humans are on an equal footing, and they mutually define each other's identity. This is also the moment of the circulation of ren, the liquid-like energy among humans, animals, and plants. When this primary cord is reestablished, all becomes equal. In other words, animals, plants and humans all have their equal and independent will and agency in their coexistence. Human identity, instead of being an enclosed entity, becomes open and engaged in dynamic relationships with things. This vantage point of being equal with things becomes the yardstick of fashioning the self for the Chinese. This philosophy of *ren* finds its full articulation in Mo Yan's major works. *Red Sorghum* is not only the fictional background of the story but also concretizes the activating protagonist of red sorghum in the story. *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* merges human and animal identities into an inseparable entity. *Frogs* blurs the boundary between tadpoles and infants, and contrasts the abundant fertilized eggs of amphibious creatures with the rigidly rationed ovum of human beings. In short, rather than arriving fully developed, human identity is formed during a process of interacting with the changing surrounding things, while the self unfolds itself into its symbiotic relationships. The sense of self is enhanced and intensified as it extends beyond the cocoon of the social I and connects with myriad nonhuman species.

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World Literature as Method: An Interview with Professor Theo D'haen

Theo D'haen (Leuven University and Leiden University)

Haitao Jiang (Beijing Normal University)

Abstract:

In this interview, which took place on November 11, 2024, in Le Royal Café, Antwerp, Prof. D'haen shared his insights into world literature studies and his own approach to the field, referring to the rise of world literature studies in Europe, the various theoretical models, and the methods of spatialization and historization in this field. He also made meaningful connections between world literature and other terms like decolonization, postcolonialism, Geopolitics, and global literature. Moreover, the situation of Dutch and Flemish literature in world literature was touched upon as a special case to show the general condition of minor literatures. In conclusion, He recommended that world literature, comparative literature, and translation studies should work together with specialists in national literature to achieve a combination of methods in the field.

Keywords: World Literature, geopolitics, Dutch and Flemish literature, Translation Studies, Global Literature, Comparative Literature

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Jiang: Professor D'haen, thank you very much for accepting this interview request. You enjoy a high reputation among Chinese literary scholars, and it is not the first time that you have been interviewed on world literature by a Chinese scholar. Yet, when I look at the field of world literature, especially the field of Western world literature studies, I still find many questions. I hope you can share your answers not only with me but also with other readers. I think we can divide our discussion today into three parts. First, let's focus on your interpretation of the history of "what has been written about world literature",[1] about which we read in your new book, *A History of World Literature* (2024), a revised and expanded version of *The Routledge*

1 Theo D'haen, *A History of World Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2024), 1.

Concise History of World Literature from 2012. Then, I think we should examine some issues derived from *World Literature in an Age of Geopolitics* (2021) to focus on your methodology of world literature research. Last, I would like to ask you briefly about the condition of Dutch and Flemish literature in world literature. However, let's start with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In *A History of World Literature*, you take Goethe's use of the term *Weltliteratur* as the real starting point of the discourse of world literature, though the term may not have quite originated with him. Why?

D'haen: The term *Weltliteratur* had indeed been used already some fifty years before Goethe, but this never had become common knowledge throughout Europe. Goethe was the most influential writer in Europe at the time he came to use it, and this familiarized European intellectuals with the concept. That is why, in accordance with established usage, I date the beginning of the effective discussion about world literature, rather than the sheer mention of the term, from Goethe.

Jiang: You mean that it is simply a historical fact, don't you?

D'haen: There is also a reason why Goethe picked up the term and made it popular when he did. The time was right for it. Europe had just come out of the Napoleonic wars which changed Europe very much. At the same time, there had been some technical innovations in journal production and distribution, and this facilitated the spread of ideas around Europe. Goethe was keenly aware of this. What also played a role is that the advent of Romanticism had fueled interest in the most diverse literatures in Europe.

Jiang: I see that the historical condition was right for Goethe to make the term well-known around Europe. But as we know, the contemporary trend of world literature studies arose basically in North America rather than from Europe, and it is primarily connected to the pedagogical arrangement of departments of English and of comparative literature in United States. As you mentioned somewhere, "[u]ntil recently, in Europe interest in the subject was mostly limited to research."[2] Could you elaborate a little on the context and practice of world literature discourse in Europe? Based on my own experience of visiting KU Leuven in the past year, I guess comparative literature classes in Europe are also starting to incorporate some introduction to world literature research. As a senior teacher and one of the most important literary comparatists in Europe, could you please review briefly for us the vicissitudes of the pedagogical arrangement of comparative literature in Europe throughout your long career in teaching?

2 D'haen, *A History of World Literature*, 3.

D'haen: Comparative literature originated in the nineteenth century in France, Switzerland, Italy, and Germany. For the longest time, though, if it was taught at all, this was on a very small scale. Literature in most European countries was usually taught in departments of either Romance or Germanic philology, and sometimes Slavic philology, where the emphasis was on the historical study of both the languages and literatures of the various language families in Europe. Romance philology comprised the languages deriving from Latin: French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian, although the latter was only rarely taught. Germanic philology covered German, English, Dutch, and the Scandinavian languages. Slavic philology concentrated on Russian, Polish, Czech, and so on. In a sense, these departments were already engaged with comparative literature, albeit confined to the various literatures within a specific language family, and without using the term comparative literature. In the United States, things were different, which explains why scholars such as Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer, who in Germany (and in Turkey, to which they exiled themselves when the Nazis came to power in Germany) had been active in departments of Romance philology, were considered comparatists when they moved to the US after the Second World War. Of course, until the Second World War, a university education was the privilege of a small elite in Europe.

After the Second World War, and especially during the 1960s and 1970s, a wave of democratization swept through European higher education. Many more people could pursue higher education studies, and this led to the expansion of university departments—among them the foreign language departments. Mostly, these foreign language departments continued with studying and teaching the languages and literatures of one language family, or they confined themselves to only one language and literature, as was the case in Holland. Only comparative literature scholars worked on combinations of literatures from several of these fields. They were very few, though, and they were looked upon with some suspicion by national literature departments that perceived them as competitors. As a result, comparative literature scholars, and their departments, if they existed at all, were not very popular.

Moreover, in the 1960s and 1970s, comparative literature, as the study of several literatures simultaneously, was replaced by theory. In many countries departments of comparative literature were renamed departments of general and comparative literature or departments of comparative literature and literary theory. Only over the last twenty-five years has there been a return to comparative literature as the study of several literatures, this time spurred by the renewed interest in world literature.

Now, in Europe, as I said, there had always been an interest in world litera-

ture, but this was mostly limited to research. Change happened for two reasons. On the one hand, there was the influence of developments in university teaching in the United States. Whether we like it or not, what happens in American academe has influenced European higher education ever since the Second World War. On the other hand, some structural changes occurred in European higher education. In 1999, the European ministers of education met in the Italian city of Bologna to discuss the harmonization of European higher education. Until then, higher education around Europe had been very diverse. In some countries, a university degree required four years of study, sometimes divided to two plus two, sometimes in one plus three, or other variants. In others, an undergraduate degree took three years, followed—or not—by one or two years for an MA. In all countries, you could add on a PhD, again with varying lengths of study after the BA or MA. In 1999, in Bologna, it was decided to harmonize all this into three years for a BA, one or two years for an MA, and then a PhD. This facilitated educational exchanges between the different European countries via the European Union Erasmus program, named after a famous sixteenth-century Dutch scholar. Further, whereas in many countries, it was customary for a university course to run for an entire year with exams at the end, from now on semester courses would be the rule. This enabled students to go on an exchange for one semester or one year, depending on what they wanted to do. But it also raised the problem of language. Hungarian students in Denmark or French students in Poland most probably were unfamiliar with the local language of instruction. Hence, it became mandatory that a lot of courses should be taught in a language that was comprehensible and usable for most students around Europe. For practical reasons, universities started offering courses in English to accommodate foreign students. And you needed courses that were broad enough to appeal to students from different countries, interested in different literatures, and using different languages, and that could also include students from your own country.

Around the same time, many countries started encouraging students to opt for so-called STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) courses, which led to falling enrolments in the humanities, especially in language and literature courses. In addition, governments argued that it was too expensive to offer so many different literatures and languages in separate departments. A combination of all this led to the cutting of personnel in language and literature departments, which also meant that at a given moment the number of people offering courses in separate languages and literatures became too small to really continue as usual. Add to this the influence of multiculturalism and postcolonialism and geopolitical developments forcing Europeans to look beyond the borders of their own little continent.

Altogether, this made a convincing case for no longer teaching national literatures exclusively but switching at least to some degree to courses taught in English and addressing various literatures. In several countries, then, there arose an interest in how to teach European and world literature, often relating the two. In Denmark, for instance, there were initiatives in this direction by Svend Erik Larsen and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen at Aarhus University. In Spain, César Domínguez at the University of Santiago de Compostela, and in Portugal, Helena Buescu at the University of Lisbon developed similar interests. After that, it spread to the rest of Europe. This is also one of the differences between the book I published in 2012, *The Routledge Concise History of World Literature*, and its revised and expanded 2024 version, *A History of World Literature*. In the former, I only mentioned the examples of Denmark, Spain, and Portugal. In the twelve years since that book was published, in many more places in Europe, courses in European literature and world literature are being offered. That is a big change in European higher education.

Jiang: This is a quite fresh and interesting view according to which we should pay more attention to the rise of world literature discourse in Europe in the last decades, taking into consideration the institutional changes and pedagogical impetus behind European scholars' renewed enthusiasm for doing more research in and teaching of world literature.

D'haen: As I said, it has to do with institutional changes in the university landscape but also with geopolitics. There is not only the rise of China as a contender for economic and political and military power with the United States, but also the emergence of several other powers such as India, Brazil, and soon also South Africa and Indonesia. In the old days, France, Great Britain, and Germany were world powers. This is no longer the case. They may still think that they are but in reality they are not. After all, from a global perspective, they are small countries. France and the United Kingdom have some seventy million inhabitants, Germany eighty-five. In Europe, that is a lot, but next to China, India, Brazil, Mexico, or Indonesia, it's nothing. Europe is still relatively rich, still relatively powerful, but every decade its power diminishes. You can also see this in demographic terms. In 1800, the time of Napoleon, the population of Europe made up about 25% or one-quarter of the total population of the world. Now, it has dropped to something like 8%. In terms of power, Europe reached its pinnacle around the turn of the twentieth century, but ever since then it has been on the wane. The only way for Europe to still carry some weight in today's world is united, which of course is what the European Union is all about. But this also means that to continue to study separate national European literatures today is to deny the reality of Europe's position in the changed world order.

And the only way you can give the literatures of Europe their rightful place, next to Chinese literature, Indian literature and so on, is to look at European literature as a whole and to teach it as such.

Jiang: Yes, I see that we should always take geopolitics, whether historically or at present, into consideration. Let's turn to the third question. In *A History of World Literature*, you connect the failed revolutions of 1848 with the reference of Marx and Engels to world literature, which in your opinion and that of many others, signals the end of the idea of *Weltliteratur* as a utopian model for society. However, when we take the thought of world literature as a strategy of the bourgeoisie, we might also remember that Marx and Engels sometimes praised the bourgeoisie as a historically revolutionary class, which makes us try to believe that they would also hold a dialectical view on world literature. Would you please give us more ideas about the significance of the legacy of Marx and Engels in the field of world literature?

D'haen: Obviously, Marx and Engels thought of world literature as reflecting the uniformization and globalization of all markets under bourgeois capitalism. In this sense, they saw it as a bad thing because it signaled the power of the bourgeoisie. On the other hand, they considered the bourgeoisie as a necessary step in the historical evolution towards the final coming of the rule of the proletariat and ultimately of a classless society of equals. I think they are relatively ambiguous about the role of literature in this. From a dialectical perspective, it makes sense to see realism, which was basically the ruling form of literature under the bourgeoisie, as a necessary step towards bringing literature closer to the lived reality of real people, which in this case would be the middle classes. The next step would be naturalist literature, which concentrated not on the middle classes but on the working classes, although often from a deterministic point of view. But, of course, Marx and Engels only lived to see the beginning of that. The final achievement would then be the advent of proletarian literature by somebody like Maxim Gorky at the end of the nineteenth century and ultimately the rise of Soviet-style social realism. I don't know what Marx and Engels would have made of social realism, for they died long before this became a reality, but you can see the whole thing as part of the dialectical process, which, of course, they inherited themselves from Hegel. It is Hegel who sketched the process of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, which then becomes a new thesis, which leads to a new antithesis, which then leads to another compromise synthesis, which in turn functions as a new thesis, and so forth. Marx and Engels imposed their own teleological perspective upon this process. For Hegel, the dialectical process would resolve itself with the ultimate freedom of the individual

achieved under the Prussian nation-state. For Marx and Engels, the end of the whole exercise would be the rule of the proletariat, which would do away with all class differences, and which would leave only the class of humans, which amounts to another form of Utopia again.

Jiang: Yes, I think we must make an effort to get their idea about world literature, which is a little complicated, and you show us one important path to start. Well, the next question is related to the previous one in a way. I myself would like to take a dialectical view when dealing with Euro-American models of world literature like those of David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, and Pascale Casanova. Although, as you mention in your 2012 book, they all three have a certain bias related to a single point of view from America, France, or Europe in general, they definitely made an effort, at least in my eyes, to break through the limitations of Euro-Americanism, for it seems to me that Casanova and Moretti described an unequal structure in order to fight against the current hegemony in the field, and as for Damrosch, he did pay special attention to the reading of works beyond the Western canon. Whether or not they succeeded in this effort, I would rather believe that their models are exemplary just because they are always willing to problematize their own models. For those who want to follow in their footsteps, what is illuminating and challenging is exactly this pattern in which one establishes one model and then actively problematizes it oneself. Do you think this is a fair way to look at it?

D'haen: We should also not forget that Casanova, Moretti, and Damrosch wrote their groundbreaking texts some twenty-five years ago now. I think that things have changed since then, with other scholars reflecting upon, criticizing, and adjusting their models from different perspectives. But what you say is correct in that they are all aware of their limitations. But on the other hand, there is no way you can describe anything, or analyze anything, without taking a particular position. There is no such thing as a neutral approach to anything. So, I think what they did is that they chose a model, and they tried to apply that model, but always being aware that any model is only valid as long as it holds and that it is always open to improvement. I have great admiration for all three of them because I think they brought something new to the field of world literature studies and comparative literature, and they did so at a moment when several other approaches to literature were running out of steam. I am thinking, for instance, of multiculturalism, of postcolonialism, and so on. In a sense, world literature set itself up as an alternative to these movements, but at the same time it also led these movements to rethink themselves in terms of world literature, and that is again why especially since 2012, when I published the first version of my book, what we see is a whole plethora of attempts

to combine these movements with world literature. I am thinking of someone like Pheng Cheah who published *What Is a World: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* in 2016, but there are many others. For instance, in *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*, the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) rethinks world literature in economic terms, incorporating insights from postcolonialism and neo-Marxism. In some instances, they are picking up on work that had already been done earlier in the century. The Cuban Fernando Ortiz, for example, already in 1940 wrote a book on the importance of tobacco and sugar for the development of the Caribbean and how that is reflected in literature. The same thing has been going on with other movements that since then have developed. For example, eco-criticism is also being rethought: Either you can say that it is being rethought in terms of world literature, or you can say world literature is being reconceived in terms of ecology. That is what Ursula Heise is doing, for instance, or Martin Puchner, a colleague of Damrosch at Harvard. They are all writing and thinking about world literature from an ecological point of view, and when they reflect on climate change, they do so not just with respect to the present but also historically, relating it to older literature. This is what Puchner has done in a little book he published two or three years ago.

Jiang: One more specific question concerning David Damrosch. In your opinion, Damrosch adopts the philology of Erich Auerbach, for you say that he "finds his *Ansatzpunkt* in his elliptical or triangulated reading of the past and the distant, or the present and the near."[3] I find this very interesting. Could you offer more explanation? Is the term *Ansatzpunkt* always useful in the field of world literature?

D'haen: *Ansatzpunkt* means how you get to grips with a piece of literature—the English translation is usually given as "entry" or "entry point." In this case, it would refer to how you approach world literature. Comparative literature and world literature have repeatedly been critiqued for being too broad, in the sense that they would keep you from reading any work of literature in sufficient detail. By what he calls triangulation, Damrosch tries to defuse this criticism. He admits that from a comparative or world literature perspective, you indeed say less about a specific work than a national literature specialist would do, especially in its local context, because you don't go as deeply into the work's history and language, also because in world literature you often deal with works in translation and not in the original. On the other hand, because you read the work in question from a point of view that is located outside the national literature, you can see it from a different angle, in

3 D'haen, *A History of World Literature*, 126.

the context of other works, other literatures, and other languages. This may lead to the discovery of unexpected similarities or differences. Obviously, when you read something in translation, you are not going to get the full linguistic experience compared to when you read it in the original. But on the other hand, if you don't know the original language, the only way to get to know that work is to read it in translation; otherwise you would never know about it at all.

Jiang: Let's talk about Franco Moretti. How would you rate the presentism of Franco Moretti? For me, one sees the genuine origin of the new world literature studies in the establishment of modern systems of world literature proposed not only by Franco Moretti but also by Pascale Casanova and others. My point is that at first one finds world literature in its modern format, and it is only after this finding that one could deduce different premodern versions of world literature from the modern model at hand. And, if you forget the initial liaison between the term "world literature" and capitalist cultural modernity, you will obscure the significance and many concerns of this term even though you definitely expand its historical scope. What is your idea? I am very interested.

D'haen: Both Casanova and Moretti admit themselves that they practice a form of presentism. Moretti is very clear that he only talks about literature after 1750 and only about the novel. Casanova picks as her starting point Du Bellay's *Défense et illustration de la langue française* of the mid-sixteenth century. This, for her, signals the beginning of truly national literatures as we now think of them, with French literature in the lead. From then on, she says, we witnessed the development of a literary system which aims at the autonomy of the literary sphere from economic and political intervention. This argument is debatable, of course, and I think she mainly talks about the French literary system, inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who developed this idea of the literary system striving for, and eventually achieving, autonomy. I think she has a point with respect certainly to European literature. Whether it stretches beyond European literature is a question mark. But I think she was aware of this, and she never pretended to really say something about Indian literature, Chinese literature, or non-European literatures.

Jiang: At least, we are sure that she never did that in a concrete way.

D'haen: Damrosch is different in that he doesn't really develop an all-encompassing model. What Damrosch offers is a way of reading. What I see him doing is updating the close reading model typical of the American pedagogical system, now with respect to not just the original but also translated literature, and not just applied to English or American literature, as was the case previously, but with regard to literature from all around the world. In this sense, he is very different from Moretti

and Casanova, and that is also, I think, why finally he has had perhaps more success with commentators around the world. It is precisely because he does not argue the eminence or the pioneering role of French, English, or more broadly European literature. The only thing he offers is his triangulated reading, and we can apply this to all works that satisfy his basic criterion for works of world literature should be works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, whether in translation or in the original.

Jiang: Actually, much in the same way you do, I would rather believe that there are two beginnings for the new discourse of world literature, and the first beginning refers to both Casanova and Morett and then the second one is about David Damrosch. I mean, obviously, Casanova and Moretti elaborated their own methods of systematic reading for world literature and definitely bring back topics like literariness, literary forms, genres and so on, to this field. However, they didn't bother to attach any kind of universalist agenda of cultural politics to the term "world literature" and sometimes they would rather highlight the commercialized and thus negative dimension of the term. However, it was Damrosch who established world literary research as a positive agenda with his concern that we should endorse the universalism and multiculturalism implied by the term. Although Damrosch's way of setting the agenda of universalism in this field still invites many controversies, I think we must admit the significance of Damrosch's re-departure.

D'haen: I think you are correct in that.

Jiang: You know, partly because we barely find the politics of recognition in its positive form in the hands of Casanova and Moretti, we see that this politics is back only in the second beginning of new world literature related to Damrosch's works. Of course, the presupposition of this observation is that the politics of recognition is very important to start a universalist and democratized agenda of cultural politics in the Western context as we know from the end of Second World War, if not from the elaboration of the whole idea by Hegel.

Then, another question is about the connection and comparison between the spatial and temporal approaches to world literature. Taking WReC as a typical case, I find many projects in this field prefer to grasp the spatial structure of world literature in a historical course. It seems that the temporal dimension has the priority in the field to decide and interpret the spatial configuration of world literature. Then, could we say that the discourse of world literature is at last a discourse of historical judgment? Or, is it above all an approach of literary criticism derived from a historical narrative?

D'haen: I think the study of world literature is mostly a literary-historical prac-

tice. Of course, one of the things you have to say about this is that, at least as I have been thinking about it for a while, what you call world literature depends upon the particular period you are talking about. To use Damrosch's term again, what circulates now are on the one hand very recent works, especially in the commercial circuit, and on the other hand older canonized works. But, of course, if we try to see what world literature was in, let's say, 1900, we would probably find that the list of canonized classics would be only partially identical to today's list. Some works considered classics then we may no longer think of as such, while we may now consider classics works they did not think of in these terms. More popular works circulating globally at the time (although for obvious reasons the real extent of "global" needs qualification here) we most probably do not read and very possibly do not even know anymore. And even more so if we go back yet another one hundred years. So, I think at the given moment, what somebody should do, which is quite a job of course, is to look at different conceptions and extents of world literature in different periods and different places, and perhaps also to look at them from different points of view. For instance, what did Chinese intellectuals in the middle of the Ming dynasty consider as world literature?

Jiang: I am far from an expert in that, but actually I don't think they paid a lot of attention to any conception of the term "world" as in our context [laughing]…

D'haen: Maybe not, but that is already interesting in itself, isn't it?

Jiang: Of course, I mean, it's very interesting as you raise it. And in *A History of World Literature*, I read your, I want to say, excellent, close, and comprehensive analysis of the paradigms of postmodernism and postcolonialism. My impression is that, compared with the term "postcolonialism", you are more appreciative of the term "decoloniality". And, as you pointed out, "if world literature has included discussion of Latin American works of literature, this has been much less the case with Latin American decoloniality theory, and decoloniality has paid even more scant attention to world literature"[4]. Why is this the case? Do you see any path to integrate the two different discourses? Or, any path simply to make the tension between them productive?

D'haen: Actually, African writers and intellectuals such as Chinweizu and Ngugi wa Thiong'o already used "decolonizing" and "decolonization" in the 1960s, but the term "decoloniality" only gained firm ground from the 1990s on. I think the reason that until recently it has not gained the same popularity as the term postcolonialism is that the latter emerged within the anglophone context. Initially, it was

4 D'haen, *A History of World Literature*, 196.

used only to refer to works written in English in former British colonies or by writers coming from former British colonies. It is only later, that it has also been adopted for French literature written by, again, people from the former colonies, and to a lesser extent, for other literatures. Decoloniality came to be used in Latin America in the 1990s, especially by Anibal Quijano, and it was then picked up by critics working mostly in the United States, such as Walter Mignolo and Nelson Maldonado-Torres, to talk about Latin American literature. So, there has been a dichotomy: Postcolonialism was and is mostly applied to literature in English, lately also in French and some other languages; decoloniality mostly to literature produced in Latin American, in Spanish, and in Portuguese. I think that in world literature studies, both will continue to be used not as interchangeable but rather alternative formulations.

Jiang: The reason why I raised this question is that, as I know, many people in Chinese context think that the term "postcolonialism" is above all a mask of neocolonialism.

D'haen: Sure.

Jiang: The next question is about postcolonial world literature. As you mentioned, after postcolonialism had for too long neglected questions of aesthetics, "[t]he rise of world literature could at least in part be explained as a move to reintroduce these concerns into the field of literary studies."[5] I think Christopher Prendergast held the same view when he, in commenting on Casanova's great contribution to the field, highlighted that Casanova had "put the question of literature back in the spotlight."[6] Would you please explain a little more about what the discourse of world literature brings to postcolonialism?

D'haen: Well-known proponents of postcolonialism, such as for instance Robert Young, have said quite clearly that the first concern of postcolonial literature is not aesthetics, but ethics, or more bluntly politics. It has to do with the resistance and emancipation of colonized or ex-colonized peoples. Somebody who has also originally argued along these lines is Elleke Boehmer, but in 2018 she published a book in which she tried to put aesthetics back into postcolonialism. And, yes, to a certain extent, world literature was an attempt to return to the idea of aesthetic distinction and to read literature again from the point of view of aesthetic and not just ethical-political value, but this time with an eye also to literatures beyond the West. The way postcolonialism is now recuperating world literature tends to put politics

5 D'haen, *A History of World Literature*, 181.

6 Christopher Prendergast, "Introduction," in *Debating World Literature*, ed. Christopher Prendergast (London and New York: Verso, 2004), vii-xiii.

back into it. Pheng Cheah in *What is a World* argues that world literature should be postcolonial in the sense that it should be normative. It should advocate change in the right direction, meaning emancipation and resistance to oppression and discrimination. Cheah's book has been quite successful, and a lot of people have taken up his idea. WReC aim to look at world literature from an economic and social perspective angled toward the have-nots of the world. In other words, the way they see economics playing out in world literature is precisely as a sign of either oppression or emancipation. Members of WReC pay particular attention to works that are neglected, forgotten or half-forgotten, because they have been written by authors from the working classes and have as their subject the plight of these working classes. I distinctly remember essays on, for instance, mining communities in Wales, and you can see how this perspective might lead to renewed readings of world literature classics such as D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, which is a story about a son-mother-father relationship, but it is also a powerful novel about working-class life in a mining community in Britain around the turn of the twentieth century.

Jiang: Let's turn to *World Literature in an Age of Geopolitics*. In this book, you suggested that there is a causal connection between the recent rise of the discourse of world literature and the fact that "America is losing the position of political, military, economic, and cultural hegemon it has held since WWII."[7] I believe this is an important statement to help readers grasp the significance of "an age of geopolitics" for world literature. Would you please elaborate?

D'haen: One of the events that triggered the return of world literature in American academe was the 9/11 attack on the world trade center in New York because it made Americans realize that their country had become vulnerable to attacks from outside. Intellectuals realized that Americans didn't know enough about the rest of the world because for the longest time they had felt safe behind the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and therefore didn't really need to know very much about the rest of the world. This is when people like Emily Apter, for instance, started arguing for more attention to translation, and Gayatri Spivak advocated for a renewal to area studies, including knowledge of local languages, to know more about countries and parts of the globe little known to Americans, not just intellectuals, but also ordinary Americans, and of course also the military [laughing]. The world became more important also to people in literary studies, and this translated into greater attention to literature from around the world.

Now in a sense, you can say that by making world literature an American con-

7 Theo D'haen, *World Literature in an Age of Geopolitics* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2021), 35.

cern, especially in the form of anthologies of world literature such as the Longman, under the general editorship of Damrosch, or the more recent versions of the Norton, with Puchner as general editor, Americans found one way to get a grip on the world, or even to master the world. Of course, I believe that people working on world literature in the US, Damrosch, Puchner, and all the rest, do this in good conscience and genuinely aim to teach their students about literatures they didn't know before. At the same time, Apter in her 2013 book, *Against World Literature*, argues that if they are doing this in English translation, and given the fact that English is not only the world's leading language for the moment but also that of the world's most powerful nation, this also means that everything in a sense becomes Americanized. For Spivak, in her book *Death of a Discipline*, America, while pretending to open itself to the world, via the new world literature studies, is appropriating the literatures of the world to itself.

Personally, I have a more nuanced opinion. Yes, to a certain extent, you can say that things become Americanized. On the other hand, without translation and anthologies such as the Longman and Norton anthologies edited by Damrosch and Puchner, a lot of literature in languages other than their own would remain inaccessible and therefore largely unknown to Americans, and by extension to those for whom English is the gateway to literatures in languages beyond them. The idea that America is appropriating the literatures of the world to itself by way of world literature can be a point of critique, but if you are alert to this, you can mitigate things by always keeping a certain distance, for instance via the triangulation propounded by Damrosch. By approaching the idea of world literature as elaborated by Damrosch and as embodied in the anthologies on world literature used in American colleges, we can gain access to the literatures of the world and at the same time keep reflecting upon them, and upon the very idea and practice of world literature, intellectually, consciously, and critically.

Jiang: Now, I remember that in your essay, "How Many Canons Do We Need? World Literature, National Literature, European Literature," which you wrote for the 2011 book *The Canonical Debate Today: Crossing Disciplinary and Cultural Boundaries*, you mentioned that multiculturalism in world literature is closely related to the domestic policy of the US. To be more exact, Americans made attempts at changing their pedagogical list of great books time and time again since the 1920s to keep their teleological ideals of American exceptionalism working well, which means they worked hard to endorse the American dream of success and the daily mechanism of a political melting pot. A very interesting point you made in the essay is about the difference between the domestic context of the US and the various

contexts of other countries all around the globe. For instance, when Americans keep making an effort to establish a domestic political order based on "mindless celebration of difference for its own sake"(30), Flemish society, with the rest of European societies alike, is desperately looking for the reaffirmation of a collective identity to make good on the EU's promise of "unity in diversity"(33).[8] It seems that one should always pay attention to this tension when he or she receives the influence of the US in this field.

D'haen: Sure. I also think that precisely the study of world literature and all the rest play different roles in the US and Europe and probably in China because I know that people are also working with this in China.

Jiang: Sure, we have always been looking for what is best suited to the Chinese situation. In my opinion, your book makes an effort to create a European discourse of world literature, which is different not only from the discourse of the United States but also from the discourse of the Global South. In your own opinion, what are the most distinctive features of this European discourse of world literature?

D'haen: Well, I think one of the issues precisely is that, at least in my opinion and as far as my concerns go, it leads to an approach to European literature as an entity. Together with a Swedish colleague, Anders Pettersson, I am just finishing a history of European literature in which we try to incorporate insights from world literature and still uphold a European view of the world. People in Europe are thinking about world literature, but they are also trying to incorporate what they value themselves. Again, I am thinking of somebody like Helena Buescu in Lisbon, who has edited a six-volume anthology of world literature in Portuguese. In a sense this is doing what Damrosch and Puchner are doing in America. But she is doing it from a European and in this case Portuguese perspective, which leads to the incorporation of different works, different views, and a different emphasis. What we see shaping up is a different application of the idea of world literature coming from a different place and perhaps also a different moment in history, because her anthology comes almost twenty years after Damrosch's Longman anthology. I think I can return the question. What about China? Is there a Chinese vision of world literature being developed and being elaborated right now?

Jiang: Professor Hongtao Liu 刘洪涛, also my supervisor back at Beijing Normal University, worked with other scholars to publish an anthology of world litera-

8 See Theo D'haen, "How Many Canons Do We Need? World Literature, National Literature, European Literature" in *The Canonical Debate Today: Crossing Disciplinary and Cultural Boundaries*, eds. Liviu Papadima, David Damrosch, and Theo D'haen (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, B. V.), 2011, 19-38.

ture in Chinese two years ago, which I believe shows one of the visions of world literature from Chinese comparatists. It has five volumes and basically each volume is devoted to one continent, so we have volumes on Asian, European, American, and African and Oceanic Literature, and then there is a volume on Diaspora, Ethnicity, and Linguistic Literature. Personally, I think the editing was influenced by various traditions. For instance, from the first volume to the last, the order of arrangement is based on how closely the literature in the volume is linked to Chinese literature, and thus the volume about Asian literature comes first, followed by the volume on European literature, and so on. At least in my opinion, this view of concentric rings of world literature, with Chinese literature in the center, has to do with the traditional Chinese mindset when we deal with the ethics in one big family and even with imperial politics. Besides, we can think about, not unreasonably, the presence of the heritage of socialist world literature in the anthology because editors in the socialist camp during the Cold War were always willing to highlight the literatures of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, very often making a separate volume on "peripheral" literatures and in this way affirming their value. And of course, when you notice "Diaspora, Ethnicity, and Linguistic Literature," you know that also in this field we Chinese cannot escape the influence of the American paradigm and yet I don't think we need to avoid that influence…

D'haen: Sure, I mean, there is no way in which we can escape the influence of American academe, but again, we can think about it critically, reflect upon it, and see how we can use it in our own context.

Jiang: Yes, let's say you change several pieces of a puzzle, and then you probably find that you already have a completely different vision.

D'haen: Indeed.

Jiang: And the next question. As you mentioned in the book, if we look into the cases of some ex-colonized writers, for instance some Western Indian writers, "we see at work here is a dual process of differentiation and identification" between "mother" and "ex-colonized."[9] I believe it is in this complex of "double insider/outsider" we find the strength of geopolitical narratives, especially compared with any simple tags indicating civilizational affiliation and postcolonial dedication. In other words, the geopolitical lens offers us a more complicated vision of world literary mapping than ever. Could you talk more about it for us?

D'haen: West Indian or Caribbean authors are an interesting case. Because the Caribbean was the first part of the world to be colonized by Europeans, it was also

9 D'haen, *World Literature in an Age of Geopolitics,* 116.

one of the first to yield authors writing in colonial languages, along with some Indian writers. How are we to read Caribbean authors? As a part of the presumed mother literature the language of which they are using, at times in a creolized version of, or should they be considered as belonging to different literatures entirely because of what they say? Or should we perhaps read them first and foremost as world authors? Take Derek Walcott. He came from a Caribbean island, Saint Lucia, where the majority of the population speak a French-derived dialect or *patois*. He was educated in English because the island at a given moment changed hands. He wrote in English. *Omeros*, usually considered his major work, refers to Homer, and is a partial rewrite of the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*. Or take another writer who draws on literary works in many languages and who in his own work incorporates almost the entire history of western literature: Jorge Luis Borges, not from the Caribbean, but from Argentina. In a short essay from the 1920s, "The Argentine Writer and Tradition," Borges claims that an Argentine writer, precisely because he does not belong to any established tradition harking back to pain or Europe, has the liberty to exploit all of European literature, indeed all world literature, for his own work.

Jiang: Let's talk about the aesthetics in the field. As we know, the international literary criticism that Casanova proposed aimed at overcoming "the supposedly insuperable antinomy" between internal criticism and external criticism,[10] which could be taken as a seminal character of the new world literature studies. In *World Literature in an Age of Geopolitics*, we see you offered, among others, a brilliant comparativist reading of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Don Quixote*. In so doing, in which specific way could you keep the communication between internal and external criticisms?

D'haen: Usually internal and external criticisms refer to whether one restricts analysis to the intrinsic structure of a work or considers also contextual elements such as the author's biography, the social and political background, etc. In this instance, I assume that by internal you mean within a national context and with external, a world literature one. In the chapter to which you refer, I apply a form of triangulated reading à la Damrosch informed by Casanova's theories. In American criticism, *Huckleberry Finn* has traditionally been read as a novel about the American frontier, race relations, and the old American south. At different times, and from different perspectives, it has been praised as the greatest American novel and reviled because of its use of the so-called N-word to refer to Black people. However, you can read the book differently from a world literature perspective. In the first

10 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, tr. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 2004), 4.

couple of pages Tom Sawyer, the boy-hero from another book by Mark Twain, proposes to Huck and his other friends that they rob a caravan of Arabs carrying valuable goods. Huck soberly retorts that he does not see any caravan but only a bunch of schoolchildren on an outing. To which Tom Sawyer replies that if Huck would have read *Don Quixote,* he would realize that the schoolchildren *are* Arabs, but that a wizard makes him see them as schoolchildren. Now, you can say that this is just an anecdotal passage. However, if you stop to think about what Mark Twain is doing here, you find that he is allying his novel about a rural village in the middle of America and in the middle of the nineteenth century to one of the most renowned works of world literature, namely Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. By doing so, he is angling for the kind of recognition on the world literary scene, which simply operating on an American playing field could not give him. American literature at the time carried little prestige on the world literary scene, and by explicitly appealing to a recognized work of world literature, Mark Twain is trying to worm his way into the rank of world authors by way of comparison. The internal view posits *Huckleberry Finn* on the American literary scene. The external view resituates it on the world literature scene.

Jiang: In your book, you also promote a global literature perspective, that is to reread literary works from a global literature perspective without therefore necessarily reneging on readings from other perspectives. Why do you insist on the need for a global literary perspective in addition to a geopolitical one? What is the relationship between the two perspectives?

D'haen: World literature has sometimes been criticized for aligning itself with globalism, a term current in the field of economics. In the piece I wrote about this, I was saying that there is probably a point in calling literature, next to world literature, also global literature because it is also part of the global economy. Perhaps one of the most important levels at which literature functions is as a commodity. Next to a literary or intellectual good, a work of world literature is also a capital good that circulates as part of a global economy, and thus world literature in at least one sense is also global literature.

Jiang: I think this is a very good point. Should we turn to the specific condition of Brussels as a metropolis for world literature? In describing Brussels as a transnational node for world literature, you also referred to other European metropolises for world literature in the long nineteenth century, cities such as Vienna, Berlin, and Munich. The problem is that, although these metropolises seem more useful than focusing on any single world literary capital in facilitating the democratization of world literature, one can't ignore the fact that Brussels as one of the most famous

transnational nodes so far hasn't changed the poor condition of Flemish literature in world literature. Then, I would be wondering if a metropolis of world literature really has a positive effect on the democratization of this field. Would you please elaborate more on this?

D'haen: Again, I think it depends on different historical periods. Certainly, between 1900 and 1940, German-language literature, with centers in Vienna, Berlin, and Munich, played a very important role in what we now call world literature. The coming to power of Hitler in 1933 and the Second World War eclipsed the influence of German-language culture and literature. We now see a partial return of this, and over the last twenty years or so, a lot of books have appeared that discuss especially the role of Vienna as a capital of world literature before 1914, when the Austro-Hungarian empire was one of the largest political entities in Europe. After the First World War, the Austro-Hungarian empire was divided into smaller entities, which put an end to Vienna as a cultural capital. Between the two world wars, especially in the 1920s, Berlin took over that role. Munich always hovered in between. Casanova, focusing on Paris, and Moretti, concentrating on Paris and London, do not say much about these other literary capitals of Europe.

Brussels is a minor case in point. Belgium, although very small, before 1914 was one of the most important industrial and financial countries in the world. Because Belgium had a very liberal constitution, Brussels became the place to which authors that were in trouble in their own countries fled to continue their careers unhampered. Marx lived in Brussels when he and Engels wrote the Communist Manifesto. Victor Hugo for many years lived there at least part time. It is Brussels that Multatuli, the most famous nineteenth-century Dutch author, wrote his seminal *Max Havelaar*—the only Dutch-language novel by the way that at least occasionally makes it into lists of world literature. Baudelaire for several years lived in Brussels.

Flemish literature is literature in Dutch originating from the northern part of Belgium where the people, constituting some 60% of the total population of the country, have Dutch as their mother tongue. Because of specific historical circumstances at the time we are talking about, the nineteenth through early twentieth centuries, the official language of Belgium was French, even though the majority of the population, as I just mentioned, always has been Flemish. The French-speaking elite of the country looked down upon the Flemings, who primarily belonged to and the working class and upon the Flemish language, a dialectically tinged variant of Dutch. There was the beginning of a Flemish struggle for emancipation, but this would take time to make itself felt. Brussels, as the capital of the country, by and

large was a French-speaking city, certainly as far as politics, economics, finance, and culture went, and this is another reason why a lot of these foreign writers fled to Brussels. French was the language most elites around Europe shared anyway. The First World War largely put an end to Belgium as an important country. It also finished the role of Brussels as a cultural capital with a more than national reach. However, between 1860 and 1914, it functioned as an alternative capital to Paris for the French-speaking world and to some extent also for the rest of Europe. My critique simply was that Casanova and Moretti paid little attention to any literary capital or metropolis beyond Paris or London and that this is a shortsighted view of world literature.

Jiang: Of course, I agree with the point, but I think, at least in one place of her book, Casanova did mention Brussels as a quite important literary capital in Europe.

D'haen: Casanova of course was well aware that Baudelaire and Hugo for part of their careers lived and worked in Brussels, but her point is that their works needed to be validated in Paris in order to be accepted as world literature. By the way, one of the reasons why some French writers came to live, or in any case publish, in Brussels was because they wholly or partially made their living by writing erotic literature. There was strict censorship on this kind of writing in France, whereas Belgium was so liberal that almost anything could be published there. These publications were smuggled into France where they were sold illegally of course … [both laughing]

Jiang: Really?

D'haen: Yes, and everyone knew [laughing]…

Jiang: That's new to me, and I must say that if anyone wants some real historical sense for world literature, he or she should look into that. Now, since we are discussing the role of Brussels as world literature, do you mind giving me some idea about Flemish literature or literature in Dutch in the field? As the editor of *Dutch and Flemish Literature as World Literature*, if you would need to point Chinese readers to some specific paths to get acquainted with Dutch and Flemish literature, which writers and poets would you prioritize? And why?

D'haen: Well, as in any literature, so too in Dutch-language literature, there are interesting authors. The thing is that Holland (or the Netherlands as is the official name of the country) and Belgium have always been rather uneventful. Before the eighteenth century, all of Europe came to what is now Belgium to fight their wars. During the First World War Belgium, and during the Second World War both the Netherlands and Belgium, were overrun and occupied by the Germans. Beyond

this, hardly anything shocking has ever happened here. This means that literature from or about these countries is in general not very interesting to people from other cultures. One of the most successful Dutch novels abroad is The *Assault*, by Harry Mulisch. It is set at the beginning of the Second World War in Amsterdam. A German soldier is shot, and the people in front of whose house he was shot move his body in front of another house. So, it is the people from that other house that get arrested by the German authorities, and then everything develops from there. Relatively successful has also been *The Sorrow of Belgium*, by Flemish author Hugo Claus. It describes a boy and his family's experiences during and after the Second World War. Another book that has had some success is *War and Turpentine*, published in 2013 by a Flemish author, Stefan Hertmans. This is a novel about his grandfather during the First World War. What happened to the two countries during the two world wars is one of the few things that makes Belgium and Holland interesting in the eyes of outsiders, or externals, as you called them before. The most famous Dutch book in world literature is…

Jiang: By Erasmus?

D'haen: Well, Erasmus, yes, but he wrote in Latin, not in Dutch,

Jiang: Oh, Right!

D'haen: No, it's the *Diary of Anne Frank*, about a Jewish girl and her family in Amsterdam during the Second World War. They hid for years from the Germans, but in the end they were caught and sent to a concentration camp in Germany where they were murdered. But as you can see, all these Dutch and Flemish books that have had some success in translation abroad are about the First or Second World War.

Jiang: You mean people are interested in the events, not in the writing.

D'haen: Right. Dutch-language literature, or at least Dutch and Flemish writers and intellectuals, did play an important role in the transmission of culture and ideas from the south to the north of Europe, but this was primarily during what we now call Early Modernity. One of the reasons was also because especially during the seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic adopted a rather liberal attitude in politics and religion, and a lot of things that could not have been published in France, England, or elsewhere in Europe could be published in Holland, and were then disseminated throughout Europe.

Jiang: This was in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries, wasn't it?

D'haen: Mostly the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Jiang: I see. In China, comparatists working in world literature don't pay attention enough to literature in Dutch, though not without a reason as you just sug-

gested. However, I think we should try to change the situation. Let's turn to the next topic which is relative to this one in one way or another. As we know, the democratization of the relationship between major and minor literatures is one of your concerns. Yet, there is another democratization of world literature since Goethe referring to the literary integrity and independence against the commercialization of cultural modernity. Should we establish any epistemological connections between these different categories of democratization?

D'haen: Again, that's a point for debate. When we talk about world literature as literature that is commercially successful from a global perspective, we talk about things like airport literature, the kind of books that are sold in airport shops around the world. I have in a number of instances argued that literature with the widest reach worldwide these days is literature in popular genres such as crime or detective fiction, thrillers, adult romance, and Chick lit. "Chick" is a popular term in English to refer to girls in their late teens and young women in their early twenties. "Chick lit" is literature that specifically aims at this category of readers. It is very popular and sells by the millions everywhere. There are a couple of good English language bookstores in Antwerp, where I live, and they have a whole section devoted to this kind of literature. This is what people, or in any case most people, if they read at all, actually read these days. Of course, this literature is very ephemeral. It is in fashion for a year or so and then drops out of sight and disappears from the bookstores. That is also why authors of this kind of fiction need to produce a new book every year or every few years. By then the previous book has run its course at the till, and they need to sell a new book. Some authors are very successful at this.

Jiang: Would you see anything positive in this?

D'haen: Sure. Because I have argued already several times that a lot of this literature is not just, as has often been said, sheer entertainment. Notwithstanding the clichés with which some, or even most, works in these genres are loaded, or precisely because of how they handle these clichés, they can usefully be read as indices of what ordinary readers yearn for in this day and age. That is one way of defining present-day world literature. The other way is of course the classical view, which is that of works that endure over time, that keep being translated and retranslated, and that play a role in the general intellectual debate over a longer period. However, I think things are changing now, and I have just recently given a couple of lectures on recent developments in world literature studies, in which I argue, and of course I am not alone to say so, that the actual circulation of classical world literature these days no longer happens in print, but via other media, such as movies, YouTube, podcasts, and even via sound bites or single words, sentences, or expressions quoted

on X or TikTok. If you mention *The Iliad* to students these days, they may recognize the title, but few would know what the work is actually about, let alone have read it, even in parts. But if you ask who played the title role in the movie *Troy*, they would all immediately scream, "Brad Pitt!" This is how they know about *The Iliad*, not through reading the book. If contemporary students know anything at all about ancient Greek literature, it is probably through a movie or a Netflix series such as *Kaos*, which is a retelling of the Greek myths in a contemporary setting. Something similar—I assume—applies to a classic from your own culture, *Mulan*. There are versions of the story of Mulan going back at least a thousand years. Yet, most people know about Mulan from the movies. This is how world literature circulates nowadays: via popular media versions.

Jiang: But what about the distortion of classical information from ancient times? Would you simply say that you only see something positive happening in the process of adaptation?

D'haen: You can say that in one sense it is watering down the original classics. On the other hand, if they wouldn't circulate in these popular versions, world literature classics risk being forgotten. So, it is one of the ways to keep students but also the public at large, interested in these works. One can always hope that at least a few people will move on to the original, whether it's the classical version of the *Mulan* legend, the original Greek of Homer, or whatever. And again, it is a process of democratization, but it's also a process of preservation. If nobody reads the original anymore and there is no popularized version, it risks disappearing.

Jiang: It's the first step for further reading.

D'haen: Right.

Jiang: Now, we can turn to our final question for this interview. Last but not least. When we talk about world literature, we always look to translation. Many years ago, as we know, Susan Bassnett proposed a new comparative literature with translation studies as its focus. However, today, we see that world literature discourse holds the upper hand. Why did it turn out like this? Should we find some specific merits of world literature discourse in this context?

D'haen: Susan Bassnett has always been a great proponent of translation and translation studies and that is at least partially because she has a multilingual background herself. In the 1980s and 1990s, she had very strong connections with what was then called the Tel Aviv-Leuven-Amsterdam school of translation studies. In Israel, the main scholars involved were Gideon Toury and Itamar Even-Zohar. In Amsterdam, there was James Holmes. In Leuven, José Lambert and Hendrik Van Gorp, and in Antwerp André Lefevere. Susan was in touch with all these people,

and collectively they invented something called descriptive translation studies. Until then, translation studies had mostly been concerned with whether a translation is faithful to the original or not. Descriptive translation studies instead look at what is translated and how it is translated, because this says something about the receiving culture, about what is possible in this culture and what is not. In other words, you are comparing how the original and the translation function in their respective cultural and even wider social environments. This means you are basically treading on the ground of comparative literature. Because Susan was very much invested in translation studies, and because descriptive translation studies was exciting and new at the time, when she published her *Introduction to Comparative Literature* in 1993, she claimed translation studies not as a branch of comparative literature but rather the other way around: comparative literature as a branch of translation studies. In a 2006 article, she admitted that maybe she had been exaggerating a little [laughing]. But it is certainly true that translation studies, which now usually actually means descriptive translation studies, has earned itself a prominent place in literary studies. In world literature studies, it becomes even more important because a lot of world literature happens through translation, precisely. I think there is a lot to be said for including translation studies as one of the approaches to world literature studies.

Jiang: But translation studies cannot replace comparative literature or world literature, right?

D'haen: No. In my opinion, three or four approaches should work together. World literature, comparative literature, and translation studies should work together with specialists in national literature, who usually know more about a specific work than people working in the other three approaches. Ideally, you would get a combination. Then you would get four perspectives on one work, and that, I think, would be very interesting.

Jiang: Can we take the view that the four terms converge in the field of world literature? Can we say that?

D'haen: Yes, maybe, why not?

Jiang: I ask because I know that you once pointed out, in another interview, that comparative literature is a method and world literature is a practical application of that method. Now, I am wondering if you would like to accept a term like "world literature as a method," which refers to the convergence of the four terms above.

D'haen: We could if we describe it in such a way. Yes, we could. Actually, in the history of European literature, which I mentioned before, I am doing together with a Swedish colleague, I wrote the part between 1500 and the present, and I pay

a lot of attention to translation and also to the influence of non-European traditions on European literature, which is a sort of world literature approach to European literature.

Jiang: That is the title I would like to use for our interview, "world literature as method." Thank you very much!

D'haen: Thank you!

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Reading World Literature within Its Institutions: An Interview with Professor Pieter Vermeulen

Pieter Vermeulen (Leuven University)

Haitao Jiang (Beijing Normal University)

Abstract:

In the interview, Prof. Vermeulen shared his ideas not only about how we read world literature with an awareness of the limitation of its institutions, but also about how we reaffirm literary writings and literary criticism as useful forms of thinking despite such limitations. He highlighted not only academic communities but also several market-based elements to explain the dynamics of the making of world literature, thus dealing with issues like historization of world literary learnings, commercialization of literary experiences, and linguistic hegemony in this field. The talk also featured entanglement of literary value with ethical, political, and other kinds of value. Furthermore, Prof. Vermeulen turned to the term *necessary misnomers* to illuminate the inexhaustible worldliness of some impossibly large terms like "world", "Anthropocene", and "planetary", as a way to keep the latter terms productive in literary research.

Keywords: institutions of world literature, Anthropocene, cosmopolitanism, Flemish literature, world literary market

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Jiang: Professor Vermeulen, thank you very much for accepting this interview. We know that as a professor of American and comparative literature, you take world literature as one of your research interests. It seems to me that your research in this field is such a comprehensive one that you do excellent work in making connections among discussions of literary form, affect, memory, Anthropocene, and the big theory of world literature. However, at first, would you please introduce to the readers your early academic and research background? I am curious about how you became interested in the topic of world literature.

Vermeulen: Thank you very much for this question and for inviting me to do this interview. I studied German and English literature and philosophy in Leuven and Vancouver and as a doctoral student I was very interested in literary theory. As I didn't really have a lot of inspiration to think of a doctoral project of my own, I followed the suggestion of my supervisor to focus my project on the work of the critic Geoffrey Hartman. Hartman was a massive figure in postwar literary criticism, working in fields such as romanticism, literary theory, especially deconstruction and psychoanalytical criticism, and later in his life, also trauma theory and Holocaust studies. For me, this was a fantastic opportunity to explore the whole history of literary criticism. Hartman was an extremely erudite scholar, who engaged with French literature, German philosophy, Jewish thought, and so on. And working on him forced me to also familiarize myself with that whole canon of work. I still think that for me this was an excellent advanced education in the field of literary studies. At that time in the 2000s, world literature was not really on my radar. Although my office was situated next to that of Theo D'haen, a prominent researcher in the field. But he was not my supervisor. It was really only when I had my first tenure-track job at the University of Stockholm—and by that time I had shifted my research focus to contemporary anglophone literature—that I really began to engage with world literature in a more or less systematic way. My colleague Stefan Helgesson was a huge inspiration, with his deep knowledge of African and lusophone literatures. He initiated the intellectual dialogues with the cultural anthropologists at Stockholm, people like the formidable Helena Wulff and others, who also happened to be very interested in forms of literary writing from an anthropological perspective that was totally new to me. So it is thanks to these colleagues that I realized that there was a huge gap in my education and that it was worthwhile beginning to fill it.

Jiang: Then I see that you started with contemporary anglophone literature, and one thing leads to another, and one day you find yourself working in world literature. You are coeditor of *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets*, a volume which is, in my opinion, one of the most important books in the field. As a whole, it develops diverse, practical, and effective approaches to world literature, most of which are also productive in theory. Could you give us some background and thoughts on editing the book?

Vermeulen: It is really my colleague Stefan Helgesson who deserves credit for this book. It was he who planned to organize a conference and was generous enough to take me as a junior colleague on board to help organize that conference and coedit the book based on this conference. So I really look back to the process

of editing the book as a huge learning process for myself, as I still think there is no better way to pick up new ideas than by editing or supervising or helping the work of other scholars with an expertise different than mine. As academics, we of course need to balance our desire to always learn new things with the duty to continuously publish our own research. I tend to think of my published work as a record of my own learning process, and that is very much the case for this book. I'm still very proud of that book. I think it really participated (in however minor a way, of course) in a shift in the discussion in world literature studies from the grand theories of the beginning of the twenty-first century to a more considerate and patient attention to the role that markets, institutions, and other mediations play in the production and circulation of literary texts. The importance of such mediations is something that I was not very much aware of at the beginning of my career, but it is a sociological dimension that has become increasingly prominent in the work I've done in the last decade.

Jiang: In the introduction of *Institutions of World Literature*, you and your colleague first made the point that "world literature is made, not found"(1).[1] I, for my part, would primarily connect this trait of world literature with the specific genres that Goethe, Marx, and Engels employed to propose "world literature," by which I mean it was in *Gespräche* (conversation) and *Manifest* (manifesto) that they promoted the seminal term, and you really see the performative significance of the forms. However, when you made the point, who is in your opinion the subject of this "making"? Writers? Readers? Critics? Publishers? Translators? Or even markets? All of them? Could you elaborate more on this proposition?

Vermeulen: The question of "who *makes* world literature?" is of course becoming an increasingly important one as literature continues to become an increasingly marginal reality in the world at large and in the university more specifically. A lot of my work is interested in the question not only of who *makes* world literature but also of who is going to *preserve* it. And there I think we need an alliance of what we could call the stakeholders in the persistence of literature. A community of readers, translators, critics, teachers, publishers, students, and so on. Consideration of these different actors is not only crucial for the survival of literature as a force in the world and as an academic subject, it is also crucial for understanding what literature is and has become. I see myself as a researcher very much as an interested participant in that community of the *makers* of world literature.

1 Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen, "Introduction: World Literature in the Making," in *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets*, eds. Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 12-31.

Jiang: On the one hand, you highlighted "the performative function of language" to "institute something," and on the other hand, you emphasized equally that "successful performativity does not emerge out of nothing," "it needs social recognition and sustenance" (2).[2] Then, how do you demarcate the subjectivity or agency of the making of world literature when you insist on the dialectic?

Vermeulen: I think it is an important methodological challenge to read text and institution dialectically, by which I mean, in a way that underlines how the two cannot exist in isolation from one another. It is always slightly frustrating to read the works of scholarship that offer a brilliant institutional account of literature but then fails to develop exciting and unpredictable textual readings. In the field of contemporary American literature, for instance, Dan Sinykin's *Big Fiction* is such a book—totally great in its historical and archival work and its sociological reflections, but not very original in its textual analyses. It is equally frustrating to see that books offer dazzling interpretations of individual works without really connecting them to the institutional realities through which literature functions today. My earlier work has definitely been guilty of the latter error, where I believe too much in what you call the performative function of language—the power of literary language to make something special happen. I believe more than ever that the combination of textual analysis and institutional account is the way forward for the study of also contemporary world literature—which does not mean it is easy, nor that I feel I have found a good way to achieve the balance in my own writing or teaching.

Jiang: I believe it's a challenging task for all of us. As you used the term "institution," is it the academic institution to which you mainly referred? Does the term also include "writing, translation, and markets"? Or did you use the term in a more abstract way to suggest a relationship between these differing fields?

Vermeulen: In the study of American literature, which is so much embedded in academic institutions, I would definitely say that the academy takes priority as the most important institution. But looking at Belgian literature, the literature in the country I live, it is clear that the situation is quite different, and that state-funded institutions, publishers, journals, and translators are at least as important as academic institutions. In Belgium, there is simply more government support for literature, and there are no real developed creative writing programs the way there are in the States. So it really depends on particular contexts.

Jiang: Yes, I see. I believed you historicized the collective undertaking of world literature in English academia over the past twenty years, and thus you saw that

2 Helgesson and Vermeulen, "Introduction," 1.

"the dominant, emergent, as well as residual modes of world literature as something made can be critically examined." Obviously, you located your own project in the third and critical mode of world literature. You also argued that before the critical phase, the second decade of the millennium has seen "consolidation" of the field, which means that "world literature de facto exists."[3] Should we really be that optimistic?

Vermeulen: I don't think me and my coeditor mean much more than to say that world literature had become a visible discipline within the larger discipline of literary studies. Whether world literature in the more substantial and utopian (so not just disciplinary) sense of Goethe or Marx can really be said to exist is a very different matter. Although even in that regard, I have become slightly more optimistic in recent years. While I see that the number of serious readers and serious students of literature is definitely not rising, I see that there is simply more exciting translation activity from world languages into English. And when I look at the Dutch and Flemish book markets, of which I am a big consumer, there are now exciting, small, and new publishers that take many more risks in publishing foreign literature than was available even ten or twenty years ago. So am I optimistic about world literature? I think I actually am, even though literature has, in the time that it has become *more worldly*, probably also become *much smaller* than it used to be. Life is probably too short to be too sad over that.

Jiang: It's interesting to think literature is more worldly but also smaller these days. Then, in the same introduction, I believe that you mentioned two "Holy Trinities" for the establishment of world literature, by which I refer to firstly Goethe, Marx (with Engels), and Erich Auerbach, and secondly Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti, and David Damrosch. For you personally, do you find anyone among them whose idea is most inspiring?

Vermeulen: For me personally, Auerbach has by far been the most inspiring. When writing my dissertation on Geoffrey Hartman, I came across the work of Auerbach, who was one of Hartman's admired teachers at Yale in the 1950s, after he had fled Germany and moved on from Istanbul, where he had written *Mimesis*. When I read *Mimesis* and his work on the notion of the *figura*, I found that work weirdly inspiring even though it dealt with a Christian and medieval literary tradition that I'm not particularly interested or knowledgeable in. But his reading of Dante at the heart of *Mimesis*, where he explains how literary realism emerges from Dante's effort to capture the embodied, fleshy reality of the afterlife, I have always

3 Helgesson and Vermeulen, "Introduction," 1.

found that extremely impressive. The combination of attention to literary style and larger historical ideas is something that is hardly possible today but which I found very inspiring. And I am still convinced that his idea of the *Ansatzpunkt*, basically the idea that it is important to find a particularly resonant element in the text or culture you want to discuss to launch your discussion, also points to something very essential in what it means to write good literary criticism.

Jiang: Everybody likes Auerbach and you give us a good explanation. Yet the next question is somehow related to the hardly possible combination today, as you just mentioned, of attention to literary style and larger historical ideas. In remaking Casanova's great attribution to this field, Christopher Prendergast mentioned that Casanova did have the merit to "put the question of literature back in the spotlight."[4] As the starting point of "new world literature," the international literary criticism that Casanova proposed aimed at overcoming "the supposedly insuperable antinomy" between internal criticism and external criticism,[5] which I find is befitting to characterize your literary criticism as well. As early as in your research on the romanticism of Geoffery Hartman, you paid special attention to his "deliberately minimal form of aesthetic," which "derives its performative power from its withdrawal from the available terms of debate" on contemporary culture.[6] Could we say that it is also your path to approach world literature?

Vermeulen: As I said, a totally convincing combination of internal criticism and sociological contextualization is extremely difficult to achieve. In the field of American studies for instance, Mark McGurl's book *The Program Era* offers an extremely powerful account of the forces that have reshaped the literary field since the end of the Second World War, and while he is a fantastic reader, you still feel that the strength of his sociological argument really harms some of his textual analysis, in the sense that he will read every novel as in some sense a campus novel or at the very least an allegory of the creative writing workshop. I just finished writing a review of another very brilliant book, Alexander Manshel's *Writing Backwards*, which analyzes the rise of historical fiction as the most celebrated and prized form of American literature in the last four decades. Now Manshel's readings are brilliant, but even a fantastic reader like him begins to produce unconvincing analyses when he stretches his argument too far in his final chapter, where he coins the genre

4 Christopher Prendergast, "Introduction," in *Debating World Literature*, ed. Christopher Prendergast (London and New York: Verso, 2004), vii.

5 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, tr. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 4-5.

6 Pieter Vermeulen, *Geoffery Hartman: Romanticism After the Holocaust* (London & New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 3.

of the so-called recent historical novel. So it's hard! There is also of course something to the fact that a long-form monograph forces you to sustain an argument beyond breaking point. In that sense I'm probably lucky that I was socialized in a system that for better or worse prioritizes article-length publications. I never felt forced to develop a theory I needed to sustain for, say, two or three hundred pages. If my work is sensitive to what actually happens in the texts I analyze, the fact that I have had to prioritize article publications definitely helps me remain flexible in the approaches I take.

Jiang: You make an interesting and surprising connection between the finitude of literary criticism and different forms of publication of literary scholarship, which I never realized before. I think you have a point. In your reading of Teju Cole's *Open City*, I find it quite interesting that, on the one hand, you pointed out that "aesthetic experiences fails to generate the intercultural associations that literary cosmopolitanism claims it can provide," and on the other hand, you wrote that "only the aesthetic or the literary can make apprehensible" a largely "virtual, non-dramatic, non-evental sense of unease" connected to the aforementioned fail.[7] I think it might be the reason why you keep working on the affect of literary form. Could you elaborate more on this?

Vermeulen: Since I first read it, *Open City* has been a consistently irritating and provocative novel for me. It is very attractive in its melancholy mood, its many cultural, musical, and literary references, and its depiction of New York. At the same time, it's quite clear to me that *as a novel*, it's not super successful. Cole to me is not really a great novelist, and his second novel, *Tremor*, which was published in 2023, confirms this sense. While it's very interesting in its range of references and formal experiments, it simply doesn't cohere like a novel. So when I started to write about *Open City* I wanted to come to terms with that. And since I published my first article on Cole, it seems like everybody has felt this need to write about *Open City*, making it still my most cited article. And I still stand by my earlier interpretation, that the novel is much less a celebration of the powers of literature than a critique of an exaggerated belief in the ethical power of literature to forge a kind of cosmopolitan connection across cultural borders. But as your question suggests, in that way I am of course still saying that literature is some kind of special ethically salient thing in that it has the power to self-reflexively critique its own ethical impulses, which might be giving it too much credit! This is the part of my earlier interpretation that I'm no longer really convinced of. When I read Cole's more recent novel,

7 Pieter Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel: Creature, Affect, Form* (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 95-99.

the sustained ambiguity of the first novel has gone. It is clearly a novel that remains blind to its own weaknesses (more specifically, to the privilege of the narrator, who is a clear stand-in for the author). So feeding that back into *Open City*, I'm really no longer sure that that novel is a carefully crafted self-reflexive self-critique. To put this differently, I'm no longer sure that Cole is as intelligent as I gave him credit for. But what I do remain committed to is believing that the novel, and especially in the case of *Open City*, is smarter than both its protagonist and its author—if that makes sense!

I follow Timothy Bewes's idea that the novel *as such* is form of thinking, irrespective of what the author or reader thinks. I am aware that this sounds rather mystical, but for me it's one of the things that makes it rewarding to really try and follow a novel in the direction it takes you (which also means: writing about it; I don't think that *as a reader*, it is possible to push a novel that far, at least I can't, I am much too relaxed and uncritical a reader for that). It is an experience I've had several times, most recently when I was reading Hernan Diaz's novel *Trust*. Diaz is a very, very good novelist, unlike Cole, I would say, but when I read interviews with Diaz in which he talked about his novel, he made it sound like a very bland liberal novel in which the powers of literature can undo the violence of history by recovering lost voices. And when I then read the novel, it struck me that the novel is simply much smarter and more ambiguous and more complicated than even the author thinks—which is the main reason I find it rewarding to write about it!

Jiang: A novel is smarter than both its protagonist and its author. I like your phrasing especially because I know when you say it, you are not simply celebrating the power of literature to "undo the violence of history"; indeed, you want to remind me that literature is really unable to do that. Yet, as you convince me, as a good reader, maybe especially as a literary critic, one can still take a novel as a good form of thinking. As for the case of Teju Cole, what is relevant is the way in which you use the term "cosmopolitanism." I think you are always willing to endorse the universalism of cosmopolitanism, which is, in your words, "increasingly rooted in a commitment to human rights."[8] Yet you highlighted "the insufficiency" of a merely aesthetic cosmopolitanism at the same time. How could we, readers, understand the tension here better?

Vermeulen: I continue to struggle with this issue. It's simply the case that one of the best public defenses of the value of literature that we have is the contribution it can make to fostering empathy and furthering justice, including human rights.

8 Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel*, 85.

At the same time, of course, literary scholarship has for a long time indicated the limits of literature's capacity to foster empathy and has instead emphasized the ways in which it can confront us with an otherness that simply is not available for empathetic connection. When I was a master's student over twenty years ago, these two positions, one defending literature for its empathy-enhancing potential, the other deconstructing those claims and insisting on the radical otherness of literary form, were really diametrically opposed poles of the debate—one side humanist, the other deconstructionist. But I don't think they are any longer. A conference I co-organized about literature and ethics in the summer of 2024 in Stockholm set out to update that old opposition between empathy and otherness, but somewhat to my surprise, the debates took a very different turn and it seemed to me that, especially for younger scholars, that opposition doesn't really make much sense anymore. Today, it makes more sense to say that literature can enhance empathy, can do cosmopolitan work, can help people imagine each other's fates, while at the same time underlining that such empathy is never enough, that it never automatically translates into better world. So as long as we factor in the insufficiency of a merely emotional connection, I'm much more comfortable now defending literature in terms of the affective and empathetic work it can do.

Jiang: That's a good point. Let's turn to linguistic issues of world literature. As a professor specializing in American literature and world literature, it is absolutely fair that you always stay in the field of anglophone world literature. Still, I would like to ask whether you take that as a problem?

Vermeulen: Having grown up in a bilingual country at the periphery of the world literary system, issues of translation and multilingualism have of course always come very naturally to me. So while I mostly work on American literature and am very interested in the American literary field, I never address those fields as an insider, as someone who can hope to belong to that field (I have also not spent very much time in the States, I really approach them as an outside observer). At the same time, I do actually believe that because anglophone publishing and anglophone institutions are so central to the circulation of world literature, it is not impossible to develop a worldly perspective through a focus on the US. Of course, as in my response to the previous question, it's crucial to remain aware of your own limitations. To overcome those, world literature needs to necessarily be a collective endeavor, in which different kinds of linguistic expertise and different positionalities come together. But once you factor in such an awareness of multilingualism and plurality, focusing on American literature or the American literary field becomes a surprisingly worldly affair. In the book I'm writing now I'm mak-

ing a case that in order to understand twenty-first-century American literature, it's absolutely crucial to factor in the work of writers like Sebald, Bolaño, Ferrante, or Knausgaard, or the role of independent publishers translating exciting global work. And while there is this traditional image that the American literary system does not translate a lot of foreign literature into English, it seems increasingly clear that that perception is caused by the vastness of that system and that there is an increasingly vibrant translation culture, especially through independent publishers. There is a lot of exciting Latin American and Asian literature that is available in English even while it remains unavailable in European languages, for instance. Two decades ago, the idea of studying American literature as world literature was a fashionable idea, in the work of Wai Chee Dimock, for instance. In a sense my perspective is much more that of an outsider studying world literature as American literature, however perverse that sounds, but I do believe that we can rarely skip the role of American institutions when we try to understand world literary dynamics. All of that with the awareness, of course, that you very much need the expertise of other scholars to fill out the many, many blind spots that such a perspective leaves.

Jiang: I agree with your idea that until now we can rarely skip the role of American institutions when we try to understand world literary dynamics. However, specializing in anglophone world literature, you are still a Flemish comparatist. Would you like to recommend some Flemish writers and poets to our readers?

Vermeulen: I am hardly a specialist in Flemish and Dutch literature as I have never studied those literatures, nor am I a big reader of them; most of what I read in Dutch is translated literature. Among the major and most famous writers, I am a big fan of Gerard Reve, a postwar writer whose most famous work is called *The Evenings*, which describes the malaise of life after the war in a kind of deadpan humorous way. And I can really recommend Hugo Claus' *The Sorrow of Belgium*, which is in many ways the great Belgian novel dealing with Catholicism, nationalism, and the far from the heroic role that Flemish nationalism played during the Second World War. Among contemporary writers, I admire the work of Charlotte Van Den Broeck, which has been translated into English. She's written great nonfiction books about failed architects and about our obsession with the Tasmanian tiger. But again, I am a fan, not a specialist.

Jiang: Thanks. Let's return to the issue of anglophone world literature. One of your papers, "The Americanization of World Literature? American Independent Publishing and the World Literary Vernacular," challenges the simple "equation of commercialization, devernacularization, Americanization, and aesthetic diminish-

ment on both theoretical and empirical grounds."[9] And, in remarking on Emily Apter's proposal for a new comparative literature centering upon "the Untranslatable," you pointed out that "it undervalues the power of contemporary capital to convert singularities into marketable differences."[10] Would please you elaborate more on the relation between "Americanization" and these "marketable differences"? I find it interesting.

Vermeulen: For me, this is essentially a trade-off one has to make when one considers the place of global English in the world literary system. It is clear that you lose something by circulating and receiving text in English translation. Especially vernacular detail threatens to disappear. And I am sympathetic to scholars and readers who emphasize the loss involved in the domination of global English. At the same time, I believe that as readers or as teachers and researchers we simply cannot afford to look only at the losses involved. The spread of English also makes available a whole international library of texts to readers who could not otherwise dream of even accessing those texts written in languages they don't understand. So for me, the incredible reach of global English to a large extent compensates for the undeniable aesthetic diminishment involved. Americanization is real, and it is a mixed blessing, but it is not the end of literature; it is, if anything, perhaps the main future of it. What I mean by "marketable differences" is that even postures of resistance, uncompromising opposition to Americanization or to global English are themselves very much part of the system they oppose. So for me, as there is no real outside to this large world-literary system, the more interesting question becomes how to best and most productively inhabit that system in a way that makes the benefits outweigh the disadvantages.

Jiang: Again, that's a good point. You led the research project "Harlem, Capital of World Literature? James Baldwin's Posthumous Career and the Dynamics of World literature," which ran from 2021 to 2025. How does this fit in your interest into world literature?

Vermeulen: This project really ties in with my interest in processes of valuation in the ways that some forms of writing are endowed with world literary value and others are not. It also resonates of course with my interest in the work of Baldwin, who I think is a really fascinating writer. My intuition was that the return of Bald-

9 Pieter Vermeulen and Amélie Hurkens, "The Americanization of World Literature? American Independent publishing and the World Literary Vernacular," *Interventions*, 22:3, 435.

10 Pieter Vermeulen, "On World Literary Reading: Literature, the Market, and the Antinomies of Mobility," in *Institutions of World Literature: Writing, Translation, Markets*, eds. Stefan Helgesson and Pieter Vermeulen (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 80.

win to prominence in the literary domain but also in the broader culture and especially in political and online discourses was a perfect case study to investigate what practices and discourses participated in his return to world literary prominence, after he had really been a marginal figure for several decades. The doctoral researcher who worked on the project was able to discover very fascinating material, which really shows the extent to which literary value is entangled with ethical, political, and other kinds of value. But that is not the whole story, as we also noticed that there are still significant differences between the political Baldwin who we see being circulated on social media and the Baldwin we encounter in bookstores. Baldwin the activist and essayist is a somewhat different entity from Baldwin the queer novelist. Another takeaway from this research was the role that contingency, personal relationships between authors and translators or publishers, and occasional encounters play in the world literary circulation of even a very prominent writer like Baldwin. It is very tempting to have recourse to grand sociological theories to explain the dynamics of world literature, and while such large theories are obviously necessary for developing a general picture, the world of literature, even world literature, is sufficiently small for minor events, coincidences, and chance meetings to play a large role in shaping that world. Which of course means we need detailed historical and archival work and not just sociological reflection or literary analysis to really understand what makes literature into world literature.

Jiang: I believe so too. Then we have our final question. Let's say if there is a term that makes people more dizzying than "world literature," it is "Anthropocene." Prof. Theo D'haen suggests the possibility of integrating these two terms into another term, "planetary."[11] Would you take the same view? If so, how could you mediate the very longue durée of the Anthropocene and the presentism of world literature research?

Vermeulen: I have now been working on the notion of the Anthropocene for almost a decade. What remains very useful in that term for me is that it somewhat forces you to draw connections between the universal and the particular, between the general and the unique. It is a concept that almost automatically invites an interdisciplinary dialogue, a dialogue in which I firmly believe that literature can play a part but in which you know it cannot do all the work by itself. And as your question suggests, one of the productive aspects of the notion of the Anthropocene is that it forces you to think about time and history and temporality in more expansive terms, that it reminds you that not even the present can fully be taken for granted,

11 Theo D'haen, *A History of World Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2024), 218-37.

as there is a whole world out there, both spatially and temporally. As for "the planetary," I'm fully convinced that that term can do very similar work. With impossibly large terms like "world" and "Anthropocene" and "planetary," the key issue for me is not whether they adequately name a particular reality. As we are talking about extremely extended realities, those realities cannot possibly be named adequately by one simple word. I consider these terms as what I call *necessary misnomers*, terms that cannot possibly fit the larger reality that they refer to, but can, precisely because they *don't* fully fit, serve as a catalyst for debates, debate that is more important in itself than finding an answer that will never arrive. In a sense, those terms do what I also believe literature can do, that is, continue to generate questions and debates that are almost by definition inexhaustible.

Jiang: If I understand you correctly, "world literature" is also a "necessary misnomer," which is a catalyst for keeping our minds running. As usual, the way in which you dealt with all these issues I have raised today is very productive, and I myself learned a lot from it. Again, thank you very much!

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The Sensual Uncertainties of Staying True:
A Review of Hua Hsu, *Stay True: A Memoir.* New York: Doubleday Books, 2022. ISBN-10: 0385547773; ISBN-13: 978-0385547772. 208 pp.

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> We could never write in a way that assumed anyone know where we were coming from. There was nothing interesting about our context. Neither Black nor white, just boring to everyone on the outside. Where do you even begin explaining yourself?
>
> Hua Hsu, *Stay True*, 187

Stay True offers a range of poetic, philosophical, and sensual musings on the uncertainties of friendship, loss, memory, history, and staying true to who you are. A second-generation Taiwanese American mourning the murder of his Japanese American college friend, Hua Hsu's memoir reveals the profound diversity of Asian American experiences and refuses to be narrowly defined only as an Asian American memoir. *Stay True* interrogates the uncertainty of staying true to friendship and identity, with a focus on how music, film, sports, writing, and other forms of media mediates our relationships and individual identity formations. Throughout his memoir, Hua Hsu showcases the importance of sensual encounters through sound, image, representations of joys and pain, attempting to make sense of the senseless murder of his college friend through writing and remembering.

I first heard Hua Hsu interviewed by Terry Gross on Fresh Air when his book, *Stay True*, came out in 2022. The interview foregrounded how music and mixtapes helped make the author who he is, with the senseless murder of his college friend Ken in 1998 at the center. The book recently won the inaugural 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Memoir. Hearing the interview again on National Public Radio after the book won the Pulitzer Prize in September 2023 finally made me want to do a critical review of the book. I am a skeptic, and I cannot wait to tear the book apart; at least a part of me wanted to. At the same time, with mixtapes (what we now call playlists)

so central to the narrative, I instinctively felt there must be a lot of things I could tease out for review.

An Asian American Memoir?

As a female Asian American reader, I was looking for Asian American things in the book, and I found a rather nuanced take on the issue but still operating very much within a male-centered homosocial world. The first time the question about being Asian American was raised is some forty pages into the book, when the author, Hua, a second-generation Taiwanese American, formally introduced his college friend Ken as one of the Japanese American kids who "can seem like aliens to other Asians, untroubled, largely oblivious of feeling like outsiders" (44). The very much assimilated Ken appeared too mainstream for the taste of our author, "I remember how odd it was that he sometimes forgot to take his shoes off when he came over" (78). That is to the extent, however, the author seems to want to indulge in the question of being Asian American at face value, although it is a thread that lingered throughout the book.

Staying True to Friendship and Identity?

The formation and transformation of friendship and individual identity seem much more central to the memories that must be written down for the sake of remembrance and preservation, archiving and activation, after the murder of Ken. Hua offers insights from philosophers from Aristotle to Derrida to breathe life into his storytelling of love and loss, and memory and history. Youthful friendship, the instability and quick succession, as well as the possibility and intensity of pleasure as articulated by Aristotle, came to be disrupted by Derrida, who saw dichotomies as mutually constitutive. In *Stay True*, Hua wanted to "tak[e] seriously the ideas of our departed friends" and considered such an action "the ultimate expression of friendship, signaling the possibility of a eulogy that doesn't simply focus attention back on the survivor and their grief" (57).

"What does it mean to truly be yourself?" (80), Hua asks his readers. He continued to weave in insights from philosophers, anthropologists, and sociologists to connect friendship, identity, and the sensual and emotional connections between individuals. From Charles Taylor, Bronisław Malinowski, to Marcel Mauss, Hua guided his readers through a journey in search of identity in remembrance. In his exploration of friendship in relation to the idea of the gift, Hua zooms in on Mauss's "Essay on the Gift" and its original publication in 1923 as part of a special issue of

L'Année sociologique, a journal that Émile Durkheim, Mauss's mentor, had founded in 1896 and edited until his death in 1917.

The 1923 comeback issue overseen by Mauss paid tribute to a generation of scholars who were among the millions lost over the proceeding decade. Mauss projects into a future that never arrived, imagining "what this would have become, if there had been no war" and his colleagues had continued living and working together. In this context, Mauss's idea of the gift takes on a new resonance. He is salvaging a lost world, trying to see through on a set of impossible potentialities, something Hua similarly attempts in his memoir (103-4).

How Media Mediates?

Stay True is all about how media mediates our friendship, identity, memory, and sense of loss and history. Music and mixtapes are key, so are film, TV, radio, and other forms of mediations. Hua offers two film experiences as essential to the bounding of Ken and himself: One is *La Jetée*, a short film by the French filmmaker Chris Marker, and the other is *Berry Gordy's The Last Dragon*, considered by himself as "the greatest film ever made" after about ten minutes of watching. *La Jetée* impressed Hua with its formal and thematic simplicity: It mainly consists of a series of still black-and-white images with minimal voiceover; and it was a simple tale of a future civilization trying to time travel their way out of doom (71). However, I see something else in Hua's obsession with the film. The film not only resembles a zine, one of Hua's favorite ways of self-expression in addition to mixtapes, but it is also about confronting a past death in the future, Hua's central preoccupation in writing *Stay True* after Ken's murder. As to *Berry Gordy's The Last Dragon*, a kung fu comedy that featured a predominantly Black cast, it also inspires in multiple ways: Hua and Ken wrote a film script together inspired by *The Last Dragon* (98), although they never even got to the point of finding someone with a camera to shoot the film.

In this sense, writing as the ultimate means of mediation, is Hua's way of bringing Ken into the conversation after his murder. However, Hua is a skeptic, just like me. He invokes Derrida's "deferral of meaning" in his self-interrogation of the incapability and uncertainty of words and their meanings: "yet words are all we have, simultaneously bringing us closer, casting us farther away" (125). Similarly, "music no longer modeled a better world," and he decided that he could no longer listen to anything from before (132).

Making Sense through Sensual Encounters?

In a memoir full of music and mixtapes, Hua did not necessarily privilege the auditorial as a dominating sensual function for encountering friends, forging identities, and creating or losing meaningful connections. One particularly memorable example is offered when he hurt himself, almost intentionally and violently, in a baseball game after the murder of his friend Ken:

> A gruesome, lunch-meat-sized scab formed on my knee. I appreciated the way it expanded, mutated, took on new crevasses. It looked like a landmass slowly expanding across the sea. I wore the wound like a badge. I loved telling the story of how it happened, because something about the way I reveled in its violence seemed uncharacteristic. And it was also a new story—one that had nothing to do with Ken or the past. (138)

This bodily experience is so vividly conveyed to the readers that it could easily be visualized and felt. Telling stories about it adds auditorial sensations to the visual and bodily experiences, guiding the readers to a deeper appreciation of the need for a new story, a new narrative, and the need to forge a new sensual experience. However, Hua's final musing on how to best represent what he and Ken experienced together betrayed his intended forgetting:

> I needed to figure out how to describe the smell of secondhand smoke on flannel, the taste of pancakes with fresh strawberries and powdered sugar the morning after, sun hitting a specific shade of golden brown, the deep ambivalence you once felt toward a song that now devastated you, the threshold when a pair of old boots go from new to worn, the sound of our finals week mixtape wheezing to the end of its spool. (193)

In this sense, *Stay True* is Hua's attempt at making sense of the senseless murder of his friend through writing and remembering. To what extent one can stay true, however, is always open to the intervention of sensual uncertainties.

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