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Editor

Tensions in World Literature

Between the Local and the Universal

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Martin Kern

Thank you very much for having me here. I'm coming to you not as a specialist in comparative or world literature, but as someone who works on Chinese antiquity. We are in China, so this is appropriate. Professor Fang and I met last year for the first time at a conference at Peking University, which is my university here in Beijing where I studied. We were talking about translation at that time and I think that is why he then invited me here.

I also feel deeply honored to be able to comment on Professor Zhang's rich paper this morning. I must say I came here with a feeling of both excitement and considerable terror, because I knew that Professor Zhang would be talking for about 40 minutes, while what I had been given beforehand was just a two-page summary. So I went by that summary when I wrote my comment—and yet now, conveniently, he completely departed from that summary! But in the end he came back to what I think is the most interesting and exciting part of that summary, and that is what I want to focus on, as I now improvise my comments.

Of course I agree with Professor Zhang's idea that he formulated at the very end, where he said we should bring the best things from our own literary traditions into world literature. We should bring our classics. We should bring our canonical texts. This is the stuff that matters. Because we

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cannot just bring everything. And of course, Professor Damrosch has written on this in great detail in his book *What Is World Literature?* The idea is that one way of looking at world literature is to look at the classics. Now, this leads to some sort of United Nations of Great Books, and I kind of agree with that, but I have to disagree with a few things, so that we can have a discussion. In that spirit, I will come up with a few points.

I am happy that Professor Zhang started with Goethe, as we always do. I studied German literature in my home country, which is Germany, and I am a great fan of Goethe. Yet although that passage on world literature that we have been talking about this morning is always involved at the beginnings of our ruminations on world literature, I find it a very troubling passage. There is a lot I find difficult to understand in Goethe's passage. I will come back to that in my talk tomorrow, so let me not dwell on this now.

In my own field, ancient China, what I really believe is that we cannot do our best work by simply taking the ancient Chinese texts on their own terms. We have to put them into a comparative perspective. We have to confront them with world literature, precisely in order to find ways to better imagine them in their own world of antiquity.

What I will say—pointing to something that happens a lot in my field—is that we assimilate the ancient classics to our own needs; we always do that. This has been done for 2000 years in the ever-evolving Chinese tradition, and of course most powerfully in the early twentieth century by people like Hu Shi, about whom we heard this morning. Hu Shi is really, to some extent, a product of American education, and the reading of the ancient Chinese classics that we have today is really the May Fourth reading. It is the reading of May Fourth nationalism and a search for cultural origins, for a new Chinese nation. In this, it is very similar to Herder and the Brothers Grimm in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, who looked for the origins of Germany: not just for German literature, but for the origins of the German language, in the tongue of German folk songs.

This is exactly how modern Chinese readers read the *Shijing*, especially the *Guofeng*. And I think we have to liberate ourselves from these modern readings in order to rediscover classical texts, the classics that then matter again as parts of world literature. We cannot just take the most recent reading of the classics and say that's what it is and that's how we run with it. As the British novelist L. P. Hartley begins his 1953 book *The Go-Between*, "the past is a foreign country. They do things differently there." This is wonderfully captured in the ancient *Shijing*, which is the

literary classic of China. And in order to understand the *Shijing* in its own world, we need to forget almost everything that modern scholars have said about it. For example, nobody in early China—and by early China, I mean before the empire—nobody ever asks where that text comes from. Nobody ever asks what the original meaning is. Nobody ever asks who wrote these songs. These are all our own, modern questions. Everyone before the empire, and that includes Confucius, is concerned with what you can do with it, how you can appropriately apply it, and how you create a new cultural communion with your audience. And I think this is not only how the *Shijing* worked in early China before it was put in the service of the imperial state and the imperial scholars; it is precisely how world literature works. You know, of course, to some extent, that there is some relevance in questions like where does it come from, who wrote it and what does that person want to do with it. But the moment it enters into different communities, as Professor Damrosch has spread out very eloquently in his book, it really changes in its meaning, and its original authorship begins to matter less, and to matter in different ways.

So, when Professor Zhang at the end of his talk just said that we really have to bring our best texts to the United Nations of World Literature, I completely agree. We cannot have world literature as a random pile of everything that has been written. Obviously, that is not possible, plus all the oral literature of the world which usually gets short shrift here. (May I remind you that the *Shijing*, in my view, is much more an oral text than a written text.) We need some ways to select and to introduce the best of our own traditions to the world. That seems like a good point to start with.

Now, it is also true and totally obvious that at the very moment when we begin to talk about world literature, we have to talk about translation, as Professor Zhang does, and we always come back to Jerome and basically ask the same questions that he was asking: should we translate meaning or should we translate words? At the same time, we have to think of Schleiermacher's essential question: should we take the text to the reader or the reader to the text? Of course, we need translation and we must take it seriously; simply because there are no other options after Babel. There can only be world literature because it requires translation. But translation does not mean just from one contemporary language into another contemporary language. Translation also means from the past to the present. Absolutely for me: I firmly believe it does not matter in which language you read the *Shijing*, in modern Chinese

or in anything else. You are translating it, because the past is a foreign country. Of course, we have all the problems with translation, as ever. And I agree with Professor Zhang's critique about trying to do what cannot be done and insist on doing it, just as Confucius says, as you know. I hope that in the minds of our Chinese audience here, the right passage from the *Lunyu* now lights up. Isn't he the man who knows it cannot be done and who insists on doing it?

But if we now think about how we bring our best works to the world—and I like this model that came to my mind when I heard Professor Zhang's comments that we send our own delegates to the United Nations of Great Books—of course one problem is, literature is not a democracy, and that is probably a good thing. But then we have to ask how we organize this United Nations of Great Books. Which country—or rather, which language—gets to send how many delegates? Based on what? Size of the country? Size of the population? Geostrategic power of the different nations? Which countries or communities are even entitled to have their own delegates? I think that is a question that resonates in China very well.

Who determines what the canonical works are? What the classics are? Who controls the selection? And when do we do that, relative to the time of these works? How do we evaluate the literature of our own time that is by definition not yet canonical, but that must be part of world literature, too? So, if we just go for the Great Books, we are in some way reproducing the same problem of canonicity and hegemony that world literature has been struggling with since Goethe, except that we are now repeating it within our own communities: what gets in and what does not?

Professor Damrosch has long argued for world literature as the body of texts that gains in translation. That is a very important concept, because it reverses the selection process: it is the other side that gets to decide what works for them. It is not that I get to decide what works as canonical in my own culture, which I can then bring into the world. In other words, we would have to accept to see ourselves *represented*; our own cultures, "siwen" as Confucius says—"this culture" of ours. We have to accept to see this culture represented in this United Nations of Great Books by delegates we may not really like or acknowledge, maybe. So it is the Russians who get to decide whom the Americans can send, it is the Indians who decide whom the Chinese can send, and so on. That seems rather difficult to accept, of course. But if you think about it, that is exactly how world literature works. It is the translators who make the decisions how to translate, and they are coming from the target language, they are not coming

from the source language. So they have to figure out how our things would work in their language. How a classic survives and circulates in the world is determined by the translation, not by the original text. We do not control how our own canons enter world literature, and what they are doing there, and what meanings they attain there.

The real problem, then, is still with translation. One thing translation easily does with the text is that it levels it, it invariably has to operate at some level of superficiality, and it may trivialize a great text. In a way, whatever is canonical is also by definition never fully translatable, precisely because it is so rich in its own context; or that is exactly what we hope it to be.

But then there is also canonization, the agreement on what the great classics are. The canonical work, in order to appeal to all of us and to be representative, has to be leveled. Over the time of a long cultural tradition, it must agree to things that are not its own; namely, the cultural contexts and demands of later readers, be they historical or ideological. Therefore, notice how often—or even always?—the canon is tied up with the purposes of the nation, with the project of nation-building. For this reason alone, the canon has no passport, or at least it has no visa.

Here I come to the paradox of tradition: we always treat those works as canonical and representative of their time, or of a genre, or of an idea, that in their own contexts were never representative but different.

In fact, more often than not, the very definition of the best works of literature is that they were out of sync with their own time. That is true almost all the time. They were invariably disruptions of the pleasant status quo, they went beyond what everyone else was doing. If you want to know what is great about Du Fu, just read the stuff that other people wrote at his time and then you will see why Du Fu is great: because he is different. He is not representative. If you think Du Fu is representative of the *shengtang* period, the glorious time of the *Tang*, he is not. Contemporary anthologies have not a single poem by Du Fu in them. That is what makes the classics great in the beginning: they were precisely not assimilated to their own culture but took that culture to a new place—and again, that is a beautiful parallel to how world literature works. You have to take it to a new place. Or think of Tao Qian. How long did it take for Tao Qian to become canonical? We heard about Tao Qian a lot this morning. How long did it take? About 700 years! That is quite a stretch. Think of Goethe, the one person of that time in Germany, or in the world of the German language, who was extraordinarily successful in his own time and could

actually live from selling his books. That was very rare at that time, but Goethe could do it. He was very successful but then, when he got old and when he wrote the most fascinating stuff he ever wrote, his late poetry, he was completely unacceptable to his own time and it took 150 years before scholars, German scholars of Goethe, got over the disruptions that Goethe's late poetry introduced into German literature. You have scholars in the 1950s throwing up their hands and saying: did he lose his sense of grammar? Was Goethe just struck by senility? Of course not. If you read his late poetry, it is the best thing he ever wrote. There are quite a few people who agree with that, but only today.

So this is the potential of world literature, I think, of the classics of world literature, because these texts are disruptive in their own time, they are never fully the texts of their own culture. Therefore they may offer possibilities to resonate elsewhere, and perhaps even more so than in their own culture. So we must give these great texts the space, their own space, that precisely removes them from the demands of their own culture on them, as to being canonical and representative. We must liberate them from that. We must allow for their differences vis-à-vis their own culture, for their uniqueness, for their being non-representative or, as Adorno would say, for their being non-identical. We must allow for this radical alterity of literature in its own context, or at least its radical ambiguity, the word that came up this morning, that always resists the leveling that is brought about by both canonization and translation.

I think that is what Italo Calvino meant when he said a classic is a text that has never stopped saying what it has to say. Such a beautiful line makes me cry when I read it in this beautiful essay "Why I Read the Classics." Calvino says at the end that the only good reason I can tell you why you should read the classics is that it's better to read the classics than not to read them. That is actually more profound than it seems. There is something often immanent that transcends the national in our own best texts. They are just international from the beginning. They are disruptive. They transcend their own time and culture. And while it's good to read them, that reading cannot be easy or simple.

But how can this literature then be canonical without becoming assimilated, domesticated and leveled flat? How can this literature remain itself instead of becoming appropriated by the national discourse surrounding it, and for the purpose of nation-building that is surrounding it? In other words, if we send the great classics as our representatives to the United Nations of World Literature, do we have to diminish them first and trans-

form them in order to serve our own national purposes, not only through translation, but through canonization in the first place?

And then what do we do with our own works, of our own time, that are not yet canonical? Is world literature by definition a museum corpus of literature? Only the corpus of dead bodies? Dead for how long? How dead do they have to be in order to be resurrected as world literature? Think of Tao Qian and Du Fu again: how long they had been dead before they could come to life again in their own culture. So, what are the Great Books? And to which extent do they need to be leveled and trivialized in order to work as canonical works?

If we accept all of that, which seems kind of hard, we have to make allowances for our texts, as we bring our best classics to the world. We have to allow that they will be radically reinterpreted and rewritten in the minds of readers. So are Americans ready to have their classics reinterpreted by Chinese readers, and vice versa? Of course, but it's never painless. It can't be painless. If it can be painless, then it's not working. World literature must hurt, it must create pain when being translated back into its national contexts. When you move it to the broader world of literature to see what it does there and then take it back from there, that must hurt. If there is no tension there, if there is no disagreement in that moving out and back, I think that is the sure sign that something didn't work, and something didn't get reinvented as world literature. So we are not in some cozy assembly in the company of Great Books but rather, we have to discover and then bear the disturbing potential of the classics, both at home and in the world. In this sense, a canon of world literature may well be a canon that undermines the national canon it comes from. Or, put the other way around, the national canon cannot survive in its *national* meaning as part of the world literature canon. Instead, the world literature canon has to speak back to the national canon, and has to disrupt and destroy its national meaning. And in this, I think world literature may actually connect back to the texts that were great before they became part of the national canon. Maybe you have to, first of all, find your best classics, find your canonical works, and let go of what your own culture needs from them and on what grounds it makes them canonical, in order to have them really work as world literature. Because national literature for national purpose doesn't really have a passport: the passport gets lost in the nationalism of the texts.