
Guest Editor's Interviews

(World) Literature: Beneath and Beyond

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Abstract: In this interview, Zhang Longxi explores topics and approaches that have made him one of the leading scholars on cross-cultural studies in the world. Longxi's innovative understanding of both the relationship between East and West and literary hermeneutics is clarified in his latest contribution, *World Literature as Discovery: Expanding the World Literary Canon*, which aims at suggesting that world literature may favor a productive way to return to the reading of literature.

Keywords: world literature, Eurocentrism, non-hegemonic literary traditions, globalization

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Guest Editor's Remarks

Zhang Longxi's first book, *The Tao and the Logos*, already contains the vast and fascinating intellectual program unfolded in his productive and relevant career. He started with a bold statement: "[...] hermeneutics has implications that are truly universal, it is not and cannot be limited to one particular realm of study; to one culture or one tradition" (ix). In the early 1990s, when the *Zeitgeist* was dominated by the (almost obsessive) search for *differences* and discontinuities, Zhang was not shy in unveiling the *radical difference* of his own project:

This is of special importance at the present because the goal of this East-West comparative study is unabashedly the finding of sameness despite profound cultural differences, while in so many contemporary or postmodern Western theories are predicated on the assumption of cultural, ethnic, gender or some other difference. [...] and attempt to go beyond the Self and

the Other in an effort to attain to an expanded horizon of experience and knowledge. (xv, xvii)

It is only possible to go beyond the Self and the Other because Zhang's philosophical understanding of literature as well as of literary hermeneutics allowed him to go beneath what is common between East and West—and for that matter common to all human communication. In other words, whoever conveys a thought has to resort to linguistic devices, and, whoever does it, incurs a set of epistemological dilemmas and aesthetic possibilities. Zhang's way of facing this challenge consists in proposing a comparison not between structures of meaning already articulated, but rather between ways of structuring meaning not yet fully articulated. As a consequence of this approach, Zhang has performed thorough and insightful analyses of concepts and metaphors present in both Eastern and Western traditions; after all, "[...] metaphors are not just a figure of speech but are *basic to any structure of language*, and that they often provide revealing illustrations of how the mind works in articulating sensibilities and experiences" (*Mighty* 9; emphasis added).

This dimension of Zhang's work has been keenly synthesized by Qian Suoqiao while relating Zhang's achievements to the legacy of his master, Qian Zhongshu¹: "In his critical engagement with contemporary Western theory, Zhang Longxi inherits and exemplifies the quintessential traits of modern Chinese scholarly tradition" (9).

Beneath and beyond: Zhang has broadened both the methodology of literary studies and the concept of world literature, and in doing so he brought East and West together in an unprecedented manner.

JFLC: The concept of world literature has broadened the boundaries of literary canons. How has a scholar from a non-hegemonic cultural context (of course, I say it from a traditional viewpoint) been affected by this development? Are there additions to be made from this relative position as far as the theoretical framework of the concept of world literature is concerned?

Zhang: Wolfgang von Goethe is often credited with calling critical attention to the idea of *Weltliteratur* in the early 19th century, but his idea was not clearly defined and was often appropriated by his contemporary European, and especially French, scholars to refer to European literature only. The new redefined concept of world literature beyond Eurocentrism in our time, for example, David Damrosch's concept of world literature as works circulating beyond their culture of origin, offers an excellent opportunity to expand the world literary canon by introducing traditionally neglected non-hegemonic literary traditions, that is, non-European or even "minor" European literary traditions, to a global readership to become part of world literature. That is why as a comparatist from a non-hegemonic culture, I feel excited about this opportunity and have worked hard to make world literature true to its name. We do have such a great opportunity, but we must also realize that the widely circulating works of world literature today are canonical works

of Western literature, while much of the non-Western or even the “minor” European literatures are overshadowed by canonical works of the major European traditions and remains mostly unknown and unappreciated outside their linguistic and cultural environments. The imbalance of knowledge between the West and the Rest is an obvious fact, which is related to the imbalance of power in economic, political, and military terms. A college student in China, India, an Arabic or a South American country would have some knowledge, or at least have heard of the names of Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Jane Austen, Dickens, Balzac, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Baudelaire, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and many more European poets and writers, but a college student, and even a literary scholar, in a European or American university, with the exception of a very small number of specialists, would hardly have any idea who the best poets or writers are in non-hegemonic literary traditions like Chinese, Japanese, Dutch, and many other such literatures. Therefore, I see it as the task of comparatists and scholars of world literature today, particularly those from non-Western and “minor” European literary traditions, to discover great works from those largely unknown literatures and bring them into the sphere of world literature by translation and critical scholarship. And that, in a nutshell, is the main argument of my forthcoming book, *World Literature as Discovery: Expanding the World Literary Canon*, to be published by Routledge in late July or August 2023.

JFLC: You have recently participated in a bold experiment: the edition of a collection of 4 volumes entitled *Literature: A World History*. You were the editor of Volume 3: 1500-1800. As you wrote in the introduction, “It is always problematic, if not totally impossible, to epitomize what transpires in the world across such vast space and time [...]” (697). How have you dealt with this challenge from a theoretical and a methodological vantage point?

Zhang: The four-volume set of *Literature: A World History* published by Wiley Blackwell in June 2022 is the result of a long period of international collaboration and teamwork. It started in 2004 in Stockholm, where the project on world literature sponsored by the Swedish Research Council was turned into an international project led by a core group of ten scholars from Europe, North America, Asia, and the Middle East, of which I am a member. In the 19th century and the early 20th, there were quite a number of histories of world literature, some of them multi-volume works, all written by European scholars. Not surprisingly, those works concentrate on European literature and neglect much of the world’s other literatures and traditions, treating them, if at all, from a Eurocentric point of view. What makes these four volumes of our project different from such Eurocentric histories is the fact that we as a group hold a clearly global point of view, treating the world’s literary traditions equally against not just Eurocentric, but all ethnocentric biases. We tried, as much as possible, to have scholars from different literary traditions write the history of their own literature, which avoids the kind of Eurocentrism that has vitiated many of those older works. The four volumes are divided in time by a kind of arbitrary periodization: Volume 1 covers the world’s literatures from the beginning to the year 200, in which “beginning” refers to the

time when a literature appeared with historical evidence; Volume 2 covers literatures from 200 to 1500; Volume 3 from 1500 to 1800; and Volume 4 from 1800 to the present. David Damrosch and Gunilla Lindberg-Wada serve as general editors, and each volume has a volume editor. I edited volume 3, which covers the period from the 16th to the 18th centuries, in which European literature went through the important changes from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, a period in which I am very much interested. All four volumes are also divided by what we call macro regions: Africa, the Americas, Europe, East Asia, South and Southeast Asia and Oceania, West and Central Asia. Evidently, such a geographical division counts Europe as one region equal to other regions, not a predominating one over other regions, even though in modern time European literature has had a tremendous influence. So, both theoretically and methodologically, the division of time and space, the periodization and cartography of world literature in our work create a framework for world literature beyond Eurocentrism and any other ethnocentrism towards a cosmopolitan vision of the world. *Literature: A World History* is of course not perfect in fulfilling all the aspects of such a vision, but the effort to go beyond Eurocentrism to offer a basic view of the literary world from a global perspective is an important first step.

In this work, the space is limited for a long tradition like the Chinese; so I wrote another and much more detailed book, *A History of Chinese Literature*, just published by Routledge at the end of 2022, which is my attempt at introducing the canonical works of Chinese literature in their historical context to a global readership beyond their culture of origin. I hope scholars of other non-hegemonic literary traditions can write histories of their own literatures to make the yet-unknown literatures well-known in the world.

JFLC: In 2015 you published a book whose title is in itself a statement of principles. In its final chapter, “The Changing Concept of World Literature,” you affirm that “world literature is also a productive way to go back to literature itself” (*From* 181). Could you expand on this idea?

Zhang: The book you refer to is *From Comparison to World Literature*, published by SUNY Press in 2015, and the final chapter was originally written at the invitation of David Damrosch as the last chapter, the “Epilogue,” of *World Literature in Theory* he edited and published by Wiley Blackwell in 2014. In my forthcoming book, *World Literature as Discovery*, I have further expanded the idea that world literature is a productive way to return to the reading of literature. World literature is definitely on the rise in literary studies everywhere today, and in my view, world literature arises mainly for two reasons. One is the larger and external reason of globalization and the increasing connectedness of the world, and the other is a sort of internal and disciplinary reason of the logical development of literary studies. Much of the 20th century can be characterized as the century of literary theories. From American New Criticism and Russian formalism to Northrop Frye’s archetypal and mythological criticism, from Czech structuralism and French semiotics to deconstruction, from German hermeneutics to reception theory and American reader-response criticism, from postmodernism and postcolonialism to New Historicism and cultural studies, from

feminism to gender studies and gay and lesbian studies, many Western literary theories invigorated the study of literature in the 1970s and the 1980s, but the development or overdevelopment of theory and the increasingly ideological pressure of identity politics gradually moved away from literature in the later part of the 20th century and created the so-called “crisis” of comparative literature or even the “death” of the discipline. Literary scholars became reticent about traditional literature and terms like “canon,” “classic,” “aesthetic pleasure,” “aesthetic value,” and “value judgment” etc. all became a kind of “taboo” and were thrown into the dustbin of “*l’idée passée*.” For a period of time, there was the vogue of “decanonization” as though canonical works could be made overnight and overthrown overnight. Cultural studies threatened to replace literary studies, and an untenable “presentism” predominates. Many people are tired of the obscurantism of overtheorizing without sustained reference to literature and there is definitely a need to return to the reading of literature. In the 21st century, world literature not only provides an answer to that need, but it makes it possible to return to the reading of literature beyond the traditional Western canon, to more literary works of high aesthetic values from the world’s non-Western literatures. I think the idea of “decanonization” fundamentally misunderstands the nature of canon, which is established by critics and literary scholars through a long period of time. What is canonical has gone through the test of time and canonical works are read and appreciated by generations of readers under different social, cultural, and political conditions. Of course, the literary canon is changeable, and some new works can be admitted into the canon while some other works may lose their relevance and go out of the canon, but the core of the literary canon remains relatively stable and resilient. I am not at all for “decanonization” of the Western canon, but I do believe it is now high time that we expanded the world literary canon by including great works from non-Western and non-hegemonic literary traditions and make world literature true to its name.

JFLC: Jorge Luis Borges has been a very important literary author to your own theoretical work. It seems that Borges’s multifaceted literature provides a perfect case study for the refined type of cross-cultural approach you have developed. Do you remember how have you come across Borges’s texts and how he has impacted your understanding of cross-cultural studies?

Zhang: I became interested in Borges when I was studying for my PhD at Harvard in the mid-1980s, and what he said in a conversation with an interlocutor struck me as extremely insightful and important to the world we are living in. “We love over-emphasizing our little differences, our hatreds,” says Borges, “and that is wrong. If humanity is to be saved, we must focus on our affinities, the points of contact with all other human beings; by all means we must avoid accentuating our differences” (12). Given the over-emphasis on the difference of various kinds, i.e., gender, class, race, and cultural differences, which was the general atmosphere in the West at the time, what Borges says not only makes perfect sense, but also is directly relevant to the geopolitical situation of our world today. Foucault, on the other hand, deliberately misquoted Borges to create the idea of a Chinese “heterotopia,” a space incomprehensible and unthinkable

for the Europeans, at the beginning of his hugely influential book, *Les mots et les choses*, or in its English version, *The Order of Things*. When I read Borges, I found that Foucault's appropriation of Borges was fundamentally alien to the spirit of Borges the great writer and cosmopolitan, and the more I read, the better I love Borges's brilliant works that are so rich in meaning and insights, so innovative and thought-provoking, and more importantly, so congenial to my own mind and my convictions. For me, Borges is one of the great writers with a broad vision for humanity to prosper in a world of peace and mutual cross-cultural understanding, and that makes Borges one of my heroes.

JFLC: In your book, *Allegoresis: Reading Canonical Literature East and West*, we find a synthesis of the theoretical framework unfolded in your work: "For cross-cultural understanding, therefore, China may offer a useful test case, because the distance between China and the West, in geographical as well as in cultural terms, makes it especially important to examine, first of all the possibility of knowing" (1). Could you expand on this notion?

Zhang: Since the late 19th century and the early 20th century, there has been a scholarly lineage of making distinctions between Europe and the rest of the world not just in material life and living conditions but elevated to the philosophical level of language and thinking. This is particularly true of French scholarship, though not limited to just the French. It was Lucien Lévy-Bruhl who became famous and influential with his many publications on the "primitive mentality" as fundamentally different from the logical and rational thinking of the Europeans. Many French scholars, e.g., Jacques Gernet in the mid-20th century and François Jullien at the present, apply this idea to China because China is far from Europe and had little contact with Europe in much of its long history, and therefore it offers a reverse mirror image of the European self. As Jullien argues, China is the one country in the world that is the opposite of Greece, which is understood as the origin of the West. "De fait, si l'on veut 'dépasser le cadre grec', et si l'on cherche alors un appui et une perspective appropriés" (In fact, if one wants to "go beyond the Greek framework," and if one searches for appropriate support and perspective), says Jullien, "je ne vois pas d'autre voyage possible 'qu'à la Chine', comme on disait jadis. C'est, en effet, la seule civilisation qui se soit donnée dans des textes consistants, et dont la généalogie linguistique et historique soit radicalement non européenne. . . . Or, à strictement parler, la non-Europe, c'est la Chine, et cela ne peut être rien d'autre" (Then, I don't see any voyage possible other than "China-bound," as one used to say. This is, in effect, the only civilization that is recorded in substantial texts and whose linguistic and historical genealogy is radically non-European. . . . And strictly speaking, non-Europe is China, and it cannot be anything else; Jullien and Marchaisse 39). Since China has been seen as the opposite of Europe by many of those who overemphasize cultural differences, I would make use of this very idea to show what Borges calls "affinities" and "the points of contact" precisely between the Chinese and the Greek or the European, not to make everything the same but to challenge the absolute dichotomy or the either/or thinking, which has

rendered so much of their scholarship untenable and problematic. What we need is a truly open-minded vision of the world and its many different peoples, cultures, histories, political systems, and literary traditions, and embrace all human beings as our equals. We are of course different, individually and collectively, but differences are a matter of degree, not of kind. To insist on fundamental difference or uniqueness, particularly uniqueness of one's own, and to think of one's own language and literature as superior to any other, is either the close-mindedness of a country bumpkin or the core of fascist ideology. Again, that is why I appreciate what Borges said about focusing on our "affinities" rather than "our little differences" and "our hatreds." Harmony or *he* (和) is a concept emphasized by both the Greek philosopher Heraclitus and the Chinese sage Confucius, and that concept is in great need in our world today.

Interviewed by João Cezar de Castro Rocha

Note

1. In his first book, Zhang acknowledged: "I feel encouraged by the example of Mr. Qian Zhongshu, whose work gives me guidance in bringing the East and West together, though his formidable knowledge and scholarly accomplishment I cannot emulate" (*Tao* xviii).

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