
The Challenge of Writing a World Literary History

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Abstract: The writing of history has encountered many challenges in twenty-century theoretical discussions, and postmodernism and deconstruction in particular have made literary history all but impossible in the West. Because world literature today remains the canonical works of Western literature, while much of the non-Western literatures and even “minor” European literatures remain unknown and untranslated, a world history of literature is absolutely necessary to introduce the yet-unknown world literature to a global readership beyond the original linguistic and cultural milieux of those unknown literary works. Translating those yet-unknown works into English for a wider circulation is the first step to make world literature go beyond Eurocentrism, and writing a world history of literature will help us know the basic situation of the world’s literary traditions from a truly global perspective.

Key words: literary history, postmodern critique, Hayden White, David Perkins, “minor” European literature, non-Western literature, writing world literary history

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The Challenge of Literary History in the West

Historiography was a major academic discipline in the 19th-century Europe not only with works of general history under the influence of Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) which offered a model for “scientific” study of the past, but also with several famous and influential literary histories, such as Hippolyte Taine’s *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (1864), Francesco de Sanctis’s *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1870), and Gustave Lanson’s *Histoire de la littérature française* (1894). All these works gained a reputation not only for the narration of a national literary tradition, but also as manifestations of some “scientific” approaches to history. For example, Taine stated with assurance that the purpose of writing literary history was to discover the individual author as a living being through literary works as clues to his existence, comparable to the scientific study of a fossil. “Under the shell there was an animal, and behind the document there was a man,” says Taine. “Why do you

study the shell, except to bring before you the animal? So you study the document only to know the man. The shell and the document are lifeless wrecks, valuable only as a clue to the entire and living existence” (1: 2). Taine was confident that the historian was able to know the man and his living existence through the author’s literary works that were produced in the combination of social and historical forces of *race, milieu, et moment*, or “race, surroundings, and epoch” (17). Such a sociologically deterministic understanding of literature, however, was dismissed as positivistic and put into the dustbin of history in the 20th century.

Indeed, the writing of history, including literary history, faced many challenges and quickly declined in the 20th century, for the legitimacy of historiography as a humanistic discipline was questioned by several schools of thought and theories, most notably by the postmodern critique of the modernist “grand narrative,” the deconstruction of such concepts as development, facts, objectivity, truth, etc., which had made literary history a flourishing genre of scholarly writing in the 19th century. Among many literary history’s critics, Hayden White is probably the most influential in destroying the 19th-century concept of history as actuality or record of facts, *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, by arguing that writing history is not so different from writing a novel, for both are constructing a narrative with a beginning, a middle, and an end. White argues:

The process of fusing events, whether imaginary or real, into a comprehensible totality capable of serving as the *object* of a representation is a poetic process. Here the historian must utilize precisely the same topological strategies, the same modalities of representing relationships in words, that the poet or novelist uses. (125)

With a heavy theoretical hammer, White knocked down the wall of distinction between history and fiction and exposed the ideological or political nature of historical narratives. “What is at issue here is not, What are the facts?” White argues. “But rather, how are the facts to be described in order to sanction one mode of explaining them rather than another?” (134). Once the objectivity and reliability of representation of the past are put in question, the disciplinary foundation of historiography is dissolved, and writing history becomes very difficult, if not impossible.

For René Wellek, literary history necessarily represents a point of view and makes value judgment; it “cannot be divorced from criticism” (74). Quoting the words of such distinguished historians as Johan Huizinga and E. H. Carr, Wellek argues that “historical thinking is always teleological” and that historians must “find and accept a sense of direction in history itself” (75). As the ideas of teleology and value judgment had all fallen out of fashion, Wellek realized that the 20th century was not a propitious time for writing literary history. “There is no progress, no development, no history of art except a history of writers, institutions, and techniques,” he complained. “This is, at least for me, the end of an illusion, the fall of literary history” (77). Many scholars today may look at Wellek as representing an old generation of conservative scholarship, but from a very different and left-wing perspective, Fredric Jameson also recognized the disappearance of history and the lack of a historical sense of direction in the West, for he saw “depthlessness” and “a consequent weakening of historicity” as “constitutive features” of Western postmodern societies (6). Postmodernism, Jameson argues, is the manifestation of the cultural logic of late capitalism, which is completely inimical to history or historical representation.

According to David Perkins, the author of the two volumes of *A History of Modern Poetry*, there was some renewed interest in literary history in the 1990s, which was manifested in “sociological literary histories, studies of the institution of literature in past ages and of the ‘literary field,’ histories of reception, analyses of the diachronic modification of genres, many New Historicist essays, much *Ideologiekritik*, and constructions of the literary traditions of women, gays, ethnic groups, political movements, socioeconomic classes, and new, third world countries” (9). Such revisionist literary histories as radical *Ideologiekritik*, however, did not make him feel encouraged at all. In fact, Perkins wrote a book about his ambivalence and presented it in the form of a question: *Is Literary History Possible?* to which he eventually gave a negative answer. “I have followed the reconstruction of the discipline with the keenest interest and sympathy,” Perkins admitted, “and yet, having tried to write literary history, I am unconvinced (or *deconvincing*) that it can be done” (11). He even questioned that the reemerged literary history could offer any useful knowledge when he says that such revisionist literary histories “might present a selection of information about the past, appeal to our sense of form and our imagination, satisfy our hunger for wisdom, or fortify our political commitments and our ideologies, but they would not be knowledge” (16). Obviously, Perkins has a deeply ambiguous feeling about the possibility of writing literary history in the West at the present time, and as a historian, he still believes that the purpose of writing a literary history is to provide historical knowledge about the literary past.

As a literary historian, Perkins could not really deny the possibility of writing literary history after all, and the title of his book and his negative answer can only be ironic. In his book, he argued for the possibility of writing literary history and defended narrative history against its critics. “Narrative history differs fundamentally from fiction because, in constructing a novel, the ‘plot’ takes precedence over the ‘story.’” Here Perkins may well have in mind Hayden White’s equation of history with fiction. “In writing narrative literary history, one cannot do this. That we can make many different narratives out of the same events does not mean that the structure of events in our narrative is not true of the past” (34-35). Indeed, we can readily acknowledge that a historical narrative to represent or reconstruct the past is written from a historian’s own point of view, in a particular way of organizing available materials, and is not divorced from value judgment; and that historiography from a particular ideological or political perspective may suppress certain facts and distort historical reality. At the same time, it is also undeniable that history is or should be written or reconstructed on the basis of evidence, either textual or archaeological, and cannot be based on mere imaginary or hypothetical constructions. To recognize our human limitations and acknowledge the partiality, incompleteness or even bias of any historical representation is one thing, but to deny the possibility of historical representation at all is quite another; the one correctly acknowledges the historicity of all understanding and interpretation, but the other unavoidably falls into the trap of historical nihilism.

History of the Yet-Unknown World Literature

When Perkins remarks that the renewed interest in literary history would not contribute to the advancement of knowledge, the underlying assumption seems to be that the major authors and their works of European and American literatures have already been so well known that nothing new is

likely to emerge in literary history, either traditional or revisionist. If that is true of Western literatures and literary histories, that is certainly not true of other, particularly non-Western literary traditions. Put in the global context of a *world history* of literature, we may quickly realize that what is talked about as world literature today is mostly well-known canonical works of Western literature, while much of the world's other literatures remain yet unknown and unfamiliar, and that most of the major non-Western writers and their works are still unappreciated beyond their original linguistic and cultural environment. Even within European literary traditions, there exist the so-called "minor" literatures that are not widely known, either. As Theo D'haen remarks, the study of world literature is an uneven playing field, and what is known as Western literature is actually limited to certain "major" literary traditions, while the "minor" ones remain in the shadow:

In fact, in most world histories of literature, hitherto without exception products of the Western world, non-European literatures were routinely neglected especially in their more modern manifestations, with attention given almost exclusively to early mythical and religious writings. But even between Western, more specifically European literatures, treatment has been unequal. Concretely, French, English, and German literature, and to a lesser extent Italian and Spanish literature, next to literature in ancient Greek and in Latin, have received the lion's share of attention and space. ("Major" 34)

What is major or minor makes sense only in comparison, for each and every literary tradition would not consider itself as minor within its own cultural context; moreover, every literature has its own major and minor works established by its own critical evaluations. For example, Dutch literature may be "minor" in world literature anthologies and histories, but in the history of Dutch literature itself, the poet and playwright Joost van den Vondel in the 17th century and the modern poet J. J. Slauerhoff would be considered major authors known to Dutch-speaking readers (D'haen, "J. J. Slauerhoff" 143-157). What is thought to be minor is very often the result of what I would call the imbalance of power in our world, the fact that major European and North American literary traditions are well-known and appreciated world-wide, setting up models of huge influence and high prestige for the rest of the world, while much of the literary and cultural traditions outside the West, and also "minor" European literary traditions, are overshadowed by the major literatures of the West. The imbalance of power in literary knowledge is closely related to the imbalance of economic, political, and even military power, and it has little to do with the size of a country or population, the number of speakers of a language, or the number and quality of canonical works of a national literary tradition.

Chinese literature is a case in point. China is a huge country with the world's largest population, and the Chinese language has probably more speakers than any other language in the world. With a long history dating back to more than two thousand years and having numerous great poets, writers, and canonical works, Chinese literature has all the qualities of a major tradition. Historically, the Chinese language and literature assumed a pivotal position in East Asia, which some scholars identified as the Sinosphere because the classical Chinese language and literature had a huge influence and enjoyed a high prestige in the whole of East Asia, i.e., not only in China, but also in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam in the pre-modern period, roughly before the 19th century. This has been discussed, for example, in Joshua Fogel's 2009 book, *Articulating the Sinosphere*, in Wiebke Denecke's 2014

book, *Classical World Literatures: Sino-Japanese and Greco-Roman Comparisons*, as well as in a special issue on the Chinese Scriptworld of the *Journal of World Literature* in 2016. In the last two hundred years, however, with the predominance of Western powers not only in economic, political, and military forces, but also in terms of culture and literature, Chinese literature fell from a major to a minor position vis-à-vis literature of the West.

An obvious indication of the imbalance of power is the extent of knowledge of what is considered important from the West vis-à-vis the non-West, with the non-West knows much more about the West than the other way around. Major works of Western literature are well-known and widely circulating in the world, often through translation in various languages, while works of the non-West are mostly limited in local or national circulation. A college student in China and many other non-Western countries with a reasonable degree of education would know the works, or at least the names, of major European poets and writers from Homer and Virgil to Dante and Shakespeare, from Cervantes and Goethe to Dickens and Balzac, from Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf to Kafka and James Joyce; but on average a college student and even a literary scholar in Europe or America would have no idea who the major Chinese poets and writers are. Names such as Li Bo, Du Fu, Tao Yuanming, Su Shi, Tang Xianzu, Cao Xueqin and many others would sound exotic and totally unfamiliar in their ears, no matter how famous these names are in China. That is of course not just the case with Chinese literature, but with all non-Western literatures and even “minor” European literatures, because most of the canonical works in those literary traditions remain yet-unknown beyond their original linguistic and cultural milieu.

In general, non-Western literary scholars would know many famous works of major Western literatures and the important works of their own literary tradition, but they know very little of other non-Western literatures as well as those “minor” European literatures. What we find in world literature anthologies and critical discussions today remain by and large Western canonical works, while non-Western and “minor” European literatures remain largely unknown, untranslated, and insufficiently studied on the international scene. For example, since the mid-Tang period (766-835) in China, Du Fu (712-770) has been generally acknowledged in indigenous Chinese criticism as the greatest Chinese poet with a corpus of exquisitely elegant and brilliant works, but outside China, his works are little known, let alone appreciated on a degree comparable with those of great Western poets and writers like Dante or Shakespeare. Under such circumstances, anything about Chinese and other “minor” literatures would be new knowledge in the context of a world literary history, a history that includes all literary traditions in the world, not just the Western. That is to say, a history of the world’s various literatures, or a world history of literature, will have a great deal of new knowledge to offer. In our world today, such a world history of literature is absolutely necessary for going beyond Eurocentrism and any other ethnocentrism, and to provide us with a basic understanding of the world’s literatures. Writing a world literary history thus becomes a necessary challenge to the conventional notion of world literature that has so far been predominated by Western canonical works. World literature and a world literary history in that sense would become a discovery of the yet-unknown canonical works of the many non-Western as well as “minor” European literary traditions, an expansion and enrichment of the canon of world literature that would truly represent the best and the finest of the world’s various literary traditions, big and small, in all their beauty, brilliance and creativity, a world literature that lives up to its name and its claims.

History as Knowledge, Narrativity, and Value Judgment

As the aim of such a world literary history is to present to readers the basic condition of the various literatures of the world, that is, to provide the basic knowledge of the world's literary traditions, we must first have a clear sense of what is literature globally and what are out there in an unfamiliar literary terrain and command a view, so to speak, of an unknown field. That is to say, we must have some basic knowledge of what major writers and canonical works exist in those unfamiliar traditions. And yet, in the West, in response to the critique of historical narratives as constructed sequences with a beginning, a middle, and an end, following a line of development or a direction, many scholars have abandoned historical narrative and attempted at writing literary history without narrative sequence, and replaced the account of historical development with an assortment of essays on the various aspects of a society at a given period of time when some literary genres or works were produced. This resulted in what Perkins calls a "postmodern encyclopedia," of which the most famous examples published by prestigious presses in America are the *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (Columbia UP, 1987) and the *New History of French Literature* (Harvard UP, 1998). "Both are intended to respond to a genuine crisis in literary historiography," says Perkins in commenting on these two books:

Their forms of presentation are evidence of the crisis and also show why this formal model cannot overcome it. Encyclopedic form is intellectually deficient. Its explanations of past happenings are piecemeal, may be inconsistent with each other, and are admitted to be inadequate. It precludes a vision of its subject. Because it aspires to reflect the past in its multiplicity and heterogeneity, it does not organize the past, and in this sense, it is not history. There is little excitement in reading it. (60)

Here seems to be the distinction between piecemeal and unorganized information on the one hand, and knowledge as well-structured materials on the other, which should provide a sense of direction and order. In the postmodern age, however, as Jean Baudrillard observes, order and coherence disappear when atomic fragments are floating in a random and frenzied condition. "Each atom pursues its own trajectory to infinity and is lost in space," says Baudrillard. "This is precisely what we are seeing in our present-day societies, intent as they are on accelerating all bodies, messages and processes in all directions and which, with modern media, have created for every event, story and image a simulation of an infinite trajectory" (40). What Perkins calls "postmodern encyclopedia" attempts to create such a simulation of an infinite trajectory with no particular direction and therefore leads to no structured historical knowledge. This is also what David Damrosch finds in commenting on a similar unorganized work of multiple authors, *History of European Literature* edited by Annick Benoit-Dusauso and Guy Fontaine (Routledge, 2000), which moved away from the usual framework of national literatures, but resulted in a history that "is impressive in its sweep, and yet is difficult to sit down and read through. The 150 contributors worked largely in isolation from each other, and the results are often more disconnected than one might wish in a book devoted to showing the interconnectedness of Europe's literary cultures" ("Toward" 487). That book seeks to deviate from the usual narrative history and the usual canonical authors, but as a result it "often becomes a blizzard of names and passing references,"

and “often starts to shade over from a history into an encyclopedia” (488).

For a history of the world’s literary traditions, such an incoherent encyclopedic form is not at all helpful, for what we need is a historical outline that allows us to have a basic understanding of the most prominent features of many literary traditions and their canonical works that are yet unknown in the world. Encyclopedic *information* or *data* does not offer a well-organized body of historical *knowledge* and thus does not give readers an intelligible view of history of what is the basic and the prominent. Of course, what constitutes a “basic understanding” and what are “prominent features” are debatable, and in that sense many of the problems in writing national literary histories reemerge in writing a world literary history. At the same time, writing a world history of literature also offers an opportunity to rethink the theoretical critique of historiography and to reconsider some of the assumptions we have seen in Western literary theories. Unlike the already well-known French, English, German, and other major Western literary traditions, much of the non-Western literatures remain unknown and unfamiliar, and without a narrative that tells the story of those literatures, their important authors and works, we would remain in the dark and have no basic understanding. We would have no idea who the important authors are and what canonical works exist in those unfamiliar literatures; we would not know the historical process, of how important works are produced under what historical conditions, and how they move, change and lead to the emergence of new works, new genres or new movements. Under such circumstances, a narrative account of the basics would be absolutely necessary to offer a view of the history and a basic account of the yet-unknown authors and their works.

In writing histories of non-Western and unfamiliar “minor” literatures, there is no escape from the necessary value judgment because the historian needs to make decisions as to what should be included and presented in a historical account. In other words, critical evaluation is unavoidable in making judgments and choices, otherwise history would lack a clear outline and a sense of direction, and would shade into an unreadable text, an encyclopedic conglomeration of isolated materials with no connection or coherence, and thus offer no knowledge worth having about a literary tradition. It would be more honest and transparent for a historian to have a self-awareness of value judgment than to discard value judgment as an overt public gesture while surreptitiously smuggles it back in one’s own account of history. In Western academic discourses, however, value judgment is deeply suspect of subjectivism, elitism, and even the worse crimes of repressive ideologies, but the fact is that any expression of ideas and any argument would have the underpinnings of one’s values and value judgment, and any denial of value judgment only hides that fact and turns out to be self-deceptively disingenuous. In writing literary history, therefore, the question is not so much value judgment per se as who gets to decide the value of literary works. For the yet-unknown literary traditions, we should certainly avoid imposing an external, often predominantly Western, criteria of value judgment. In fact, we don’t have to impose an external value judgment because each literary tradition already has certain works judged to be important and canonical by critics in that very tradition, who know the native language and culture, and have already formed a sense of history of that particular literature. In writing about that literary tradition, then, the historian should respect the indigenous value judgment made through the historical understanding in that literature’s own critical tradition.

Again, taking the history of Chinese literature as an example, given its long temporal frame and large number of major writers and works, none of which is currently familiar and well-known

in the global context of a world literary history, a historian should be led by the Chinese critical tradition to recognize the value of the most important works of Chinese literature. A literary historian is by necessity a literary critic with certain principles and standards of a value system, a critic with an eye for the literary value of a particular work and the ability to present that work's value in a cogent narration and argument. Aesthetic judgment is certainly personal, but it is not just personal or subjective. Chinese literature, like any other literature, is accompanied by a long critical tradition responsible for the canon formation and embodying the ways in which that particular literature is valued and appreciated. More importantly, the formation of a literary canon is a long process with many debates and changes before reaching a relative consensus. Unlike religious canon, literary canon is often changing, but the core works of a canon in any literary tradition tend to be stable and resilient, ultimately based on certain specific literary and cultural values. In writing a world literary history, a historian can and should always consult the native critical tradition for the selection of the most important canonical works, works that have withstood the test of time and continue to be relevant and valuable for generations of readers under different social, political, and historical conditions. Canon is not formed overnight, nor can it be "decanonized" overnight. Critical rethinking of the literary canon forms the background of the change of canon as well as its consolidation, but critiques and radical rethinking are also subject to the test of time. Time, it seems, is the only force that can make or break a canon in a literary or cultural tradition.

Lingua Franca, the Hegemony of English, and Untranslatability

In writing a world history of literature to introduce the best works from the various literary traditions of the world, particularly works from non-Western literatures and "minor" literary traditions that are yet-unknown beyond their original linguistic and cultural contexts, another question will necessarily arise—that of language. In what language should such a world literary history be written? We may recall David Damrosch's definition of world literature as "all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language" (*What Is It* 4). His example of a work of literature circulating widely in the original language is Virgil, the great Roman poet writing in Latin, the lingua franca in Europe from late antiquity and the medieval period to the early modern period. Likewise, *wen yan* or classical Chinese served as a literary lingua franca in pre-modern East Asia. In the modern times, however, neither Latin nor classical Chinese can function as a regional lingua franca anymore, and for international and intercultural communication, English is unquestionably the lingua franca in our world today. Even works originally written in French or German get much wider circulation and better known when they appear in English translation. This is certainly true of the rise of literary theories from Russian formalism to Czech structuralism and the various French theories. It was by writing in English or being translated into English and taught in graduate seminars in American universities that Roman Jakobson, Victor Schklovsky, Ferdinand de Saussure, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva and many others were catapulted to academic stardom first in America, and soon in the whole world. To bring the yet-unknown works and literary traditions to the awareness and recognition in the global context, therefore, English is the most effective medium, and consequently a world history of literature should

be written in English.

Some scholars in comparative literature and translation studies have cast a skeptical eye on translation, and particularly the translation into English. They argue strongly against the “hegemony” of the English language and insist that English translation of any work, particularly a non-Western work, would necessarily distort the “foreignness” of the original and domesticate it, that is, control its original meaning. Aamir Mufti is exemplary of this kind of argument when he criticized global English, particularly in the Indian context, for consigning “the languages of the global South, including formerly extensive and dispersed cultures of writing, to narrowly conceived ethnonational spheres,” and thereby assuming “the mantle of exclusive medium of cosmopolitan exchange” (335-336). And yet, we should note the irony that Mufti’s argument against global English becomes widely known because it was written in English and published in a prestigious journal in America. If he wrote his essay in any of the indigenous languages of the global South, it would be unlikely that his argument could be heard beyond the limited circle of speakers of that language. Looking more closely at his essay, Mufti singled out and castigated Salman Rushdie for failing to find hardly any work written in India’s many vernacular languages worthy of being translated into English and included in an anthology to represent post-independence Indian literature. The only exception was “the Urdu short story ‘Tōbā Tēk Siñgh’ by Saadat Hasan Manto, a translation of which was consequently included in the collection” (337). Evidently, Mufti was not arguing against translation into English at all, for he faulted Rushdie precisely for not including more literary works written in India’s indigenous languages for translation into English, but choosing instead “Indo-Anglian” works written in English as representing modern Indian literature. What Mufti argued for is a more adequate representation of Indian literature, “the heterogeneity of the Anglophone novel’s own linguistic environment” (338). His critique is targeting a case of continual neglect and silencing of non-Western works by leaving them untranslated, uncirculated, and unknown beyond their linguistic and cultural environment, and consigned “to narrowly conceived ethnonational spheres.” That is exactly why a new kind of world literary history is needed to introduce those unknown works of non-Western literatures to readers beyond their culture of origin, and why those unknown works must be known and available through adequate translation and global circulation.

There are other objections to translation into English. Lawrence Venuti, for example, considers translation as “ethnocentric” in nature, and readable translation as covering up the distortion of the foreign original. “Good translation is demystifying,” Venuti declares; “it manifests in its own language the foreignness of the foreign text” (11). For Venuti, as Susan Bassnett observes, foreignization constitutes “a strategic intervention that would challenge the hegemony of English,” while domestication, the transparency of translation, is seen to be “a discursive strategy that is both ethnocentrically violent and deceptive, in that it conceals the violence through the illusion of transparency” (48). But is translation necessarily “ethnocentric” in nature? Is the aim of translation to preserve the “foreignness of the foreign text”? What is “foreignness” anyway? In whose eyes does the non-Western work appear “foreign” and contain an inherent “foreignness” in the text? Obviously, such a concept of “foreignness” is possible only from a Western point of view, because the non-Western work has nothing foreign to readers in its own culture of origin. This double bind of vision does not seem to have been sufficiently discussed in translation studies, and the emphasis on “foreignization” becomes a tendency that makes translation deeply ambiguous and almost self-defeating. Excessive

domestication as distortion is certainly unacceptable, but excessive foreignization is equally objectionable for perpetrating an act of violence to the foreign text, an act that makes the foreign original grotesquely strange, alien, and exotic, demonizing the foreign as fundamentally different and thus defeating the purpose of translation.

In translating Chinese poetry into English, for example, some have argued for a kind of word-for-word translation based on the misleading presumption *à la* Ezra Pound that the Chinese poetic line is a string of concrete images without grammatical connections. This fundamental misunderstanding of how the Chinese language works often leads to the dubious argument about the fundamental differences between Chinese and Western mentalities. “The use of ideograms represents a system of thought (quite distinct from that represented by abstract alphabets),” says Wai-lim Yip. In using the Chinese language, therefore, “it is important that individuals communicate concretely in images and objects,” whereas “thinking based on alphabet languages tends toward the elaboration of abstract ideas, analytical discursiveness, and syllogistic progression” (11). Notice here the Chinese “thought” is said to operate in concrete images and objects, while Western thinking would work with abstract concepts, analysis and logical syllogisms. This “mentality” argument originated in the French sociologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s work, in particular, as Geoffrey Lloyd notes, “in connection with his ill-starred hypothesis of a *prelogical* mentality. This was supposed to be a feature of much primitive thought and one that helped to establish a contrast between it and the logical or scientific mentality to be found in advanced civilisations and especially in his own society” (1). Perhaps without knowing its French origin, Yip applied this “mentality” argument to legitimize the kind of foreignization in translating Chinese poems into a sort of choppy, broken lines of disconnected bits and pieces, into a strange language that sounds not just unidiomatic, but outlandish and exotic.

The following example of a simple poem by Lu Lun (739-799), a Tang dynasty Chinese poet, can illustrate this problem of foreignization as exoticization. This poem describes the military life in the border regions, the escape of the leader of defeated nomadic tribes in the north and the snow-covered scene of Tang soldiers’ nightly pursuit. Because classical Chinese tends to express as much in as few words as possible, laconic expressions invite readers to bring their imagination into full play and to concretize what the text offers as a basic and highly suggestive schemata of meanings. This feature of the classical Chinese language is of course not without similar features in the West. As Erich Auerbach argues, the biblical language is concise and suggestive, much of the biblical poetry or narrative “is left to the reader to visualize it” (9). Likewise, in this Chinese poem of only four lines, a few words sketch out the basic idea, while much is left unsaid in the background. A native reader familiar with the conventional feature of the classical Chinese language would pick up the suggestions and understand the whole by linking the few textual elements together. Let us look at Lu Lun’s poem in the original and then a word-by-word equivalent in English:

月黑雁飞高	Moon black goose fly high
单于夜遁逃	Khan night flee
欲将轻骑逐	About-to lead light rider pursue
大雪满弓刀	Great snow fill bow sword

The English Sinologist Angus Charles Graham used this poem to discuss translation of Chinese

poetry, and he offered a translation of his own, which tries to render the original text comprehensible while keeping as close to the original text as possible:

Moon black, geese fly high:
The Khan flees in the night.
As they lead out the light horse in pursuit,
Heavy snow covers bow and sword. (25)

Graham also quoted a more literal translation by Wong Man, whose word-by-word translation *à la* Pound does read rather “foreign,” staying close to the original word order but bordering on the incomprehensible in English:

Black moon geese fly high,
Tartars flee the dark;
Light horses pursue,
Sword and bow snow-marked. (qtd. in Graham 25)

Grammatical connections are omitted but understood in the Chinese original, but they cannot be omitted in English, otherwise the poem appears much stranger and far more unnatural than it is in the original. Wong’s translation hardly makes sense, and the strange, almost half-witted expressions sound, in the words of Graham, like “a kind of literary pidgin English” (24). For readers who only read English translation without knowing the original, such a “pidgin” translation certainly sounds foreign and strange, but it also consolidates a racist stereotypical impression that this is how the Chinese speak, or worse, how the Chinese poets speak, in a kind of idiotically broken language, a ridiculous way of speaking suggestive of a linguistically challenged foreigner. To translate Chinese poetry into such a “foreignizing” pidgin English only consigns it to an exotic Oriental heterotopia, and such “foreignization” is nothing but a travesty of translation.

In many discussions in translation studies, however, untranslatability has assumed the leading position of a fashionable Western theoretical concept. Here again we find a manifestation of either/or thinking: because translation cannot fully and completely recreate a foreign original (which is not what translation is supposed to do in the first place), translation is pronounced impossible. In practice, this would make all foreign, particularly non-Western works, remain locally contained and never have a chance to circulate beyond their culture of origin or enter the realm of world literature. By opposing the “hegemony” of English, therefore, the argument of untranslatability effectively keeps the Western canon as the only canon of world literature circulating all over the world. I find it dubious that just as the rise of world literature today makes it possible to have non-Western works to be introduced to a global readership, some scholars declare translation impossible, while they seem to have no problem with French or German literature being translated into English. In my view, I would rather have imperfect translation than no translation of those important works of world literature that are still unknown and yet to be discovered, and translation into English is the most effective way to have those works known on a global scale.

Translation is only the first step, however, for the deep understanding and appreciation of a work

of literature is often the result of critical scholarship. For works of a different literary tradition coming from a very different linguistic and cultural environment, critical scholarship is absolutely necessary to explain those unfamiliar works and make an argument for their global canonicity. Given the current condition in which much of world literature remains yet-unknown and to be translated adequately, a world history of literature will be an effort to discover important or canonical works from those unknown or unfamiliar literary traditions. That is the goal of an ambitious project of writing a world history of literature in English, in which an international group of scholars have collaborated in the project called *Literature: A World History*, abbreviated as *LAWH*, a four-volume work covering different regions of the world, which aims to present a simple map of the literary world with a basic outline and prominent features. One important feature that distinguishes this project from earlier world histories of literature, which were, as D'haen noted, “without exception products of the Western world” that “routinely neglected” non-Western literatures, *LAWH* is the collective effort of a group of scholars from different parts of the world and experts of different literary traditions, representing a view of the world’s literatures from different perspectives, and self-consciously critical of any ethnocentric point of view. *Literature: A World History* will soon be published by Wiley Blackwell in four volumes. It will not be perfect as a history of the world’s different literary traditions, but it will be a significant step going beyond Eurocentrism in literary studies to offer readers basic and new information about the literary world from a global perspective.

If a world literary history must organize materials and impose order in a structured account of the past, and if it must identify most prominent features and major works of the world’s various literary traditions, no critic or historian can have knowledge or expertise enough for such an impossibly complicated task, and international collaboration with literary scholars working together as a team becomes necessary. The final product will not present a perfect picture of the world and its literary traditions, to be sure, but that is the nature of historiography and indeed the nature of human knowledge. The best way to answer the skeptic or nihilistic challenge of writing literary history, I would argue, is to write it in earnest. Action, as they say, speaks louder than words, but in this case, speaking and writing the appropriate words constitute the very action that proves the significance and value of historical knowledge.

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