

Worlding World Literatures and Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract: In "Worlding World Literatures and Coetzee's *Disgrace*" Miaomiao Wang explores the concept of world literature(s) as world-making activity, which gains in elliptical refraction, translation, and mode of reading. With the example of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Wang illustrates cultural variations between the original English text and the Chinese translation of *Disgrace* through cultural filtering and literary misreading. Further, Wang analyzes images of "otherness" in Coetzee's text with regard to East Asia, especially in China, through the assimilation of the cultural rules of national literature and its literary discourse thus making it part of world literature. Wang argues that cultural variation and the images of otherness can be attributed global importance as an emerging world literary canon and its aesthetic ideology.

Key Words: World Literatures; Cultural Variation; Images of Otherness; J.M. Coetzee

WORLDING WORLD LITERATURES

The term and concept of "worlding" ("Welt weltet") first appeared in Martin Heidegger's 1935 *Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*. Heidegger took the world as emerging from the temporality of "worlding" which is in the process of becoming or bringing into being. He reinterpreted the understanding of the world and reoriented the relationship of literature to the world with the artwork as world-making. The problematics of world literature(s) has become one of the hot debates in literary scholarship over the last three decades or so, albeit mostly in English-language scholarship (see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek, "About"). Some define it as "global literature" while others define it as "literatures of the world" both of which are challenges to the concept of "world literature." The concept of world literature originated from Johann G. Herder in 1807 and elaborated by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1827 (see Moretti). In recent studies on world literature and the circulation of literatures, scholars have turned from thinking about texts to thinking about books: "I will borrow this initial hypothesis from the world-systems school of economic history for which international capitalism is a system that is simultaneously *one* and

unequal, with a core and a periphery (and a semi-periphery) that are bound together in a relationship of growing inequality. One, and unequal: *one* literature (*Weltliteratur*, singular as in Goethe and Marx), or perhaps, better, one world literary system (of inter-related literatures); but a system which is different from what Goethe and Marx hoped for, because it's profoundly unequal" (*Distant* 46).

David Damrosch explicates the concept more extensively and specifically. He defines the term "to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language" (4) and posits that "world literature" effects in a literary system beyond that of its original culture and a mode of circulation and of reading: "world literature consists of a huge corpus of works which stem from widely disparate societies, with very different histories, frames of cultural reference and poetics" (Damrosch 5). Damrosch writes that "if we consider world literature as including works that achieve an effective life outside their country of origin, we have already begun to give definite boundaries to the concept. Most literary works do not in fact find readers beyond their home country, and so the canon of world literature is a fairly selective canon even in expansive times such as the present" (95). And he attempts to propose a more precisely theoretical approach in his book *What is World Literature?* in which he focuses on the circulation processes of literatures or world literature(s) and the significance of such factors as translation and reception. He provides a threefold definition: "World literature is an elliptical refraction of national literatures, world literature is writing that gains in translation, and world literature is not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time" (Damrosch 281). To "become" world literature, works should be influenced by the source culture and also be accepted and adapted by the host culture(s) through communication, transmission, and translation: "it is important to recognize that the question of translatability is distinct from questions of value. A work can hold a prominent place within its own culture but read poorly elsewhere, either because its language doesn't translate well or because its cultural assumptions don't travel" (Damrosch 289).

Meanwhile, in the process of translation, literary language usually gains or loses, which is used to differentiate national literature and world literature. And in the final part of the definition, world literature is "not a

set canon of texts but a mode of reading, a detached engagement with a world beyond our own" (297), world literature is not a collection of classics, but interaction and production of different cultures in an elliptical literary space. To "become" world literature or not, a work depends on the mode of reading of different varieties of other cultures. While Damrosch's definition contributes to the discussion of/about world literature, it also generates debates regarding ways of circulation, translation, and production: are all national literatures world literature(s)? Which kind of works are taken as classics? Which language is the work to be translated into as world literature? Are untranslated works not considered as world literature(s)? If Shakespeare's masterpieces were not translated are they still part of world literature? What criteria are used for the evaluation of reading and reception in world literature? In this sense, Damrosch's definition is an echo of Cao Shunqing's variation theory, a theoretical framework that demonstrates an advanced understanding and engagement with the above questions in the cross-cultural literary process.

One of the many recent definitions of the concept of "world literature" and that I prefer is as follows: "world literature implies the extension of translation on a global scale beyond all regional boundaries, presumably for purposes of building a kind of literary canon. It aims to offer the finest fruits and most exquisite flowers of literary cultivation to all irrespective of their national or ethnic or regional origin. We have considered through this discussion among comparatists how becoming world literature prevents the classics from being limited to their appropriations for merely nationalistic purposes, or for the ideological aims of one specific and exclusive cultural politics. As world literature, classic works attain a wider and potentially more lasting significance" (Franke 139).

Cao first put forward the concept of the "variation theory" in comparative literature at the Eight Congress of the Chinese Comparative Literature Association in 2005 and followed it with a number of publications in Chinese and English of which in English the most important is his 2013 book, *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*: "The variation theory of comparative literature is the study on variations of the literary phenomena of different countries with or without factual contact as well as the comparative study on the heterogeneity and variability of different literary expressions in the same subject area so as to achieve the goal of exploring the patterns of intrinsic differences and

variability" (xxxii; see also Cao and Han). Variation theory includes five parts: variation theory in a cross-country context, variation theory in a cross-language context, cross-cultural variation theory, cross-civilization variation theory, and the foreignization of literature. Variation is inevitable also in literary hermeneutics both between different cultures and in different time dimensions of the same culture and it is advisable not to interpret literatures from China, Africa, and other non-Western countries or regions from the perspective of Western literary theory, but from the national literary and cultural traditions of their own in order to illustrate the variation and heterogeneity through comparisons. Variation theory provides such a notion and platform for mutual recognition and complementarity which I argue is the future of the development of literature(s) of the world and the world of literature(s). The theory contributes its theoretical discourse and methodology in literary circulation, translation, and production in the processes of cross-cultural exchanges. Further, cultural variations and the images of otherness exist in transnational, trans-linguistic, and cross-cultural processes through cultural filtering and literary misreading, as well as by the assimilation of cultural rules of national literature and its literary discourse in the making of world literature(s).

WORLD LITERATURE(S) AND COETZEE'S *DISGRACE*

J.M. Coetzee is one of the most well-known and widely studied contemporary writers. He positions himself as a writer of South African and then Australian with South American links. He admits his relationship to South Africa that his: "intellectual allegiances are clearly European, not African" (**Attwell, 2003**). These allegiances make him a "late representative" of European colonial expansion together with its "history of oppression" responding to the people of "the part of the world" where this "failed or failing colonial movement ... sought and failed to establish itself" (Coetze qtd. in Zimble 117). Coetzee is a peripheral writer through global endeavors with writings in English relating to Europe, fictional locations relating to Australia, struggles against European colonialism relating to South Africa and the USA, and ways being constructed as symbols of Western colonial desire relating to Asia.

Coetzee's *Disgrace* is designated as diaspora writing in Chinese, which is peripheral within the system of culture. It came into the global literary market when it won the Booker Prize in 1999 and then the Nobel Prize in literature in 2003. The work has been translated into many different languages and began to be read widely in English and other languages, circulating beyond a national South African context: "By this late point in the century the journey to a heart of narrative darkness has become a safe literary destination, almost a cliché. *Disgrace* goes beyond this to explore the furthest reaches of what it means to be human; it is at the frontier of world literature" (Geoff Dyer on the book cover of the book's 2000 edition). With regard to translation and world literature, translated literature functions as a way of intellectual exchange between nations: "Translation might seek equivalence, but only the sort of equivalence that does not aspire to identity, to a sameness. It would deal in similarities that communicate, but without suppression difference" (Berman 4) and as Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek suggests, "Diaspora, migration, and ethnic literature is difficult to account for, difficult to canonize, difficult to recognize. As recognition and canon formation of literature occurs in a complicated and fragmented way based on various factors and in areas such as critical and academic attention, readership, production and distribution parameters, sales figures, literary historical attention, etc., diaspora, migration, and ethnic writing is and remains hard to assess and, and consequently, to accept as a significant corpus of literature in the scholarship of literature and culture" ("Migration" 86-87). In a comparison to source literature, it is doomed to occur variations in the translated texts as that of creativity relies on a mastery of the target language and the fidelity relies on a mastery of the source language in order to expand and adapt to serve the target readers. The Chinese translation of *Disgrace* is popular with cultural variations between the original English text and the Chinese translation through cultural filtering and literary misreading, as well as the images of "otherness." *Disgrace* has lots of Chinese translations, with variations from languages to cultures. The latest versions are the one co-translated by Chong Zhang and Guo Zhengfeng and published by Zhejiang Yi Lin Press and another version one translated by Xiangsen Meng and published by Taiwan World Culture Press. In general, both Zhang's and Guo's and Meng's partly adapt to the cultural backgrounds and reactions of the recipients with subjectivity and selectivity, and partly

follow the literal translation with gracefulness, elegance, and authenticity respectively.

CROSS-CULTURAL VARIATION THROUGH CULTURAL FILTERING AND LITERARY MISREADING

In the processes of the cross-cultural communication or circulation, variability arises inevitably with respect to the translation of literary text aimed at conveying the artistic state of the original text to target readers thus enabling them to read in an aesthetic way. In this process, it also highlights the creative transformation and impact of target readers with regards on the ontological nature of comprehension. When a literary text is transmitted and circulated in a different cultural context, it is unavoidable for the recipients to accept and reject it selectively owing to different social and cultural backgrounds. Meanwhile, the recipients would also misread the original text because of cultural filtering: "Cultural filtering is the selection, transplantation, transformation, and reconstruction of communicating information by receivers according to their cultural tradition, realistic context, value standard, and aesthetic habits, whose result is the Variation of the original communicating information within an indigenous context" (Cao, *The Variation* 160).

Cultural filtering is the essential factor to cause variation. It is to explore the way of grasping and accepting the essence of literary texts across heterogeneous civilizations and it is also the key to facilitate variations and this is the case when English-language literature is translated for a Chinese readership owing to a different social and cultural context and vice versa. There are three important factors: the first aspect is the cultural background of the recipients. Recipients grow up in certain geographic space and time space and thus are marked by related unique cultural, historical, and national characteristics which are bound to play their parts in cultural communication. The second aspect is subjectivity and selectivity in readers' reception. Readers' subjectivity is a basic prerequisite of cultural filtering and it is also an admission of the possibility and necessity for readers to select, deform, camouflage, permeate, rebel against, and create information in cultural and literary communication. The third aspect is the reaction by recipients: in cultural exchange, influence acts and reacts though the individual reader. In the original text

of *Disgrace*, "This is all very quixotic, Professor Lurie, but can you afford it? (49) which in the Zhang and Guo translation is "卢里教授，这样逞英雄真是十分荒唐，你真能承认吗?" (55) and in the Meng translation is "这很唐吉珂德，鲁睿教授，但是你承担得了吗?" (73) with a difference in the Chinese translations of "quixotic." In the novel, Coetzee portrays the protagonist Lurie as an impractical and idealistic man. In the Zhang and Guo translation the strategy of domestication occurs with the "quixotic" as unrealistic and absurd and Meng did a literal translation with "quixotic" in the context of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. While it is true that *Don Quixote* is considered as part of world literature of a "Western" type of world literature, many Chinese readers would have little knowledge about this work to understand the meaning of "quixotic" and hence the occurrence of "filtering" in this case. The following example is related to the subjectivity and selectivity in readers' reception.

In *Disgrace* Coetzee writes: "'There are the dogs. Dogs still mean something. The more dogs, the more deterrence. Anyhow, if there were to be a break-in, I don't see that two people would be better than one.' 'That's very philosophical.' 'Yes. When all else fails, philosophize'" (60). Zhang and Guo translate it as "有狗呢。狗还是很有用处的。狗越多，越能镇住人。反正吧，就是有人硬闯进来，我看两个人也不见得比一个人好多少。'你倒是想得开！' '是啊！' 别的办法不行了，就想开点" (67) and Meng translates it as "'有狗' 狗还是有点用！' '狗越多，人家就越不敢乱动！' 不管怎么说，如果有人闯入，我看两个人也不见得比一个人有用' Q '这很阿' '没错！' 什么都没用时，就只得阿Q了" (92). Zhang and Guo opt for different translations from Meng's on "philosophical and philosophize": they select and translate the words as meeting trouble with level-headed detachment or being optimistic. While the latter one transforms them as Ah Q, a character created by Xun Lu with the spirit of mental victory or self-comfort. Meng's translation seems to show the essence of the original text and close the distance to Chinese readers. But it is still difficult or impossible for certain readers to read and grasp the image of Ah Q in literary works. Meanwhile if taking the protagonist Lurie, a professor of English literature, back into the cultural context in the novel, it is absurd to imagine him and his daughter to quote Chinese literature in their daily communication in such a remote farm in the post-apartheid South Africa. Another example of cultural filtering in variation theory is about the Chinese versions of the title of *Disgrace*.

Owing to the different identities and social backgrounds of the translators have, Zhang and Guo who are from Nanjing translate it as 《耻》 generalizing the meaning of disgrace into shame or dishonor or damage to reputation or state of dishonor, etc. Meanwhile, it could also be interpreted as disgrace from the moral aspect of a university professor on his female student or the personal one of men over women or even the historical one of the White or the colonizers over the Black or the colonized. While Meng who is from Tai Wan translates it as 《屈辱》 which is more specific, meaning humiliation.

If we accept that cultural filtering exists through literary exchanges, misreading would follow in the whole process. Harold Bloom pointed out that influence is misreading in his *Influence and Anxiety* in 1975. He emphasized that literary influence lies in creative misreading instead of inheritance: "Poetic Influence—when it involves two strong, authentic poets—always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation" (30). Literary misreading is the "resultant force of the selection, recreation, transplantation and infiltration, and transformation of literary text in the process of cross-cultural literary transmission and reception." (Cao, *The Variation* 176). It is the ultimate result of actions and interactions of different various factors owing to the loss of the source culture and the infiltration of the target culture in the process of cultural filtering, with the following four aspects: "the irreducibility and irreducibility of authorial intention, the openness and aesthetics of literary text, the individual subjectivity and cultural dominancy of literary reception, and the specialty of historical context in literary transmission" (Cao, *The Variation* 176). A good example of misreading in *Disgrace* is the misreading of the description of the students' sentiments of the professor: "They look through him when he speaks, forget his name. Their indifference galls him more than he will admit" (4). Zhang and Guo translates this as "他讲课时学生们目光茫然，连他的名字都记不住。学生们的这种漠然，使他十分生气" (5) while Meng translates it as "当他说话时，他们的眼光从他身上传过去，忘了他的姓名。他们对他的漠然让它感到不是味道，而程度则超乎他自己的承认" (6). The phrase "look through" originally means someone looks at that person without seeming to see him/her or recognize him/her. In the context, because professor Lurie has no respect for what he teaches in his classes, he makes no impression on his students.

As such, it could be interpreted as that his students do not listen to him attentively when he speaks in class. Zhang and Guo translate it as "目光茫然" which means to stare at someone/something, but vacantly and they also add an degree adverb "连" (even) in front of "forget his name" to emphasize and to highlight the complete disregard/indifference of the students and the spleen/gall of Lurie as a professor. In the following sentence, they translate "more than he will admit" as "使他十分生气" (to get him into a rage) instead of literal translation. It is out of the restrictions of languages to innovate and adapt to the subjectivity of readers on cultural traditions, ways of thinking, psychological factors, as well as reading modes. In the process of cross-heterogeneous communication, due to the collisions and conflicts of different cultures, it is inevitable for translators to select, recreate, transplant and infiltrate, and transform the text to adapt to the reception of the target readers. Likewise, Coetzee makes Lurie speak different languages besides English and make good uses of literary quotations and historical allusions. For instance, "No doubt with other men she becomes another woman: *la donna é mobile*" (3). In both Zhang and Guo "毫无疑问, 同别的男人在一起的时候, 她就成了另一个女人" (3) and in Meng's translation "无疑, 跟别的男人, 她就变成了别的女人" (4), *la donna é mobile* is not in English, but Italian, which means woman is fickle in English. Coetzee uses it to criticize the capricious or changeable prostitute Soraya. While in their translation, the translators translate the English part literally and omit the Italian part leaving it for readers to imagine and think about the characteristics of Soraya. This deliberate misreading just conforms to the spirit of Chinese tradition. Chinese traditional literature and art mostly pursue the beauty of implicitness and the pursuit of natural/implicit beauty in traditional Chinese also lies in and originates from Confucius's "With plausible speech and fine manners will seldom be found moral character" (Ku 10) to Lao Tzu's "True words are not eloquent; eloquent words aren't true" (Lao Tzu qtd. in Mitchell 81). Implicitness does not mean that the speaker or translator does not want to express it clearly: it means unnecessary to be explicit. It requires the creator to make full use of various artistic techniques of expression, such as the suggestiveness of languages and the symbolism of images to inspire and arouse the readers' associations and imaginations to discover much meaningful and profound interests beyond the expressing forms of literary and artistic works.

CROSS-CULTURAL VARIATION THROUGH THE IMAGES OF "OTHERNESS"

The image of "otherness" is formed by long and deep cultural communication. In different cultural systems, when one literature is transmitted into another, it will inevitably go through a series of processes such as cultural filtering and misreading. The image of "otherness" in variation theory refers to "the literature of one country that is introduced in another country, necessarily attended by deep-seated variations through culture filtering, translation, and acceptance, reflecting the assimilation of the cultural rules of the national literature and its literary discourse and making the national literature of a country part of literature and culture of the recipients' countries" (Cao and Wang 188). And the phenomenon is proposed from two different perspectives: the recipients' countries and the disseminators. As Howard Goldblatt notes: "Some changes and rearrangements were effected during the translation and editing process, all with the approval of the author" (xii).

Coetzee's *Disgrace* has been translated into Chinese and introduced to East Asia, especially in China, through the assimilation of the cultural rules of national literature and its literary discourse thus making it part of world literature. In the English-to-Chinese translations, the image of "otherness" is the product of the translators' Sinicization of the original texts by deconstructing the cultural imprints of source literature into national norms of target literature and to reconstruct the literary discourse of target literature. With regard to the original text "Were this a chess game, he would say that Lucy has been outplayed on all fronts" (151), instead of literal translation as "要是把这比作一局棋，那可以说露茜在各条战线上都被对方胜了一筹" (Zhang Guo 169), Meng creates and domesticates his according to Chinese cultural rules and translates it as "若说这是一局棋，则他要说，露西已四面楚歌" (225) whereby "四面楚歌" is a traditional idiom from Chinese classic *Historical Records of Maqian Si*, meaning besieged on all sides or be amidst enemies. Meng applies the strategy of domestication in his translation with a famous Chinese idiom/classic to illustrate and localize the English meaning, to close the distance between the author and readers, to defamiliarize and introduce world literature to China, and to inspire readers to accept and

understand world literature deeper and better. The image of "otherness" not only lies in the Sinicization of the cultural spirit of the text in China, but also in the transformation of its literary norms into Chinese traditional poetics which generate literary discourses in line with the cognitive models and behavioral models of modern readers and conforms to the norms of Chinese classical traditional poetics.

Another example in *Disgrace* describes the domestication of language: "He enjoys the late-afternoon quiet of the reading room, enjoys the walk home afterwards: the brisk winter air, the damp, gleaming streets" (11). Zhang and Guo translate it as "他很喜欢下午迟些时候跑图书馆，因为那时的阅览室十分安静，也喜欢看完书后步行回家，穿过冬季凛冽的寒气，走过潮湿、发亮的街道" (12) and Meng as "他享受午后近晚阅览室的寂静，享受随后的步行回家；清爽的冬季空气，潮湿、闪亮的街道" (15). Rather than Meng's literal translation, Zhang and Guo take the Chinese literary narrative discourse into the original sentence by integrating the scattered parts by adding conjunctions of "因为" (because) and "也" (also) together with verbs "穿过" (look through) and "走过" (pass by) into a complete sentence in a logical order. Thus the translated text conforms to the tradition of Chinese novel narration, but also localizes foreign literature and caters to recipients' interest in traditional literature, to globalize national literature. The images of "otherness" is a literary variation in the transmission of national literature in a heterogeneous cultural context. As a result, the cultural rules and norms of literary discourse in *Disgrace* are assimilated by Chinese readers making it part of foreign literature and world literature.

CONCLUSION

World literature is made and transformed from national literature. Coetzee's *Disgrace* as minor literature in a peripheral position, is first national literature and then it is transformed to world literature in circulation with the acceptance and recognition of readers through translation and cultural variation. The aesthetic function of language is inseparable from the historical and cultural traditions of the language itself and the life experience of the language users in its context. Consequently, when translating the original literary text into another language, the translator is required to find the linguistic means that can stimulate the

target readers to read aesthetically, to inspire them to arouse the same feelings as that of the source text readers. Thus, variation emanated from the translation process is unavoidable. Variation enables the literary translation to be equal to literary creation, which not only vitalizes the original literary works in another language, culture, and society. It implants new expressive ways, new ideas, and new perspectives in another language, culture, and society. In our global era, contemporary Western literary theories have varied owing to the infiltration of cultural studies and have shown a tendency of diversification. Variation theory breaks the limitation and expands the scope of literary research integrating philosophy, aesthetics, history, sociology, politics, cultural communication, and other multi-disciplinary theories and studies with characteristics of interdisciplinary research in the humanities. The concept of world literature provides a new perspective on examining cultural mobility or literary exchanging activities between different cultures.

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