

## **Literary Syncretism and Variations in the Formation of World Literature**

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**Abstract:** If we inspect closely the works that ascend to world literature from the peripheral, David Damrosch's well-recognized argument that "world literature is writing that gains in translation" may need some revision, because apparently translation is not the sole factor that decides the formation of world literature. Translated works do not necessarily represent the best part in one national literature. Damrosch's overemphasis on translation differences and untranslatability in world literature tends to overlook the syncretism of heterogeneous literatures: The influence of Roman Empire on Indian Buddhism, the influx of elements from Indian, Arabic, and Persian stories into European writers' creation, the genres of China's ancient literature influenced by Buddhism, etc. Furthermore, a great deal of Chinese idioms and allusions appearing in Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese literatures provide us a general view of how world literature forms through exchange and syncretism. On this account, Damrosch's argument may be reformulated as "world literature is writing that gains in variation." Variation reflects the ability to absorb otherness and then to create something new. Meanwhile, the perspective of literary syncretism will help us reasonably distinguish world literature and national canons.

**Keywords:** Variation; Literary Syncretism; World Literature; National Canons

When discussing world literature, Stephen Owen once used a metaphor of "food court" to demonstrate the diverse tastes in world literature (535), which provides us an inspiring perspective. There is a popular Chinese cuisine named General Tso's Chicken on the menus in overseas Chinese restaurants, of which many Chinese people may never have heard. In 1952, in order to entertain the Commander of the United States Navy Seventh Fleet Arthur William Radford during his visit, a Taiwanese chef invented this dish. It is now recognized as one of the most famous Chinese dishes

by consumers all of the world. However, few people in China would agree that General Tso's Chicken represents the best of Chinese cuisines.

This type of reception gap also widely exists in literature. For example, among all those great Western poems, it is surprising that the first one translated into Chinese is *A Psalm of Life* created by the American poet Henry Wordsworth Longfellow. On account of this fact, we can say that Longfellow's reception in China is more enthusiastic than that of Shakespeare and Dante Alighieri when they were first translated into Chinese. The Chinese comparatist Qian Zhongshu regards this kind of unexpected reception in literary exchange as an irony to literary professors and critics (565). Classical Chinese poetry flourished in Tang Dynasty, exerting a considerable influence on Japanese literature. However, instead of Li Bai or Du Fu who are considered the best Tang poets in China, the most well-received Chinese poet by Japanese readers is Bai Juyi. Bai Juyi's long narrative poem *A Song of Everlasting Sorrow* has enchanted countless Japanese writers from the past to the present times. Similar examples include *Hau Kion Chooa*, *The Orphan of Zhao*, *Hanshan Poems* and so on with the European reception of Chinese literature. We all know how a Chinese novel inspired Goethe's imagination of world literature. Thanks to him, *Hau Kion Chooa*, the obscure novel in the Qing Dynasty, is now recognized by world readers.

One could argue that Goethe had not read *The Dream of the Red Chamber* when he proposed his idea of Weltliteratur, so he could not imagine what a genuine Chinese canon should be. However, we cannot assume that *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, or any other Chinese classics, would be more attractive to him than *Hau Kion Chooan*. The intricate relationships within a feudalistic Chinese family depicted in *The Dream* might not be appreciated by foreign readers because they are too alien for them. As Owen suggests, "These extremes—the too common and the too exotic—have no place in the stalls of the food court," and "the cuisine of the food court has to exist on a comfortable margin of difference—with plastic knives and forks provided" (537). This brings up a crucial problem of world literature: what decides the canonicity in world literature?

Generally speaking, there are two treads lying in literature's progress. On one hand, national literatures are situated in a succession of their own traditions and histories. It is a diachronic development in which a national literature gets sophisticated both in form and content, manifesting the

shared aesthetic, values, and orientations. Even though forms and styles vary, the unique nature that ultimately defines its cultural identity grows consistently. Those works that are canonized as national classics because they manifest the most distinctive characteristics of one culture. On the other hand, a national literature is also in constant interactions with other national literatures. The process of certain literature approaching Others and establishing connections outwards can be called literary syncretism.

Therefore, a boundary between national canons and world literature can be hopefully drawn with the introduction of these two threads. Although often ambiguously taking as one, world literature and national canons are diverse concepts of two dimensions: the former, which is the result of literature's diachronic development, is intimately related to the construction of nation-state, in which inheritance and coherence outweigh alien influences; however, world literature is formed in syncretism, where indebtedness, influences, and circulations transcending singular cultural backgrounds are elaborately portrayed. If blindly taken as one, then world literature will be no more than a companion to national literatures, through which one may glance at the general situation of a literature or another. The above specific examples tell us that national classics are not necessarily world literature. Many works now belonging to world literature are canonized outside their original context owing to the benefits of literary circulation and exchange. In another word, the rise of a global market greatly facilitates the formation of world literature. As Marx claims in *The Communist Manifesto*, "National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature" (Ahmad 9). What Marx described is the influx of various literatures into one domain.

What encounters first in the global circulation is languages, and Pidgin English is one of them. It is a linguistic variation, mainly used in commercial business at the 19th century by those people living in the coastal areas of China's Guangdong Province. This term interestingly demonstrates a harmonious combination of two languages, for that the word "pidgin," now generally referring to a hybrid language with limited vocabulary and practical grammar, derives from the Chinese pronunciation of "business." Pidgin English operates in an extremely simple way by combining Chinese expressions with English vocabulary, and thereby untranslatability is temporarily skipped. Even though Western

missionaries living in China back then such as John Fryer and Richard Wilhelm complained about the misuse of English in China, Pidgin English as a pragmatic way of communication displays an open-minded attitude between heterogeneous cultures that compromise for better understanding.

To put it differently, there is no ideological confrontation or cultural hierarchy in the case of Pidgin English but pure cooperation. The essence of Pidgin English is to co-create a new language by both parties, which impairs neither Chinese nor English. However, once being used outside particular contexts, untranslatability is still a tough issue that cannot be neglected. The awkwardness of Pidgin English used in American daily life is vividly depicted in Amy Tan's essay "Mother Tongue." Nowadays, most Pidgin-English vocabulary has been abandoned by "standard" English, but it has become an indispensable part of the Chinese language, widely used by some Chinese people who may not realize its presence.

However, Pidgin English is an occasional variation in cultural exchange. While the "core-periphery" model is true in all languages, language still maintains its core to circulate. There were many independent city-states in feudal Europe, but the center of Europe was mainly controlled by Roman Catholic, with Latin as its official language. *Advancement of Learning* by Francis Bacon was finished originally in English, which was the forerunner of his later work *De augmentis scientiarum* published in 1623 in Latin. When introducing this work to Prince Charles (who later became Charles I), Bacon said, "It is a book that will be passed down, and it will become a cosmopolite which a book written in English cannot be" (Yang 14). Bacon understood that language determines literary reception and circulation. If a book aimed at being accepted by the world (namely Europe back then), it must be written in an authoritative language. Dante, as a pioneer writing in the vernacular, contributed considerably to the Italian national language. Harold Bloom in his *Western Canon* claims that *Divine Comedy* destroys the distinction between sacred and secular writing (81), for it challenged Latin's authority as the official language of the Catholic Church. However, when he tried to promote the vernacular, he still had to result to the dominant language. *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (*On Eloquence in the Vernacular*), in which Dante wished to endow the Italian vernacular with legitimacy, was paradoxically written in Latin. He wanted a greater influence without the help of translation.

Until the 19th century, general studies on philology as a professional discipline in Europe not only facilitated the establishment of modern nation-states, but also disassociated Europe's classical literary unity with Latin. It was exactly at this point in time that the idea of world literature came into being. Timothy Brennan believes that Rene Wellek and Austin Warren have summarized a divergence in world literature: on the one hand, to compare the literatures of different languages, and on the other, to identify "literature in its totality, with 'world-literature' with 'general' or 'universal' literature" (Brennan 27). Scholars after Goethe's conjecture have attempted to reunify a literary community, but with an unprecedented diversity and heterogeneity. Meanwhile, the prosperity of comparative literature seemed to prove that Goethe's prediction of national literatures finally being terminated by world literature is wrong. As Charles Bernheimer reminds us, "Comparative literary studies tended to reinforce an identification of nation-states as imagined communities with national languages as their natural bases" (41-42). The discovery of difference result in comparisons.

On this account, comparative literature appeared on the scene along with the rise of national languages. In 1997, after a national rearrangement of academic disciplines in Chinese universities, the Ministry of Education and the State Education Commission jointly issued "The Catalog of Disciplines and Specialties for Conferring Doctoral and Master's Degrees and Training Graduates," in which "world literature" and "comparative literature" were officially merged into one new subject called "comparative literature and world literature," which is a secondary subject affiliated to the primary subject of "Chinese language and literature." Before that, in the former Catalog issued in 1990, "world literature" and "comparative literature" were two individual secondary subjects both affiliated to the primary subject of "Foreign Languages and Literatures" (Wang 99). This significant rearrangement explicitly suggests the return of Chinese comparative literature's focus to national language. As Huan Saussy maintains, this discipline is "founded on the traditions of learning in national languages and literatures, inseparable from them but distinct from them in its purposes. It occupies a second floor and has no stairway of its own: the only way to get there is through a national language" (11).

Unfortunately, Edward Said was not able to further include East Asia in his *Orientalism*, while in contrast Haun Saussy finds East Asia a far more ideal environment for comparative literature:

For the East Asianist, the other end of the Eurasian continent is a far more promising place to host the international, interlinguistic, intercultural investigation. A far longer temporal series; a single dominant literary idiom shared by multiple dynasties, nations, religions; a common canon parsed and combated in many ways; the emergence of vernaculars from and against the literary language; exchanges with people from different cultural backgrounds, and the consequent adaptations and revaluations—these and other factors combine to make East Asia a more “normal” ground for comparative literary history (10).

To some degree, the comparison between the West and the Far East can be more inspiring when it comes to the discussion of world literature for their essential differences.

World literature is a way of interpretation, in which the Other is imagined according to specific needs. Henrik Ibsen was interpreted, by George Bernard Shaw, for example, as a realistic writer in Britain addressing social problems; however, Ibsen was understood as a Symbolist of universal poetic insights in French (Casanova 158). At other times, people tend to criticize their own cultures in order to idealize that of the Other. Wolfgang Kubin once takes the Austrian poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal as an example. Hofmannsthal regarded Germany's overactive spirit as a lack of viability, so instead he praised China's leisurely and carefree mood as the art of life. In contrast, Chinese intellectuals at the beginning of the 20th century criticized China's traditions for being inhuman and took the German spirit as their model (Kubin 108). These divergent interpretations are perfect examples of literary variation, which provides the impetus for self-reflection and social change.

Variation happens frequently in the history of intercultural travels. People's awareness of the world was strictly limited to the environment that they perceived and experienced, as Samuel Huntington argues, “Every civilization sees itself as the center of the world, and writes its history as the central drama of human history” (54-55). This awareness is then constantly enriched with the development of knowledge and science. In the early periods, literary exchanges were mainly the appendages of military conquest or of the spread of religion, slowly advancing in time but

vastly extended in space. During the 3rd and the 4th century, the whole Mediterranean area and even the Northwestern India's cultures manifested Hellenization to varying degrees due to the campaigns of the Roman military; China's Buddhist literature which emerged during the Wei and Jin Dynasties enjoyed a prosperity that lasted approximately 800 years.

The Orient described by Marco Polo once was an inexhaustible topic for medieval Europeans. His exaggeration of China's highly developed economy and wealth attracted numerous navigators, including Columbus who learned a great deal about Cathay from Polo's travel note. Benefiting from the great explorations such as those of Polo and Columbus, Europeans greatly expanded their horizon, and formed a general global vision in the 18th century. Scholars started to publish monographies transcending Western culture that focus on human beings of a general nature, such as Voltire's *An Essay on Universal History, the Manners, and Spirit of Nations* (1756), Condorcet's *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795) and so on. By contrast, seafaring did not help China step into modernity due to the ingrained Sinocentric consciousness. This worldview is especially characterized by a binary Huaxia-barbarian construction, which suggests that, except the Han nationality of China, all Others are barbarian. In Zheng He's seafaring map, there are more than 300 foreign places being charted, but the way the world was perceived by the Chinese people was not changed thereby. As a matter of fact, there was a counterpart to Eurocentric world literature in ancient China that is called Sinosphere.

The order "writing in the same language" issued by the first Emperor of Qin has long united this enormous country since 221 B. C. Chinese characters as a common written language have spread to neighboring countries like Korea, Japan and Vietnam across different periods of time, and then a Sinosphere that was profoundly influenced by Chinese culture gradually formed. A great deal of Chinese idioms, allusions, and literary quotations can be found in Japan's *Genji Monogatari*, Korea's *Chunhyang* and Vietnam's *The Tale of Kieu*, all of which have adopted Chinese stories. At the same time, China explored the outside world quite early. In the 1st century, the Silk Road of China's Han Dynasty was a bridge to Western Regions (including Central Asia, Western Asia, and Mediterranean countries). There are many cases of China-foreign cultural exchange that have exerted a huge influence on Chinese economy, politics, cultures as

well as literature. For example, Buddhism spread to China during Wei and Jin dynasties, and soon left its indelible mark on Chinese literature. Chinese scholar Zheng Zhenduo compared the pre-Qin literature with the works from Six Dynasties to Tang Dynasty to consider the influence of Indian Buddhism. He wrote: "Pre-Qin literature is purely indigenous. There was nothing more than Ci and Fu (two genres of Chinese ancient poetry), Siyan and Wuyan poetries (poems with four and five words each line), and prose." In contrast, Six Dynasties to Tang Dynasty was a period that witnessed Indian literature and Chinese literature's syncretism, resulting in the emergence of various new genres such as Bianwen (a literary script for performance and singing), Zhugong Tune (a type of poetry created for singing), and so on (Zheng 35).

Under the influence of Indian Buddhism, one of the most significant variations should be *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*. It is the first systematic monograph of literary theory in China, which is based on Confucian ethics and aesthetic principles. However, at the same time it clearly manifests the influence of Buddhism Hetuvidya (a logic developed by ancient India). Apart from the numerous Buddhism terms used directly in this book, its exquisitely designed structure and logically proposed arguments were unprecedented in China. There are 50 chapters in *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* that cover a variety of topics in literary theory and aesthetics, such as genre, genesis of creativity, rules of criticism three aspects with various subsumed sub-themes. With an elaborate introduction and conclusion, the book presents an organic argument that was totally different from the loose and lyrical writing style popular before its publication. Even though Buddhism has influenced China's ancient literature profoundly, the core of Chinese literature has not been shaken. The evidence is that Taoism retains its presence in the form of Zen Buddhism after incorporating the elements of Hetuvidya.

If we keep tracking this clue of influence elsewhere, we will find how Indian Buddhism rides on the expansion of the Roman around Peshawar, the northeastern region of India (which belongs to Pakistan nowadays). The result is Greco-Buddhist art. The Northwestern India was an area which was greatly influenced by the Greek culture due to the campaign of Alexander the Great. The emergence of Buddhist idol is a major achievement of the Gandharan art. Indigenous Indian Buddhists did not enshrine or worship statues. In fact, concrete images of Buddha were



prohibited. On this account, symbols like lotus, bodhi or dharmacakra were used whenever there was a need for Buddha's presence. In contrast, Greek gods were always endowed with human figures. As a result of the cultural exchange, the image of Buddha was gradually reified under the influence of Greek idols, and the Buddhist sculptures manifest conspicuous Greek features. Since the establishment of the Kushan Empire (A. D. 55-425), India started to make sculptures of Buddha and Bodhisattvas (Lu 34). This aesthetic style further spread to China, and Yungang Grottoes built in the middle of the 1st century is a persuasive illustration.

Laws of literary diachronic development have been thoroughly studied by literary historians who have come up with abundant theories and terms covering different periods, different themes, and different genres. It is time for us to pay attention to the history of isolated literatures converging into world literature. From the scattered to the coherent, from national or regional literatures to an open and interdependent community, more and more cultures and literatures could be stitched together by the force of literary syncretism. The syncretism of heterogeneous literatures has motivated numerous innovations and variations that are central to the formation of world literature. With the development of technology and the advances in communications, the world has become smaller and closer, and our understanding of it is no longer abstract and speculative. When literatures are read through variation by readers of many cultures, the notion of world literature can only be richer and more consequential.

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