
Introduction

World Enough

Yu-lin Lee and Chun-yen Chen

This feature topic, “Non-Worldly Literature,” is aimed at responding to the discourse of world literature rising over ten years ago in Western academe. World literature started off as an internal breakup in comparative literature: to popularize cultural competence, the new field would no longer cling to the comparatist principle of reading everything in its language of origin and attending to close reading; and a signature rhetorical device in some of the prominent studies in the field is anecdote. More and more higher education institutions, prestigious ones included, have designed their general education or liberal arts curriculum around this subject matter, offering survey courses in the undergraduate classroom. The survey may span a timeframe of two thousand years and traverse the globe from East to West and back, as transcultural and transhistorical as it gets.

What is noteworthy is that world literature is not just a thematic rubric. It is also a doctrine. These overview-style courses provide efficient training for future entrepreneurs and civil leaders.

We would like to contest this program/programming, not least because the “being in the world” configured by its advocates really means, if anything, “the global” in the sense of globalization. This complicates matters—all because it simplifies them. Everything seems mixed up now. An attempt at breaking away from one’s original frame of reference or a chance encounter, a conscious act of transgression or fleeting whims, *world* as a geophysical entity, *world* as an aesthetic choice, *world* as a philosophical leverage—all of these are now flattened out and

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co-opted by the umbrella doxa of a world literature that really just means globalization, which is a particular rationale predicated on flattening things out.

The crux of the debate is not whether there are positive, defensible cases of globalization, but rather why we should subject ourselves to an institutional campaign that tells us, regardless of the situation, “oh, we’ve got that covered,” “that’s world literature too.”

This feature topic, quite simply, is an effort to interrogate that wholesale *too*. We are not customers of any academic enterprise, are we?

That said, we hasten to add that we did not set out with the intention to gather unanimity. We invite conversations and challenges. Equally important, we are not against translation. Quite the contrary, translation is in fact at the heart of this issue. What we have trouble with is the all-encompassing posture of certain discourses.

To drive home the purpose of our proposition, which, to be sure, is polemical, we have created a sub-feature focused on presumably the best-known Taiwanese writer in the international literary scene at present, Wu Ming-Yi. His novels have been translated into a number of languages, and one of them, thanks to its English translation, was longlisted for the Man Booker International Prize not so long ago. He is an author much loved by readers at home and well received abroad, and has now become a popular research topic in academic publications on Chinese-language literature worldwide. To include him in discussions over non-worldly thinking and practice would defy common sense, and yet that is precisely the point—we would not want to settle for the obvious.

To further the inquiry, we have chosen another Taiwanese writer as a case of comparison: Luo Yijun. Luo made his name at a relatively a young age and has long been recognized as an important presence in the Chinese-speaking literary world. A multi-award winning author in Taiwan, his two-tome novel *Xixia luguan* (*Tangut Inn*) won the much coveted Dream of the Red Chamber Award, a literary prize presented by Hong Kong Baptist University every two years to the best Chinese-language novel around the world. However, Luo has yet to appeal to academics and readers outside the Chinese-speaking communities. There has not been much critical attention from international scholars working in Chinese literature. The first volume of *Tangut Inn* has been translated into English, by scholar Pingta Ku, to much critical acclaim—it was winner of PEN English’s translation award in 2017. As of June 2019, it has yet to find a publisher.

So, under the general architecture of the feature topic, we also have these two focal points—or rather, one focal point that spins off to another. With the luxury of the section “Perspectives” in the journal, which offers a space for exchange in the form of non-research essays, we are able to accommodate solicited

contributions to a specific question that we believe can help frame the comparison between Wu and Luo: the question of translation and translatability.

In the Perspectives section, we have conducted a virtual interview with Wu Ming-Yi where he responds to questions we had for him regarding the premise of the topic “Non-Worldly Literature,” the question of translatability, his relation with his imagined readership, and the way he understands a writer’s ability to “see” the world.

An indispensable force behind Wu’s international success is his English translator Darryl Sterk, now teaching in the Department of Translation at Lingnan University, Hong Kong. He gives us detailed examples of the translator’s dilemma translating Wu Ming-Yi’s *Danche shiqieji* (*The Stolen Bicycle*). It is an illuminating explication on how translation is a creative process as it is an ongoing scholarly inquiry on the part of the translator.

Then we have a specialist in translation studies and critical theory, Pei-yun Chen, who challenges us to leave behind the trite conceptual scheme of local and global, and of border and mapping altogether, when we think of translation. Building on current translation studies, she puts forth “wave” as a new figure for translation. In her original reading of Wu Ming-Yi’s *Fuyan ren* (*The Man with the Compound Eyes*), Chen urges us to consider translation as a creative way of viewing the world, as topographical moments in our encounter with nature.

Chen’s article was, as a matter of fact, a special “assignment” conducted for the journal. She was invited to respond critically to an important voice in critical world literature studies today, Rebecca L. Walkowitz’s concept of “born-translated” novels. We gave the same assignment to Pingta Ku. In his response, he uses his experience with Luo Yijun’s novel as an entry point into pondering two things: on the one hand, the *ethos* of untranslatability, which links Luo’s writing to that of none other than James Joyce, Ku’s academic area of expertise; on the other hand, the untranslatability of *ethnos* involving the “Chinese question” as a linguistic and political question. In a coincidence, if Pei-yun Chen has found “wave” as an affirmative metaphor for translation, Ku evokes one of the etymological ramifications of the word *translation*, which is, unmistakably, also a figure of liquid and fluidity.

The section ends with selections from Pingta Ku’s translation of *Tangut Inn*. If anyone thinks translation is trifling business, this by turns Joycean and quasi-Medieval English rendition of what Ku calls Luo Yijun’s “monsterpiece” will boggle a lot of minds.

So, translation is foregrounded as the key problematic in this issue. Aside from Darryl Sterk and Pingta Ku, we have yet another translator-scholar writing from

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hands-on experience. Wu Ming-Yi's French translator, Gwennaël Gaffric, wrote a long article for the Research Articles section in which he converts the translation question into an agenda, proposing alternatives to the mainstream discourse on world literature. He draws on Édouard Glissant's conception of creolization and demonstrates how language is essential to any discussion of the worlding of literature. He also provides precious examples of how he went about rendering Wu's mix of languages in French by way of creolization.

Also in the Research Articles group are two articles on Wu Ming-Yi's *The Stolen Bicycle*. You-ting Chen identifies the anti-neoliberalist potential in the singular speaking and viewing position of the narrator: it is, Chen argues, a self-effacing position, one that lets in the voices of numerous others. This gesture can stand as a resistance to neoliberalism's ideology of self-care and self-interest. The article also points toward viable ways of critiquing the neoliberal logic in non-economic, non-political realms.

Dingru Huang, too, works on *The Stolen Bicycle* and, too, attends to not only the thematic but also the formal aspects of the text. Her argument is that the novel makes a compelling intervention into conversations over world literature (and postcolonial contexts) by demonstrating heterotemporalities and an openness to the nonhuman other. Similar to You-ting Chen, she tries to show how the formal construct of the novel can play a vital part in reinforcing the critical valence of the text.

To allow our intended comparative scope to come to the fore, we have translated an essay about Luo Yijun written by scholar in French philosophy Kailin Yang over ten years ago. It remains an insightful, thorough study of Luo's body of work, bringing forth Luo's potent force in making writing an event of thinking. The essay is on Luo's earlier writings, prior to the publication of *Tangut Inn*. It should serve as a valuable starting point for anyone interested in the novelist. We also believe that Yang's essayist style of engaging with Luo's work—coupled with our translator's more-than-competent rendering of it—showcases another act of translation in our relationship with literature as scholars. Again, translation is anything but secondary.

There are two pieces in this feature topic that do not belong with the Wu-Luo cluster. The article that opens our Research Articles section is Carole Hang Fung Hoyan's informed study of Eileen Chang. There, Hoyan asks a question that many of us have been pondering but cannot unpack: the rather marginalized position of the legendary writer Eileen Chang on the map of world literature. Chang has been a deity figure for readers and critics of modern Chinese literature. In her article, revolving around her examination of Chang's life work and some rare documents,

Carole Hoyan presents a cogent rethinking of the claims of current world literature as well as those of Sinophone studies and global Chinese literature scholarship. She demonstrates how these disciplinary debates always involve historical and urgent, topical issues and must be constantly renewed.

Last but definitely not least, the first essay in the Perspectives section is by scholar of Filipino Spanish literature Adam Lifshy. If Carole Hoyan—most timely—refreshes our considerations of the timeless goddess in twentieth-century Chinese literature, Adam Lifshy’s case study is like an invocation, bringing back memories of a Taiwanese writer who once enjoyed a stellar status no less than Eileen Chang but has been somehow forgotten: San Mao. Her life journey originating in Taiwan and extending to mainland Spain, Spanish Sahara, and the Canary Islands would make her ideal material for world literature. But Lifshy, in his careful and astute observation, tells us why it may not be the case. Lifshy’s reflection was first occasioned by the recent publication of the Catalan and Castilian translations of San Mao’s Chinese-language work. Yet the gist of his point was in effect prompted by a misunderstanding of San Mao’s name. What comes out of this misreading, however, is a thought-provoking proposal. Lifshy proposes that *taiwan*, small though it might be, be retooled into a verb, so as to bring to light what does not fall within the compass of current world literature. He also wishes that an anthology could be created which consists solely of works from those seventeen nations which recognize Taiwan politically—seventeen, Lifshy duly reminds us, *as of* the time of him composing his essay.

Indeed, that number might change any day. Indeed, the scenario of international relations surrounding Taiwan is one of constant vicissitudes, to say the least. All the scholars—and translators—included in this project are here to show us how and why “world literature” is never just light-hearted anecdotal stuff.

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