

Alors, la Chinoiserie? The Figure of China in Theorizations of World Literature

Lucas Klein, University of Hong Kong

In the poem “At Customs in Shenzhen Heading Back to Hong Kong” 过罗湖海关从深圳返回香港, Beijing-based poet Xi Chuan 西川 (b. 1963) writes,

一些东西一霎变得遥远：
方才会议上领导的陈词滥调
留在了社会主义那边；
方才与小李、小吕握手的感觉
被我带到了 Connie 和 Diana 面前——
再握手，我回到这弹丸之地。
弹丸之地的书摊上卖着一个大国所有的秘密。
China 和 China Town，你要哪个？
小 China Town 和大 China Town，你要哪个？
为把 China 建成 China Town，兄弟，你尚需努力。
大陆手机换成香港手机，
人民币换成港币其价值就变得普世。(Xi Chuan 西川, *Gou Yimeng* 229–230)

The passage is hard to translate. Even putting the title in English is not straightforward; I’ve elided the specific location of the customs-crossing from the title in English, since the port of entry between Shenzhen and Hong Kong is known as Luohu on the mainland, but as Lo Wu in Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong. And as can be seen from the “Connie” and “Diana,” and the repetitions of “China” and “China Town,” the poem exists in a polyglossia that would be hard to render monolingually into English, the code-switching itself carrying a meaning relevant to the border-crossing between Shenzhen and Hong Kong.

Nevertheless, here is my shot at putting the passage into English:

Some things grow instantly distant:
the leaders’ clichés at the meeting just now
stay on the Socialist side;
the feeling of handshakes with Li and Lü just now
I bring face to face with Connie and Diana—
another handshake, and I’m back in this bullet-sized land.
A bullet-sized land where bookstands broadcast a large nation’s secrets.

China or *Chinatown*—which do you want?
Small *Chinatown* or big *Chinatown*—which do you want?
To re-build *China* into *Chinatown*, brother, is going to take some work.
I trade my mainland phone for a Hong Kong phone,
and my RMB to HKD so their value can be universal.

Xi Chuan's poem presents an awareness of China understood amidst its global relations and imaginations (and conceptualizing, as the title of one of his essays has it, of "Chinese as a Language in a Neighborhood" 汉语作为有邻语言 (see *Dahe Guai Dawan* 1–12)). In the clichés of the "leaders" (a word applied both to politicians and employers, often enough overlapping categories) Xi Chuan lands on an example that has just as often been proposed as emblematic of "Chineseness" today even as others use it to de-legitimate applicability to an equally stringently imagined Chinese culture—a fact that puts it and other examples in line with formations of knowledge known as *Chinoiserie*. Just as outsiders are likely to define China by its Communism, they are equally likely to argue that Communism is a foreign imposition, always and forever ill-suited to Chinese cultural realities. A locus of many of these charges is in fact Hong Kong, which at least from 1949 to 1997 could promote itself as simultaneously *an* alternative China and *the* real China. In pitting "China" against "China Town" (or "*Chinatown*"), Xi Chuan confronts the reader with a choice between simulacrum and reality, first reversing the notion that Hong Kong would be more authentically Chinese than China, but then deconstructing the attainability of that reality in the next line's implication that all of China is indeed one big Chinatown, or simulacrum of itself. I do not know whom Xi Chuan is addressing as "brother," but I expect that foreigners, Hongkongers, and mainland Chinese leaders alike have dreamt of turning China into Hong Kong. Trading his *renminbi*, meaning "people's currency," into Hong Kong dollars purchases him access to such dreams, the value of his currency becoming not only universal, but universalist.

Hong Kong was long, and still presents itself as, a "gateway" to China. It has also been, and continues to present itself as, a portal for Chinese people to get to the "outside world." This identity explains much of the region's tourism, but also reflects an ideological continuation of roles whose origins were economic and political, as in practical terms China nowadays should need gateways no more than any other country. The fact that it does, at least in the global imagination of China, or the imagination of China's relationship to the world, attests to a

particular role for China in that imagination, which I want to examine here through a discussion in which this imagination has turned on itself, in the topic of *world literature*. Though I write from Hong Kong, like many of the contributors to this feature, I will not be discussing Hong Kong and its roles here; rather, it serves only to mark an impulse toward universalism at the same time as it eschews universalism—an impulse I see as definitively theoretical. My citation of Xi Chuan’s poem serves to locate my consideration of twenty-first century Chinoiserie in the role China plays in contemporary discussions of world literature. By “Chinoiserie” I refer to discursively powerful conceptualizations of China as a culture, a more specific version of what “Orientalism” has come to mean in regards to Asia as a whole.¹ Through my discussion of the role of these conceptualizations of China within discussions of world literature, I will explain some of my attitudes toward the importance of translation, an act which may be able to point to a reconciliation or *détente* between nativist and universal or even universalist values.

China As and Against the Universal

In politics and poetry China in translation represents a troubled relationship with universalism. In poetry, some see the Chinese language as containing the seeds for its own universality; Eliot Weinberger: “the first-person singular rarely appears in Chinese poetry. By eliminating the controlling individual mind of the poet, the experience becomes both universal and immediate to the reader” (Weinberger 7). Others see translation from Chinese unlocking its universalist potentials, the transfer of languages unlocking its abstracted essence; Wai-lim Yip 葉維廉, writing on Ezra Pound under the title “The Platonic Form of the Poem”: “to hold on to the ‘indestructible’ part of the poem, the poet is to abandon ‘local’ taste ... because certain things can never be translated ‘locally’” (Yip 138). And in politics, still others see China as proving the universal, such as Slavoj Žižek’s admonishment of Marxists to “fully endorse the displacement in the history of Marxism concentrated in ... the passage from Lenin to Mao”—just “as Christ

¹ While “Orientalism” as named by Edward Said has been widely deployed in studies of the use and representation of China in literature and theory, Said’s book is about the Middle East as an object of discourse, not Asia as a whole. In fact, Said cautions how “Americans will not feel quite the same about the Orient, which for them is much more likely to be associated very differently with the Far East (China and Japan, mainly)” (Said 1). Furthermore, if “the Orient,” as Said puts it, is “almost a European invention” (Said 1) then too facile an application of the Orientalist critique to the presentation of China would be accepting the validity of that invention in eliding important distinctions between the Arabic-speaking, Indic-speaking, and Chinese-speaking worlds while purporting to criticize the structural politics at work in its formation as knowledge. I am glad, then, to have room here to talk about “Chinoiserie” as something distinct from “Orientalism.” See Gu for more on how Said’s theory of Orientalism applied to China is like “scratching an itchy toe from outside one’s shoe” (2).

needed Paul's 'betrayal' in order for Christianity to emerge as a universal church"—since “*only in this way, universality is born*” (Žižek 2–3).

The problems with positing China as universal, however, are well known within the academic community conversant with critical theory. It is what Jacques Derrida called, in *Of Grammatology*, “the ‘*Chinese*’ prejudice,” which “all the philosophical projects of a universal script and of a universal language ... invoked by Descartes, outlined by Father Kircher, Wilkins, Leibniz, etc., encouraged seeing in the recently discovered Chinese script a model of the philosophical language thus removed from history” (Derrida 76). And yet not even Derrida could be free of such hallucinations; he writes, in “largely nonphonetic scripts like Chinese [which] remained structurally dominated by the ideogram or algebra ... we thus have the testimony of a powerful movement of civilization developing outside of all logocentrism” (Derrida 90), and, citing its “irreducibly graphic poetics,” he writes, “The fascination that the Chinese ideogram exercised on Pound’s writing may thus be given all its historical significance” (Derrida 92).²

In our current discussions of world literature, where values we call nativist and universalist are of course also at stake, Chinese writing occupies a privileged position. The newly established Institute for World Literature was inaugurated in Beijing in 2011, was in Hong Kong in 2014, and will be in Taiwan in 2017; likewise, the only national literature branch-off of *World Literature Today* is *Chinese Literature Today*. But whereas China has often been imagined in terms of universalism, China in terms of world literature is more often imagined as a bulwark against universalism. Instead, I see it imagined as the nation *par excellence*.

The reasons Chinese literature has become such a commonly discussed test case in our reconfigurations of world literature are many. In part it’s just coincidence: some of the more renowned comparatists in English have an expert knowledge of Chinese, and as Stephen Owen, Zhang Longxi, Haun Saussy, Shu-mei Shih, Eric Hayot, Alex Beecroft, Jing Tsu, Jacob Edmond, and others have turned to the topic of world literature, they have enriched the discussion with their takes on the place of China within it. Of course, the fact that such impressive scholars became interested in explaining Chinese literature to English-speakers in the first place has its own historical underpinnings, too, underpinnings which further explain curiosity about what Chinese and world literature have to say to each other. As China has “risen” over the past thirty-

² For further discussion on this issue, see Zhang, “The Debasement of Writing”; Saussy, “The Prestige of Writing”; Chow, “How (the) Inscrutable Chinese Led to Globalized Theory”; Cayley and Yang Lian; and Saussy, “Fenollosa Compounded.”

some years, which is to say, as China's engagement with the rest of the world following the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976) has increased its economic and political significance globally, attention to Chinese literature and the ways in which it stands with and/or against world literature's trends has increased as well. Explaining the relationship between Chinese and world literature to English-language academia is partially the result of the historical predicament of China's changing role over the last decades.

But the special case of China in world literature is also the result of historical forces much older than thirty years. Another look at the above list of names can explain why: Saussy and Beecroft are primarily experts in the literature of China's bronze age; Owen is an authority on medieval Chinese literature; Tsu and Shih focus on late imperial and modern Chinese literature, as well as literature of the Chinese diaspora; Edmond specializes in contemporary international poetry; and Zhang, Saussy, and Hayot have centered on how China is written in the literary and philosophical culture of the West. Simply put, Chinese culture has been around a long time, and at every moment in its cultural history (despite mythology to the contrary), its relationship with the non-Chinese world has contributed to its definitions, and its complicated relationship to the question and questions of world literature. If, as Beecroft has argued, a history of world literature can be understood according to a history of "the shifting configuration of the relationship between literatures and environments" (Beecroft 92), then Chinese literature is unique in having passed through all stages of relationship between text and context, as well as all stages of self-definition that sustain a tradition nameable as "Chinese."³ I have written elsewhere about how Chinese literature at significant moments contains the act of translation that defines world literature (see Klein); what I would like to do here is offer some thoughts on translation from Chinese into languages such as English and its importance to furthering our discussion of world literature.

To distinguish itself from the naïve cosmopolitanism of *Weltliteratur* as Goethe dreamt it, our contemporary discussions of world literature center around its power imbalances and its misrepresentations. Though Emily Apter endorses "World Literature's deprovincialization of the

³ Beecroft proposes six modes to name the shifting relationships between literatures and environments ("the epic, panchoric, cosmopolitan, vernacular, national and global"). I make the claim about Chinese literature undergoing each stage of relationship despite Beecroft's assertion that "No single literature or language has passed through all six of these modes" (Beecroft 92); in fact, in *An Ecology of Verbal Art* Beecroft spends considerable time discussing Chinese literature in terms of each—the only exception being the vernacular, as he says that classical Chinese never participated "in a full-fledged vernacularization ... for distinct reasons and with distinct results" (187). See *Ecology* 187–191 for his detailing of those reasons and results.

canon and the way in which, at its best, it draws on translation to deliver surprising cognitive landscapes hailing from inaccessible linguistic folds,” when she argues in *Against World Literature* against “tendencies in World Literature toward reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability, or toward the celebration of nationally and ethnically branded ‘differences’ that have been niche-marketed as commercialized ‘identities’” (Apter, *Against World Literature* 2), she marks the problem I note. In opposition to a presentation of China as culturally equal to and substitutable—commensurable and fungible, like currency—for any other culture, an ossification of China has arisen in terms hard not to see as a niche-marketed and commercialized “identity.”

Much of the discussion of China’s place in world literature, particularly by those who do not know Chinese, presents such a Scylla and Charybdis.⁴ In “World Literature, National Contexts” (an article based on his *What Is World Literature?*, published the same year), David Damrosch approvingly quotes André Lefevere that we must “no longer translate Chinese T’ang poetry ‘as if’ it were Imagist blank [sic] verse, which it manifestly is not,” and that “the leap we often call ‘of the imagination’ ... could be much more aptly called ‘of imperialism’” (Damrosch 522; Lefevere 78). But Damrosch then praises a translator whose “echoes assort well with the debt to U.S. modernism” because the “crucial issue for the foreign reader is how well the poems work in the new language”—and at any rate reading Chinese literature “we don’t finally need the Chinese context in all its particularity ... [For] those of us who don’t read Chinese [and] cannot judge, it is actually irrelevant to the poem’s existence abroad” (Damrosch 527–528). The back-and-forth represents a confusion about the role of translation in shaping world literature, but more importantly whether or to what extent Chinese literature is translatable in the first place. Chinese cultural creations are “manifestly” not Euro-American cultural creations, the logic goes, so the only way to translate is to spruce it up with “echoes” that make the “poems work,” because accuracy “is irrelevant to the poem’s existence abroad.” Certainly there is a gap between source text and target, as there is a bar between signifier and signified (see Lacan 149); if that bar

⁴ For a relevant discussion featuring mostly those who do know Chinese, see the conversation begun by Owen, “What Is World Poetry?” For its follow-ups, see Zhao; Yeh; Chow, *Writing Diaspora* 1–4; Zhang, “Out of the Cultural Ghetto”; Jones; Lee 93–101; Huang; Owen, “Stepping Forward and Back”; Hayot, “Chinese Modernism, Mimetic Desire, and European Time”; and Edmond; as well as Damrosch 524–529; Apter, *The Translation Zone* 101–102; and Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature* 280–282.

becomes impenetrable, however, or the gap can never be crossed, then we have China otherized and isolated as a nation whose stylistic relationship to our imagination of it is “irrelevant.”⁵

Writing that “Developmental narratives of literary history ... tend to naturalize parameters of comparison that exclude certain kinds of cultural production,” Emily Apter notices that “when European nineteenth-century art history invented ‘Chinese art,’ it treated China as a totalized cultural essence; calligraphy and painting were anointed as art, while temple architecture was consigned to lower status as sacred building” (Apter, *Against World Literature* 57; she cites Clunas 10–12). In Damrosch’s dismissal of “the Chinese context in all its particularity,” he is in fact making the same move. But Apter’s response is rather to critique the “translatability assumption” she sees implicit in world literary studies, and propose instead “incommensurability” and “the Untranslatable” to be more sufficiently “built into the literary heuristic” (Apter, *Against World Literature* 3). Applying this to China (which is not to say that I see Apter doing so), we would find its untranslatable incommensurability theorized as an essential difference, as if our inability to understand it—its illegibility, its inscrutability—were its problem, not ours. We might even reconfigure that problem as a virtue, a definition of its nationality standing against our multinational capitalist will to power.

While I hope this particular iteration of Chinoiserie does not last throughout the whole twenty-first century, it certainly has roots reaching earlier than the year 2000. Haunting my description here is the specter of Fredric Jameson in the twentieth century. Once he decided that postmodernism was nothing but (the Cultural Logic of Late) Capitalism, China became the location of his imagined resistance to American-led capitalist domination of the world and its cultural products.⁶ Jameson is unabashedly nationalist: when he launched investigation into the “reinvention, in a new situation, of what Goethe long ago theorized as ‘world literature’” (Jameson, “Third-World Literature” 68), he did so stating, “a certain nationalism is fundamental in the third world ... thus making it legitimate to ask whether it is all that bad in the end”

⁵ I do not want to imply that the target text, or the translation’s *acceptability*, is less important than its accuracy to the source text. On the contrary, it is exactly in struggling for new forms of accuracy that the parameters of acceptability expand. As Charles Bernstein notes, referring to the same translations Damrosch praises: if Chinese poems “are translated into conventional sounding American free-verse ... the style chosen for the American version would fail to convey one of the most fundamental aspect of how the poems were heard, and how they mean, to Chinese ears, which is the most interesting aspect of the work. This would be true, perversely, in direct proportion to the literal accuracy of such a translation, because the apparently ‘same’ or in any case mistily similar style does not mean the ‘same’ thing is [sic] the different cultures” (Bernstein 88).

⁶ The article to whose title I refer was published in 1984; the book in 1991; see Jameson, “Postmodernism” and *Postmodernism*.

(Jameson, “Third-World Literature” 65). The pinnacle example of his “national allegory” hypothesis is Lu Xun 鲁迅 (1881 – 1936), even though Lu Xun died before the Cold War could give a name such as “third world” to non-aligned countries, and even though the People’s Republic of China was only ever “third world” according to Mao’s idiosyncratic definition of the term.⁷ In the mid-eighties Jameson gave a series of lectures in China critiquing postmodernism, presumably in the expectation that his ideas would take root in the country’s Marxist soil; contrarily, his lectures are seen as the birth of Chinese interest in postmodernism.⁸ Another step in the unified field of world literature accepting China ended up being defined by Jameson’s commodification of it as oppositional.

The capitulation to capital by which China entered the postmodern global market is not entirely, or even mostly, attributable to Jameson, of course, but the nationalist fantasy of his epistemology derives from the discursive weight of a nineteenth-century consideration of world literature. In *The Communist Manifesto* Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels demonstrate how, given growing internationalization or globalization under capitalism, “National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.” But as their paradigmatic example of the national *on its way out* Marx and Engels point to China: “The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilisation. The cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians’ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate” (Marx and Engels 477). At the mention of world literature, Marx and Engels present China as nation *par excellence*.

This depiction of China as paradigmatic nation presents a strange sequence of ironies. The first is that the *Manifesto* was published in 1848, a year of revolutions across Europe and South America associated much less with internationalism than with what Eric Hobsbawm has called “an assertion of nationality, or rather of rival nationalities” (Hobsbawm 82–83). An even

⁷ As several scholars have noted, “national allegory” is a positive take on what C. T. Hsia criticized as the “obsession with China” (Lupke 159; Wang xxiii; Lu 38). For other key treatments of Jameson’s theory by scholars of Chinese literature writing in English, see Zhang, “Out of the Cultural Ghetto” 73–79; Liu 45–46; Denton 59–61; and Shih, “Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition” 20–22. I have no desire to challenge the consensus that Jameson cannot be judged simply right or wrong. And yet, insofar as we reduce China to nationhood, our propensity to find Jameson convincing here even in the face of the historical incongruities I point out should support my argument, not rebut it. On Mao’s “Three Worlds Theory,” see the 1977 *People’s Daily* pamphlet.

⁸ His lectures were published as *Houxiandai zhuyi yu wenhua lilun*; for more, see Dirlik and Zhang.

greater irony is that China in 1848 was not a nation-state at all, but rather an empire comprising many nationalities. Only with the establishment of legations in Beijing in the 1858 Treaty of Tien-tsin 天津條約 did the Qing become a state equal to other nations, rather than an empire viewing itself as superior to others; other hallmarks of nationalism, such as the codification of the vernacular, did not appear in China until the twentieth century. Yet the fact that both the Qing's allowance of legations into its capital and the rise of colloquial *baihua* 白話 were the result of foreign influence—coercion or compulsion—demonstrates the ideological power behind Marx's representation of China as nation to end all nations.

China in Theory Translation and China in Translation Theory

That power of this kind of Chinoiserie is still with us, as are its effects. Not only has our tendency in the West been to understand China, tacitly or overtly, as a nation-state, China itself has become a resolutely nationalistic country. Two decades ago Prasenjit Duara proposed *Rescuing History from the Nation*, but while nominally espousing similar ideals, world literature only reconstitutes China's nationhood.

The difficulty of conceiving China as anything but a nation also has implications that ripple outward from the location of Chinese literature as configured within world literature, namely in the relationship between Chinese literature and the canon of literary theory. By “theory” I mean the turning inward of philosophy against its own universalist impulse; as Paul de Man put it, “the language [theory] speaks is the language of self-resistance” (de Man 19–20).⁹ (Theory, then, is to post-modernity as philosophy is, or was, to modernity: it is created by it, and it creates it). Part of this self-resistance is that theory does not come with an acknowledged canon of works that would limit and delimit its theorizations, making it hard to discuss in the abstract (which is the point). And yet I've found online a list of “87 Texts Every Critical Theorist Needs to Read” (Wolters) (though I don't know any potential critical theorist who could respond to this without problematizing the *every* and *needs* of the headline). Only eighty-seven titles long, it nevertheless provides a decent set of important works, sorted as coming from philosophy or sociology or literary theory, and so on. With categories including the Marxist and Structuralist traditions, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Queer Theory, it represents an array of investigations

⁹ Another distinction theory seems to make between itself and philosophy is the latter's mere interpretation of the world, as Marx put it, where “the point, however, is to *change* it” (Marx 145). Change having proven quite difficult, alas, many theorists seem content now only to judge it.

into and around certain central questions born in European continental philosophy. Its list of Postcolonial must-reads, including Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, saves it from being a racist Whites Only bibliography, but even this is offset by the conspicuous absence of any theorist not only not writing within the Continental tradition but also not writing in English, French, or German. There are many different cultural or linguistic ways from around the world to phrase or frame this question, but as I phrase it, it goes, “Why is there no Chinese theory?”

In other words, can Chinese people theorize? I mean this not in the sense of, “Are people in China exposed to the education through which and against which they could theorize about broadly applicable notions,” but rather, “If Chinese people were to produce such theory in Chinese, would we in the West allow it to be translated as such?”¹⁰ Stephen Owen’s anthology of literary theory from pre-modern China is titled *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, and Martha Cheung 張佩瑤 titled her collection of Chinese translation theory *An Anthology of Chinese Discourse on Translation*, as if Chinese thought on literature or translation were of a different order than John Dryden, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Walter Benjamin, or Jacques Derrida—names taken from John Biguenet and Rainer Schulte’s *Theories of Translation*.¹¹ The hesitancy to assert any Chinese thought or discourse as “theory” represents to me a delimiting and belittling of Chinese knowledge as knowledge, quarantining the Chinese from the possibility of the universal.¹² The impulse to posit Chinese “thought” and “discourse” instead of “theory” is

¹⁰ Both are important questions, but I am only focusing on one now. In the latter question, I see the continuation of the West’s compartmentalizing imagination of China as behind what Marx calls “Chinese walls.” Yet if the former question is hard to answer, I believe it is because of China’s own ideological purchase on such oppositional segregation, despite or indeed because such segregation is born in the West. And yet at the same time, because of the same promotion of Western philosophical knowledge as universal, Chinese-speaking intellectuals are very likely to have an education in critical thinking that covers not only Chinese classical thought but the critical thinking embedded and embodied in the continental tradition, as well. Thanks to one of my anonymous readers for pointing to the socialist literary criticism of the 1930s – ’80s, the hegemony of which, the reader explains, may have driven liberal scholars away from direct and self-conscious engagement with theory, while its Marxism might be confusing to scholars in the West familiar with a separate Marxist tradition. See also, Dabashi.

¹¹ Cheung explains her title as follows: “The use of the word ‘discourse’ in the title of this anthology is deliberate, chosen after careful consideration of alternatives such as ‘An Anthology of Chinese Theory on Translation’, ‘An Anthology of Chinese Theories on Translation’, and ‘An Anthology of Chinese Thought on Translation’. The purpose is to highlight the point that no writing is done in an ideological vacuum” (Cheung 1). In other words, she sees “discourse” as *larger* than “theory.” My mention of her title admittedly reads against the grain of her stated intent. Also worth considering is, in contrast to titles such as Biguenet and Schulte, above, titles such as Lawrence Venuti’s *Translation Studies Reader*, and in contrast to Cheung, Leo Chan’s *Twentieth-Century Chinese Translation Theory*.

¹² Even when theory is the turning inward of philosophy against its universalism; we might otherwise think that if the Chinese cannot be universal, it could only always already be theoretical!

the impulse, for instance, to translate *tianxia* 天下, a concept coined in the bronze age but which has currency even today, not as “under heaven” but as “the empire,” “our land,” or even “China,” as if “under heaven” would imply a Biblical epistemology and turn the *tian* of *tianxia* into the *tian* of “Christian.”¹³ The academic critique of universalism has tied it so tightly to the European Enlightenment and its implicit positional superiority (“modernity is a theory of the world,” writes Eric Hayot, and thereby “*of a particular kind of worldedness that it most commonly calls the ‘universal’*” (Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* 105)) that we may have become blind to possible imaginations of the universal rooted in other times and other places.

Unfortunately, the only available Other to universalism seems to be nationalism, also born in the same moment of Western-led modernity, and susceptible to the same epistemological pitfalls. Yet here we observe a problem with Apter’s argument for “the politics of untranslatability,” namely, that she seems to understand “translatability” as equal—perfectly translatable—to “commensurability.” Whereas in *The Translation Zone* she proposed both that “Nothing is translatable” and that “Everything is” (Apter, *The Translation Zone* xi–xii), in *Against World Literature* she seems to have decided that few things should be. But the difference between everything and nothing being translatable is the definition of *translatable* itself. In the latter, its definition is impossibly narrow. I therefore prefer the former: translation is not about positing equals, but *equivalents*. And as users of language we are able to distinguish between different contextual meanings of what appears to be the same vocabulary: we know that modernist fiction does not necessarily espouse modernist philosophy, any more than a romantic novel necessarily tells a romantic story. Translation is not a pronouncement of eternal commensurability, but an assertion of nonce communicability. Many terms seem to assert themselves, so to speak, but that is the result of history, rather than of any timeless truth. A translation says, *This is the cultural equivalent at my time for the purposes of this text*; anything beyond that is a claim made by and for a different text and with a different purpose, function, or *skopos*.

In this understanding of translation, perhaps a way forward from the impasse that locks universalism and nationalism as currently known into the same discursive construct.

¹³ For more on *tianxia*, its meanings, and its translations, see Pines; Rawnsley and Chen; and Xie Fang. As with many terms, its usage changed over time and depending on context; at times it seems to have been coterminous with the central states of the Zhou dynasty, and at times it was not. Even if “China” appears to be a philologically accurate translation, though, we should also submit our concept of “China” to such philological rigor.

Monks' Mountains

The tendency in recent literary scholarship to prioritize theory over its purported object of literature has been criticized many times, most memorably, for me, in Marjorie Perloff's "If Foucault has pronounced so definitively on the death of the author, why are we always invoking the name of the author Foucault?" (Perloff 410). I certainly do not want to do away with theory, either as a tool for reading or for investigations in their own right into how reading is situated between the text and the world. Nevertheless, it could serve to be expanded, or even reimagined: while we are now very comfortably in the era in which literary theory from a broadly Western tradition can be applied to Chinese texts (and challenged by such application), we are not at the point where theories originating in Chinese intellectual traditions can illuminate or be illuminated by non-Chinese works of literature. This does not necessarily *essentially*, but often enough *effectively* reproduces Western power over Chinese culture as a known object.

Shu-mei Shih has written very well on "the majoritarian dichotomy of the West (theory) and the Rest (Asia)" and on whether Asia could be a "location of theory" (Shih, "Theory, Asia and the Sinophone" 467, 471). My own tactical response to the lack of a "Chinese" theory legible as such in English, rather than to search for a theorist writing in Chinese whose work I could translate into the appropriate idiom, is to look to literature as an already-existing construct with ties both to the local and the universal. I have heard of university departments of Philosophy whose excuse for not teaching *Zhuangzi* 莊子 was that it was not philosophy, but literature. This is parochialism, of course, but it nevertheless demonstrates that our understanding of literature is broad enough to include the whole world, even if our philosophy and our theory are not. Turning to literature, by the way, rather than philosophy or science, is the "historical significance" of what Derrida calls the "fascination that the Chinese ideogram exercised on Pound's writing." He wrote, "the necessary decentering cannot be a philosophic or scientific act as such, since it is a question of dislocating, through access to another system linking speech and writing, the founding categories of language and the grammar of the *epistémè* ... It was normal that the breakthrough was more secure and more penetrating on the side of literature and poetic writing ... This is the meaning of the work of Fenellosa [sic] whose influence upon Ezra Pound and his poetics is well-known: this irreducibly graphic poetics was ... the first break in the most entrenched Western tradition" (Derrida 92). In other words, if the use of Chinese is

fundamentally literary or poetic rather than philosophical, the theoretical deconstruction of philosophy's abstraction can take place.

Like the excerpt from a Xi Chuan poem that began this essay, with its discussion of how crossing borders and changing money calls to mind questions of national versus universal value in the imagination and representation of China, there is no shortage of examples of non-causal affiliations between Chinese texts as theoretical companions to non-Chinese writing, even or especially in the twenty-first century. Another example I have found is in "Glenn on Monk's Mountain," by contemporary American poet Nathaniel Mackey from his lifelong serial poem "Mu" (Mackey 44–45). Describing jazz musicians on tour in Austria, it depicts a voyage up Mönchsberg and its imposing cliff; Glenn is tenor saxophonist Glenn Spearman, and jazz permeates and confuses the poem, so that, for instance, Thelonius Monk makes "Monk's / Mountain not the Monk's we / took it for." But sound also creates a unity between parts of speech, and in Mackey's poems, as he explains in his introduction, "ringing is sonic resurfacing, a step up as well as out. It invites echo, reverberation, overtone, resonance and repetition." These poems, he writes, are "poems in which *rung* is both noun and verb, in which *climb*, we're reminded, rhymes with *chime*" (Mackey xii). We see this, or hear it, in the transcendent union of opposites at the end of the poem, where the rungs on Monk's Mountain resonate with the ringing of Spearman's saxophone bell:

Pads and keys cried out for
climb, clamor, something yet
to arrive
we called rung. Rickety wood, split
reed, sprung ladder. More splinters
the more steps we took... Rung
was a bough made of air, an
unlikely plank suddenly under our
feet we
floated up from, rung was a loquat
limb, runaway ladder, bent miraculous
branch, thetic step... Flesh beginning
to go like wax, we sat like Buddha,
breath
an abiding chime, chimeless,
bells
had we been

rung

As the jazz musicians sit “like Buddha, / breath / an abiding chime,” even the Benedictine monks who gave Mönchsberg its name have transmogrified not only into Thelonious Monk, but into Buddhist monks, meditating to the rhymes of chimes.

In the eighth century, Chinese poet Wang Wei 王維 (699 – 759), one of the most prized poets of his day and after, wrote a poem about his search for a temple amidst the misty mountains:

過香積寺 **Passing Gathered Incense Temple**

不知香積寺 Where is Gathered Incense Temple?
數里入雲峰 How many miles into the cloudy peaks?

古木無人徑 Ancient trees with no path for men
深山何處鐘 Deep in the mountains where is that bell?

泉聲咽危石 Sounds from the spring coughing on slippery stones
日色冷青松 The color of sun chilling green pines

薄暮空潭曲 In thin dusk by the curve of the empty pool
安禪制毒龍 Meditation curbs my poison dragons

Like most temple-visiting poems, “Passing Gathered Incense Temple” (Wang Wei 131) is a description of an ascent to a Buddhist temple that is also an ascent to Buddhist enlightenment. In this case, the ascendance is the more transcendent because the temple—like reality—is not there. This positions the poem within the realm of theory (we cannot even be sure of whether “where is that bell?” 何處鐘 refers, Hume-like, to a bell that *is* ringing or that *should be* ringing), but its theory is further borne out by the poem’s echoes, reverberations, and resonances in Mackey’s “Glenn on Monk’s Mountain.” I have no reason to assume that Mackey was either familiar, via translation, or unfamiliar with this poem when he wrote “Glenn on Monk’s Mountain.”¹⁴ My assertion, then, is not one of filiation, but of affiliation; not that Mackey was copying, translating,

¹⁴ I imagine Mackey may have been familiar, for instance, with the David Hinton translation, “Visiting Provision-Fragrance Monastery” (*The Selected Poems of Wang Wei* 12), but the similarities between Wang Wei’s poem and Mackey’s are less pronounced in that version.

or inspired by the medieval Chinese poem, but rather that the similarity between Mackey's poem and Wang's turns the former into an application of the latter's theory, a theory about the availability of the transcendence of the self in the simultaneous absence and presence of sound.

Of course, the trajectory works the other way around, too, as my translation takes advantage of those posited theoretical echoes to assert an alignment between Wang Wei's eighth-century poem and Mackey's from the twenty-first century. If I had been a reader unlikely to encounter Mackey's poem, I could not be a translator able to translate Wang Wei into a discourse appropriate for Mackey's kind of poetry. Without knowing Mackey's poem, I may not have translated the final couplet to have "curve" bend into "curbs," and would probably not have talked about the sun or pine trees "chilling." This is not to say anything about the commensurability of Wang Wei's world and Mackey's, only something about the communicability that can exist between them. In this way, writing can enter the "realm of transformation" or "sublimity" (*huajing* 化境) that is, according to polymath Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 (1910 – 1998), "the highest ideal of literary translation" 文學翻譯的最高理想可以說是 "化" : "words of one language transforming into those of another, with no trace of stiffness or contrivance due to difference of custom, yet preserving the flavor of the original" 把作品從一國文字轉變成另一國文字, 既能不因語文習慣的差異而露出生硬牽強的痕跡, 又能完全保存原作的風味 (Qian Zhongshu, "Lin Shu de Fanyi" 77).¹⁵ It presents a pathway out of seeing Chinese writing as writing that always comes from and leads back to China's own nationhood; it presents a vision of Chinese literature as literature, instead, in a neighborhood, in dialogue with the rest of the world, neither necessarily adhering to nor providing the terms of conversation.

Chinese Currencies

Speaking of "*Alors, la Chine ?*" Roland Barthes's brief essay about his voyage to Cultural Revolution China (to which my title here alludes), Eric Hayot writes that for Barthes, "China was not really in the world" (Hayot, *Chinese Dreams* 156). Hayot sees China's not being in the world as a productive absence for Barthes, along the lines of his "neutral," whose relation "to both politics and the aesthetic," Hayot explains elsewhere, "attempts to negate the demand that the work take a position in relation to the field of its appearance" (Hayot, *On Literary Worlds*

¹⁵ For a full translation of this article, see Duncan M. Campbell, trans., "Lin Shu's Translations."

174).¹⁶ But if China's absence for Barthes was productive, its presence as too often formulated in critical discussions of world literature is destructive. Rather than *neutral*, it becomes *neutralized*, unable to say anything to the rest of the world because, in the acknowledgment that it has been otherized, it becomes de-universalized out of existence. That neutralization by nationalization constitutes its own Chinoiserie. A way past that, I think, is to look to Chinese cultural texts as texts that can go beyond the limitations of their imposed Chineseness. We need more translations from Chinese, but we also need to broaden the context in which we read those translations, so that they relate both to "the Chinese context in all its particularity" and to the specifics that make the translations "work in the new language." In this way, we can see an end to our questions of whether we want "China" or "Chinatown," and can exchange Chinese currencies in a way that keeps those currencies current.

¹⁶ See Barthes, *The Neutral* and "Well, and China?"

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