

# Introduction: Chinese Worlds of World Literature

Yingjin Zhang

## Remapping the Field

The new millennium has experienced a veritable boom in scholarship in English on world literature, which one may attribute to the repeated refashioning of theories and practices. The changing sociocultural condition of globalization has undoubtedly posed a fundamental challenge to academia, making revisiting world literature a timely opportunity for reflection across disciplines of comparative literature and national literatures. For those unfamiliar with the recent development, the renewed interest in world literature came in the form of several provocative publications from scholars such as Franco Moretti (2000), David Damrosch (2003), and Pascale Casanova (2004), although it would take more than a decade for this latest fashion to reach its current prominence. By 2016, when the journal *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* carried a call for papers for this special issue on “Chinese Literature as World Literature,” Damrosch had established the *Journal of World Literature* with the publisher Brill of The Netherlands<sup>1</sup>, and London-based Bloomsbury Publishing had launched a new book series on “Literatures as World Literature,” edited by Thomas Beebee, that features titles such as *German Literature as World Literature* (Beebee 2016), *Roberto Bolaño as World Literature* (Brins/De Castro 2017),

<sup>1</sup> Another similar peer-reviewed English journal launched in 2016 is *Comparative Literature & World Literature*, both in print and online with open access (<http://www.cwlliterature.org/>).

and *Crime Fiction as World Literature* (Nilsson/Damrosch/D'haen 2017).

The titles in the Bloomsbury series represent a formula, “x as world literature,” with x being a variable filled in by a national literature (both major, such as American, and minor, such as Danish), an author (both Western and non-Western), or a genre (both elite and popular).<sup>2</sup> The premise of this series is that any such entity must be examined in a global context of production, circulation, and reception, and the singularity of x as well as that of world literature is perceived as always already in motion. All constitutive key words and their relations are now under interrogation: *What Is World Literature?* (Damrosch 2003) or, conversely, “What Isn’t World Literature?” (Damrosch 2016), “Why (Not) World Literature?” (Thorner 2016), “What Is a World?” (Cheah 2008), and “What Is ‘Literature’?” (Damrosch 2009: 6–23). Focusing on the national and the transnational, our special issue continues such interrogations: What is Chinese (see Kueifen Chiu’s essay)? What is Sinophone or Chinese language (see Chew Thia Chan; Carlos Rojas)? Which aspects of Chinese literature—for instance, multilingual writers (see Jun Lei), popular genres (see Angie Chau), and planetary themes (see Belinda Kong)—used to be ignored by world literature but have now captured or at least deserve attention? Inevitably, “mapping” becomes a dominant metaphor in interrogating “x as world literature” (Zhang 2015). Indeed, the seven contributors to this issue explore the terrains of world literature—both in creative works and in theoretical formulations—and scrutinize various maps of geocultural knowledge production when China is brought into view in different contexts.

We conceive of world literature as a dynamic institution that has developed in response to changing historical conditions as well as to competing agents, visions, and values. In 1827, Goethe envisioned *Weltliteratur* as a new era of literary cosmopolitanism when he wrote: “National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand” (in Damrosch 2014: 19). In 1848, Marx and Engels proffered a comparable global view in their *Communist Manifesto*: “The

<sup>2</sup> Two of the best examples in the Bloomsbury series (<https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/series/literatures-as-world-literature/?pagesize=50>) are *Danish Literature as World Literature* (2017) and *Surrealism as World Literature* (2017). Recent articles on Chinese literature as world literature include Zhang 2015; Shi 2016; N. Wang 2016.

intellectual creations of individual nations become common property . . . and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature" (in Nilsson/Damrosch/D'haen 2017: 1). Despite such early cosmopolitan and global visions, the ensuing institutionalization of world literature over two centuries aligned itself largely with national literatures in western Europe and resulted in a dominant formation of a world literary canon written in or translated into major European languages, especially French. Paris was posited as the absolute center of "the world republic of letters," as Casanova (2004: 146) asserts: "It is plain that translation into French, owing to Paris' unique power of consecration, occupies a special place in the literary world . . . [and] the greatest English authors enjoyed truly universal recognition during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries only through the translation of their writings into French." Writing on *Weltliteratur* as early as 1899, the Danish critic Georg Brandes (2012: 25) was keenly aware of this centripetal model of world literature: "First in the second rank are the English and Germans," who, along with the French, "can hope of being read in the original by the most educated in all nations"; then, "Italian and Spanish writers are much less advantageously positioned, but are nonetheless read by a certain public outside their homelands"; further out, those "who write in Finnish, Hungarian, Swedish, Danish, Icelandic, Dutch, Greek, and so on are in the universal struggle for world renown clearly positioned most disadvantageously." Significantly, Russian writers had also been omitted from Brandes's otherwise perceptive description of a "universal struggle" (his words) for "truly universal recognition" (Casanova's words) in a relatively early moment of canon formation in world literature.

A century after Brandes, the center/periphery model institutionalized in world literature has been duly diagnosed (D'haen 2011: 173) and challenged (Shih 2004), but it persists because Western institutions and agents are reluctant to relinquish power associated with knowledge in the field. Firmly grounded in her France-centered position, Casanova claims

that *littérisation*, defined as “any operation—translation, self-translation, transcription, direct composition in the dominant language—by means of which a text from a literarily deprived country comes to be regarded as literary by the legitimate authorities,” is essential for a literary work to “obtain a certificate of literariness” and move from a state of invisibility to visibility in world literature (2004: 136). As if to clarify “the legitimate authorities” who decide on what counts as literary and what is visible in world literature, Moretti (2000) consolidates the Eurocentric perspective by advocating “distant reading” to measure the spread of the Western form of the novel across the rest of the world. His quantitative methods imported from social science disciplines reaffirm the West as the center of both literary production and academic research and the non-West as a series of outer rings of “distant” lands to be brought into the center’s view through its maps of world literature.

In terms of methodology, both Moretti and Casanova prefer sociological models, whereas Damrosch insists on humanistic approaches characterized by long-range historical investigation and close textual analysis. Defining world literature as “a mode of reading: a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time” (2003: 281), Damrosch intentionally leaves the reference of “our” unspecified and thus preserves the possibility of a reversed positionality or directionality in which the non-West reads the West, something that has historically taken place in translations of Western literature into non-Western languages and that has conventionally fallen into the purview of comparative literature. Damrosch’s intervention thus succeeds in reformulating world literature as “less a set of works than a network” of associations, circulation, and reception (2003: 3) by redirecting attention away from the assumed stability of the center to the precarious vagrancy of various peripheries along the meandering and crisscrossing routes of translation and reading.

Beyond the humanistic and sociological orientations of the two approaches, Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (2008: 20) notices other differences,

such as Damrosch's retrospective inclination, Moretti's future-orientation, and Casanova's tracking of current developments. Moreover, Thomsen proposes a constellational or thematic approach to "the literature of denial of life" (103–108), which foregrounds matters of life, death, survival, trauma, memory, and representation and has enabled writers from various nations to transcend their particularity and enter the ranks of world literature, as is evident in the cases of two ethnic Chinese Nobel Prize winners, Gao Xingjian in 2000 and Mo Yan in 2012. Behind Thomsen's thematic approach to the desire for and denial of life is a recognition of world literature's firm grounding in the world.

Not surprisingly, the latest scholarship embraces a new theorization of "world" in world literature: rather than a concept descriptive of a geographic scale, "world" is now vested with agency. Emily Apter (2013: 187) draws on Heidegger and other thinkers to reinstate the creative "world-forming" (*Weltbilden*) potential of world literature. Similarly, Cheah (2014: 303) advocates for "an alternative notion of world literature as an active power of world making that contests the world made by capitalist globalization: that is, world literature is reconceived as a site of processes of worlding and as an agent that participates and intervenes in these processes." Indeed, the term "worlding" has gained popularity lately, even in the context of discussions of national literature (D. Wang 2017). To say the least, "worlding" necessitates recognizing the "worldliness" of literature, of literature's timely intervention in the real world and its vivid imagination of alternative worlds.

### **Introducing This Issue**

Worlding also takes place in literary scholarship, as is evident in the essays in this special issue. My intention in using "Chinese Worlds of World Literature" as the subtitle for this introduction is to foreground the plurality of positionalities involved in mapping both Chinese literature and world literature. On the one hand, "Chinese worlds" refers to certain Chinese

ways of reading world literature translated into Chinese that scholars of world literature outside China may not have fully recognized; that project, however, has long been investigated in translation studies and is not our immediate concern in this special issue. The term also suggests the ways writers and scholars in different languages around the world have imagined Chinese worlds, an area that has been conventionally treated in the fields of Chinese literature and comparative literature. To approach “Chinese literature as world literature,” I believe it is productive to keep “Chinese” as an open horizon inclusive of relevant languages, dialects, scripts, sounds, visualities, ethnicities, nationalities, and geocultural politics, as I have proposed for “Chinese” in “Chinese cinema” (Zhang 2004: 1–12).

On the other hand, the formula “x as world literature” compels us to differentiate types of Chinese literature that are not necessarily our focus in this special issue, although these projects warrant further consideration. First, world literature is not just any “transnational literature,” which is the kind of literature that moves across national borders in the original language (e.g., global Chinese literature). Second, world literature is not simply “global literature” written in a major language (e.g., English or French) that appeals to a large audience regardless of cultural specificity and is read mostly for leisure (e.g., airport novels). Third, “Chinese literature as world literature” may not include all varieties of “Sinophone literature,” especially those dedicated to “worlding” in a transregional or translocal context and intentionally detached from, or even resistant to, the global scale of the world at large (as Rojas discusses in this issue).<sup>3</sup>

This special issue does not address all the important questions regarding “Chinese literature as world literature.” Instead, we offer three substantial contributions to the current debate on world literature. First, we emphasize the modes of circulation and reception beyond academia and test our comfort zone by measuring the impact of literature across the globe through new technologies of the digital humanities. Kuei-fen Chiu recommends a quantitative measurement scheme, “international

<sup>3</sup> As coeditors of this issue, Kuei-fen Chiu and I share an understanding of the parameters of Chinese literature as world literature, and we agree that future projects should interrogate related questions of multilingual writings and mixed use of languages. Because Chiu has contributed an essay to this issue, I wrote the introduction myself, but I acknowledge her timely collaboration and am grateful for her vision and expertise.

recognition indicators,” or IRI, as a relatively objective method of tracking the effective life—or the lack thereof—of a literary work and to reduce subjective interpretations that have occasioned contestations among literary scholars. Using “word clouds” generated from readers’ responses on amazon.com and goodreads.com as a visualization technique, Chiu’s combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches challenges us to see Taiwan literature from multiple angles, and her summary of four models of Taiwan literature as world literature—the global multicultural model for Li Ang, the globalization model for Wu Ming-yi, the transnational model for Yang Mu, and the cross-medial model for Chen Li—points to a dynamic system that compels us to recognize the roles of anonymous readers and multimedia among multiple agents in the institutionalization of world literature of the past, the present, and the future.

Second, we extend and complicate the parameters of centers and peripheries by investigating what Taiwan literature can offer us when it is reconfigured as a productive node in a global network of transregional, multidirectional flows, not only to the centers of world literature (i.e., western Europe and North America) via translation and reception, as summarized by Chiu, but also to other peripheries across the literary “Galápagos archipelago,” an eye-catching term coined by the Taiwan-based Malaysian-Chinese writer Ng Kim Chew (Huang Jinshu) to designate the vast South Seas of the Pacific. Carlos Rojas examines Ng’s hypothesis of “the republic of southern Sinophone letters” as a distinct type of small-scale transnational, cross-regional literature, which resists top-down co-optation by cultural centers of power and prestige large or small, ancient or modern, near and far and exclusive representation by the latest theoretical formulations, such as “global Chinese” and *Huayu yuxi*. As if to furnish an example of Ng’s hypothesis, albeit without giving up maps as part of worlding in literature, Chew Thia Chan analyzes a few key scenes related to maps in a two-volume novel, *Where the Great River Ends* (2008, 2010), by Li Yongping, another Chinese-Malaysian writer based in Taiwan, and

further complicates the knowledge production of centers and peripheries by addressing questions of Borneo indigeneity, geographic and mythic maps, and transperipheral literary cartography, all pertinent to the intra-Asian project of worlding “world Chinese-language literature.”

Third, we investigate literary genres, especially those previously dismissed as popular and thus insignificant, as an area critical to our comprehensive understanding of world literature. The editors of the volume *Crime Fiction as World Literature* in the Bloomsbury series justify this belated recognition in these terms: “Often discussed largely in terms of elite productions, world literature has been studied too little in terms of more popular writings” (Nilsson/Damrosch/D’haen 2017: 2). Three contributors to our special issue take up the challenge of revisiting popular genres: autobiography, science fiction, and the epidemic novel. Jun Lei interprets Ling Shuhua’s *Ancient Melody* (1953), an English-language book partially self-translated from Chinese, through the lens of “autography” so as to foreground the agency a Chinese multilingual writer acquires through her negotiation with the modernist aesthetics of the Bloomsbury group in London, the first-world feminism of Virginia Woolf, and the entrenched Orientalist expectation of post-WWII British readers. Angie Chau reminds us of President Obama’s reading of Liu Cixin’s “Three-Body Problem” trilogy while in office as evidence of Chinese science fiction as world literature, and her comparison of the Nobel Prize and the Hugo Awards highlights a changed landscape of world literature in which “technologies of recognition” (Shih 2004) now include participation of a broader online readership base. Whereas Chau’s emphasis on science fiction reminds us of the larger context of contemporary literary circulation and reception, in which “world literature comes into play through international multimedia conglomerates and publishing houses, driven by commercial interests” (Nilsson/Damrosch/D’haen 2017: 5), Belinda Kong argues for a thematic approach whereby the increasing threat of global pandemic diseases legitimizes the acceptance of the Chinese epidemic novel as

world literature. Like Wu Ming-yi's eco-writing (discussed in Chiu's essay), which gains a planetary significance because of global environmental degradation, Hu Fayun's *Such Is This World@sars.com* (2006) provides Kong a thematic lens on a new subgenre in "the literature of denial of life" (Thomsen's term), which Kong further contextualizes vis-à-vis persistent Orientalism in the West and a resilient challenge to totalitarianism in mainland China by embracing the ordinariness of the everyday, even in times of an epidemic, as a worlding tactic worthy of special attention.

Finally, Hangping Xu revisits the controversy surrounding Mo Yan's 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature and contends that the rigid ideological divide of anti- versus pro-establishment writers obscures our understanding of the official literary system inside mainland China. Xu advocates a view of the system as a spectrum that allows, or indeed enables, a considerable degree of literary autonomy, which Mo Yan has tactfully utilized to make space for his signature works of hallucinatory realism, such as *The Transparent Carrot* (1985) and *Red Sorghum* (1986). Mo Yan grounds his vision on the soils of his mythopoetic hometown of Gaomi, and his aesthetics exemplifies the power of imaginative literature to transcend the politics of particular national and international contexts.

Like its recent counterparts (Park 2016; Wang/Ross 2016), our special issue is another collective attempt to comprehend the broad picture of Chinese literature as world literature. Just as Christopher Prendergast concedes that the multivalent idea of *Weltliteratur* is not exclusively Goethe's, we may view Chinese literature as world literature in the same way: "it belongs to no-one in particular by virtue of the fact that its determinate shape and content are as yet far from clear. By the same token, what we make of it today is necessarily open to indefinitely extended reflection and debate" (Prendergast 2004: viii). With this special issue, we invite readers to continue such reflection and debate.

## Glossary

Chen Li	陈黎
Hu Fayun	胡发云
Gao Xingjian	高行健
Gaomi	高密
Huang Jinshu	黄锦树
huayu yuxi	华语语系
Li Ang	李昂
Li Yongping	李永平
Ling Shuhua	凌叔华
Liu Cixin	刘慈欣
Mo Yan	莫言
Wu Ming-yi	吴明益
Yang Mu	杨牧

## Bibliography

Apter, Emily. 2013. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. London: Verso.

Beebee, Thomas Oliver, ed. 2016. *German Literature as World Literature*. London: Bloomsbury.

Brandes, Georg. 2012. "World Literature." In Theo D'haen, César Domínguez, and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, eds., *World Literature: A Reader*. London: Routledge, 23–27.

Brins, Nicholas and Juan E. De Castro, eds. 2017. *Roberto Bolaño as World Literature*. London: Bloomsbury.

Casanova, Pascale. 2004. *The World Republic of Letters*. Tr. M. B. DeBevoise. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Cheah, Pheng. 2008. "What Is a World? On World Literature as World-Making Activity." *Daedalus* 137, no. 3: 26–38.

———. 2014. "World against Globe: Toward a Normative Concept of World Literature." *New Literary History* 45, no. 3: 303–329.

Damrosch, David. 2003. *What Is World Literature?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- . 2009. *How to Read World Literature*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell.
- , ed. 2014. *World Literature in Theory*. Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell.
- . 2016. "What Isn't World Literature? Problems of Language, Context, and Politics." Plenary lecture of the 2016 Institute for World Literature program at Harvard University (June 20). URL (accessed 2/10/18): <https://iwl.fas.harvard.edu/keynote-plenary-lectures-videos>
- D'haen, Theo. 2011. *The Routledge Concise History of World Literature*. London: Routledge.
- Moretti, Franco. 2000. "Conjectures on World Literature." *New Left Review* 1 (Jan./Feb.): 54–68.
- Nilsson, Louise, David Damrosch, and Theo D'haen, eds. 2017. *Crime Fiction as World Literature*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Park, Sowon S., ed. 2016. "Special Issue: The Chinese Scriptworld and World Literature." *Journal of World Literature* 1, no. 2.
- Prendergast, Christopher, ed. 2004. *Debating World Literature*. London: Verso.
- Shi, Flair Donglai. 2016. "Post-Mao Chinese Literature as World Literature: Struggling with the Systematic and the Allegorical." *Comparative Literature & World Literature* 1, no. 2: 20–34.
- Shih, Shu-mei. 2004. "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition." *PMLA* 119, no. 1: 16–30.
- Thomsen, Mads Rosendahl. 2008. *Mapping World Literature: International Canonization and Transnational Literatures*. London: Continuum.
- Thornber, Karen. 2016. "Why (Not) World Literature: Challenges and Opportunities for the Twenty-First Century." *Journal of World Literature* 1, no. 1: 107–118.
- Wang, David Der-wei. 2017. "Introduction: Worlding Literary China."

In David Der-wei Wang, ed., *A New Literary History of Modern China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1–28.

Wang, Ning. 2016. "Chinese Literature as World Literature." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 43, no. 3: 380–392.

Wang Ning and Charles Ross. 2016. "Contemporary Chinese Fiction and World Literature." *Modern Fiction Studies* 62, no. 4: 579–589.

Zhang, Yingjin. 2004. *Chinese National Cinema*. London: Routledge.

———. 2015. "Mapping Chinese Literature as World Literature." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 17, no. 1. URL (accessed 2/10/18): <http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2714>