

## Introductory remarks

Ning Wang

Published online: 6 July 2011  
© Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, Hungary 2011

Most of the essays in this special issue were delivered at the Fifth Sino-American Symposium on Comparative Literature which was held in Shanghai on August 11–15, 2010.<sup>1</sup> Henry Yiheng Zhao submitted his essay afterward although he failed to attend the conference. Those by Michael Holquist and Zhu Shoutong were invited by the guest editor as their essays are very relevant to the current theme Comparative Literature: Toward the (Re)construction of World Literature.

As we know, in the current international literary and cultural scholarship, discussing the issue of world literature with regard to that of globalization has become one of the most cutting edge theoretical topics, especially along with the acceleration of globalization in literature and culture. But as for what world literature is still invites various debates and discussions. Obviously, the term world literature (*Weltliteratur*) was created by Goethe in his conversation with Eckermann in 1827, but actually, before Goethe, different literatures in the world had already started their mutual exchange and communication. Although classical Chinese literature was seldom influenced by foreign literature, modern Chinese literature has been developing under the foreign influence, especially under the Western influence. Similarly, in the period of Enlightenment there even appeared a sort of orientation of world literature in Europe. But at the time, to call for a world literature is nothing but a utopia. The reason why Goethe could put forward his conjecture of world literature is largely due to his reading of some of Chinese literary works of minor importance. Today, even the specialists of Chinese literature have almost forgotten those works read by Goethe, his utopian conjecture of world literature has always been discussed and

---

<sup>1</sup> The Fifth Sino-American Symposium on Comparative Literature, jointly sponsored by Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Harvard University and Tsinghua University, was held on 11–15 August 2010 in Shanghai. Wang Ning and David Damrosch respectively headed the Chinese and American delegations. Those present at the conference were leading scholars of comparative literature and world literature from the major Chinese and American universities as well as research institutions. Some European scholars were also invited to participate in the conference.

---

N. Wang (✉)  
Institute of Arts and Humanities, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, 800 Dongchuan Road,  
Shanghai 200240, People's Republic of China  
e-mail: wangn22@sjtu.edu.cn; wangning@tsinghua.edu.cn

interpreted from different perspectives. Later, *Karl Marx* and *Friedrich Engels* used the term in their co-authored work *Communist Manifesto* (1848) to describe the “cosmopolitan character” of bourgeois literary production as a consequence of global economic capitalization. But actually, what Marx and Engels describe as “world literature” is a very inclusive umbrella which not only covers literary and cultural production but also intellectual production. From a disciplinary point of view, world literature should be viewed as the very early stage of comparative literature, coming out of the process of economic and financial globalization. Such contemporary Western and Eastern scholars as Franco Moretti, Douwe Fokkema, David Damrosch, Haun Saussy, Pheng Cheah and Wang Ning have all contributed on the international occasions to this theoretical topic from their own perspectives. And *New Literary History*, *The New Left Review*, *World Literature Today*, *Neohelicon* and some other journals have also promoted this project in international literary and cultural scholarship. In order to highlight the function of literary and cultural studies in the current era of globalization, we comparatists should certainly have a comparative perspective and international view on which we could achieve some new advances in our literary studies. This is perhaps the very significance of putting literary study in a broad global culture and world literature. It is also significant to reconsider the old issue of world literature in a new and broader context of globalization today.

In the context of globalization, along with the remapping of global culture and world Englishes, re-emphasizing the construction or reconstruction of world literature is particularly significant. As we all know, in today’s literary studies, traditional boundary of national literatures has been more and more obscured. No literary scholar can claim that he just studies one individual national literature only without referring to other literatures or social and cultural contexts, for cultural and literary trends have been marked with regional or even global characteristics. In this sense, world literature also means those literary works with “transnational” or “translational” or global significance, common aesthetic quality and far-reaching social influence. In the process of their traveling and circulation, translation plays an important role, without which many of the canonical literary works might well remain “dead” in the contexts of other cultures and literary traditions, or “marginalized”.

It is true that when we talk about world literature, we usually adopt two attitudes: cultural relativism and cultural universalism. The former emphasizes the equal value of different national literatures, while the latter lays more emphasis on the universal and common aesthetic and criterion of value judgment, which finds particular embodiment in anthologizing literary works in translation. We were fortunate enough to have the two eminent scholars, Martin Puchner and David Damrosch, who are enthusiastically involved in editing the prestigious and popular *Norton Anthology of World Literature* and *Longman Anthology of World Literature*, to speak at our conference. Although various anthologies of “world literature” have often used the term to market a largely European canon, the past three decades have given rise to a much more expansive conception of literary interest and value. Recent books such as David Damrosch’s *What Is World Literature?*, for instance, define world literature as a category of literary production, publication and circulation, rather than merely using the term for evaluation of different works. It is also used for the domain of its objective influence. Arguably, this is closer to the original sense of the term in *Goethe* and *Marx*. Similarly, in viewing the acceleration of globalization in culture, one tends to see its homogenizing tendency while overlooking its diversifying aspect which is actually more and more conspicuous in the process of cultural globalization.

As world literature is represented in different languages, translation has played an important role in reconstructing such world literatures in different languages and cultural

backgrounds. In dealing with different versions of world literature, some of the essays discuss the dynamic function of translation in helping construct world literature or world literatures in different languages. In the past decades, the postcolonial literary attempts have also proved that even in the same language, for instance, English, literary writing is more and more diversifying, hence the birth of international English literature studies. The same is true of world literature in Chinese to which some of the Chinese American writers have contributed a great deal. In this special issue, Zhu Shoutong's essay for the first time elaborates this in detail. Thus the concept "world literature" is no longer determinate, for it has evolved in the historical development of literature of all countries.

Since comparative literature in the current era is more and more characterized by going toward world literature, the latter is certainly the ultimate phase of comparative literature. So the symposium also dealt with different "versions" of world literature or literatures, especially in the Chinese and English languages, two of the major world languages. In exploring the general theme, we tried to categorize it into several sub-themes which were heatedly discussed and even debated during the symposium: (1) To what extent does world literature exist in the age of globalization? (2) What is the significance to reconstruct world literature by expanding the literary boundary? (3) What is the dynamic role played by translation in reconstructing world literature? (4) Is it possible to write a new history of world literature in different languages, especially in English and Chinese? (5) What works should be regarded as world literature? (6) What is the criterion in judging the quality of world literature? (7) What contributions has postcolonial writing made to the reconstruction of world literature? (8) What contributions has Chinese American literature made to canon reformation? (9) What contributions has Chinese American literature made to canon reformation? (10) Is it necessary to anthologize world literature as literature proper is severely challenged by other means of representation in the present era? All the above issues are addressed in the essays in this special issue, and some, for instance, the one by J. Hillis Miller, even have dialogues with the other essays on the issues of common interest.

As I have mentioned, the conference we held is the Fifth Sino-American Symposium on Comparative Literature, for since the early 1980s, there have been regular bilateral symposiums between Chinese and American comparatists: The first one was held in Beijing in 1983, sponsored by Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; the second was held in several places of the United States in 1987, co-sponsored by Princeton University, Stanford University and Indiana University; the third one was held in Beijing again in 2001, co-sponsored by Tsinghua University and Yale University; and the fourth one was held in Durham, NC, in 2006, co-sponsored by Duke University and Tsinghua University. But unfortunately, the previous symposiums were not able to put the excellent essays together to publish either in journal special issue or in book form. This time, I should express my heartfelt thanks to Peter Hajdu, Managing Editor of *Neohelicon*, who not only attended the symposium, but also invited me to guest-edit this special issue. I am sure that the future symposium of this type will further discuss the issue of world literature which should be always open for reinterpretation and reconstruction.