Afterword

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As several of the contributors to the present issue of *Neohelicon* remark, the bulk of the discussion that as of approximately the turn of the twenty-first century has sprung up around the issue of “world literature” has been heavily concentrated on fiction, and to a much lesser extent on poetry and drama. It is the latter lacuna that the editors of this issue of *Neohelicon*, Wang Ning and Youngmin Kim, seek to fill. Given the affiliations of these editors it is not surprising that their attention first and foremost goes to relationships between East-Asian literatures, *in casu* Chinese and Japanese, and Western literatures. Both Wang and Kim have written extensively on these issues before, Wang with respect to Chinese literature, Kim with respect to Korean and other East-Asian literatures.

A common feature of the contributions by the Chinese participants is the influence that Western drama has exerted upon the emergence of Chinese “spoken drama” in the first half of the twentieth century. Until then, Chinese theatrical tradition mostly consisted of opera and other musical performances, sometimes mixed in with acrobatics, primarily aiming at entertaining their audience. The performances were highly stylized, yet also very popular in the sense that, comparable to theatrical attendance customs in Shakespeare’s time, talking, drinking, and generally having a good time while the performance was going on, were entirely acceptable, and even expected. As Wang Ning argues, this tradition, with its various genres, had been alive in China since at least the Tang and Song dynasties, so well before the revival of modern drama in Europe at the turn of the sixteenth century. Yet, the two most famous playwrights in both the Western and Chinese traditions, Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu, were almost perfect contemporaries, both dying in the same year 1616 by Western reckoning. While Shakespeare is a household name around the world, though, Tang remains little known outside of China. The reasons for this discrepancy, Hao Liu claims, are to be sought in the economic and political imbalances shaping up between China and the Western world precisely around the time

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of the two poets' lives: European expansion, Western modernity, and European world domination through colonialism and imperialism. Surely, then, there is room here for comparative approaches to Shakespeare and Tang, but I would argue also other important theatrical traditions developing in the same period, such as Spanish Golden Age drama and Japanese Noh and Kabuki. Such an approach should shun attributing more weight or authority to any one of these traditions, but should try and explain why they arose at—roughly—the same time.

Hao Liu's article, however, also points to something else than the sheer imbalance in reputation, and treatment, of Shakespeare and Tang in drama history and criticism around the world. He also points out that the reception of Shakespeare in China served very specific purposes, independent of the artistic merit of the British dramatist's plays. In fact, according to Hao, in the first half of the twentieth century "Shakespeare" in China stood for modernization and Westernization, even before his plays were translated or performed on the Chinese stage. In this sense, Shakespeare shared the stage with more recent European playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw. Drawing upon the cultural capital of what were arguably the most famous European near-contemporaries Ibsen and Shaw along with that of the undisputed all-time "classic" Shakespeare, all of whom were introduced almost simultaneously on the Chinese scene, allowed Chinese intellectuals and writers to at one and the same time address "modern" issues in Chinese society and promote Chinese values in a fusion of tradition and modernity, the old and the new. The result was a Sinicizing of the European "originals." Hao mentions that especially in more popular opera adaptations of Shakespeare plays, amongst others of Hamlet, the setting is transposed to China, and Chinese characters are added. Chinese Shakespeare, then, is different from British or Western Shakespeare, just as Tang must be different for Western audiences. This, for Hao, is the essence of world drama: how by traveling from their local or national environments to foreign ones, plays take on different shapes, and serve different purposes. It is only in being subjected to locally "other" inflections that "Shakespeare" and "Tang" can truly "become" world drama, or world literature. Studying how both of these cultural icons, Western and Eastern, undergo a similar process in traveling abroad, then, not only brings them closer together, but also makes room for a truly unbiased approach to "world drama."

Obviously, although there may always be some Chinese that are able to understand Shakespeare in the original if performed in China, the majority of Chinese spectators would need for the British playwright's work to be translated. The same thing applies to an even far greater extent to works of Tang Xianzu being staged in the West. This is a point Wang Ning insists upon in his contribution, and it is an issue he has repeatedly addressed in his earlier publications. But whereas he freely admits the importance of Shakespeare, Ibsen, O'Neill, and Becket in having influenced modern Chinese drama, he also lodges a forceful plea for more translations of Chinese plays as a means for enhancing the influence and importance of Chinese literature in world literature. For instance, in a detailed analysis of Cao Yu's 1934 *Thunderstorm*, he demonstrates how the Chinese playwright, in what is generally considered his masterpiece, brilliantly incorporates much of what in the West is commonly thought of as Freudian psychology, and more specifically the Oedipus complex. Earlier, of course, Qian Zhongshu (1981), in "Our Sweetest Songs,"

a 1980s article, had already suggested that many Freudian insights had been anticipated in Chinese literature and criticism. In a wider sense, though, Wang Ning's stressing the importance of translation underscores the centrality of translation studies in present-day approaches to world literature.

For He Chengzhou, the introduction into China of Ibsen's plays and theories on drama, and particularly *A Doll's House*, constitute an "event," i.e. more than just the staging of a play. In fact, He argues, the performance of *A Doll's House* amounted to a crucial intervention in the development of spoken drama in China, in the development of performance in China, and because of its picture of Nora, its main character, also with regard to the position of women in Chinese culture and society. Specifically, the transformation of the character Nora, leaving her husband and home, translates into a transformation of Chinese culture, as testified to by a series of "departure" plays. The Chinese Characteristics of these plays rest in that they do not necessarily feature women, although most of them do, and the departure is not for sexual freedom and liberty, but against parental control, and for marriage and independence as a couple. Women revolting in such plays are usually referred to as "Nora's sisters", and the plight of women is part of the treatment of wider problems. Nora eventually—in China—becomes a symbol not only of women's emancipation, but also of class emancipation, of the New Youth and New Culture, thus answering the question, posed by Lu Xun in a lecture in 1923, "what becomes of Nora after her departure?" Lu Xun's answer was that she transcended being an individual and became a revolutionary—socially engaged, along Marxist lines. When traveling abroad, then, Ibsen, as a cultural icon, and Ibsen's works, and particularly *A Doll's House*, for He become transformative agents and this is precisely what world literature, and world drama is for him: a play that travels, is translated, is adapted to local circumstances, but still conveys its original message transposed to local conditions.

He Weihua develops much the same reasoning with respect to Bertolt Brecht and his reception and influence, especially his theories on alienation effects and epic theatre, in China. Brecht's reputation fluctuated with changing political conditions in China. His work was enthusiastically championed in the 1950s but rejected during the Cultural Revolution. After 1979 Brecht's star rose again. The use of Brecht allowed for formal renewal, but also for social reform, or at least the latter's advocacy—in this sense his theories and works constitute an "event" in Chinese literature and culture, as Ibsen's before, as argued by He Chengzhou.

Some remarks are in order here with respect to current debates on world literature. First of all, much of what Hao Liu sees happening with the works of Shakespeare and Tang Xianzu when "traveling," He Chengzhou with *A Doll's House*, and He Weihua with Brecht, can be read as an extension of André Lefevere's classic article "Mother Courage's Cucumbers," (2000) which discusses the translation of Brecht's 1939 play *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder* for a Broadway performance in 1952 not, as until then had been the rule in translation studies, from the perspective of closeness to the original, but with an eye for the reason why what was put on stage in New York differed rather sharply from Brecht's text. The reason, Lefevere argues, was precisely to be found in the need to inflect the original so as to make it palatable—in this particular case primarily having to do with political circumstances during the so-called McCarthy era in the

USA—for its new audience in its new context, thereby turning “German” theatre into “American” theatre, and, in its ability to travel, and to undergo comparable transformations also elsewhere, I would now argue, at the same time into “world” drama. The well-known tendency to imbue everything imported into China with “Chinese Characteristics,” then, can be seen as merely a more general application of the same principle, but also as only a specification of what happens also elsewhere, indeed everywhere. In other words, adopting such an approach provides a good ground for studying “world” literature, and especially so for world drama, because of the direct contact with the audience the staging of a play pre-supposes.

What Binghui Song sees happening with Gao and Brecht, however, goes further, and leads us to a reconsideration of current ideas on world literature, especially as they circulate in the West. Song sees Gao Xingjian as influenced by Beckett and Brecht, and as dialoguing with Chekhov, Stanislavski, and Ibsen. Gao, he claims, draws on both classical Chinese tradition, opera, various kinds of regional theatre, and the “new” Chinese tradition since the New Culture movement, which is that of Ibsenesque theatre Sinicized, but now adds influences of Beckett and Brecht. Of course, Brecht’s theories on alienation effects and epic theatre were themselves at least partially inspired by Chinese examples. In fact, Song argues, Brecht here engaged in “a type of creative misreading.” When Gao then in turn seeks inspiration with Brecht, and some of Brecht’s predecessors, such as Meyerhold, he is in a sense re-importing Chinese tradition, albeit “reworked,” into Chinese drama. Moreover, this was only one element of Chinese tradition, or traditions, that Gao employs: he also draws on “Peking Opera and Kun Opera represented by Mei Lanfang,” “folk operas and rituals,” “Tibet Opera, Guizhou Opera, Nuo Operas (Hunan and Jiangxi), Story-telling and Singing (Epic Biography of the Darkness of Han nationality in Hubei Province), as well as the folk operas of Yi, Miao, and She ethnic groups.” We might say, then, that Gao defamiliarizes mainstream Chinese modern drama à la Ibsen by re-introducing classical and folk Chinese traditions partially filtered through Brecht’s theory and example. As Song puts it, “If, what Chinese drama practiced in the 1980s is ‘Western Drama as Basis, Chinese Drama as Subsidiary,’ then since the late 1980s, what Gao Xingjian’s efforts showed was ‘Chinese Drama as Basis, Western Drama as Subsidiary.’”

The final sentence of the previous paragraph can be seen as an effective rebuttal of the Euro- or Western-centric theories of Pascale Casanova, in *The world republic of letters*, (2004) and Franco Moretti, in “Conjectures on world literature (2000).” Casanova, drawing on Bourdieu’s theories of the progressive development of an autonomous realm of letters as the achievement of what I would almost dare call a Hegelian *Weltgeist* of literature, sees all of “modern” literature as arbitered from Paris. Moretti, although admittedly taking care to limit his claims to the novel, sees modern literature—and again, primarily the novel—as originating in France and England, or to be even more precise, Paris and London, and then spreading in almost concentric circles around the world. What he sees as a law pertaining in such spreading, is that European form—especially plot—is filled with local content: setting, characters, voice. From Song’s discussion of Gao’s oeuvre, it would seem that at least for this Chinese dramatist Moretti’s theories do not hold water.

In fact, when we look at the theatre of Brecht himself, the flaw in Moretti's reasoning immediately appears. With *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *The Good Woman of Sezuán* Brecht is importing foreign form into the European theatre. The same conclusion forces itself upon us from Youngmin Kim's essay on Yeats's borrowing from the Japanese Noh theatre for his *Four Plays for Dancers*, with as outstanding case the first of these, *At the Hawk's Well*. Yeats uses foreign form and local materials, most particularly the character of the Irish mythological hero Cuchulain, to de-familiarize his subject and his readers. And just as Chinese playwrights in the first half of the twentieth century are using Shakespeare and Ibsen to revolt against what they saw as their calcified native tradition, so Yeats is using the Noh against the by then dominant Ibsenesque strain in the Irish theatre.

Carrie Preston extends Kim's discussion of the influence of the Japanese Noh drama from Yeats to T.S. Eliot, showing how Eliot in *Sweeney Agonistes* combines elements from the Noh, gleaned from a performance of Yeats's *At the Hawk's Well* in 1916 with elements from classical drama and the American minstrel show. This in essence is an extension of Eliot's techniques in *The Waste Land*, where he combines high and low, Shakespeare with rag, Dante and Dharma, and of Pound's technique in *The Cantos*, where he combines passages, allusions and references to Western texts with Chinese and other non-Western counterparts. This leads Preston to lodge a plea for looking at drama and theatre in a global context, where techniques, traditions and texts are available transnationally, as one huge reservoir of possibilities.

World drama then consists of a continuous process of borrowing, adapting, changing, and incorporating bits and pieces from elsewhere, from everywhere. Such works, we could say, citing Eliot in *The Waste Land*, at one and the same time "shore fragments" against the "ruins" of national traditions, having become untenable at this time, and launch a new "global" culture, offering its audience much of what it knows from its own culture/tradition/literature, but also a lot of "foreign" stuff, making for a world culture. Even if in such works much may remain perhaps only half understood, their importance lies in the opening up of horizons beyond the familiar, yet linking the familiar, uprooted, to the strange and foreign—another kind of *Verfremdung*, this time not along Brechtian lines but more in the image of our new fast-moving media culture, continuously changing, constantly shape-shifting. For some this may seem as realizing Jacques Derrida's fear from *Postcard* that "an entire epoch of so-called literature, if not all of it, cannot survive a certain technological regime of telecommunications" (1987). J. Hillis Miller quoted this particular passage from Derrida's in a talk he gave to a Beijing Conference in 2000. Originally titled "Will literary study survive the age of globalization," but later published under various other titles, (2000) this talk caused great controversy among Chinese scholars. As the papers in this issue of *Neohelicon* demonstrate, though, such fears are not warranted. Instead, I prefer to see them as collectively holding out the promise of world drama as a powerful call for opening up to the world, not with an eye to appropriating the world to ourselves, but rather as giving ourselves up to the world.

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