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Rethinking World Literature through the Relations between Russian and East Asian Literatures

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Abstract

Based on the historical and cultural connections between Russia and East Asia, this article explores how the literary relations between these regions complicate current discussions about "world literature." The case of Russia, East Asia, and their leftist literary relations refute the diffusion model of world literature and the perspective that sees literary works as embedded in the competitive relations of national literatures. Through a discussion of recent world literary theories, the author argues that we would be better served by thinking of world literature less as an entity made up of certain literary works which must, by its nature, operate by inclusion and exclusion or a single diffusion network defined by hierarchical and competitive relations than as a totality of entangled literary and cultural relations and processes through which new meanings and implications are generated. Rethinking world literature as a methodology, not merely as an object to know, also provides new perspectives that allow us to understand the world better through literatures and their connections.

Keywords: world literature, literary relations, Korean literature, East Asian literature, Russian literature, translation

Introduction

In this special issue of *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* examining the cultural interactions between Russia/Soviet Union and East Asia, this article focuses in particular on literature, with the aim of critically rethinking world literature models using the Russian and East Asian case. I start with a discussion of Pascale Casanova's and Franco Moretti's world literature theories before moving on to more recent theories, because they are among the pioneers who reinvigorated discussions of world literature in recent years and because they remain reference points in the field. The case of Russian and East Asian literary relations provides us with an example that substantially and historically challenges their theories. Taking these literary relations as a starting

point for a discussion of world literature, I will further explore the contributions and limitations of more recent studies of world literature in the last section of this article.¹

The questions of what constitutes world literature and who has the power to decide which authors and works are included in that category have always been political. During the nineteenth century, Western “civilization” asserted its preeminence through legal, economic, and military force, while the signs of the culture were nonnegotiable emblems of entitlement in the Euro-American imperialist world order. At that time, in the West there was effectively no possibility of recognizing other cultures as having equivalent contemporary value. As can be seen in the canons of Western literature, art, and music of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the West understood itself as the source of all cultural value, especially in modern forms such as the novel. Those assumptions have been thoroughly undermined over the last half-century, a development that has reopened the question of what constitutes world literature or world culture.

Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova are two scholars who have tried to answer that question in ways that move beyond latent colonialist and imperialist assumptions but who have nevertheless been broadly criticized for their continuing Eurocentric perspectives (Moretti 2000; Casanova 2004).² Moretti’s theorization is useful in that it undermines the commonsense assumption that the novel and modern literature emerged autonomously in Western European countries; it shows instead that most literatures went through a process of “compromise” with other cultures. However, Moretti’s approach adapts Immanuel Wallerstein’s socioeconomic theory of world systems to literature, which results in systemizing literatures of the world into core and periphery (and semi-periphery) and oversimplifying the complexity of the encounters among cultures. He holds that the movement or flow takes place almost exclusively from the core (Spanish, French, and English literatures) to the periphery, and accounts for the textual production that emerges from those encounters by categorizing it into three simple components: foreign form (foreign plot), local material (local characters), and local form (local narrative voice). One problematic implication of this schematization is its reaffirmation of a Eurocentric diffusion model and a failure to examine relations and exchanges among “(semi-)peripheries.” This article examines the relationships among the (semi-)peripheries of Russia and East Asia to show that, in this case, the diffusion model and simplistic division of forms and material into “foreign” and “local” are inadequate for understanding how modern literature formed around the world.

Casanova’s influential book, *The World Republic of Letters* (2004), reaffirms the Eurocentric mapping of world literature. The “Greenwich Meridian of Literature”—the

¹ This explanation of Russian and East Asian cultural interaction has been adapted from sections of my book, *Translation’s Forgotten History: Russian Literature, Japanese Mediation, and the Formation of Modern Korean Literature* (2016).

² The criticisms of Moretti include Kristal (2002), Arac (2002), and Shih (2004). Criticisms of Casanova include Sapiro (2003), Prendergast (2004, 7), and Hill (2011).

term Casanova uses to indicate the relative autonomy of the literary field and literary modernity—is linked with the literary world and publishing industry in Paris. In Casanova’s theory, every literary text is situated within competitive relations with other texts in joining literary modernity, and within a hierarchical relationship with the center of “the world republic of letters.” As with Moretti’s model, this idea also denies other possible forms of relationality, particularly among the literatures that are remote from the Greenwich Meridian of Literature.

For Casanova, France—which became the literary center because it had accumulated literary assets for the longest time and had more literary independence than any other national literature—is associated with such terms as “international,” “autonomous,” “cosmopolitan,” and “literary innovation,” whereas literatures in peripheries are associated with “national,” “political,” “provincial,” and “stylistic conservatism” unless challenged by writers who are touched or recognized by the center (2004, 108–114). However, the East Asian literary community imagined and pursued an alternative literature that actively engaged with social problems and people’s lives through interactions with Russian literature, not through alignment with literary modernity in Paris. This was most obvious among proletarian literary coalitions but broadly characterizes the modern literary community as a whole.

Through a specific discussion of the transregional literary relations in East Asia and Russia, I show that these cases effectively and substantially refute the diffusion model of world literature and the perspective that conceives of literary works being embedded in competitive relations among national literatures. Through a further discussion of recent world literary theories, I argue that we would be better served by perceiving world literature more as totality of entangled literary and cultural relations and processes than as an entity composed of certain literary works that must operate by inclusion and exclusion or as a single diffusion network defined by hierarchy and competition. Even more importantly, we should consider “world literature” as a complex mode of those networks that constantly generates new meanings and implications through those entangled literary and cultural relations and processes. I also argue that rethinking world literature as a methodology, not merely an object to know, provides us with new perspectives to focus on the networks in various ways, which would let us understand the world better through literatures and their connections. I start by discussing the relations that East Asian cultures had with Russian literature, their shared sensibility regarding literature, and the case of Russia and East Asia in relation to world literature theories.

“Literature for Life”: Russian Literature in East Asia

During the first decades of the twentieth century, Korean intellectuals enthusiastically imported and translated foreign literature starting in the 1900s and reaching a peak in the 1920s. Essays by Korean writers show that they eagerly sought out Russian

literature, which was the most favored of all foreign literatures.³ For example, Yi Hyosŏk recalled that he and his friends “also read English and French literature such as Hardy and Zola but nothing could compete with the popularity of Russian literature” during high school (in the early 1920s) (Yi H. 1990, 7:156–157).

Russian literature was also the most popular “Western” literature in China, Korea, and Japan during the formation of these countries’ national literatures. There are a few reasons why this might have been the case. The first is geographical proximity. Political and geographical contact among these countries created both the need and the opportunity to know each other’s languages, causing a boom in language education. Literary works were often used as language texts, and language learners became familiar with the other language’s literature, whether or not this was their primary goal. This process drove translations of Russian literature.

Another factor to consider in relation to Russian literature’s popularity is that in the late nineteenth century, Russian literature entered the realm of what was known to Japanese and Koreans as world literature: an established canon of European masterpieces. Russian literature existed as world literature in East Asia mostly through other European languages, and these translations often became the basis for further translations. In Japan, the Maruzen bookstore imported many English translations of Russian literature, and a smaller number of direct translations from Russian were produced by the Orthodox Theological Seminary and the Tokyo School of Foreign Languages. Nobori Shomu and Futabatei Shimei are representative translators who graduated these schools. In China, May Fourth writers relied on English, German, or Japanese translations (Ng 1988, 7). In Korea, most contact came through Japanese translations or Korean translations based on Japanese translations. France, England, and other European countries’ validation of Russian literature as “world literature” legitimated and accelerated its importation in East Asia.⁴

Finally, it is likely that writers in Japan, China, and Korea felt a strong sympathy with Russian writers or with the characters who appeared in their works. Literature takes on a special role as a voice of social conscience in societies where the state controls political speech. The Tsarist regime in Russia, the strong state in modern Japan, and the Japanese colonial government in Korea all controlled public speech and blocked politically dangerous messages. This type of censorship had the effect of endowing literature with a marked sociopolitical importance. In countries that were half- or fully colonized, such as China and Korea, literature became a space in which intellectuals could express their sociopolitical concerns indirectly. Liang Qichao, a Chinese reformist and philosopher, held literature to be “the most effective instrument of social reform” (Ng 1988, 4). Lu Xun, credited with writing the first modern Chinese short story, considered literature as the best tool for changing the Chinese national character, and Yi

³ There were 89 total translations from Western literature during the 1910s, compared with 671 in the 1920s (Kim P. 1998a, 414). In the 1920s, 81 Russian, 78 French, 55 English, 24 American, and 23 German literary works were translated. For details, see Kim P. (1998b, 188–712).

⁴ For the reception of Russian literature in European countries, see May (1994, 11–55).

Kwangsu, credited with writing the first modern Korean novel, considered it “a fundamental force which determines the rise and fall of a nation.”⁵

One of the most noted elements of Leo Tolstoy’s persona as it was understood in Korea was the claim that the Tsarist regime could not punish him because he was a renowned literary figure (Ilso 1921, 39). The Tolstoy that Korean intellectuals idealized and took as a model was not someone who wrote aesthetically excellent works, but a person who engaged with the problems of contemporary society through literature. To a certain extent, this focus on Tolstoy’s role in his society reflects the ideal man of letters in Confucian society, which stressed the leader’s social and moral duty and his benevolence. But it also addresses the situation in which East Asian intellectuals found themselves—namely, one that left them with little room for direct engagement with the political circumstances they lived in, as the forces of colonization and development swept the world. In China, May Fourth writers Lu Xun, Yu Dafu, Mao Dun, and Ba Jin found a resemblance between themselves and the “superfluous and revolutionary Hamlet tradition,” exemplified by the intellectual heroes of nineteenth-century Russian novels, whose idealism was so often frustrated by state power (Ng 1988, 4–5).

Lu Xun in particular was explicit about why Chinese intellectuals sympathized with Russian literature:

Stories of detectives, adventurers, English ladies and African savages can only titillate the surfeited senses of those who have eaten and drunk their fill. But some of our young people were already conscious of being oppressed and in pain. They wanted to struggle, not to be scratched on the back, and were seeking for genuine guidance. That was when they discovered Russian literature. That was when they learned that Russian literature was our guide and friend. For from it we can see the kindly soul of the oppressed, their sufferings and struggles. Hope blazed up in our hearts when we read the works of the forties [1840s], and sorrow flooded our souls when we read those of the sixties [1860s]. (Lu 1959, 3:181)

The image of others is produced through the projection of self-identity onto others, and self-identity itself is constructed through the same process. In this case, Lu Xun’s understanding of and desire for Russian literature discloses the ideal identity of Chinese literature, or one that Chinese intellectuals were hoping to claim.

For Korean intellectuals, Russian literature fit most closely with their idealized conception of modern literature as it developed during the 1910s and 1920s. An Hwak, Chu Yosöp, Kim Kijin, and Pak Yönghŭi argued that Russian literature differed from other European literatures in that it publicly pursued reform of Russian society. This pursuit led them to consider Russian literature to be morally superior (Chu 1920, 88; Kim K.

⁵ For Lu Xun’s discussion on the Chinese national character, see Liu (1995, 45–76) and Yi K. (1977, 1:545–546).

1988, 4:341; Pak 1997, 3:24; An 1921, 41). What they saw in Russian literature was “a literature for life,”⁶ meaning that Russian literature was not art for art’s sake but an art for life’s sake. The phrase “literature for life” is ambiguous, but in this context it emphasized Russian literature’s greater involvement in society than other literatures. The expression “literature for life” was used in China as well as Korea. Chinese intellectuals believed that Russian literature endorsed a “literature of man” and “literature for life” that distinguished itself by “portraying the oppressed and struggling to achieve a better future for them” (Gamsa 2010, 29–33).

Although each writer had a slightly different idea of what “literature for life” meant, we can look at the example of Ilso as one specific instance. He explained that Russian society in Tolstoy’s time was suffering a dark period under an authoritarian regime; people did not have any freedom of publication, speech, or organization, and the power of the Russian police put every citizen under surveillance. He went on to argue that because Tolstoy was a great human being, the Tsarist regime could not punish him even though he stood against it (Ilso 1921, 39). Kim Myöngsik argued that whereas the literatures from the past were all dead because they focused on poetic and emotional expression, Russian literature was alive because it brought social concerns into the literary realm. According to Kim, Russian literature was a “living” literature because it expressed the agony and sorrow of a society and worked for social reform. Kim concluded that Russian writers sacrificed themselves for justice and righteousness and thus created a literature not of beauty and technique but of thought and people.⁷ Korean writers’ passionate reception of Russian literature was related to their own desire for an active role for literature in their specific sociopolitical situation.

Proletarian Literature: Alignment with Nineteenth-Century Russia

Political and military events during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also affected East Asian intellectuals’ view of Russia. These included Japanese intellectuals’ interest in Russian nihilism during the Freedom and People’s Rights movement in the late nineteenth century, King Kojong’s pro-Russian politics in Korea, the Russo-Japanese War in 1904–1905, and the Russian Revolution of 1917. The Russian Revolution in particular brought sociopolitical and cultural changes to Korea and East Asia, both directly and indirectly. One of the changes was the development of the proletarian cultural movements, which started in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Along with the development of proletarian cultural movements, Korean intellectuals utilized most of the well-known prerevolutionary Russian writers and their works to promote their own radical social ideas during the 1920s. The way that Russian literature was received and constructed in Korea was constantly reworked depending on changes in

⁶ Korean writers used a specific phrase such as “*insaeng ŭl wihan yesul*” (literature/art for life) (Kim K. 1988, 2:422) or explained that Russian literature is “the literature that has the closest relationship with life” among all literatures (An 1921, 41).

⁷ Kim Myöngsik, “*Nosöa ŭi san munhak*” [A living literature of Russia], quoted in Kim Pyöngch’öl (1998b, 607–608).

the Korean social and political situation. For example, well-known Russian writers such as Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky were interpreted as socialists, even though this interpretation misrepresented the authors' actual positions. Although the Korean proletarian literary movement came under the sway of the Communist International (Comintern) in its later stages during the 1930s, it was characterized by flexibility and tolerance during the 1920s. For Korean authors and intellectuals in the 1920s, proletarian literature was an intermingled collection of various ideas and movements, including the French Clarté movement, Russian populism (the Narodnik movement), nihilism, and an ambiguous and eclectic neo-idealism (used by Pak Yŏnghŭi, for example). The term "proletariat" referred to a broad range of Korean common people and often came to include intellectuals themselves. At its greatest extension it included the whole Korean people, including the bourgeoisie.

Parallel to this inclusive understanding of the proletariat in the 1920s, the range of proletarian literature in Korea was inclusive enough to embrace engaged literature even if it lacked a clear socialist ideology or conception of workers' solidarity or class identity. Proletarian literature in Korea covered not only literary works written about or by workers but also the works written about and by intellectuals. This inclusiveness was what allowed Russian bourgeois literary works to become a strand of socialist literature in Korea. Prerevolutionary Russian literature that aspired to social change may even have been more appealing to Korean intellectuals than Bolshevik literature (such as Fyodor Gladkov's historic 1925 novel *Tsement* [Cement], which described the process of postrevolutionary reconstruction).

Many proletarian literature writers in Japan and Korea repeatedly refer to prerevolutionary Russian writers and their characters in their discussions of proletarian literature. In Korea, for example, Ivan Turgenev and his characters were frequently cited and appropriated by Korean proletarian literature writers and fellow travelers. What might Turgenev and nineteenth-century Russian writers have meant to Korean proletarian literature writers? Korean and Japanese proletarian literature expressed the aspiration for the revolution to come, whereas Soviet proletarian literature was built on or with the revolution that had already arrived.⁸ In Russia, the literature that embodied an aspiration for the revolution to come was that of the last few decades of the nineteenth century—the time when Turgenev crafted his revolutionary characters. If a study discusses Korean and Japanese proletarian literature only in relation to Soviet

⁸ As Michael Denning correctly points out, Russia was exceptional rather than typical because "in Russia, the literary movement developed largely after the revolution, in alliance (in varying degrees) with the new regime, rather than as an oppositional avant-garde. As a result, proletarian novels were more about reconstructing the nation and building socialism than about struggling against capitalism or colonialism" (Denning 2004, 61). Samuel Perry's argument that the proletarian literary movement in the Japanese Empire was a part of "social formation" and "counter-hegemonic oppositional movement" aligns with Denning's observation about proletarian literature as an oppositional avant-garde in most countries (Perry 2007, 1–12).

literature and its theories after the revolution, it cannot properly capture the direction that early Korean proletarian literature pursued.

Korean proletarian literature aimed at a clear break from the literature of the past, as did proletarian literatures in other countries. But while emphasizing its discontinuity from its own tradition, especially that of art for art's sake (which itself had only a very short history), it simultaneously constructed a connection with the tradition of nineteenth-century prerevolutionary Russian literature. The fact that Korea at the time had a relatively short tradition of modern literature (it had been less than ten years since the first modern Korean novel was produced) may also have meant that authors of proletarian literature were less concerned with distinguishing themselves from existing bourgeois literature. Instead, these writers paid more attention to creating a legitimate basis for a literary movement by emphasizing the role of engaged literature in nineteenth-century Russia, and by stressing the similarity between prerevolutionary Russia and 1920s Korea.

Unlike in revolutionary Russia, the principal motivation and aspiration of proletarian literature in Japan and Korea was based not on the successful revolution of these countries or the growth of the working class, but on a hope for the advent of social revolution in the near future. As we can see in Kim Kijin's recollections, for example, Japanese and Korean writers' belief that revolution was imminent in Japan and Korea ignited their will to change their literary worlds, and ultimately to alter their societies.⁹ The initial emotional and literary alignment of Japanese and Korean proletarian literature writers with progressive and sympathetic Russian writers and their characters, regardless of their social classes, is clear in Kim's memoirs. Nineteenth-century Russian literature had self-consciously played a counterhegemonic role against Tsarist tyranny by engaging with ordinary people's lives and exposing the need for social change. This was the image of Russian literature that attracted Korean intellectuals throughout the colonial period. If the success of the Russian Revolution gave East Asian socialist writers a future that they could dream of, then it was nineteenth-century Russian literature that served as a guide along the path that might lead them there.

In a 2002 article, Ch'oe Wönsik, a renowned scholar of modern Korean literature, argued that Korean proletarian literature was the result of external transplantation of a worldwide movement of left-wing literature. He enumerates three specific features of Korean proletarian literature in its heyday in the 1920s and early 1930s: external transplantation, international synchronism, and the contemporaneity (*hyöndaesong*) that Korean proletarian literature acquired as a result of intensive, self-conscious development. Emphasizing contemporaneity and transplantation, Ch'oe defines Korean proletarian literature as a part of "a revolutionary literature that began

⁹ According to Kim, the event that made him return to Korea to take action was a conversation with Asō Hisashi (1891–1940), a Japanese socialist activist and writer. Asō believed Japanese society would accomplish a revolution in ten years, and Kim returned to Korea thinking that Korea should keep pace in order to liberate itself from colonization (Kim K. "Na üi hoegorok" 1988, 2:204–205, and "P'yönp'yön yahwa" 1988, 2:344).

and prospered throughout the world under the leadership of the Comintern in the 1920s and the early 1930s” (Ch’oe 2002, 20). This definition provides solid historical grounding to Korean proletarian literature and conveys its international character in the early twentieth century. But it also erases the complexities of Korea’s sociopolitical and cultural context. Despite the influence of the Comintern on the Korean proletarian literary movement in its later stage, 1920s Korean proletarian writers embraced a diverse array of ideas and social movements. They also consciously aligned Korea’s historical stage and themselves with nineteenth-century Russia and its realist writers.

Most writers of proletarian literature in colonial Korea, despite their awareness of and belief in socialist international coalition, prioritized the recovery of their national sovereignty and assumed that the revolution that they were waiting for and working toward would always accompany the independence of Korea. For the proletarian writers in colonial Korea, national sovereignty was not a byproduct of revolution but a *motivation* for it and the imagined shape of its success. With this prioritization of national independence and their recognition of its resemblance to Russia’s prerevolution reality, Korean proletarian writers sympathized with Russian realists not simply emotionally but logically, as is shown in their manifestos, essays, and fictional writings. Their attachment to and alignment with nineteenth-century Russia may seem anachronistic, but it was in fact colonial Korean writers’ emotional and realistic sense of contemporaneity and internationality that Korean proletarian literature pivoted around in the 1920s.

Russian Literature as an Explanatory Tool for East Asian Literatures

Korea’s engagement with Russian literature during the early twentieth century was one part of an East Asian intellectual community that utilized Russian literature to develop a new, modern literature. Addressing East Asia through the process of its interaction with Russian literature lets us see common cultural denominators in China, Japan, and Korea that do not necessarily surface when we approach East Asian modern literatures vis-à-vis “the West.”

The process of East Asian interaction with Russian literature highlights the fact that a foreign literature went through a number of layers of linguistic and cultural mediation as it entered the literary world of East Asia. Russian literature was mostly read and translated in East Asia through other Western languages or Japanese. Even though many intellectuals hardly knew enough Russian to read or translate Russian texts, Russian literature was the most frequently translated literature in East Asia during a crucial formative period for modern East Asian literatures, and arguably had the greatest intellectual impact of any Western literature on Japan, China, and Korea in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁰ Russian literature’s reception in East

¹⁰ According to Tetsuo Mochizuki, “Other literatures, French, German, and English in particular, also played an important role in the shaping of modern Japanese literature, but of those introduced during the [the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries], Russian literature is rightly regarded as the most influential” (Mochizuki 1995, 17). In the case of China, Gamsa argues that

Asia, therefore, provides a large-scale and extreme example of how general accessibility of a foreign language does *not* determine the volume of translation or the popularity of literature in that language. It shows that linguistic distance or unfamiliarity between two cultures does not necessarily discourage reception of one culture by another. It is a unique aspect of East Asian modernity that East Asia created an immense field of cultural interest in Russian literature despite the relatively undeveloped infrastructure of language acquisition or education about Russia.

The three writers who are credited with writing the first modern novel or short story in Japan, Korea, and China—respectively, Futabatei Shimei, Yi Kwang-su, and Lu Xun—all had a strong connection with Russian literature both in terms of their literary work and the direction of their own lives. Futabatei Shimei explained that Russian writers studied the oppression of people as “a human problem” and described their approach to the problem of oppression as “sincere” or “serious” (*majime*). He took Turgenev’s *Hunter’s Sketches* (1852) as an example of a work that was a factor in the emancipation of the serfs, and he emphasized the sacrifices Russian writers made for their literature (Futabatei 1965, 5:283–284). Futabatei’s view is close to that of Lu Xun, who considered Russian literature to be a “guide and friend” in whom he could see “the kindly soul of the oppressed, their sufferings and struggles” (Lu 1959, 3:181). It was not a coincidence that Yi Kwang-su’s self-conception as a writer and his theory of literature incorporated Tolstoy in many aspects, that the first modern Japanese novel, Futabatei’s *Drifting Cloud* (*Ukigumo*, 1887), shows close connection with Russian writers such as Nikolai Gogol and Turgenev, and that the title of Lu Xun’s first modern Chinese story, “A Madman’s Diary” (“Kuánggrén rìjì,” 1918), resembles that of Gogol’s “Diary of a Madman” (1835). What attracted these three writers to nineteenth-century Russian literature and what they paid primary attention to was less the aesthetic quality or modern-ness of the works than the concern with common people and society that they demonstrated. Thus, Russian literature was not simply an “advanced” civilizational technology for East Asian writers to compete with or emulate, but something through and within which they could envision and communicate a shared directionality in the literatures that they were making.

While East Asian intellectuals’ aspirations regarding literature were closely intertwined with their concern for their societies and oppressed people, their engagement with Russian literature is also an example of how literature could shape

“by common consent, the literature of no other country had as important and as many-sided an impact on modern China as did the literature of Russia and the Soviet Union” (2010, 4). For the number of Chinese translations of Russian literature in different periods, see Gamsa (2008, 20–25). In a study of Japanese-Russian non-state intellectual relations from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century, Sho Konishi argues that “in macro historical perspective, the Russian cultural presence in Japan from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth century was, for interpretive purposes, comparable to that of the Chinese cultural presence in the intellectual life of Tokugawa Japan before 1860 and the American cultural presence in the intellectual life of Japan after the Asia-Pacific War” (Konishi 2013, 5).

their lives and lived reality. Translations of foreign literature in early twentieth-century Korea did not attempt to reproduce “the original” but appropriated foreign works productively. Translators creatively reconstructed source texts, developing new ways of perceiving and shaping lived reality. In some cases, writers went beyond their perceivable lived reality, using literature to spell out the lives they would live and the lives they would ask other people to join. Some writers lived the lives they described in their literature, as we can see in the homology between the Korean writer Cho Myōng-hŭi and his own characters in “Naktong River,” a short story that Cho created during the mid-1920s through a translation of Turgenev’s 1860 novel *On the Eve*. The hero of “Naktong River,” Sōng-un, returns to Korea and leads a social movement after being involved in the independence movement in Northeast China for five years, and the heroine Rosa leaves for a northern area (Russia or China) to take up Sōng-un’s struggle after his death. After writing this story, Cho Myōng-hŭi himself left for Russia, but he was executed there and did not return to Korea. Thus he had already virtually lived the life he would go on to pursue through Turgenev’s characters and through his own characters before following their path to take up a life of cultural and political activism. Similarly, for Chinese writers, “Russian, and then Soviet, literature in China was identified with real life, its fictional characters with living men and women and its authors with teachers” (Gamsa 2010, 12). For Chinese intellectual Qian Gurong, Russian literature went beyond a genre and provided a cognitive frame through which he was able to perceive and understand the world around him.¹¹ When East Asian intellectuals characterized Russian literature using phrases like “literature for life” and cried out for such a literature in their own languages, it meant not only the literature that they would produce but also the literature that they saw producing their own present and future lives.

The image of Russian literature and writers that East Asian intellectuals built did not necessarily correspond to reality, a clear example being their belief that Dostoevsky was a representative humanist writer. Dostoevsky was a stalwart imperialist and typical Orientalist. His essay “Geok-Tepe. What Is Asia to Us?” argued that the conquered Asian people (of Siberia and Central Asia) constituted “an indispensable element in the overall picture of Russian glory” (Lim 2013, 9): East Asian intellectuals fashioned their ideals through careful selection of foreign materials, as well as the occasional outright fabrication. They established Dostoevsky as a humanist who was sympathetic to people of the lower classes and who, through his literature, embraced the thinking and way of life of the downtrodden. East Asian writers projected an image of the literature they *desired* onto that of Russian literature, (re)constructing it to fit their purposes in the process.

¹¹ “The influence of Russian literature on me is far from being limited to the literary aspect, for it has entered my blood and marrow: the way I see and make sense of everything in the world, even my very soul, are inseparable from the moral instruction and upbringing [*taoye xunyu*] of Russian literature” (Qian Gurong’s introduction in Chen Jianhua, *20 shiji Zhong-E wenxue guanxi*; quoted in Gamsa 2010, 16).

As recent studies show, it is problematic to consider Russia as a seamless part of the West in relation to Asia (Schimmelpenninck van der Oye 2001, 2010; Konishi 2013; Lim 2013). Russia's own relationship to Asia was complicated by a historically and culturally complex identity vis-à-vis Western Europe as well as its geographical and ethnic proximity to Asia. Meanwhile, East Asia saw Russia as a Western culture, but one that had some distance from Western European cultures in its geographical and racial proximity to Asia, and in its position as a latecomer to modernization. East Asian intellectuals perceived Russia as an alternative to Western modernity, as is apparent in the example of the Russian-Japanese anarchist community in Japan in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹² Lu Xun and Zheng Zhenduo also considered Russian literature "an acceptable alternative to 'the West'" for China (Gamsa 2010, 15).

Incorporating Russian literature as a comprehensive explanatory tool for East Asian literature elucidates shared desires for social justice as well as an awareness of choices and alternatives available and sought after even amid the tumult of modernization. This perspective does not emerge as readily when we approach the impact of Western European and American literature on East Asian literature, nor even when we consider the connections between Russia and one or another single East Asian culture. Although literature in twenty-first-century East Asia seems to exist as only one among many forms of art and mass-mediated culture, the shared humanist view of literature in modern East Asia—which was imagined and concretized through dialogue with Russian literature and crystallized in the expression "literature for life"—reminds us that literatures in East Asia were born and constructed as a critique of antihumanist oppression and out of a desire to create a better society.

Rethinking World Literature

How can we understand these movements and connections between Russian and East Asian literatures in relation to recent discussions of world literature, in particular to the theories of Moretti, and Casanova and more recent theories? As we see in the interactions among Russian and East Asian literatures, writers in East Asia who belong to the categories of the so-called periphery or semi-periphery in Moretti's world literature system actively interacted in the process of forging their modern form of literature. They did so by incorporating their shared cultural values, anxieties, and desires into literature, mediating various foreign elements of literature, and connecting with each other through their yearning for a new literature in a process of projection onto Russian literature and selective appropriation from it. If we use a model of diffusion moving from the Western European center to peripheries, we easily miss the shared humanist view of literature in modern East Asia imagined in the process of interacting with Russian literature.

¹² "Anarchism" here means "a cultural, intellectual, and social movement," rather than violent confrontations with the state. For more details, see Konishi (2013, 6–10).

Casanova hardly discusses Russian literature, let alone East Asian literature. In her theory, Russian/Soviet and East Asian literatures are all supplicants competing to reach the center and attain the center's (or international hegemon's) recognition. Casanova argues that "the unification of literary space through competition presumes the existence of a common standard for measuring time, an absolute point of reference unconditionally recognized by all contestants" (2004, 87). However, the interactions among Russian and East Asian literatures show a distinctive literary community that is hard to categorize as part of a unified literary field or a universal literary standard time.

The case of Russian and East Asian literatures, including the leftist literary relations that are part of it, refutes the validity of a perspective that sees literary works as being in competitive relations tied to national literatures. Russian and East Asian literatures were not in competition but in comradeship. East Asian writers' interest in Russian literature, particularly among proletarian writers, was not motivated by a desire to gain international recognition (essentially Paris's approval) through aesthetic innovation; literature had much more important work to do both at home and abroad. Although complicated and diverse, the Russian and East Asian literary relationship exemplifies a process of world literature that is not generated by a constant rivalry among national literatures. This relationship, as imagined and practiced in East Asian cultures, was collaborative and sympathetic, rather than competitive. Proletarian literature writers most especially would have been hostile to Casanova's idea of a literary standard time controlled by Paris. Although by "standard time" these writers seemed to be behind the times, they created a form of shared concern and struggle with prerevolutionary nineteenth-century Russian literature and used it to construct an imagined revolutionary time that would arrive in the future. Such orderings of time are not founded on nation, competition, or hierarchy.

Although inspired by Moretti and Casanova in terms of providing a systematic macro-picture of world literature, Alexander Beecroft suggests a more complex and inclusive model of world literature. While criticizing the simplification of complex literary systems appearing in Moretti and Casanova's theories, Beecroft incorporates the concept of ecology in order to accommodate the various ways that literatures thrive (2015, 19). He systemizes world literature into six categories: epichoric literary ecologies (the small-scale local community where literary, mostly verbal, circulation is limited), panchoric ecologies (the communities in places with small-scale polities that feature a broader circulation of literature and art and the sense of being distinct from other polities), cosmopolitan ecologies, vernacular ecologies, national literary ecologies, and global literary ecologies. These six ecologies also roughly correspond to a modern concept of the development of world history. Beecroft's contribution is to provide a way to understand the complex literary networks varying across time and space before what he calls the national literary ecology became dominant. What is noteworthy, however, is that although Beecroft complicates Moretti's and Casanova's core-periphery models in many aspects, he still argues that the national literary ecology, to which Russian and East Asian literary relations belong, "corresponds very much with the ecological

situation of literature as described by Moretti and Casanova, among others” (Beecroft 2015, 35). This argument confirms that Moretti’s and Casanova’s problematic views continue to exert on current scholarship of modern world literature. These theories of world literature still offer no way to describe the literary relations among modern Russia and East Asia, which has had a massive historical and literary impact on world literature in the modern era.

Theories of world literature that focus on circulation, on the other hand, try to distance themselves from Eurocentric perspectives like Moretti’s and Casanova’s but have difficulty navigating the ways that the intercultural circulation of texts were already shaped by political and economic power structures as they were established in the era of imperialism. In his book *What Is World Literature?*, David Damrosch defines a work of world literature as one that is “actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture” (2003, 4). This definition acknowledges the diversity of texts and the unpredictability of their travels, but it underestimates the impact that geopolitical imbalance has on the translation, circulation, and recognition of particular works and national literatures. Although quite a few literary works written in peripheral languages have been translated into other languages—which, according to Damrosch’s theory, is a necessary process for a literature to be recognized as part of world literature—there is still an enormous gap between, for example, the number of Korean translations of English literature and the number of English translations of Korean literature. More important than the numbers is the fact that scholars have not discussed these translations from peripheral languages as much as they have those from European languages.

Another factor to consider, in the United States in particular, is that some readers are reluctant to read translated texts. As Gisèle Sapiro points out, “It appear[s] that when they do publish translations, publishers tend not to present them as such (it is not specified on the cover), out of fear that retailers will ‘skip’ them” (2014, 227). Indeed, many U.S. publishers try to avoid including translators’ names on the book cover. It is not a secret that “only about 3% of all books published in the United States are works in translation” and “in terms of literary fiction and poetry, the number is actually closer to 0.7%” (Three Percent n.d.). This proportion is in stark contrast to that of Korea, for example, where about 30 percent of all books and about half of the bestsellers are translated works. Although the low rate of translation is easiest to quantify in relation to publication, general readers’ reluctance to read translations in the United States is arguably the more important factor. If readers generally disfavor translated literature as a category of literature, it is extremely difficult for a foreign text to develop a significant readership outside its country of origin, which means that it is far more difficult for the text to be recognized as “world literature” in Damrosch’s definition.

The Nobel Prize in Literature demonstrates the unequal linguistic and cultural power structure of the “world” cultural sphere. One of the effects of the prize is to disseminate the winner’s works internationally, and, as a result, to make the authors

“actively present” beyond their original literary systems. But literary works from cultures with less empowered languages rarely win this recognition unless they have been translated into English or other European languages. Using the case of the Nobel Prize, we can understand two important issues among the many complicated aspects of the canon-making effects of prestigious international literary prizes: translation cost and selection criteria. First, the cost of translation is borne unequally by internationally dominant languages and peripheral languages: translation is expensive to non-dominant languages but largely cost-free to dominant languages. Most of the cost of translating Korean literary works into languages such as English and French, for example, is paid by Korean publishers, government, agencies, or writers, but the same is not true for English and French texts being translated into Korean. Furthermore, Michael Cronin correctly points out that “when the argument is advanced that the use of a *lingua franca* eliminates translation costs, what one has, in effect, is another form of transferred cost.” The transferred cost here means the time and money that “the non-native speakers of a global *lingua franca*” spend acquiring and translating the *lingua franca* (2013, 45).

The second issue we can see in the Nobel Prize in Literature is the importance of selection criteria. Beecroft highlights the strong Eurocentric characteristics of the Nobel Prize in Literature: of the 110 works awarded the prize between 1900 and 2013, only eight were written in non-European languages. More significantly, five of those eight were written “in Europe itself, on Europe’s periphery, or while under European rule” (Beecroft 2015, 257). In addition to the surprisingly low number of non-Western awardees, the Nobel Committee demonstrates controversial standards in judging Western and non-Western literatures. Having compared two groups of Nobel citations on Western and non-Western literatures, Julia Lovell argues that “the Nobel Committee’s ambivalent acceptance of writers from marginal literatures means that writers of non-Western literatures have to do either of two things: achieve a ‘universal’ level of development (as defined by the Nobel Committee) or earn their exotic keep as representative of their neglected corner of the literary world” (2006, 69). The Nobel Prize and other Western literary prizes guarantee the highly visible circulation of a literary work throughout the world but are themselves based on Eurocentric assumptions that make it difficult to see literatures in non-European languages as anything other than peripheral. Pheng Cheah rightly criticizes theories of world literature that emphasize the global circulation of texts, arguing that “colonial education, insofar as canonical European literature had an important function in it, may have been the first widespread institutionalization of world literature outside Euro-America. Hence, world literature in the narrow sense of literature that circulates globally is historically complicit with the epistemic violence of imperialism” (2016, 18). One of the fundamental problems behind a model of world literature based on circulation is the perceptual and economic inequality built into the system of circulation, and the considerable momentum that system gains as it is continually reinforced by highly problematic apparatuses of recognition like the Nobel Prize.

The circulation model appeals to quantitative expansion as a solution to properly defining the field of world literature and its development. As a way to study and teach world literature properly, Damrosch calls for more languages and more language studies on the philological level, more collaborative scholarship and teaching on the methodological level, and more pluralism on the ideological level (Spivak and Damrosch 2014, 368–370). The mechanism of inclusion/exclusion in the discussion of world literature is, however, often deeply problematic when scholars deal with non-Western texts. For example, Valerie Henitiuk, who is clearly influenced by Damrosch, implies that a premodern Japanese masterpiece, *The Tale of Genji*, had to be circulated in the English-speaking world and recognized by it in order to become part of “a global canon.” She argues that “foreign works must enter that canon through the idiosyncratic readings, even misreadings of translators, since these are what create the world literature text” (2012, 19). This argument is justified by the idea that a text is qualified to be part of world literature because it is circulated in other cultures and lives a life beyond its cultural origin. In practice, however, when that benchmark is applied to non-Western texts, it almost always means that something can be world literature only when it is translated into a European language and recognized by Western readers. The possibility of expanding the canon does not solve the fundamental problems generated by the unequal power structure embedded in the sociocultural systems that have been constructed and reinforced in the modern imperialist era. In order to be truly inclusive in our perspectives on world literature we would need to change our perspective about what the world is.

Cheah’s reconceptualization of the world as a temporal category (something that is structurally open, unlike the world as a spatial extension) and literature as a normative force of world-making provides us with an intriguing perspective and is a necessary contribution to the discussion of world literature. As Cheah argues, literature is not a passive response that describes the world but an active force that molds the world in an idealizing or morally demanding way. Cheah’s concept of the normative force of literature (by normativity, he means what ought to be) reminds us of the ideas East Asian intellectuals shared with each other in their interactions through and with Russian literature. Literature helped these intellectuals to perceive the world around them and construct their own lives while imagining and aspiring to a better world that would arrive in the future.

For Cheah, the literature of the postcolonial South is a good example of a normative project of world literature. As he writes, “First, decolonization is precisely an attempt to open up a world that is different from the colonial world. Second, the reworlding of the world remains a continuing project in the light of the inequalities created by capitalist globalization and their tragic consequences for peoples and social groups in postcolonial space” (2016, 194). The alternative literature East Asian writers and intellectuals imagined for their future, in particular in the case of aligned leftist literature, seems well-connected to Cheah’s concept of world literature that possesses the normative force of “worlding”: a process of making that helps the actualization of an

ideal humanity in the existing world. While Cheah's theory indicates how literatures from (semi-)peripheries can justly claim their places in world literature, it also shows how existing Western European canons would have a hard time finding a place among a world literature that embraced normativity. Thus, despite its inspiring and insightful elements, Cheah's theory of world literature seems to risk becoming trapped in a reversed mechanism of inclusion/exclusion, and of historically reinforced structures of accessibility/inaccessibility.

The importance of the ethical aspect of world literature, however, can be addressed in ways that do not exclude specific literatures if we focus on the relations themselves rather than on bodies of textual production. Karen Thornber suggests, for example, that concepts like "local" and "global" can be reconceptualized by studying "intra- and inter-regional interactions among non-Western literatures," and refocusing their practice could help scholars be more region-neutral and detached from "lingering Eurocentrism" (Thornber 2014, 461). Thornber's suggestion has some resonance with Shu-mei Shih's call for an "ethical practice of comparison." Inspired by the integrative world history and Édouard Glissant, Shih argues that comparative literature's ethical practice should be pursued by unearthing literary relations that were conventionally less recognized due to Eurocentrism, and by "setting into motion historical relationalities between entities brought together for comparison, and bringing into relation terms that have traditionally been pushed apart from each other due to certain interests, such as the European exceptionalism that undergirds Eurocentrism"; she believes that "the excavation of these relationalities" is "the ethical practice of comparison, where the workings of power is not concealed but necessarily revealed" (Shih 2013, 79).

In order to avoid the inclusion/exclusion mechanism in defining world literature and to be truly open to others, we should focus less on categorizing specific types of literature as world literature (for example, texts that are recognized by the centers or texts that exist within the system of the center-periphery; texts that are actively present beyond their own culture; texts that have the normative force of reworlding the world; or texts that relate to specific regions and history). We need to consider world literature not as literary texts but entangled literary relations and the processes whereby those relations appear and change. Because literature is process, it constantly alters its various relations to sociohistorical and cultural factors and values, other types of writing, other media and forms of movement, and other literary networks. World literature, I would argue, is a totality of these complex relationalities and processes that continuously engenders new meanings and understandings of literature and society. In this way, literature would help us understand the world not only through what it represents in its content and form or through the way it is constructed, but also through the broad relationalities that it has with other literatures and histories. Thus, I would suggest that we consider world literature not as a "subset of literature" (Puchner 2011, 256) or literature that has substantial objects that we can conveniently grasp, but a new lens through which we can better understand literary relations and their role in the world.

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