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Crafts of World Literature: A View from the Pan-Asian Empire

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'World' has a range of meaning when used as a modifier. In front of music, it is 'third-world folk'; before literature, it turns into 'first-world classic'. Given the instability of the word with the inevitable mystification this produces, it seems useful to say exactly what 'world' refers to in terms of literature and what it does not.

The historical circumstances in which this term came into circulation offer some clarification. World literature is often traced back to a statement attributed to Goethe in 1827: 'National literature means little now... the age of *Weltliteratur* has begun.' (D'Haen, Dominguez and Thomsen eds. *World Literature* 2013. 11) The background that impelled this proclamation was a new cosmopolitanism in Weimar brought about by increasing global commerce but also the rising force of competitive nationalism in Europe. What 'world' did not reflect was an objection to classification of literature along national lines. In today's discussions of world literature, such as this forum, demarcations along lines other than the national are actively traced. But categories of literature drawn by linguistic or 'craft' boundaries are relatively new. In fact, early ideas of world literature precipitated the consolidation of national literatures by affirming nation states as the basic category of knowledge. A trace of this contradiction is contained in Goethe's famous statement: 'everyone should further its (world literature's) course. ... We should not think that the truth is in Chinese or Serbian literature, in Calderon or the Nibelungen.' (D'Haen 11) In the sense that 'world' was taken to be a sum of nation states, it reinforced national boundaries of literature. So on the one hand, world was that which transcends the national, on the other, it was a hierarchy of national literatures that compete for supremacy.

The unresolved tension between the national and world is nowhere more apparent than in the world literary canon, where world literature means 'first-world' literature - the classics from the five major European states, Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, and from Russia and the US. There are many reasons for this, much of it covered by critiques of cultural imperialism and Eurocentrism in postcolonial studies. But the equivalence of European literature and world literature is not resolved easily by postcolonial critiques alone, various and important though they are.

This discussion paper seeks to locate other hidden barriers that prevent a more diverse literary canon by considering a craft of world literature from the position of the Pan-Asian Empire (1894-1945; also called the Japanese Empire and the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere). For this is a region that was never fully colonized by the west and in which a European language was never made official. The dynamics of the world literary map,

which is dependent on the 'west and the rest' model, are made complicated here. By considering the European legacy in East Asian modernism, this discussion will consider certain crafts of literature, namely, imitation, translation and adaptation, as legitimate criteria of literary value. Though often occluded in world literature debates, a proper scrutiny of these crafts would contribute constructively to the world canon debate.

But first, a justification of the category of East Asia seems necessary given that this discussion problematizes the classificatory boundaries of nations. The classification of East Asian literature as distinct is made on the ground that it is comprised of cultures that use the Chinese script: China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. The Chinese script *hanzi*, (in mandarin), is known as *kanji* in Japanese, *hanja* in Korean and *hantu* in Vietnamese and though the spoken languages are different, the four cultures share the same script system and, consequently, a common literary and cultural heritage.

That is one ground. But there is another basis for the grouping that is useful, if more problematic. In the modern era, they were all part of the Pan-Asian Empire, the only non-western empire in the modern world to rival western imperialism. The political significance of Japan's colonization of the Far East will not be addressed in this short piece. Nevertheless, the Pan-Asian Empire is invoked to place European cultural hegemony within a different kind of the global dynamics than is found in postcolonial discussions. Ideas of cultural imperialism and Eurocentrism so powerful in their explanatory powers in the rest of the non-European world, are made more convoluted here. As I have discussed elsewhere (see 'The Pan-Asian Empire and World Literature' in *CLCWeb:Comparative Literature and Culture* Dec 2013, Purdue UP), modernity in East Asia was atypical, in that while it was modeled upon the west and was imitative in nature, Europeanization was a voluntary process not a direct imposition. The literary fields of Meiji Japan, the Yi dynasty of Korea and the Great Qing Empire of China underwent a historic reform after contact with European literature, and European literatures were championed as the standard to which East Asian literature must aspire. This difference invites a distinct set of questions.

For example, if contact with European literature, referred to as 'world literature' in this region, gave birth to East Asian modernism, as the standard histories would have it, does this legitimize the equivalent status of European literature and world literature? If not, on what grounds? If East Asian modernism is derived from European literature, to what extent is the idea of cultural imperialism relevant? How might voluntary imitation and 'catching up' of European norms in East Asia be accounted for, other than in the context of Eurocentrism? Are postcolonial concepts such as 'cultural hybridity' and 'third space' really applicable in East Asia when the power relations were so distinct from the rest of the world? What other concepts might be usefully applied as analytical tools?

Of course charges of cultural imperialism and Eurocentrism matter insofar as the overhaul was an inescapable response to the threat of western imperialism, however indirect. But this postcolonial view is modified somewhat by the fact that imitations of western literary norms were driven by the express aim of competing against western hegemony and with a concentrated sense of national agency. Thus, though the starting point of East Asian 'New' literature was total adoption of European literary standards, the crucial ground for any idea of how New literature might be read lie in questions such as: under whose authority and within what framework were the adoptions orchestrated? Without an understanding of the voluntary historical process, it would be it easy to dismiss East Asian modernism as merely derivative, second-hand and politically subjugatory.

What then salvages the modern literature of East Asia from the ruins of European cultural hegemony? A detailed exploration of a range of texts is necessary to answer this question in any satisfactory sense. However, one could make a case for the powerful underlying current of certain crafts that run through the wide range of East Asian modernisms: that is, the innovation involved in the crafts of imitation, translation and adaptation. It needs pointing out that there is a tradition of imitation (仿), 'total'-translation (全译) and adaptation (改编) in this region that is a lot more dynamic, creative and authoritative than what the words signify in European languages. Here the issue of script is central.

In phonetically transcribed European languages, gaining literacy is relatively quick. By contrast, acquiring high-level literacy in the logosyllabic Chinese script system is a lengthy process which requires memorization of each and every character, and learning to imitate in the style found in the Chinese classics. A high level of literacy is reached only after studying the characters in the classical contexts and painstakingly memorizing them for decades. Thus imitation is an art form traditionally highly valued, and creativity is seen as a trait that is based upon an extended learning and imitating of the classics, not a concept that is put in binary opposition to imitation. No doubt there are crude imitations and derivations plaguing East Asian literature throughout its history that cheapen and make tawdry the overall standard. But imitation and adaptation in the Chinese script are literary crafts that are more developed than merely copying. Unless these crafts are understood against the background of the Chinese script culture, East Asian modernism is likely to be forever relegated to the margins of world literature on the grounds that they are derived from European sources.

In such a verdict, the agency in cultural negotiation found among the imitations is missed. In this sense, the much applied postcolonial concept of cultural hybridity has far less meaning in East Asian modernism than elsewhere, as the European sources have been translated, adapted and modified through the prism of a radically different script. The level of

innovative negotiation involved in translation and adaptation ranges from metaphorical substitution, to selection, integration, exclusion and condensation. Such crafts bridge the cultural, linguistic, philosophical and literary gaps between European norms and East Asian traditions, and were foundational to literary modernism striking deep roots. As such the evaluative criteria of imitation, translation and adaptation deserve more recognition as literary values in and of themselves. Only by acknowledging these crafts can there be a more realistic understanding of world literature and its history today.