Against Sinocentrism: Internal orientalism in world literature

WOOK-DONG KIM

DOI: https://doi.org/10.31577/WLS.2022.14.2.2

With the advent of the new millennium, world literature (often in uppercase, not lowercase) has occupied a dominant position as a new paradigm in the academic humanities in general and literary studies in particular. In seeking to explore literature in a global perspective far beyond narrowly defined national boundaries, it has been warmly welcomed as a new literary discourse, highly commendable and even heroic. Voracious, world literature tends to displace and even absorb older literary disciplines, such as comparative literature and postcolonial studies. As David Damrosch cogently argues in the introduction to *World Literature in Theory*, "[t]he cultural and political realignments of the past two decades have opened the field of world literature to an unprecedented, even vertiginous variety of authors and countries" (2014, 1). This fresh vista of world literature undoubtedly provides new opportunities for literatures and oratures, which have long been neglected and thus failed to attract worldwide attention, notably East Asia such as China, Korea, and Japan. On the other hand, world literature often raises serious questions, one of which is concerned with the center and periphery problem: To what extent is it free from ethnocentrism?

Despite strenuous efforts to shake off the bondage of provincialism and nationalism, world literature is still haunted by the ghosts of Eurocentrism and, for that matter, of Western-centrism. It is no wonder then that there have been critiques of this issue. In "Rethinking the World in World Literature: East Asia and Literary Contact Nebulae", Karen Laura Thornber argues strongly for a less Eurocentric and more global focus in world literary studies. A specialist in the literatures and cultures of East Asia in a global context, Thornber situates one of the great ironies of comparative literature in the fact that it has solidified its Eurocentrism in many respects "even as it moved from focusing nearly exclusively on European literatures to including literatures from other world regions" (2014, 460). Thornber further claims that current debates on world literature, which might be considered, in a sense, the rebellious child of comparative literature, have frequently marginalized literatures in non-Western languages and literatures as "local" or "peripheral". There is no denying the fact that more often than not, Western literatures still remain the touchstone against which other "minor" literatures are tested and evaluated.

Unquestionably, one of the most pressing, as well as challenging, issues facing scholars of world literature today is how they can solve the perennial problem of Eurocentrism and Western-centrism. The suggestion offered by Thornber seems to be the only possible solution to the problem. She states with some reservation, "[a]lthough not a panacea, analyzing *intra- and inter-regional interactions* among non-Western literatures is one way to help world literature shed its lingering Eurocentrism and move closer to region-neutrality" (461; emphases added). True, this critical analysis of inter-regional, as well as intra-regional, interactions among non-Western texts will certainly contribute to mitigating the heavy burden of Eurocentrism. Even so, the difficulty of overcoming the age-long burden can be expected in her use of the term "literary contact nebulae" to refer to more complex, shifting, and varied interactions than "contact zones". The transcultural term "contact zone", as Thornber explains, was first coined by Mary Louise Pratt to describe "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly symmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (2008, 7). This term has been taken up by other scholars, notably Susanne Reichl in her discussion of black British literature.

ZHANG LONGXI AND CONTEMPORARY SINOCENTRISM

Given this, it is a moot point whether such interactions among non-Western literatures would have succeeded in any meaningful way. As what Thornber calls "nebulae" implies, these interactions among East Asian countries such as China, Korea, and Japan turn out to be as fuzzy and ambiguous as those among Anglophone literatures in particular and Western literature in general – perhaps even more so. At least as far as East Asian countries are concerned, it is open to skepticism that any significant intra-regional, or even inter-regional, relationships or interactions among their texts become fruitful after all. It should be noted, however, that several Korean scholars in the 17th century were proud to call themselves *xiao zhonghua*, literally meaning "little China" – but with a wider ideological conception of the political and cultural realm of China in the Sinosphere.

The article "Relevance of *Weltliteratur*" (2013) by Professor Zhang Longxi, chair of comparative literature and translation at the City University of Hong Kong, provides an excellent illustration of how the existing discourse on world literature is dominated by Sinocentric views (or, for that matter, any nationalistically-centered ones) of the canon, the definition of literature, the expectations of content and form, and so on. Zhang's article clearly reveals how difficult it is to achieve what Thornber hoped for in her agenda for intra- and inter-regional cultural interactions, particularly in East Asian countries, whose relationships have been extremely complex largely due to historical, cultural, and geopolitical issues.

Zhang Longxi calls for "a truly global understanding of *Weltliteratur* as well as its relevance for our world today" (2013, 241). Much like Thornber, Zhang is critical of comparative literature for being highly Eurocentric. As seen in the title of his article, Zhang builds his critical argument on the foundations of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's idea of *Weltliteratur*. In 1827, the aging Goethe famously stated to his young assistant and close associate, Johann Peter Eckermann, "[p]oetry is the uni-

versal possession of mankind. […] National literature is now rather a meaningless term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach" (1984, 133), thus initiating the term "world literature". Goethe's ambitious, high-minded vision of *Weltliteratur* as universal and cosmopolitan, as Zhang sees it, has often failed primarily because its avatar, comparative literature, and particularly the French version of *littérature comparée*, was characteristic of being "national, even nationalistic" (2013, 243). In short, despite all good intentions, comparative literature has not lived up to the German writer's expectations, a lofty ideal still not fulfilled. This is largely true, Zhang argues, for world literature as well: "Even in the new idea of world literature with a genuine desire to go beyond Eurocentrism, some of the current discussions are still under the shadow of Eurocentric pretensions" (244).

In this connection, Zhang criticizes two theorists in particular: the Italian Franco Moretti and the French Pascale Casanova. Drawing on both Darwinian evolutionary theory (as well as Fredric Jameson's literary law of evolution) and on the world system theory of Immanuel Wallerstein, Moretti explores the global circulation and reinvention of the novel in terms of the concept of "one, but unequal". In "Conjectures on World Literature", Moretti proposes the concept of "distant reading", which offers a convenient solution to the formidable problem of the sheer amount of textual material in world literature. Given that "distance" is not a physical concept but rather "a condition of knowledge", Moretti defines distant reading as the kind of reading that "allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems" (2013, 48–49). Moretti further argues that the development of the novel in the world's different literatures follows a pattern of moving from European centers of metropolitan literature to non-European peripheries – "not as an autonomous development but as a compromise between a Western formal influence (usually French or English) and local materials" (50).

Zhang asserts that the center–periphery model, useful as it is to a certain degree in its own context, "if applied mechanically, would obscure the complex relationship between the novel as an imported Western form and the local context with its indigenous narrative tradition, which cannot be considered as just passive 'local materials' to be shaped into the new form of a modern novel" (2013, 245). To support his argument, Zhang cites certain renowned Chinese classic novels, such as *San Guo* (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*), *Shui Hu Zhuan* (*Water Margin*, also variously translated as *Outlaws of the Marsh*, *Tale of the Marshes*, *All Men Are Brothers*, *Men of the Marshes*, or *Marshes of Mount Liang*), and *Hong lu meng* (*Dream of the Red Chamber*). Although the modern Western novel has had a significant influence on the development of modern Chinese novels, Zhang argues, the classical as well as indigenous vernacular novels provide a fertile soil for the modern novel as a representative literary genre to strike roots. It is worthy of note, however, that in pre-1900 Chinese literary thinking, novels were mere popular entertainment and not to be compared with poetry, historiography, and essays. Furthermore, the novels Zhang lists above stretch over about 500 years and represent very different styles and techniques.

On the other hand, in seeing world literature as a space of cultural contestation, marked by inequalities between Western countries and non-Western counterparts, Casanova is not significantly different from Moretti. Zhang, who follows in the footsteps of Alexander Beecroft and Aamir Mufti, is far more critical of Casanova than of Moretti. Uncomfortable with Casanova's Paris-centered model, Beecroft claims flatly that it "cannot account for the full range of literary production across all cultures and times" (2014, 188). Mufti also criticizes Casanova for missing "this initial charting of non-Western traditions of writing on the emerging map of the literary world" (315). In Zhang's opinion, Casanova's view of world literature in *La République mondiale des Lettres* (1999), despite her assertion that her discussion is based on "a careful analysis", is not entirely free from Gallocentrism (and perhaps Eurocentrism as well). Zhang joins Beecroft and Mufti in criticizing it and argues, "[i]n Casanova's presentation, world literary history started in Renaissance Europe and gradually moved to other parts of the world along with the expansion of European power in the 19th century, followed by 20th-century decolonization in Africa and Asia" (2013, 244). Zhang further goes on to argue that Casanova "lays a particular emphasis on Paris as the capital of the 'world republic of letters', and she presumes that her Paris-centered literary space was based on historical facts" (244). What bothers Zhang most about Casanova's argument is her annoyingly stubborn insistence that Paris is "the capital of the world republic of letters", rather than the capital of world fashion, as commonly thought:

> One may wonder what Casanova would say about Greek and Roman literature, or literature in Biblical antiquity? One may also wonder whether she is aware of the existence of other powerful centers of cultural and literary activities outside Europe, such as the Persian and Ottoman Empires, or *imperial China which functioned as a center in the East Asian region* long before the European Renaissance? One would assume that such basic and large-scale historical facts were taught even in French *lycées*, but how could "careful historical analysis" have missed all that and become so blind to much of the world outside France? (244–245; emphases added)

At first glance, Zhang's argument seems to be quite irrefutable because the theory of Casanova (and Moretti as well, for that matter), useful as it is in its own context, clearly begs too many questions. Meticulous scrutiny of the quotation above also reveals that Zhang himself turns out to be not as different from Casanova as it might appear. Most noticeable is the italicized phrase in the above quote, which should be given careful attention. In all likelihood, Zhang was inspired by what Goethe stated in his conversations with Eckermann regarding China. In response to the question as to whether the Chinese novel or romance (Peter Perring Thom's English translation of *Huanjianji* with the title of *Chinese Courtship*) that his master had just read is one of their best, Goethe immediately replied, "[b]y no means; the Chinese have thousands of them, and had when our forefathers were still living in the woods" (1984, 133).

What bothers Koreans most (and the Japanese as well) in Zhang Longxi's article, "Relevance of *Weltliteratur*", is the second sentence of the passage quoted above. Wondering if Casanova knows about "other *powerful centers* of cultural and literary

activities outside Europe", Zhang refers specifically to "imperial China which functioned as a *center* in the East Asian region" (emphases added). As a Korean scholar who has specialized in East Asian literature as well as in world literature, I am little upset by this condescending attitude toward Korean and Japanese literature and thus compelled to ask: Did imperial China really function as a literary *center* in the East Asian region – just as Paris and France at large did in the European region, as Casanova wants us to believe? The answer to the question is categorically in the negative. It appears that Zhang here confuses a political sphere with a cultural one. China traditionally played the vital role of Big Brother (not in George Orwellian, but Confucian terms) in diplomatic relationships with East Asian neighboring countries, including Korea and Japan in the Qing dynasty and before.

My own objections to Zhang Longxi's argument are not merely applicable to some minor phrasings but also to his implicit Sinocentric stance with regard to world literature. Zhang's argument is, by and large, emblematic of a larger current of Sinocentrism in China, which is related in one way or another to Chinese imperialism. As Shu-mei Shih cogently argues, the history of Chinese imperialism has been largely hidden from view mainly due to two obsessions: "the fetishization of Western empires over other empires and the prevailing discourse of Chinese victimhood" (2011, 709). By the end of the 19th century, China exhibited Sinocentric, as well as imperialistic, tendencies in dealing with the Joseon dynasty, similar to the way the Western imperialists have dealt with China. The Korean port city of Jemulpo (Inchon) provides a good illustration of how Chinese merchants enjoyed extraterritoriality and the benefits of unequal treaties resembling those that Western powers enjoyed in Chinese cities such as Shanghai. As the architect of China's foreign policy, Li Hongzhang played a prominent role in Chinese diplomacy in Korea. The Chinese leaders have characterized their past as a benevolent Confucian empire, acting to civilize their neighbors, notably Korea. A similar thing could be true for modern Chinese leaders who claim that China has never been imperialistic and that no neighboring countries have anything to fear as regards China's peaceful rise. However, China's influence rested primarily on political and cultural powers during important periods of the pre-modern era. The influence was not only political but also cultural. Emanuel Pastreich makes this point quite clear:

> Literary Chinese was the primary model for literature on the Korean peninsula. It remained the dominant paradigm for writing until the 20th century because a viable indigenous script for representing the Korean language, *hangul*, did not emerge until the 15th century and did not find acceptance as a medium for intellectual discourse until the late 19th century. […] There are records indicating that, as early as 372, Koguryo established a national Confucian academy, so no doubt there was considerable literary production in all three kingdoms, granted little has survived the intervening wars and other crises. (2001, 1067)

True, Chinese cultural primacy in Korea was an undeniable fact. The Four Books (*sishu*) and Five Classics (*wujing*), which collectively create the foundation of Confucianism, served as a central model for Korean rulers and the literati. Not to mention these classic Confucian texts, Tang poetry and vernacular novels (such as *Romance*

of the Three Kingdoms and *Water Margin*) were popular among both the literati and the reading public. However, Pastreich's claim that classic Chinese remained the dominant paradigm for writings on the Korean peninsula until the 20th century is a little exaggerated. With the creation of *hangul*, indigenous literature emerged. Even before the invention of the Korean script, orality and performance were significant features of vernacular poetry in traditional Korea. Composed as early as the 10th century, the *hyangga* were sung during the Unified Silla and early Goryeo periods of Korean history. The vernacular songs of Goryeo, commonly called *Goryeo gasa*, were performed and transmitted orally until the 16th century when the poems were finally recorded in *hangul*.

In addition, Emanuel Pastreich also maintains that China continued to serve as a model of modernization for Korea throughout the early 20th century. In an attempt to prove his argument, he cites a novel form, commonly known as *sinsoseol* (new novel), developed at the turn of the century. Pastreich further argues that the new novel movement was "*directly* inspired by the writings both theoretical and literary, of Liang Ch'i-chao and other reform writers of the late Ch'ing dynasty" (1077; emphasis added). The influences of Liang on Korean writers, notably Sin Chae-ho and Pak Eun-sik, are hardly to be dismissed. But the writers of *sinsoseol* were not so indebted to Chinese writers as their Japanese counterparts. One should keep in mind that after participating in the Hundred Days of Reform, the cultural and political reform movement that occurred in 1898 during the late Qing dynasty, Liang spent 14 years in exile in Japan, where he continued to advocate for political and cultural reform in China and helped found a number of journals and political organizations. Triggered by student protests in Beijing in 1919, the May Fourth Movement, a Chinese anti-imperialist, cultural, and political movement, was in a sense influenced by the March First movement in Korea.

That China exercised strong political and cultural power does not necessarily mean that it is culturally superior to its neighbors. As seen in Latin American literature, there is a gap between political institutions and literary or cultural expressions. Historically speaking, certainly from Tang to Ming times, and to some extent in Qing (1644–1911) as well, China was both a political and a cultural center. This is evidenced by the historical fact that some Koreans competed for the Chinese civil service examinations and their poems were published in Chinese anthologies. It can be safely assumed that there were no rival centers in any significant sense at the time, although China itself was often divided or ruled by "outsiders". Even so, I find Zhang's view of imperial China as having "functioned as a center in the East Asian region long before the European Renaissance" rather hard to accept. China assumed, in one way or another, the role as a *center* in East Asia, including Korea and Japan, when it comes to the literary and cultural world. And yet it is not a good idea to deny Chinese influences on its neighboring countries. To parody what Zhang says about Casanova, one may wonder what he would say about Korean literature or Japanese literature? One may also wonder whether he is aware of the existence of other powerful centers of cultural and literary activities outside imperial China? This attitude may be an obstruction to the true spirit of world literature, which strives for better cultural hybridity.

In this connection, Martin Puchner is quite right in his observation that "for world literature, it is not necessarily an advantage to come from a large nation; there is a provincialism of the center as well as a provincialism associated with the periphery" (2013, 33). As Puchner sees it, some representative writers of world literature, such as Henrik Ibsen, Milan Kundera, and Orhan Pamuk, are by and large from the provincial or peripheral origins. The Nobel Prize for literature in 2006 was awarded to Pamuk, "who in the quest for the melancholic soul of his native city has discovered new symbols for the clash and interlacing of cultures" (www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2006/summary/). His work has been widely translated into more than 60 languages, the Kannada language included. Ibsen, Kundera, and Pamuk are all characteristic of what Puchner terms "provincial cosmopolitan". Although Korea and Japan, compared to China, might be provincial or peripheral, their cultural activities were quite remarkable.

HISTORY OF CHINESE SINOCENTRISM

Zhang Longxi's critical stance in his "Relevance of *Weltliteratur*" is inextricably related to Sinocentrism, the ideology that China is the cultural, political, or economic center of the world in general and East Asia in particular. It comes as a great surprise that Zhang, one of the leading scholars in East–West cross-cultural studies, still seems to believe in this rather old-fashioned Sinocentrism, a hierarchical ideology or system that prevailed in East Asia until the weakening of the Qing dynasty and the encroachment of European and Japanese imperialists in the second half of the 19th century. At the center of this ideology stood China, ruled by the *Shenzhou* (Celestial Empire), which regarded itself as the only civilization in the world. Neighboring countries, such as Korea and Japan (and Vietnam as well), were considered vassals of China. The relations between the Chinese Empire and these nations were interpreted as tributary relationships under which these countries offered tributes to the emperor of China and received titles and privileges in return.

Historical accounts of such tributes, however, have been considerably distorted or at least exaggerated. For instance, the Han dynasty is known to have offered tributes to the Huns (Xiongnu tribes). On the other hand, according to the *Goryeosa jeolyo* (A condensed history of the Goryeo dynasty), compiled by Kim Jong-seo, Goryeo was offered the tributes from the Jurchen, which established the Jin dynasty in Manchuria and conquered the Northern Song in 1127, gaining control of most of North China. This fact is further attested by *Sejong silrok* (Veritable records of King Sejong), in which King Sejong was quoted as saying, "[d]o not give too much Korean paper to the Jurchen" when told by a retainer that they demanded too much of it in return for the tributes. Isolated from mainland China, Japan decisively cut off its vassal relationship with China during the Asuka period because it regarded itself as an equal and individual culture. In the past, the tribute was a form of trade rather than a sign of submission, allegiance, or respect. Most historians believe that in East Asia, as in most areas of the world, the tributes were some form of barter and trade.

An extreme form of ethnocentrism, this Sinocentrism is closely related to another ideology known in China as the "Hua–Yi distinction", the ideology viewing China

as the most advanced civilization in the world (not to mention East Asia), and external ethnic groups or foreign nations as being uncivilized to various degrees. The age-old distinction between *Hua* and *Yi*, also known as the Sino–barbarian dichotomy, is an ancient Chinese concept that differentiated a culturally defined "China" (called *Hua* or *Huaxia*) from cultural or ethnic outsiders (called *Yi*). Conventionally translated as "barbarian", the English translations of *Yi* include "foreigners", "ordinary others", "wild tribes", and "uncivilized tribes". Located east of China, Korea and Japan were pejoratively called *Dongyi*, literally meaning "barbarians living in the eastern districts". Most obviously, this Hua–Yi distinction claimed Chinese superiority and at the same time implied that outsiders could become *Hua* by adopting Chinese values and customs.

If Casanova's Gallocentrism and Eurocentrism are detrimental to the development of world literature, so is Zhang's Sinocentrism. As a matter of fact, any form of ethnocentrism should be rejected for the healthy development of the "World Republic of Letters", to use Casanova's ingenuous term. Most probably, Zhang came to the recognition that he went too far in regarding China as the center of the East Asian literary world. This critical position runs counter to his critique of Casanova's Gallocentrism, weakening his argument for *shijie de wenxue*, the Chinese term for world literature. It is very interesting to note that in "The Changing Concept of World Literature", the article he wrote as the epilogue to *World Literature in Theory*, edited by David Damrosch, Zhang changes his view a little. Taking issue again with Casanova's idea of the "world republic of letters" and her view of Paris as the center of the literary world in particular, Zhang states:

> Such an account of the history of world literature is unabashedly Eurocentric and modernist, closely mapping onto the European expansion in the colonialist era and the subsequent decolonization in the mid-20th century, but completely oblivious to the Hellenic and Roman world and ignorant of the formation of literary constellations outside Europe, such as the Persian and the Ottoman empires, of the East Asian region *with the Chinese written language and culture playing a pivotal role in pre-modern times*. (2014, 518; emphases added)

In the passage quoted above, the former phrase ("imperial China which functioned as a center in the East Asian region") is deftly replaced by the italicized expression of the last sentence. Now Zhang asserts that Chinese written language and culture performed a crucial role in the East Asian region, most probably Korea and Japan in particular. It should also be noted that Zhang qualifies the statement with the phrase "pre-modern times". Since the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japan, not China, played the leading role in East Asia. By the early 20th century, the goals of the Restoration were largely accomplished. With its victory in two wars over China in 1894–1895 and Russia in 1904–1905, Japan appeared for the first time on the international scene as a major world power.

When he makes this statement on the Chinese written language, Zhang Longxi certainly has in mind what has been rather vaguely termed "Sinosphere" or the "East Asian cultural sphere" – the term commonly used to refer to the East Asian countries and regions historically influenced by Chinese language and culture. The core regions

of the East Asian cultural sphere include Greater China, Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam. Located adjacent to China, Korea in particular has historically been culturally as well as linguistically influenced by China in one way or another.

Despite the importance of its native language, major national literatures have built their literary canons on non-autochthonous languages, as exemplified in American and Canadian, Latin American or Taiwanese national literature: English, Spanish and Mandarin-Chinese. Be that as it may, Korea has a long history of its own unique language, which has belonged to the Koreanic language family for several thousand years. Even so, unfortunately, it has had its writing system only since the mid-15th century, when *hangul*, the Korean script, was invented by King Sejong and his scholar retainers in the early Joseon dynasty. Under these circumstances, early literary activity was often executed in Chinese characters. Korean scholars-cum-literati wrote poems in the traditional manner of classical Chinese at least by the 4th century CE.

It should be noted, however, that Koreans, much like the Japanese and other East Asians, transformed the Chinese characters to suit their own linguistic purpose. By the 7th century, a system called *idu* had been devised that allowed Koreans to represent the Korean phonology through the Chinese characters called *hanja*. The *idu* system was used from the early Three Kingdoms to the Joseon dynasty periods. A more extended system of transcription, called *hyangchal* (vernacular letters), followed shortly thereafter, in which entire sentences in Korean could be written in classical Chinese. The *hyangchal* is best known as the writing method that Koreans used to compose *hyangga* (vernacular songs). In still another system, *gugyeol*, abridged versions of Chinese characters were used to denote grammatical elements and were inserted into texts during transcription. Extant literary works clearly indicate that before the 20th century, much of Korean literature was written in classical Chinese rather than in Korean, even after the invention of *hangul*. In general, then, literature written in Korea falls into three categories: (1) works written in the early transcription systems, (2) those written in *hangul*, and (3) those written in classical Chinese.

A considerable body of writings by Koreans (and Japanese as well) was thus written in the classic Chinese language. It would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that classical Chinese (that is, the written Chinese language from the Han dynasty to the end of the Qing dynasty) had been the *lingua franca* across Eastern Asia for more than 1500 years. It explains, at least in part, why Zhang Longxi claims that in the East Asian region, the Chinese written language and culture performed a primary role in pre-modern times. It does not necessarily mean, however, that Korean writings written in classical Chinese, *hanmunhak*, are Chinese literature. The *hanmunhak* should be regarded not as Chinese literature per se but as Korean literature proper. With several notable exceptions (say, Yi Gwang-su, unarguably one of the pioneers of modern Korean literature, and Kim Tae-jun, the literary scholar who specialized in Chinese literature, and Yim Hwa, the poet and literary critic), numerous scholars and writers have included the writings written in classical Chinese by Koreans in Korean literature proper. In this connection, Kim Tae-jun deserves more attention. In *Joseonhanmunhaksa* (A history of Korean literature in classical Chinese), he rather peremptorily claims that "those writings should be acknowledged

as Korean literature proper only if they were written in the Korean language, *hangul*, to express thoughts and emotions native to the country" (1931, 3–4). In his narrow definition of Korean literature, those writings written in classical Chinese were totally excluded from Korean literature. Kim labels Korean writing written in classical Chinese as a "variant of Chinese literature". Undoubtedly, his powerful nationalistic view is strongly reminiscent of Johann Gottfried Herder.

As early as 1934, on the other hand, the Korean linguist Hong Gi-mun takes quite the opposite view to Kim Tae-jun and claims that literary works written in classical Chinese should also be regarded as Korean literature. More historically as well as nationalistically oriented, Hong divides Joseon literature (rather than Korean literature) into two categories: in a narrow sense, Joseon literature can be defined according to its language; in a broad sense, it can be defined according to its nationality. Hong claims that Korean *hanmunhak* can be classified as Joseon literature in the broad sense, as distinct from that in the narrow sense. Hong further recognizes Korean literature written in classical Chinese as *yangban munhak*, literature written by a privileged class whose social status was largely determined by birth and Confucian education. As Hong aptly states, "[l]iterature written in classical Chinese in Korea is none other than the literature of *yangban* in Korea. There is no denying the fact that literature in classical Chinese is part of Korean *national* literature unless one removes the age of *yangban* from Korean history" (1997, 360–361; emphasis added). Hong goes as far as to categorize the *hanmumhak* not only as Korean literature but also as Korean national literature.

Hong's argument was later supported by another scholar Yi Ga-won, who, in *Hangukhanmunhaksa* (A history of Korean literature in classical Chinese, 1960), argues that Korean literature written in classical Chinese differs significantly from Chinese literature proper in that the former has developed as a special way of expressing Korean ideology and emotion. The favorable position held by both Hong Gi-mun and Yi Ga-won was further bolstered by several men of letters such as Park Yeong-hui and Yi Byeong-gi, who played a very active role in developing Korean literature. Due to the absence of written characters, the indebtedness of Korean (and Japanese) writers to the classical Chinese language was unavoidable. I have the opinion that *hanmunhak* should be considered Korean literature. In Korea, Chinese characters have not only been pronounced differently from China but also have had significantly different meanings in some cases. Japan went further than Korea; in the 8th and 9th centuries, Japan developed its own phonetic script, *kana*, to write Japanese. The writings in *kana* have been regarded as Japanese literature. Furthermore, the Japanese have never regarded *kanji* (the Japanese equivalent of Korean *hanja*) as somehow foreign, obviously evidenced by the fact that they usually annotate the readings with hiragana and not katakana, as they do for truly "foreign" words.

On the one hand, Koreans have been acutely conscious of the presence of China, but on the other, they have attempted to break loose from its various influences. Strongly independent and self-reliant, Korea has attempted to reject Chinese domination, both politically and culturally. This can be demonstrated by an old historical document that provides valuable and specific information about Korea's cultural as well as literary independence from China. As early as the 10th century, the founder

of the Goryeo dynasty, also known as Taejo Wang Geon, left behind for his successors the testament commonly known as *Hunyo sipjo* (Ten injunctions). Considering Wang Geon's vision of the Goryeo dynasty, the fourth injunction gives evidence of his opinion of cultural borrowing:

> In the past we have always had a deep attachment to the ways of China and all of our institutions have been modeled upon those of Tang. But our country occupies a different geographical location and our people's character is different from that of the Chinese. Hence, there is no reason to strain ourselves unreasonably to copy the Chinese way. Khitan [Mongolia] is a nation of savage beasts, and its language and customs are also different. Its dress and institutions should never be copied. ("Excerpts from the *Koryosa*")

This passage clearly shows that the founder of the Goryeo dynasty saw China as a model worthy of respect and borrowing. And yet it never fails to state that Goryeo did not want to copy China exactly but instead wanted to develop its own culture. Culturally pluralist, the Goryeo dynasty was strongly characterized by an outlook that recognized greater and equal empires in China and Manchuria, while positing Goryeo as the center of a separate and bounded world ruled by the Goryeo emperor.

Furthermore, Korea's avid affection for, as well as great pride in, its own literature is exemplified by the fact that by the 13th century, it had invented *metal* movable types. Although the world's first porcelain movable types were invented in the 11th century in China during the Northern Song dynasty, the world's oldest metal movable types were invented in Korea during the Goryeo dynasty for the first time in human history. These movable types were extensively used by Korean government printers to print books. The first books known to have been printed and published in metallic type set include the fifty-volume *Sangjeong gogeum yemun* (Exemplar books of etiquettes old and new), compiled by Choe Yun-ui and the two-volume *Jikji simche yojeol* (Anthology of great Buddhist priests' Zen teachings), compiled by the Buddhist monk Gyeongan. Even though the former has not survived, the second volume of the latter survived. After more than a half century, around 1450, Johannes Gutenberg introduced the metal movable-type printing press in Europe, along with innovations in casting the type based on a matrix and hand mold.

As early as the mid-1920s, young Korean intellectuals began discussing the idea of *segye munhak* (world literature), which is comparable to what Rabindranath Tagore called *vishwa sahitya* in 1907, and a little later, the Chinese version of it was termed *shijie de wenxue*. Independent of the New Culture Movement of 1915–1921 in China, Korean students studying foreign literature at Waseda and Hosei Universities in Tokyo, Japan, founded the Society for the Study of Foreign Literature and published its magazine, *Haeoemunhak* (Foreign literature). In the 1920s and 1930s, the word "foreign" had the meaning "overseas". It is interesting to note that the subtitle of the magazine, "Cpammata Eswtika," must have been taken from the Greek words, Γράμματα Ἐσωτικά (Grámmata Esotiká), presumably referring to esoteric writings, but mistranscribed as Roman letters. This is clearly an interesting gesture of internationalism on the part of the members of the Society. The founding members included Kim Jin-seop (German literature), Zong In-sob (English literature), Yi Ha-yun (French literature and English literature), and Yi Seon-geun (Russian literature).

In the inaugural message for the first volume of the magazine, the editor first used the Korean term *segye munhak*. He proclaims in an eloquent tone, "[t]he reason for us to study foreign literature is not just for its own sake; rather, it is first of all for the establishment of Korean literature and secondly, for mutually expanding the scope of the world literature" (1927, 1). The founding of the Society for the Study of Foreign Literature, along with the publication of the magazine as its organ, created a new epoch in the history of modern Korean literature. The members of the Society not only took a keen interest in world literature; but they also first introduced the method of direct translation, the type of translation procedure in which a target text is produced directly from the original source text rather than via another intermediated translation in another language, usually from Japanese or Chinese translations (Kim 2020).

IRRELEVANCE OF THE CENTER–PERIPHERIES CONCEPT

China's Northeast Project, short for Research Project on the History and Current State of the Northeast Borderland, is one recent manifestation of Sinocentrism. Launched in 2002 by the Chinese Academy of Social Science and financially supported by the Chinese government, it was a five-year research project on the history and current situation of the frontiers of Northeast China. The main reasons for China's promotion of the Project include its interest in preventing any possible political or social impact that may arise as a consequence of future changes expected in the Korean Peninsula, thereby stabilizing the northeastern region and coping with shifts in the international order surrounding Northeast Asia. Besides, the Project may be considered China's attempt to impose cultural hegemony by putting forth the "unified multi-ethnic state" theory to undermine the history and culture of surrounding nations in general and Korea in particular. Based on economic growth, China tried to create a new image of the past in order to establish historical origins and thus unify its people and territories. From its beginning, however, some Korean scholars have entertained grave doubts as to the Project. The Project has been criticized by Yoon Hwy-tak for applying rather anachronistically the contemporary vision of China as a "unified multi-ethnic state" to ancient ethnic groups (2004).

Exclusive rather than inclusive, Korea has for a long time developed its own unique literature both in quantity and quality, significantly different in form and style from its Chinese or Japanese counterparts. The origins of Korean literature (commonly designated as *hanguk munhak*) can be traced back to an early art form that combined dance, music, and literature. Originating in festival activities, this art form served various functions: (1) the political function of unifying society, (2) the religious function of supplicating a supernatural power to avert calamity on earth, and (3) the economic function of inspiring agricultural productivity. As an agrarian society, Korea was known for agricultural work songs. In addition, the early forms of myth, legend, and narrative poetry also had their basis in the abundant harvests of earlier periods. Korean literature thus presents an extraordinary variety of forms and styles, which cannot be explained merely in terms of the natural evolution of the language. Some of these were patently influenced by the importance of Chinese vocabulary

and syntax, but others developed in response to the internal requirements of major traditional poetic forms: *hyangga* (native songs); *Goryeo gayo* or *sogyo* (folk songs in the Goryeo dynasty), *byeolgok* (special songs), or *jangga* (long poems), *sijo* (current melodies), and *gasa* (verse narratives) among many other genres.

Something similar can be said about Japanese literature (commonly called *nihon bungaku*), which has often been considered as ranking as one of the major literatures of the world, comparable in age, richness, and volume to some representative Western literatures, although its course of development has been quite dissimilar. The extant works represent a literary tradition extending from the 7th century CE to the present. Japanese literature is characterized by some unique literary genres not so highly esteemed in Western or even other East Asian countries: that is, very brief poems like *haiku* or *waka*, diaries or letters, travelogues, and personalized accounts of life, such as *Makura no soshi* (The pillow book) written by Sei Shonagon during her time as a court lady to an Empress Consort during the Heian period. Written in the early 11th century by Murasaki Shikibu, *Genji monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*) has been widely acclaimed as a masterpiece of classic Japanese literature in the Western world as well. Generally considered to be the world's first novel, the book has been referred to as one of the works categorized as world literature by David Damrosch and Franco Moretti, among others. Damrosch claims that "*The Tale of Genji* can profitably be read, as I have suggested, along with Proust's *Swann's Way*" (2003, 299). With economic prosperity, an amazing burst of creative activity has occurred since the early 20th century. Modern Japanese literature increasingly received more worldwide attention, as seen in the authors, such as Kawabata Yasunari, Oe Kenzaburo, and Murakami Haruki – to name only a few.

Seen from this perspective, Zhang Longxi's discussion of China as the literary and cultural center of East Asia provides a striking example of what has been termed "internal Orientalism", a discursive practice first building upon Edward Said's work and later developed by anthropologists in the mid-1990s. In Zhang's scheme, Korea and Japan are unfortunately treated as an internal spatial "Other" in East Asia, marginalized by a privileged China, and at the same time playing the role of internal othering; simply put, China is the center of literary and cultural activities while Korea and Japan are merely peripheral. Given what Zhang calls "basic and large-scale historical facts" with regard to Casanova's theory, however, nothing could be further from the truth. For some periods, it is easy to work out center/periphery relations; for other periods, these are rather unstable. Thus, it seems more appropriate to maintain that in East Asia, there are *neither* centers *nor* peripheries but only the middle twilight zones between the dominant centers and the subjugated peripheries. From the start, in fact, a Wallersteinian central–peripheral approach alone cannot properly account for the diversity and dynamics of the world literary space.

THE ROLE OF KOREAN LITERATURE

As is often the case with most literatures worldwide, Korean literature and orature have undergone periods of intensive influence by various neighboring and migratory cultures: Chinese civilization, Buddhism in its Chinese form, the Mongol world, and

the Manchu conquest empire, the Japanese empire, Soviet and American influences, and globalization, among others. Accordingly, it might be as injurious to world literature as Sinocentrism to argue for a pure origin of Korean literature. Even so, contemporary Korean literature has developed in a manner that is relatively free from Chinese influences and as a consequence of its wider ongoing literary exchanges. Inordinate stress on Sinocentrism and/or Sinophone centrality has tended to gloss over the possibility of Korean literature written in classical Chinese being categorically dismissed as non-Korean literature. Seen from this perspective, Korean literature has a wider spectrum, from oratures, through *hanmunhak*, to the writings in vernacular Korean.

If world literature can be understood as national literature read and appreciated beyond its linguistic boundaries, translation is no doubt a prerequisite for transmission. Translation provides insight into how new ideas, new styles, and new meanings in the world are shared between cultures and nations. This is why David Damrosch succinctly asserts that "*[w]orld literature is writing that gains in translation*" (2003, 281, 288; original emphases). His remark reminds one of what Robert Frost has been quoted by Louis Untermeyer as saying, "[p]oetry is what is lost in translation. It is also lost in interpretation" (1964, 18). Damrosch makes this point clearer:

> The balance of credit and loss remains a distinguishing mark of national literature versus world literature: literature stays within its national or regional tradition when it usually loses in translation, whereas works become world literature when they gain on balance in translation, stylistic losses offset by an expansion in depth as they increase their range, as is the case with such widely disparate works as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *Dictionary of the Khazars*. It follows from this that the study of world literature should embrace translation far more actively than it has usually done to date. (2003, 289)

What Damrosch call the "balance of gain and loss" in translation had taken place in Korean literature when it was translated into other languages, mostly into English. Since the opening of the country at the turn of the 20th century, translations of Korean literature have been done chiefly by American and Canadian missionaries and diplomats. Horace N. Allen's translation of Korean folk tales in 1889 was followed by James S. Gale, who translated classic Korean novels, such as *The Cloud Dream of the Nine*, a 17th-century novel by Kim Man-jung, and *Choon Yang*, presumably the most well-known Korean classic novel, often translated as *The Fragrance of Spring* (as initiated by Edward J. Urquhart in 1929). Marshall R. Pihl's translation, with a lengthy introduction and annotations, of *The Tale of Sim Chong: A Korean Oral Narrative* is far more scholarly. Recently, Ann Sung-hi Lee's translation of *Mujong* (*The Heartless*) provides another good illustration of academic translation.

What matters here is the extent to which Korean classics, ancient and modern, contribute to world literature. Most translations of Korean classics are intended for an academic audience rather than the world literature reader whom Damrosch has in mind. It may seem understandable given that world literature, as commonly used today, was non-existent, yet a slow but marked change can be discerned in translations of Korean literary works since the turn of the 21st century. Contemporary Korean authors have been widely translated into English and other Western European languages such as French and German.

In this connection, two promising Korean authors, Shin Kyung-sook and Han Kang, deserve special attention in terms of world literature. Beginning with a German translation *Ein einsames Zimmer* (A lone room, 1995) in 2001, translations of Shin's novels have been published in the United States and elsewhere. They include *The Place Where the Harmonium Once Was* (ASIA Publishers, 2012), *Please Look after Mom* (Vintage, 2011), *The Girl Who Wrote Loneliness* (Pegasus Books, 2015), and *The Court Dancer* (Pegasus Books, 2019), among others. Shin won the 2011 Man Asian Literary Prize for *Please Look after Mom*, being not only the first Korean author, but also the first woman to receive that award.

Seven years younger than Shin Kyung-sook, Han Kang made her literary debut as a poet and then became a short story writer and novelist. Translations of Han's books include *Convalescence* (TASIA Publishers, 2013), *The Vegetarian* (Portobello Books, 2015), *Human Acts* (Portobello Books, 2016), and *The White Book* (Portobello Books, 2017). *The Vegetarian* became the first Korean-language novel to win the 2016 Man Booker International Prize, which was awarded to both its author, Han Kang, and its translator, Deborah Smith. *Atti umani* (*Human Acts*) won the 2017 Malaparte Prize in Italy. She was awarded the San Clemente Prize for *The Vegetarian* in Spain in 2019. In addition, Han was selected as the fifth writer for the Future Library project in Norway in 2019. It should be mentioned in passing that the quality of the translation of *The Vegetarian* has been criticized; some translation scholars have pointed out that the English version of the prized novel has a significant number of awkward translations and mistranslations (Kim 2019, 133–173).

Encouraged by the works of Shin Kyung-sook and Han Kang, some of the best contemporary Korean novels in English translation have come out. The last decade or so of this century has witnessed drastic changes in the selection of what works should be translated. This stress on contemporary works differs significantly from the first part of the 20th century when translators attempted to bring Korean classics to the fore. It does not seem difficult to make of this a rather great discrepancy. In a free-market economy, the law of supply and demand, rather than academia, regulates this process of translating Korean literature.

CONCLUSION

The phrase "think globally, act locally" has been used (or somewhat abused) in various contexts, including education, business, and environment. The phrase can also be applicable to world literature, which obtains its nourishment from globalization. World literature is part of a complex process of globalization embodied in the domain of literature. Zhang Longxi is quite right when he states:

> It is in our time, when literary scholars everywhere have a much *greater* sense of the global connectedness of nations and peoples, a much *greater* need to open one's eyes beyond the tunnel vision of one's own group or community, and a much *greater* readiness to embrace alterity beyond one's linguistic and cultural comfort zones, that Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* may have found a *better* condition than ever before to make a real impact on the ways we think globally about literature, culture, and tradition, and ultimately about the world in which we live. (2014, 515; emphases added)

Most noteworthy in the passage above is that Zhang makes profuse use of the comparative adjectives – "greater" three times and "better" once. The implication is that world literature is not a *fait accompli* but still in the process of developing and still with many possibilities. To help it develop so that it will be more effective as a new literary paradigm, one should improve what Revathi Krishnaswamy calls "world literary knowledges". She proposes this new category ("knowledges" in the plural) as a new component of global literary studies in order "to open up the canon of literary theory and criticism to alternative ways of conceptualizing and analyzing literary production" (2010, 408). To push her argument a little further, I argue for "world literature literacy" to refer to the ability to read world literature in a more proper way, the ability "to embrace alterity beyond one's linguistic and cultural comfort zones", as Zhang maintains.

In the current phase of rapid globalization, we are living through what Pascale Casanova aptly terms the "World Republic of Letters" or what I call the "Commonwealth of Letters". At the present moment, however, the Republic or the Commonwealth seems to be incomplete, still under construction. Unfortunately, even some influential scholars arguing for world literature, for all their good intentions, still remain willingly or unwillingly Eurocentric (as exemplified in Pascale Casanova or Franco Moretti) *or* Sinocentric (as exemplified in Zhang Longxi). Eurocentric or Sinocentric, any form of ethnocentrism is in fact injurious, or even fatal, to the salutary development of world literature.

In thinking of new ways to explore the relations of world literature, mutual understanding of, as well as mutual respect for, other literatures and cultures are prerequisite. One of the valuable lessons we learn from world literature is, among other things, a reconfiguration of the relations between cultural centers and the periphery, between the national and the local, and between metropolis and province. Without such reconfiguration, which is reminiscent of Goethe's idea of *Weltliteratur*, the arrival of world literature will be delayed, perhaps for quite a long time.

REFERENCES

Anonymous. 1927. "Changgan Gwondusa" [Inaugural message]. *Haeoemunhak* [Foreign literature] 1.

Beecroft, Alexander. 2014. "World Literature without a Hyphen: Towards a Typology of Literary Systems." In *World Literature in Theory*, ed. by David Damrosch, 80–191. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Casanova, Pascale. 1999. *La République mondiale des Lettres*. Paris: Seuil.

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

Damrosch, David. 2014. "Introduction: World Literature in Theory and Practice." In *World Literature in Theory*, ed. by David Damrosch, 1–12. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

"Excerpt from the Koryosa: The Ten Injunctions of Wang Kon." Trans. by Hahm Pyong-Choon. Accessed on June 4, 2022. http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/korea/ten_injunctions.pdf?option=com_docman&task=doc_view&gid=581.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. 1984. *Conversations with Johann Peter Eckermann (1823–1832)*. Trans. by John Oxenford. New York, NY: North Point Press.

Hong, Gi-mun. 1934. "Joseonmungagui yangui" [Two meanings of Korean literature]. *Chosun Ilbo* October 28–November 6.

Kim, Tae-jun. 1931. *Joseonhanmunhaksa* [A history of Korean literature in classical Chinese]. Seoul: Society of Korean Language and Literature.

Kim, Wook-Dong. 2019. *Translations in Korea: Theory and Practice*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Kim, Wook-Dong. 2020. *Oegungmunhagyeonguhoewa haeoemunhak* [The Society for the Study of Foreign Literature and the Foreign literature]. Seoul: Somyeong Publications.
Krishnaswamy, Revathi. 2010. "Toward World Literary Knowledges: Theory in the Age of Globalization." *Comparative Literature* 62, 4: 399–419. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1215/00104124-2010-024.
Moretti, Franco. 2013. *Distant Reading*. London and New York, NY: Verso.
Mufti, Aamir R. 2014. "Orientalism and the Institution of World Literature." In *World Literature in Theory*, ed. by David Damrosch, 313–344. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
Pastreich, Emanuel. 2001. "The Reception of Chinese Literature in Korea." In *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, ed. by Victor H. Mair, 1067–1078. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
Pratt, Mary Louise. 2008. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Routledge.
Puchner, Martin. 2013. "Goethe, Marx, Ibsen, and the Creation of a World Literature." *Ibsen Studies* 13, 1: 28–46. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/15021866.2013.782627.
Shih, Shu-mei. 2011. "The Concept of Sinophone." *PMLA* 126, 3: 709–718. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.3.709.
Thornber, Karen Laura. 2014. "Rethinking the World in World Literature: East Asia and Literary Contact Nebulae." In *World Literature in Theory*, ed. by David Damrosch, 460–479. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
Untermeyer, Louis. 1964. *Robert Frost: A Backward Look*. Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress.
Yi, Ga-won. 1960. *Hangukhanmunhaksa* [A history of Korean literature in classical Chinese]. Seoul: Boseongsa.
Yoon, Hwy-tak. 2004. "China's Northeast Project: Defensive or Offensive Strategy?" *East Asian Review* 16, 4: 99–121.
Zhang, Longxi. 2013. "The Relevance of *Weltliteratur*." *Poetica* 45, 3–4: 241–247. DOI: https://doi.org/10.30965/25890530-0450304002.
Zhang, Longxi. 2014. "Epilogue: The Changing Concept of World Literature." In *World Literature in Theory*, ed. by David Damrosch, 513–523. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Against Sinocentrism: Internal orientalism in world literature

World literature. Sinocentrism. Ethnocentrism. Korean literature. Internal orientalism.

Much discussion of world literature, as seen in the theories of Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova, is still not entirely able to rid itself of Eurocentric and Western-centric biases. More recently, Zhang Longxi, a leading Chinese cross-cultural scholar, despite his good intentions, displays Sinocentric limitations by claiming that imperial China "functioned as a center in the East Asian region". Based on the assumption that Zhang's argument is emblematic of a larger current of Sinocentrism in China, this article argues that East Asian countries, most notably Korea and Japan, developed their own literatures and cultures, although they have been influenced by Chinese culture. This article calls for a more globally-oriented paradigm and asserts that any form of ethnocentrism, Eurocentric or Sinocentric, is injurious, or even fatal, to the salutary development of world literature.

Wook-Dong Kim
Professor emeritus of the Humanities at Sogang University
South Korea
wdykim@gmail.com