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## Comparing “West” and “Rest”: Beyond Eurocentrism?

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**Abstract:** From different perspectives, Shu-mei Shih, Rey Chow, and Revathi Krishnaswamy have accused Comparative Literature of being inherently Eurocentric in that the comparative study of non-European/Western literatures continues being steered by European/Western paradigms. In what follows I briefly outline their respective positions, and argue that over the past few decades at least some attempts have been made to move beyond Eurocentrism.

**Keywords:** comparative literature, Eurocentrism, East-West relations, world literature

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For Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza, “Comparative literature’s reason for being was founded on the notion of European literature, whether initially as a literary republic or later as a geocultural space within which to define the relationships among diverse national literatures” (420). In fact, he notes, “literature is a European concept—even Eurocentric in the most radical sense of the word—both in terms of its genealogy and in its fundamental link to the alphabetically written word and to the idea of the book” and “to talk about *European literature* is therefore, to some extent, redundant” (419). Moreover, as from this perspective European literature served as “the measuring stick” for all literature, it was for the longest time also redundant to talk of “world literature,” as the two were deemed identical. However, he finds, “the idea of European literature has come to lag behind both the new balance of global powers and our own awareness of the paradoxes and inadequacies of the 19th-century notion of literature” and it now “carries with it unavoidable echoes of a conception that is excessively canonical and self-indulgent, while its cosmopolitan dimension has been challenged” (419). From different perspectives, Shu-mei Shih, Rey Chow, and Revathi Krishnaswamy concur.

Discussing the re-emergence of world literature as a guiding comparative literature paradigm since the turn of the 21st century, Shih argues that “while many scholars resuscitating this concept offer a nominal apology for its Eurocentric origins, this Eurocentrism’s constitutive hierarchies and asymmetries are seldom analysed” (16). With “the West” the agent of recognition and “‘the rest’ as the object of recognition, in representation” (17), a Western-centered world literature neglects, ignores, silences, or at best misrecognizes what is distant to itself. Chow calls for a “new” form of East/West comparison, in which Asian literatures would be freed from what she calls the “post-European and [...]” complex in which the implicit awareness of “the European” (and by extension the American) as

the original term of comparison always haunts the term after the “and.” This new form of comparison would make room for “other possibilities of supplementarity, other semiotic conjunctions mediated by different temporal dynamics, [...] as yet unrealized comparative perspectives, the potential range and contents of which we have only just begun to imagine” (307). Krishnaswamy denounces “a widespread assumption that theory is the product of a uniquely Western philosophical tradition” and that, while “the non-West may be a source of exotic cultural production” it “cannot be a site of theory” (400). The one exception, she notes, viz. postcolonial theory, “is, we are told, simply a response to the West” and “although scholars in comparative poetics and East-West studies have tried to challenge this assumption by drawing attention to pre-colonial textual traditions (Chinese, Japanese, Sanskrit, and Arabic), their work has had little impact on the practice of comparative literature or literary theory” (400).

The question thus arises: how do we go “beyond Eurocentrism”? Let us take the three concerns raised in the previous paragraph in turn.

Shih’s critique in essence comes down to how Western comparatists, critics, literary historians, and anthologists, when addressing non-Western literature(s), are steered by what she calls “omnipotent definitions” such as “the systematic,” “the time lag of allegory,” “global multiculturalism,” “the exceptional particular,” and “post-difference ethics” (16-30) in their choice of periods, genres, works, and authors to discuss, and how to discuss them. We might think here of how Western world literature anthologists and theoreticians have traditionally limited themselves in their selections from non-Western literatures to works of religion and myth, or at best to the “classical” periods of such literatures safely insulated from anything even remotely contemporary. A telling example is the first monograph on world literature in English, by Richard Moulton in 1911, which discusses non-European literatures only in so far as they have influenced the literature of “the English-speaking peoples” (9). This leads him to categorically exclude Chinese and Japanese literature, and to include very little from Arabic or Persian. When addressing more recent periods, roughly speaking as of the advent of modernity, the tendency has overwhelmingly been to see Europe or the West as the source and driving force of literary innovation worldwide, or as the final arbiter of what qualifies as world literature. Names that immediately spring to mind here are those of Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova, but Susan Stanford Friedman also noted that “standard histories of modernism in literature and the arts have assumed the primacy of Western creative agencies, not only marginalizing the gendered and racial ‘others’ within their midst but also erasing almost entirely modernist cultural production outside the West, especially among the colonized ‘others’ of European and American imperialism” (“World Modernisms” 499). We could also think of how the privileging of the epic as the yardstick for a fully developed literary system calqued on the European example has for a long time led to the downplaying of many non-Western literatures precisely for their supposed lack of this genre. And we could mention how attention often is focused solely on works that are compatible with European/Western value judgments or that appeal to Western sentiments, prejudices or stereotypical expectations about non-Western societies. Shih herself not only invokes the Chinese new cinema of the final decade of the 20th century, but also the 2000 Nobel Prize winner Xingjian Gao who, notwithstanding that previous to receiving the prize he had for more than a decade been living in self-exile in France, was still seen as representative of “China.” Shih was writing before Mo Yan, a Chinese writer who continues to live in China, was awarded the Nobel Prize, but we could argue that insofar as he is often seen as a sort of

hallucinatory realist, he too has been "misrecognized" by the West.

Much of what Shih says is undeniably correct for how comparative literature, and world literature, were practiced throughout most of the history of the discipline. Still, the underrepresentation of non-Western literatures and the ingrained Eurocentrism of the discipline was not entirely unrecognized. Albert Guérard had already in 1940 regretted that "the East is woefully under-represented"; noting that "the term World Literature is an obvious exaggeration," he said it would be more accurate to call the field "Western World Literature: a literature for Westerners, wherever they may be, and for Westernized Orientals" (34). Werner Friederich humorously observed that world literature as taught in American universities covered only a quarter of the (then) NATO languages—practically speaking, English, French, German, and Italian, presumably along with Spanish, which was not a member of NATO at the time (9-22). René Etiemble in the mid-1960s called for the inclusion of Chinese and Arabic literature ("Faut-il réviser" 15-36). Alfred Owen Aldridge in the mid-1980s paid attention to comparative literature in Asia in *The Re-emergence of World Literature: A Study of Asia and the West*. And one year later, Etiemble, in an article on the re-emergence of comparative literature in China, asked the rhetorical question whether "on a le droit de se prévaloir du titre de comparatiste quand on ignore *tout* de la littérature arabe, *tout* de la littérature indonésienne, *tout* de la littérature chinoise, *tout* de la littérature japonaise, *tout* des littératures de l'Inde, *tout* des littératures orales de l'Afrique noire, etc." ("one has the right to call oneself a comparatist if one ignores *all* Arabic literature, *all* Indonesian literature, *all* Chinese literature, *all* Japanese literature, *all* Indian literatures, *all* oral literatures of Africa, etc."; "Sur le renouveau" 9). Since the mid-1990s, due to articles such as those of Shih and Chow, as well as editor Sarah Lawall's pioneering collection *Reading World Literature: Theory, History, Practice*, awareness of the Eurocentric heritage of comparative literature and of world literature has gained ground consistently, and we now have arrived at a point where a nod to this heritage is almost obligatory for any statement on the discipline. At the same time, so far as anthologies go, coverage has spread far beyond literature in European languages, partly under the influence of Lawall as co-editor of some of the 1990s Norton anthologies, and more recently in the Longman anthology (edited by David Damrosch) and the Norton anthology (edited by Martin Puchner). Perhaps it could be argued that even these anthologies still bear the stamp of those "technologies of recognition" Shih denounced. They can also be criticized for fostering what Jonathan Arac has labelled "anglo-globalism" (35-45), or for making US undergraduates see the world's literature as basically an extension of American literature and the world as the US's backyard, if we thus interpret Gayatri Spivak's critique of world literature in *Death of a Discipline* as she saw it taking shape around the turn of the millennium. What cannot be denied is that all this represents at least some progress over earlier anthologizing practices. The same can be said of recent developments in criticism and theory as in *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* by Pheng Cheah and *Forget English: Orientalisms and World Literatures* by Aamir R. Mufti, or the *Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, which features the text by Friedman cited earlier.

Friedman's 2015 *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity across Time* directly addresses Chow's call for a new form of East/West comparison, in which the West would no longer serve as the original term of comparison. In fact, Friedman states unequivocally that her book "aims to 'unthink' the West's idea of itself as the Ur-modernity by rethinking modernity on a planetary scale" (3). With her use of "planetary" Friedman references earlier calls by Spivak and, much earlier,

Etiemble, for extending comparative literature and world literature studies to encompass the entire planet, while avoiding the Eurocentric connotations associated with the term “world literature” as well as the techno-economic ones linked to the use of “global.” In her book she stretches the concept of “modernism” to cover worldwide instances of aesthetic innovation, from the poetry of Du Fu during the Chinese Tang Dynasty to Arundhati Roy’s postcolonial India to Korean American Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*. At the same time, her use of the plural “modernisms” anchors her analyses in the ongoing debate on “multiple modernities” largely stemming from Shmuel N. Eisenstadt’s *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities* and “Multiple Modernities.” In literary studies, this debate is addressed by Norbert Finzsch’s study of the Harlem Renaissance (193-212); Gorica Majstorovic’s *Global South Modernities: Modernist Literature and the Avant-Garde in Latin America*, which links Latin American literature to literary goings-on in India and beyond in the first half of the 20th century; Bruce Robertson and Jian Zhang’s *Modernisms in China and the United States: Art as Life/Art as Idea*, which compares Chinese and US modernisms; and edited collections such as Djelal Kadir and Dorothea Löbbermann’s *Other Modernisms in an Age of Globalization*, Mary Ann Gillies, Helen Sword and Steven Yao’s *Pacific Rim Modernisms*, and Paul Manfredi and Christopher Lupke’s *Chinese Poetic Modernisms*. Shu-mei Shih’s 2001 *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937* opened up a crucial period in one of the most important non-Western literatures to treatment in an international context. Wail Hassan has been particularly active as far as South-South connections are concerned, specifically Arab-Brazilian in his case, as in his chapter in the *Oxford Handbook of Arab Narrative Traditions* that he himself edited, and in his contributions to *Literatura e (i)migração no Brasil/Literature and (Im)migration in Brazil* (co-edited with Rogério Lima), *The Middle East and Brazil: Perspectives on the New Global South* (edited by Paul Amar), and *The Global South Atlantic* (edited by Kerry Bystrom and Joseph R. Slaughter). The temporal dimension invoked by Friedman, inclusive of the entire planet but doing away with the periodization traditionally linked to the developmental stages of Europe or the West, also recalls Wai Chee Dimock’s *Through Other Continents*. Dimock focuses on “American literature [that is to say: the literature of the United States] across deep time,” reading US literary works through the prism of other events and histories anchored in other continents, nations, or places, events and histories. The introduction to Dimock’s book is a reflection on “Planet as Duration and Extension,” again evoking the concerns expressed by Etiemble and Spivak.

If the examples referred to in the previous paragraph bear testimony to how the scope and scale of comparative literature studies have expanded enormously over the past few decades, encompassing hitherto unimagined spans of time and space, there have also been a number of not less ambitious, but temporally and geographically more restricted approaches, responding to Chow’s demand for new forms of East/West comparison. I am thinking here of Suzanne Conklin Akbari’s “modeling medieval world literature” (2-17) jointly discussing *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Book of John Mandeville*, the *Kebra Nagast*, and the *Travels of Ibn Battuta* in sketching a novel approach to how world literature might address medieval literature. But we could also point to Alexander Beecroft’s *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day* and Wiebke Denecke’s pairing of Greek/Roman and Chinese/Japanese classical cultures/civilizations/literatures in *Classical World Literatures: Sino-Japanese and Greco-Roman Comparisons*. If in both these works “Europe” and its classical literature still serve as terms of comparison, it is no longer in the old, privileged sense, but strictly on a par

with the other term. In this respect we might also invoke how Beecroft, reaching back to ideas first broached by Hutcheson Macauley Posnett, theorizes a comprehensive classification, or what he calls an "ecology," of world literature "from Antiquity to the Present Day" irrespective of literatures or cultures, without privileging specifically Western conditions or traditions (33-40). In fact, Beecroft's most immediate example and inspiration seem to have been Sheldon Pollock's 2006 *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*, in which the latter posits the existence of a Sanskrit cosmopolis extending from the beginning of the Common Era to the beginning of the second millennium and encompassing most of South and South East Asia and down to Java. Pollock points out the remarkable similarity with the reach of Latin in Europe for the same period. That the main focus of Pollock's undertaking is on Asia, though, is clear from his baptizing the European counterpart a Latin "countercosmopolis."

David Damrosch extends the idea of a "cosmos" created by a particular language when he talks of cuneiform as a "cosmopolitan script," and hence as the binding element in what he calls a "scriptworld." As Damrosch puts it: "the leading edge of a global language is its globalizing script, which can far outrun the spread of the language itself." As example he cites China, which "over many centuries [...] has had a national script rather than a national language" (206). Yet another way of configuring comparative approaches to various non-Western literatures is via what Karen Thornber, taking her cue from Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zones" (33-40) terms "literary contact nebulae." The particular nebula Thornber details is the East Asian one comprising China, Japan, and Korea, especially as of the late 19th century. As she puts it, "some of the most sustained and vibrant twentieth- and early twenty-first century East Asian artistic relationships developed not within individual East Asian societies or between East Asian and Western literatures, but among the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean literary worlds" (462). Along similar lines, but from a different perspective, Sowon Park argues that "while there has been an increasing preoccupation with literary networks beyond the Western canon since the middle of the last century, the investigations have been restricted to the colonial world and the postcolonial states of the Western powers." At the same time, she notes, "the non-Western colonial field of the Pan-Asian Empire (1894-1945) —Imperial Japan, colonial Korea, and semi-colonial China—has been not so much relegated to the margins as just passed over." Park's aim, then, is to "recalibrate the dynamics of 'the West and the rest' and 'center/periphery' models of world literature by bringing an East Asian perspective to the discussion" (web). Auritro Majumder has similar ambitions with respect to South Asia and Indian, particularly Bengali literature, when he "connects India to 1920s and 1930s Mexico and the Soviet Union; 1960s and 1970s Vietnam, Cuba, and the Congo; and present-day China and the United States," discussing "how literary texts came to highlight marginalized groups across national boundaries, provincialize dominant histories, and articulate the distinctive yet interconnected problematic of peripheral literature." "What is significant here," he emphasizes, "is that an understudied constellation of writers outside the 'West' was drawing more on one another than on the imperial center when it came to their aesthetic sensibilities" (ix). His discussion of the shared sensibilities underlying both Rabindranath Tagore's 1907 speech on world literature and Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature" is an example of South-South comparison in the context of what he prefers to call "peripheral internationalism."

It would seem that Shih's and Chow's concerns have been at least partially addressed and even remedied in more recent work in comparative and world literature studies, but things are somewhat

different with Krishnaswamy's. While Krishnaswamy shares Shih's preoccupation with how non-Western literary works are incorporated into Western paradigms via mechanisms of non- and misrecognition, she in addition raises the more fundamental issue that Western theory provides the ground for all "comparison." In other words, comparison is only possible via the use of Western theory, which is deemed universal, while non-Western theory is restricted to the local. Robert Young, writing from a postcolonial perspective, argues that "in comparative literature [...] theory functions as the global measure of comparison, so that comparative literature itself can take the position of the universal" and "European theory operates the node through which comparison is effected." He sees "this model [...] replicated in the German concept of *Weltliteratur*, in which literatures of the world are not compared directly with one another but mediated by the larger concept of world literature, a frame in which they are put side by side" ("The Postcolonial" 685). We could argue that there have been at least a number of efforts by both Western and East Asian comparative literature scholars to deal more equitably with theory, treating non-Western theory on a par with its Western counterpart. Pioneering work in this respect has been done by Earl Miner in *Comparative Poetics: An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature*, and by Zhang Longxi in *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West and From Comparison to World Literature* on the thought systems underlying, respectively, Chinese and Western approaches to literature, and world literature. While the works by Zhang here referenced are in English, he himself points to Qian Zhongshu, a Chinese scholar publishing in Chinese, as his example in striving for intercultural understanding based on equality in "Qian Zhongshu as Comparatist" and *From Comparison to World Literature*. All the same, of late there have been more assertive calls for emancipating especially Chinese theory from dependence on Western models. Perhaps not surprisingly, this development parallels China's economic and political rise. With the "rise of 'Chinese fever' in the world," Wang Ning asks, "what shall [Chinese] literary scholars [...] do to remap world literature?" ("Global English(es)" 170). Elsewhere he argues that with "world literature [...] becoming an aesthetic reality, the 'post-theoretic era' has arrived in literary theory." This enables "the previously marginalized theoretical discourses to come to the forefront in a break from a unified West-centric orthodoxy" and "scholars from small ethnic communities or non-Western groups to engage in dialogues with their Western and international counterparts on a level playing field." Thus, he concludes, "now is the time to develop a Chinese theoretical discourse" with respect to a world poetics ("On the Construction" 187). The long-standing claim that there is, or there should be, a distinctive Chinese School of Comparative Literature is also advanced by Wang's colleague Shunqing Cao in *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*. Wang emphasizes how Cao at the beginning of his career as a comparatist was influenced by the works of James Liu and Earl Miner, but that he later aimed "to develop a home-grown Chinese comparative literature" ("Variation Theory" 3). Wang sees this endeavour culminating in Cao's *中外文论史 (A History of Chinese and Foreign Literary Theory)*. "The strength of the work," Wang argues,

lies in that it for the first time put Chinese literary theory in a broad context of world literary theory highlighting its different characteristics and unique position. It also demonstrates that to write a comprehensive history of world literary theory should not overlook the literary theory and criticism in those non-Western countries, especially China, where there is its own autonomous body of literary theory with *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (by Xie Liu) as its

landmark. (3)

In all this it should not be forgotten that a lot of what Shih, Chow, and Krishnaswamy denounce in relation to non-Western literatures/cultures also applies to many Western/European so-called minor or smaller literatures. What is routinely called "European," or by extension, Western literature, only includes some very few major literatures in European languages: in historical perspective, only literature in (ancient) Greek and Latin, and then successively Italian, Spanish/Portuguese, French, German and English—everything else remains just as much "rest" as the proverbial "rest of the world." In other words, "Europe," or the "West," is not so homogenous as often assumed, or at least suggested, in discourses offhandedly opposing "East" and "West" in literary matters. But some of the solutions put forward when it comes to non-Western literatures might also be fruitfully applied to discussions of European literature. Thornber's concept of "literary contact nebulae" might for instance be compared to Dionýsz Ďurišin's concept of interliterary communities in *Čo je svetová literatúra? (What Is World Literature?)*. This not only enables comparison between such communities within Europe, but also makes it possible to include "non-European" literatures, as in Ďurišin and Armando Gnisci's *Il Mediterraneo: una rete interletteraria*, in a Mediterranean interliterary network. Such an approach, even without using Ďurišin's terminology, also opens the door to comparison between various interliterary communities across Europe, with some of them showing intimate links to non-European parts, as argued by Roberto Dainotto in *Europe (In Theory)* and "The Discreet Charm of the Arabist Theory." The latter distinguishes a literary community anchored in southern Europe, primarily Italy and Spain, from a northern one, primarily French-English-German. The dichotomy between the two has been crucial in the elaboration of the concept and scope of world literature, Dainotto claims (7-29). In his view, northern Europe definitively took the upper hand around the turn of the 19th century, not only economically, militarily, and politically, but also, and in this context most importantly, culturally. The result was that concepts, methods, and insights originating from Europe's South were systematically ignored, or bypassed, in favor of northern contributions. This was the case with Goethe's *Weltliteratur* becoming generally adopted as the origin of discussions of "world literature," effectively limiting its scope to European literature, regardless of Goethe's having first mentioned the term to his amanuensis Johann Peter Eckermann upon his reading of a Chinese novel in translation. Dainotto traces an alternative genesis of world literature studies in the multi-volume work (1782-1799) of the Spanish Jesuit Juan Andrés, who was writing in Italian. Andrés, unlike most scholars following Goethe's ideas on *Weltliteratur* in France and Germany over the nineteenth century, does not discuss European literature as *sui generis*, but traces its intimate links to non-European and specifically Arab literature. Waïl Hassan, in his presidential address to the 2021 ACLA Conference, further elaborates on the significance of Andrés for comparative literature and world literature studies (255-269).

This essay is a plea to not let "beyond Eurocentrism" translate into cutting out European literature altogether in the "new comparative literature," as this would subject European literature to the same ostracism it is accused of with respect to other literatures. Instead, one should deal with European literature on a par with all other literatures, whether one chooses to do so from a world, global, or planetary perspective. The earlier question of how to do comparative and world literature studies beyond Eurocentrism then modulates into the question of how to include both European/Western

and non-Western literature in one theoretical approach, and do so on an even keel. One solution might be found in WReC's "combined and uneven development" proposal. The Collective proposes "to define 'world literature' as the literature of the world-system—of the modern capitalist world-system, that is" (8). This system, which following Immanuel Wallerstein they identify with the period of roughly the year 1500 onward, they see as affecting the entire world—hence the use of the hyphenated "world-system," indicating that it is not simply "a" system existing "in the world," but precisely that it leaves no part of the world untouched. The point is that different parts of the world are affected differently, or, more precisely, unevenly. "World-literature" then is the label they ascribe to all literary works registering such unevenness, whether from the privileged site of the West or that of the underprivileged, disadvantaged, or outright oppressed non-West. It could be argued that all "modern" literary works register the effects of this system, even works that at first sight would seem to have only local or immediately topical connections (D'haen 35-50). In fact, the issue of combined and uneven development can also be applied internally to "the West" or "Europe," for instance with reference to the working classes and how they have been almost routinely neglected in discussions of world literature.

Florian Mussnug looks at how ecological dystopias caused by flooding and rising ocean levels transcend East and West dichotomies, affecting the entire globe—a "planetary" dimension beyond Eurocentrism (n. p.). However, this is only one instance of how problems common to the entire world shift into the center of literary attention, even though it is undeniable that they may affect certain parts more than others: ecological disasters, with rising sea levels and floods; droughts, deforestation, and desertification; medical disasters, such as the current Coronavirus pandemic; man-induced pollution; famine; revolts and rebellions; totalitarianism; mass migration, refugee crises, and general uprootedness; and much more. This is where WReC's combined but uneven development model meets recent approaches such as those taken in the environmental humanities, as exemplified in the work of Ursula Heise and Thornber, and in the medical humanities, as in Thornber's *Global Healing: Literature, Advocacy, Care*. But this is also where postcolonialism may step up to meet comparative and world literature studies, though not in a spirit of suspicion and antagonism, as has often been the case (Young, "World Literature" 213-222; Boehmer 299-308). Instead, postcolonialism can offer one more perspective on the inequalities in the world, shifting from "the rubrics of identity and hybridity" (Menozi 6) to the materialist aspects of colonialism, postcolonialism, and neocolonialism. And of course, all these may at one and the same time find a fruitful terrain for comparison and analysis, as in the oeuvre of Amitav Ghosh—but that is for another essay.

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