Neither Here nor There: The (Non-)Geographical Futures of Comparative Literature

Daniel Fried
University of Alberta

Zhang Hui
Peking University

Even at periods when it has been the most prone to assuming national essentialisms, Comparative Literature has contained within itself the seeds of its own deterritorialization. For if one once begins to 'compare', one will use (consciously or not) some standard by which such comparison is assumed possible. The nineteenth-century origins of Comparative Literature were obviously geographically limiting, sometimes to the point of explicit and deliberate racism. For example, Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett's *Comparative Literature* was published in the same "International Scientific Series" that included Social Darwinist works by Herbert Spencer and Oskar Schmidt; and Posnett presents his approach as using the evidence of literary expression to describe the differing stages of social development of various civilizations, just as comparative anatomy might determine lines of evolutionary descent. The ugly pseudo-scientific determinism of such work, with its division of literary traditions into more and less evolved, masked the possibility of a more disinterested appeal to neutral standards of evaluation; but twentieth-century universalisms in Marxism, psychoanalysis, or aesthetics encouraged comparative work to proceed at times as if local literary histories were irrelevant to reading.

The historical turn which has deeply affected literary research since the 1980s has aggressively reterritorialized all of our various subfields. Even as one recognizes that history inescapably implies not a national essence, but a confluence of competing local traditions which sample and remix ethnic, linguistic, or regional habits,

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the mental geographies of writers and thinkers have seemed to matter more even as actual national boundaries have been increasingly recognized as arbitrary arbiters of culture. Yet even as a focus on the necessity of the local and the particular has transformed our discipline for the better, would-be universals sneak back into our discourse, smuggled in on the unavoidable processes by which scholarly debate actually proceeds in its constant appropriation of concepts and terms. It does not take much reflection to recall many examples of how complex situated analysis has crystalized into convenient buzzword form, easily passed around in the particular-yet-universal academic commodity-form. Are such localist analytical frameworks really universally applicable, or might some particular locality be uniquely subject to universals?

We put things in this way not to mock the field (including our own work), but to highlight one contradiction inherent in it and the way in which the evolving distribution of scholarly practice may put into question our assumptions about the necessary operations of history. For, in fact, there certainly have been localist claims to exemption from what have seemed in some quarters to be a hegemonic Western consensus on proper (post-)literary hermeneutics. Acceptance of what might now be called the 'standard model' is still growing, but also still unevenly distributed globally, with non-Western academic departments of English defending what seems to be an internationalist and cosmopolitan consensus against often-'conservative' national language departments, which operate via a mix of indigenous discursive tradition, nationalism, and other ideologies whose provenance as the imports of an earlier age is glossed over. However, the growing ease of communication and travel between various versions of national or foreign or geographically indeterminate scholarship complicates these dynamics, too, just as it continues to complicate the dynamics of elite literary and mass cultural production.

The concurrent deterritorialization of both cultural production and scholarship should encourage us to rethink the relation between universals and particulars in underlying our assumptions about how comparative literature might compare. If we are to approach contemporary cultural production comparatively, does it make sense to continue to assume a basis of difference, when similar configurations of capital allow for parallel patterns of life in regions separated merely by distance, or by language? Or then again, for the ongoing comparative study of premodern materials whose original distinctness cannot be rewritten by current globalization, does the process by which increasing scholarly integration or reconfiguration across geographical distance encourage us to find new forms of consensus, or new sites of debate? To what degree must the integrity of local traditions remain paramount in the consideration of literary data, especially given the complex and unequal global distribution of cosmopolitan sensibilities (which resembles, but does not overlay, the unequal distribution of capital)?

Such questions have formed the core of an ongoing research and pedagogical collaboration between the Comparative Literature faculty at the University of Alberta

and Peking University. Two bilateral colloquia have been held between the faculty and graduate students of the two programs, the first in Beijing in October 2009, and the second in Edmonton in April 2012. Revised versions of certain of those papers, together with related scholarship from other contributors around the world, have been collected in this joint special issue with Peking University's *Journal of Comparative Literature and World Literature*. This is a two-part joint publication: six of our accepted papers are being published in this volume, with another four being published in *JCLWL* Volume 2014.2. All essays, however, have passed peer review for both journals, and hence the two issues are both equally joint productions. It is our hope that the form in which this joint project is produced will also be an evidentiary point for the questions it explores: readers may judge for themselves whether the various divisions in the geography of this project (by site of publication, location of authorship, field of study, etc.) are relevant to the content of the various approaches, and if the differing geographical frameworks are themselves mutually reinforcing or contradictory.

Within our broader theme, the six papers published in this volume all address more specific questions of the imaginary hermeneutics of place. If a given city, nation, or even civilizational tradition is removed from consideration as a particular spot of land, dotted with particular manifestations of the physically-there, what does it become, and for what is it useful? Are the conditions under which one place transformed by imagination replicable in others, or is there something in the literary imagination of place which fixes places and divides them more absolutely from each other than mere physical distance can? Are modes of interpretation—of texts, of cityscapes, of civilizational boundaries—reliant more upon the objects upon which they operate, via hermeneutical circles, or on the location of the interpreter, enmeshed within certain traditions of reading and expression, and excluded from others?

Yulia Naughton's essay, "'In Transit': Taxi Driving as a Mini-Paradigm in Gaito Gazdanov's *Night Roads* and Helen Potrebenko's *Taxi!*" fittingly opens the issue with an examination of a geographically self-contradictory trope. In the novels of Gazdanov and Potrebenko, taxi driving seems to function like the postmodern cosmopolitan city itself: simultaneously rootless yet intensely spatial. Although the protagonists' experiences of taxi-driving in 1930s Paris and 1970s Vancouver differ, Naughton posits that the "mini-paradigm" allows both authors, in their own ways, to highlight the circulation of a modern exilic subjectivity in and around the apparently objective cityscape. Naughton's ability to bring together two widely separated authors and their fictions through the fortuitous confluence of their highly specific dominant tropes suggests that our peculiar subjective position with regard to the cosmopolitan 'space' of analysis might, as in the two novels, be the primary driver of post-geographical comparison.

Keyang Dou's essay, focusing more on the cross-cultural application of what one might call 'macro-paradigms', offers a case study in one crucial hermeneutical tradi-

tion in Chinese literature, as an example of to what extent Gadamerian hermeneutics and Kuhnian paradigm theory may be used to trace the historical development of a non-Western discourse. The *Yijing* ("Classic of Changes," or *I Ching*, as it is still often titled in Western-langauge translations) is an archaic divination manual which very early took on layers of moralizing allegoresis; Dou's essay focuses on the process by which later commentarial modes evolved, especially the sharp break occurring early in the 20th century. Ultimately, Dou's reference to Kuhn is highly suggestive, not merely because of the sharpness of this paradigm shift, but because the modern claims to historical objectivity, like Kuhn's decriptions of the rhetoric of science, are argued to be acts of imagination, constructing a particular 'archaic' chronotope.

Of all the essays in our collection, Pei Zhang's examines the most thoroughly imaginary nation, the non/good-place of More's *Utopia*. Zhang's analysis stresses the nascent modernist politics implied in the early-modern text: it mimics the worst forms of the modern state, practicing certain forms of limited toleration, organized in the service of an absolutist authority. In his discussion of the dystopic, closed-but-liberal Utopia, perhaps Zhang also offers us a warning about the dangers of a world literature system after the purgation of geographical borders from our canons. Does this proactive tolerance in its own turn license the extension of a rationalizing authority which erases the necessity of regional and national literary histories?

Rebecca Gould, rather than imagining a unique island state outside of the world, discusses the practical challenge of reimagining world literature from the vantage point of an actual unique island state. "Conservative in Form, Revolutionary in Content" discusses the theoretical complexities of her firsthand experience setting up a world literature survey course at Yale-NUS College, a new liberal arts collaboration between Yale and the National University of Singapore. As the globalization of higher education is one of the most important academic trends of our age, Gould offers a fascinating perspective as a member of a faculty suspicious of enabling traditional Western intellectual hegemonies, yet charged with creating a "Great Books" style introductory survey of world literature. Her faculty's bracketing of what she calls "primary canonicity" (historical canonicity within a discrete civilizational tradition) in favor of "secondary canonicity" (texts capable of making claims on thoughtful readers across boundaries) seems to privilege imagination as a site in itself, not only alternative to national literary histories, but perhaps implicitly antagonistic to historical continuity as a standard of analysis.

Josh Stenberg's "Two Questions", in contrast, emphasizes the continued necessity of writing and teaching through historically-determined categories recognized in all their limitation and complexity. Stenberg deliberately conflates two quite separate facets of the intersection of 'Chinese literature' with 'world literature': the problem of mapping 'universal' genre systems onto the generally recalcitrant facts of premodern Chinese genre history, and the quest to define 'Sinophone literature' as a category distinct from 'Chinese literature'. As Stenberg observes, each question has been the subject of intense and separate debates; by discussing them in tandem, he

highlights the way in which categorical structures (whether of generic abstractions or of ethnic-national wholeness) have been party to the institution of a false history of commensurable but unbridgeable separation. One suspects that history need not be junked, but traced out in fine detail as a category which sometimes attaches to geography and sometimes transcends it.

Finally, Liyan Qin's reading of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* offers an example of what happens when alternate imaginative categories of centre and periphery collide. The "China" imagined in diasporic fictions like Kingston's is alienating and exotic to U.S. readers; but it is equally alienating and "wrong" to China-based readers, who imagine China with so much greater complexity and subjective experience that such imagination can only present itself to consciousness as simple knowledge. However, although Qin points out that Kingston's misrepresentations have limited her influence in China, it seems from her skilled analysis that the Chinese reader may be advantaged in reading Kingston or other Chinese-American fiction. One is used to quasi-heroic theorizations of the periphery reading the hegemonic centre against itself; but it seems that centres can read back at them, also progressively—and when the homelands of diasporic fiction are immediately recognized as constructions, isn't it easier to read such fiction as what it is, an imaginary map, and not a historical atlas?

Apart from these six essays on post-geographical imagination, there are also four more, by Tamara Hundorova, Massimo Verdicchio, Zheng Cai, and Sergiy Yakovenko, published in the companion issue of the *Journal of Comparative Literature and World Literature*, on the sub-theme of "The Temporal: Knots and New Departures." Neither set is wholly consistent in the answers it provides, or even in which aspects of post-geographical comparison are of greatest interest to the various contributors. This has been, however, part of the point of this project: not merely to investigate the diversity of reactions to an apparently-weakening hold of geography on world cultural life, but to discover the heterogeneity of ways in which a post-geographical comparative enterprise might be conceived, rebutted, engaged. We will be categorically happy if the results are found to be "neither here nor there."