theories and methodologies

World Studies and Relational Comparison

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A NEW KIND OF WORLD STUDIES IS EMERGING. THIS IS A WORLD STUDIES 2.0, SINCE SOME FORMS OF WORLD STUDIES, SUCH AS WORLD literature, world music, and world cinema, have existed for some years in the humanities. These categories have been more narrowly defined and refer to literature, music, and cinema from places other than the West—that is, "the rest," as seen from the West. In this vein, world literature has sometimes been euphemistically called "literature of the world at large," conjuring a chase, if only half-hearted, after a world that somehow slipped away: at large.

In contrast, our understanding of the purview of the new world studies includes both the West and the rest as one world, and it arises out of the widespread urge to be more expansive in our scholarship in the contemporary era of globalization, therefore also called "global studies," starting from the globalization of economy and extending to the globalization of culture. This urge was first expressed by scholars who studied the West, born of the perception that globalization was fast spreading from the West as new technologies and finance capitalism compressed time and space across the world. Some strands of the conversation were about how either the West will homogenize the rest or the rest will heterogenize the West and about the worries and celebrations that will attend either outcome. The conversation, in other words, was centered on the West. The itinerary of globally oriented scholarship then mimicked the perceived movement of globalization, emanating from Western-centric disciplines into, increasingly, the so-called area studies. The old division of labor between those who study the West and those who study the rest seems to be blurring now, and this is one of the consequences of the emergence of world studies 2.0.

The blurring of this division may also be a natural development or even continuation from the time when area studies, the Cold War product par excellence, was explicitly encouraged as a way to cull military and strategic information from the areas of the world important for American security interests (Harootunian and Miyoshi). As the

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zones of (in)security have spread, more and more areas of the world must be accounted for and contained by a new kind of area studies. Behind the emergence of world studies 2.0 may thus be a new imperial intent to know, map, and contain more parts of the world.

Even if it may be too soon to say that there is a continuum between area studies and world studies, I argue that it is never too early to worry about how *not* to do world studies.

This essay proposes a different kind of world studies, in this case world literary studies, which takes world-historical perspectives and uses a method that I call relational comparison (Shih, "Comparison"). My argument begins with two assumptions: first, that world literature happens in world history, making world-historical perspectives necessary for the study of world literature in its synchronic formations and in its longer *durée*; and, second, that we have always lived in an interconnected world punctuated and defined by relations of all kinds, especially power relations, so that world literature must be understood as a field of relations that extend horizontally across space and are transmitted vertically across time.

World Studies: Literature and History

Even though Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* has been around for two hundred years, it is only in the last ten years or so that the category has become widely, almost feverishly, reactivated. A new awareness of scope and scale informs recent theories of world literature: scope in terms of inclusiveness of larger areas of the world beyond the West, and scale in terms of how literary scholars, whose rice bowl used to be the close analysis of texts, must negotiate between the small material entity of a text and the largeness of the world. The pressure is especially acute in the discipline of comparative literature, since, as multilingual scholars, comparatists are seen as the natural proponents and arbiters of the contour and content of world literature. As many of us know, traditional comparative literature had tended to compare texts among European literatures, such as German and French, and the West was thus the visible, perennial, and privileged referent. To confront its Eurocentrism, comparative literature needed to include literatures from the rest, more or less following the logic of liberal multiculturalism to include the "greatest hits" from various national literatures (whether as tokens, representatives, or national allegories). By contrast, the erstwhile conceptualization of world literature as literature from the rest operated through an opposite logic, in which the West was the invisible or absent referent. The invisibility of the West in world literature was also a form of Eurocentrism in that it marked the West as universal—that is, beyond reference. To confront this Eurocentrism, the new world literature needs, ironically, to include the West. In other words, whether the West was included or not did not seem to have affected the Eurocentric thrust of comparative literature and world literature. The privileging of the West can happen through its presence as the ur-reference and its absence as that which transcends reference.

Clearly, including the rest is a step forward, but how big is this step? The canon's content might be expanded by including texts from the rest, but the idea and structure of the canon will likely remain stable. Furthermore, practices of inclusion and exclusion for an amended canon are inevitably built on a politics of recognition with its specific technologies (Shih, "Global Literature"), so that a simple liberal inclusionism not only becomes ineffective but may even exacerbate the problems. The manner of inclusion thus needs as much interrogation as the act itself, and a fundamental reconceptualization of the canon may also be necessary. When we do world literary studies, how do we decide what to include and exclude, on what criteria, and to what ends?

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One problem with most models of world literary studies, whether 1.0 or 2.0, has been a lack of attention to scale, to the ways we negotiate the difference or distance between the world and the text as we zoom out and in, or scale up and down, from the place of the literary text(s) in question. Effective scaling should allow what makes literature literature—that is, literariness—to remain a vital part of our conversation. The outpouring of criticism against Franco Moretti's "distant reading" indicates, if anything, scholars' dissatisfaction with a model that does not contain a dialectical consideration of distant reading and close reading.

Models of world history seemed to have fared better than models of world literary studies, and a few of the models of world history have important implications for world literary studies. For some strange reason, it seems that since the height of the linguistic turn in the 1970s and 1980s, when some historians borrowed from literary theory to critique historiography from deconstructionist and narratological perspectives, historians and literary scholars have been largely talking past each other. Heated debates in world history have been happening since long before the recent resurgence of world literature; hence, it is puzzling that theorists of world literature have scantly, if at all, engaged with world history.

Here, I am referring to what came after Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems theory: namely, the work of historians who critique the assumed European exceptionalism of world systems theory—the notion that the rise of the West in the sixteenth century coincided with the formation of a world economic system. These historians proposed that the world was an integrated system long before the sixteenth century. Some argue that a polycentric world system emerged as early as the thirteenth century (Abu-Lughod); or the fifteenth century, at the beginning of the Asian age (A. G. Frank); or even five thousand years ago (Frank and Gills). Maritime Asia's contribution to world integration; China's contribution of gunpowder, the compass, and printing; and the Middle East's contribution to mathematics and astronomy show that the world systems theory of the rise of the West as uniquely Western is problematic. Instead, what we see is that an interconnected world system existed for a long time and that the rise of the West was dependent on what was offered by the non-West (Hobson).

Many of these historians were influenced by Joseph Fletcher (Seigel), whose work has useful implications for world literary studies. According to Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Fletcher was a "greatly underrated historian" of China and Central Asia, whose concept of "integrative history" was a breakthrough in conceptualizations of world history and crucially influenced Subrahmanyam's own notion of "connected histories" (*Explorations* 2). In his posthumous essay "Integrative History: Parallels and Interconnections in the Early Modern Period, 1500–1800" (1995), Fletcher propounds methodological issues of world history. Fletcher identifies three terms that he thinks are crucial to the integrative approach:

> The first of these is *interconnection*, which I use to denote historical phenomena in which there is contact linking two or more societies, as, for example, the spread of an idea, institution, or religion, or the carrying on of a significant amount of trade between societies. The second is *horizontal continuity*, which denotes an economic, social, or cultural historical phenomenon experienced by two or more societies between which there is not necessarily any communication. (2)

The third, less important to him, is *vertical continuity*, which refers to institutional and cultural histories that trace back to the past and is the backbone of most national histories. Fletcher focuses on horizontal continuities, since vertical continuities have been overrepresented and the significance of already recognized interconnections is self-evident.

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In Fletcher's view, horizontal continuities refer to phenomena running parallel between two or more societies, which research might show to be connected in some way, sometimes even to share the same ultimate source. If these phenomena are not connected, they are merely parallel. Fletcher illustrates horizontal continuities with several major instances of apparent parallelism in early modern world history such as population growth, the rise of the urban commercial class, religious revival and missionary movements, rural unrest, and a decline of nomadism, and he finds that they turn out not to be mere parallelisms but in fact to be interconnected phenomena. Early modern history, he contends, is therefore a "needlepoint": "The horizontal continuities (the weft of the web) run from left to right. From top to bottom run the various vertical continuities of successive societies (the warp)" (33). This needlepoint, furthermore, is not a two-dimensional canvas but exists in three-dimensional space. A light shines through from behind the web and illuminates it, and the historian sees that the threads of the warp are of different kinds of fiber, color, and thickness and that the weft connects these threads either densely or loosely, in a myriad of patterns. Without the weft, there is no needlepoint, only a bag of threads (33–34). The world historian's task is to find the apparent parallelisms (the warp) and the connections among them (the weft) that constitute world history.

In contrast, proponents of "connected histories" illuminate not the entire needlepoint but a corner of it, though the scope of this corner always transcends the national. For instance, one historian looks at the cultural links between Latin America and the Arab world through Moorish Spain (Aidi). Others have looked at the interconnectedness of the Indian Ocean world, such as the interactions among peoples from the lands that rim the Indian Ocean that often extend beyond these lands (Chaudhuri; Bose; Pearson). A similar approach can be taken to examine, for instance, the Bay of Bengal, the Mediterranean, and the South China Sea. Subrahmanyam illustrates the scope of connected histories through the interconnection among some, not all, of the early modern empires, arguing that the Qing, Mughal, Ottoman, and Russian empires were "competing and intertwined" as they borrowed "symbols, ideas, and institutions" from each other. The diachronic transfer of imperial models and notions—*translatio imperii*—was therefore also synchronic (Subramanyam, "Holding"). In addition, Subrahmanyam often uses works of literature and art, such as travel narratives, poetry, and murals, to show the crucial role played by both experience-based and imaginary texts in connected histories. What flowed in the early modern world, he shows, were not just commodities and bullion but also symbolic and ideological constructs, echoing the concern Fletcher expresses above for the spread of ideas, institutions, and religions (see Amer in this cluster). The development of travel writing during this period reflected and facilitated this circulation of nonmaterial things, and an understanding of early modern world history therefore requires a study of travel literature as a literary genre (Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories" 291–94). To do connected histories, then, one should also study literature and literary forms. The historian of this period studying the Bay of Bengal, for instance, as Subrahmanyam notes, must "dig deep into the archives, but he must also listen closely to texts, whether in Persian, Sanskrit, or the Indian vernacular languages" (*Explorations* 14). Texts are crucial, whether oral or written, in multiple languages, literary and otherwise.

Works in integrative and connected histories can therefore offer useful ideas for the study of world literature. I take up and modify these insights below and combine them with more explicitly literary concerns, yielding the method of relational comparison I propose bringing to the study of world literature.

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The Arc of Relation

First, we can draw usefully from world history's view of the world as a field of interconnections across time and space made through already established links, vertical continuities, and, especially, horizontal continuities. The relation among literary texts in our conception of world literature can also be considered in terms of vertical and horizontal continuities, as a needlepoint, not as the usual gallery of greatest hits. In showing both time and space on one canvas, the needlepoint metaphor is actually quite literary: the representation of vertical continuities as threads in space aligns beautifully with the lyrical novel's penchant to spatialize time (J. Frank), which the metaphor makes visual as well as tactile. On this point, I would add that continuities or transfers may happen across discrepant spatialities and disjunctive temporalities; hence, we need to be open to unexpected connections and the unpredictable unfolding of these connections, as if the warp and the weft could be dislocated from their usual places and weave themselves together in unforeseen patterns. I would extend Fletcher's metaphor of light shining from behind the needlepoint and consider that the light illuminates different parts of the needlepoint in complex patterns of light and shadow, which indicate varying degrees of insight and blindness we have about certain aspects of, or events and moments in, world literature.

Second, even though world historians are proponents of macrohistories, some have attended to microhistorical aspects of these larger histories. While the World History Association maintains that "world history is macrohistory . . . transregional, transnational, and transcultural" ("What"), Subrahmanyam's work has shown that microhistorical evidences of literary as well as nonliterary texts are vital to understanding larger patterns in world history. This interplay between macro- and microhistories pertains to scaling, the capacity to scale up to the world and down to the text, albeit with some crucial differences from the similar practice of world literary scholars. World history zooms in for the purposes of zooming out, but zooming in and the zooming out are equally important to world literature. This is the burden and privilege of literary studies. While world historians might read literary texts either for documentary evidence of connections among different lands or for new geographic or intercultural imagination that implies certain connections (Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories"; *Explorations*), literary scholars would naturally read the texts differently.

Third, we can usefully consider the question of scope in terms of connected histories where the historian does not necessarily need to map or account for the entire world. Echoing my own thinking, Subrahmanyam suggests that we should "redraw maps that emerge from the problematics we study rather than invent problematics to fit our pre-existent cartographies" (*Explorations* 3). Similarly, world literary cartographies can be about the ways in which literary texts from different parts of the world relate to each other as seen through the lens of a specific problematic or set of problematics.

My proposal here is to consider a network of texts as a study of world literature along what I call a literary arc, which is not a closed circuit but an extendable and contractable trajectory that connects texts along an arc, elucidating certain problematics that are crucial for our understanding of world literature. Instead of aiming for global synthesis, the notion of a literary arc links multiple nodes, and a text can enter into relation with other texts anywhere along it, illuminating specific issues within a time period or across time periods. For instance, around the world-historical event of the Chinese coolie trade in the nineteenth century, which crossed the Pacific Ocean to the Americas and traversed the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, we

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can productively trace an arc of literary texts written during and after the event, which will help us illuminate the much suppressed knowledge about this trade, its human dimensions, and, especially, its humanistic and literary consequences (Shih, "Comparison").

Although I draw three aspects of world literary studies from world history, I find the scholarship wanting in two related areas. The first concerns how anti-Eurocentric world historians' desire to debunk the West's exceptionalism led to the unwitting proposition of an alternative center. In arguing for the importance of China's contributions to the world's development, Andre Gunder Frank, John M. Hobson, and others inadvertently turn China into an alternative center on par with the West. Much of globally oriented Chinese history—whether about tributary routes, maritime trade, or China's oceanic explorations—also tends to place China squarely at this center (Hamashita; Pomoranz; Levanthes). This is also a common problem for China-focused Marxist critiques of the West that, like Giovanni Arrighi's *Adam Smith in Beijing*, construct China as the economic, ideological, and political alternative to the West. A true anti-Eurocentrism should scatter all centers rather than replace one center with another, particularly with one that has long held a universalistic view of itself as the central, or middle, kingdom that extends to all "realms under heaven."[1]

Connected to the (un)intended construction of an alternative center is the way that much world-historical work seems to have missed the postcolonial turn altogether. The proponents of world history discussed above clearly do not overlap with those of postcolonial historiography, like Dipesh Chakravarty, Ann Laura Stoler, or Partha Chatterjee. World history's origin in "universal history," a philosophy that dates back to the Greco-Roman times and does not foreground colonial relations, might have something to do with its blindness to postcolonial issues.[2] Keeping the lesson learned from postcolonial studies about colonial power relations in mind, I would also emphasize the importance of interrelations among empires, which is distinct from postcolonial studies' usual focus on one empire and its postcolonial consequences in one colony. In *Empires in World History*, Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper argue, for instance, that not only did ancient Chinese and Roman empires exert lasting influence on later empires (vertical continuities) but that empires have always existed in relation to each other as far back as the thirteenth century (horizontal continuities).

Our analysis must therefore be not merely imperial but also, as Lenin would have it, inter-imperial (see Doyle in this cluster). Empires respond to pressures from adjacent empires, and colonies respond to the accretions of past empires (Doyle). Barbara Fuchs's notion of "imperial mimesis" (in this cluster) and what Robert Eskildsen has called "mimetic imperialism" are relevant here. Take, for example, the colonial history of Vietnam: for one thousand years Vietnam was a colony of China, long before it became a colony of France, while the Vietnam War, or, as it is known in Vietnam, the American War, was engineered by the United States, partly because the early collusion between France and the United States had failed and France had pulled out of Vietnam. Now, with the rise of China, Vietnam is again under the shadow of Chinese hegemony, even though it looked to the Soviet Union, rather than China, as its model during the high socialist period. If Vietnamese literature should be considered in terms of a world Francophone literary network, it must also be considered alongside Anglophone and, especially, Sinophone literary networks. *Inter-imperiality* refers not only to a worldwide interaction of empires—to their collusion, competition, and mimicry—but also to multilingualism in literature.

Édouard Glissant, who focuses on worldwide connectedness yet does not elide

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histories of conquest, slavery, and colonialism, offers an important means of intervention in our discussion of world literature. Influenced by chaos theory as well as by what he saw of the globalizing world of interrelations, Glissant famously proposed a poetics of Relation (with capital "R"). Even though the starting point for him is the experience of the "abyss" of slavery, an experience that is not chosen but imposed, his intention is not to apotheosize it. As he puts it, slavery is: "[n]ot just a specific knowledge, appetite, suffering, and delight of one particular people, not only that, but knowledge of the Whole, greater from having been at the abyss and freeing knowledge of Relation within the Whole" (8). Theorizing from the history of slavery, conquest, and colonialism means that conceptualizing the world as a site of "infinite interaction of cultures" (173)—that is, a world of Relation—depends on the understanding that Relation is about the "relationship with the Other" (11), a relationship of power. The particular experience of a people indexes how interconnections never happen in a power vacuum, and this awareness keeps us honest in our understanding of the incredible entanglement of cultures in our world, because "confluences always partake of marginality" (91). The history of slavery, conquest, and colonialism does not predetermine or foreclose the kinds of interactions that have happened or are possible but frees the "knowledge of Relation" and "clear[s] the way for Relation" (8). Relation thus refers not only to the past and the present but also to the future, an unforeseeable, unpredictable world of new possibilities best described as creolization, a process that can be painful or joyful, suppressive or creative, but never ending and ever generative.

World literature happens in world history; world history includes and needs world literature. World history and world literature are conjunctural formations intimately connected to each other. World history is a field of power relations in which world literature, itself a field of power relations, happens. As material objects and as events, world literature exists in world history; in turn, world history is not merely the background or context for world literature but a reality and a record that is enabled by world literature. We need, after all, a poetics that in Glissant's words "hint[s] at involvement in the evolution of world histories," a poetics of "worldwide Relation" (23).

While Glissant writes that the word *Relation* "functions somewhat like an intransitive verb" (27)—the condition of existence—I would extend his claim and assert that it can also function like a transitive verb, and thus Relation acts directly upon objects, terms, languages, texts, peoples, and societies and dispenses with any notion of insularity. I have called this active mode of Relation—the bringing of certain entities into relation—the method of relational comparison. The entities brought together for comparison are, so to speak, *relationed*. Doing comparative studies as relational studies means setting into motion relationalities between entities brought together for comparison and bringing into relation terms that have been traditionally pushed apart by certain interests. I consider the excavation of these relationalities to be the ethical practice of comparison, where marginalized texts from so-called peripheries or semiperipheries can, as much as canonical texts, be brought into Relation. The work of the comparatist thereby partially evens out the terrain of literature across the world, whether in circulation or representation.

According to Glissant, it is the nature of poetry to break down the center-periphery structure: "The poet's word leads from periphery to periphery, and, yes, it reproduces the track of circular nomadism; that is, it makes every periphery into a center; furthermore, it abolishes the very notion of center and periphery" (29). Relational comparison thus breaks up the center-periphery model of world systems theory, since the texts form a network of relations wherever the texts are

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written, read, and circulated. World literary studies is here, in a practical sense, comparative studies, and relational comparison helps link the two fields.

In this integrated conception of comparative literature and world literature, the main issue then is not inclusiveness or qualification (which text deserves to be studied or designated as "world literature" and which does not) but excavating and activating the historically specific set of relationalities across time and space. The poetics of the world (the patterns of world history) may be intimately connected to the poetics of the text (the formal arrangements in a text). We do not have to give up on either of the scales. In this regard, Hannah Arendt's notion of worldliness complements, or rather beautifully supplements, Edward Said's notion of worldliness, offering us further reflections on the question of scaling.

For Said, literary texts have a material presence in the world and are therefore worldly. Thus, as we engage with literature we must consider all the worldly aspects or contexts of the text, such as geopolitics, economics, and colonialism, emphasizing power relations and the political dimension (30–40). In this sense, Said's notion is close to Glissant's but does not, I think, contain the layeredness of Glissant's notion of Relation. Arendt's discussion of the work of art (including the literary text) offers a different but illuminating view into the literary text's worldliness. Interestingly, her notion of worldliness requires literariness or becomes literariness and vice versa, and herein lies the best answer, I believe, to the perennial question in postcolonial literary studies about context versus text, formation versus form, and worldliness versus literariness. According to Arendt, works of art are, foremost, things in the world, worldly things. Writing a work of literature, like composing a melody or painting an image, is a process of reification that requires workmanship; hence, works of art are things that have been worked on by the homo faber. Works of art are, moreover, different from other things that are merely useful, consumable, and exchangeable, things that require labor, not work. Arendt distinguishes between labor, which produces things necessary for fulfilling biological and other exigencies of life, and work, which creates the durable things that constitute human artifice, and she places the writing of literature in the category of work. While useful things can be worn out or used up, works of art are relatively useless and hence paradoxically more durable. This durability "gives the things of the world their relative independence from men" and "their 'objectivity' makes them withstand, 'stand against' and endure, at least for a time, the voracious needs and wants of their living makers and users" (137). In Arendt's view, then, the work of art is more worldly than other things and is part of what constitutes the objectivity of the world. Worldliness requires workmanship. For the work of literature, this means literariness—the attention to language and form—that makes literature literature.

What I propose, then, is a conception of world literature that emphasizes its situatedness in world history as a field of power relations while recognizing its literariness as constituting its worldliness. Literary texts along an arc come into relation through the critic's work, and perhaps this work, in its workmanship, also helps constitute the durability of the world, if only by upsetting Eurocentrism and other rigid power grids and by, if just for a moment, altering our conception of the world.

Notes

1. China's name, *Zhongguo*, means "central country": *zhong* 中 is "center" or "middle," and *guo* 國 is "country" or "kingdom." The notion of "realms under heaven" (*tianxia* 天下) is part of an imperial ideology that gives

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the emperor mandate to rule over the world. This notion has recently been revived as China exerts greater power and influence around the world.

2. See, for instance, Friedrich Schiller's classic 1789 essay "The Nature and Value of Universal History."

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