World Literature as an Approach to the Study of Chinese Science Fiction

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In this essay, I would like to talk about the approach that I have taken in studying Chinese science fiction, which is a world literature approach. Firstly, I should clarify what I mean by world literature, considering that it has become such a controversial term that the whole discipline of world literature seems to be teetering on the brink of collapse pending its definition. Since the early nineteenth century, various scholars and critics have held different views toward world literature: Goethe, Engels and Marx, Franco Moretti, David Damrosch, Pascale Casanova, Emily Apter; and countless others have written about it. The study of world literature is shrouded in an opaque mist of controversies: does world literature denote a canon of works, or is it composed of works that simply “circulate beyond their culture of origin” (Damrosch, 4), or does it include all the literature produced around the world? Or maybe none of the above? What methodology is suitable for the study of world literature (the conventional close textual reading or the bold “distant reading” proposed by Moretti)? What does the term “world literature” even mean? I propose that world literature should be considered as not a body of works, but as an approach that transcends national boundaries and looks at works in relation to each other and/or to the world in a global perspective. To give some concrete examples: a world literature approach might track the various transformations that King Lear underwent when it traveled around the world; it might analyze the defining features of Greek tragedy and compare it with modern Chinese plays; it might look at how rising environmental concerns in the twenty-first century influenced disaster novels in the pan-Pacific region, etc.

Admittedly, not all works are suitable for a world literature approach; there are, however, works that especially benefit from this approach. I consider many Chinese science fiction texts to belong to the latter. There are at least three reasons. The most important reason lies in the generic features of science fiction. It is the genre that is most outward-looking and future-oriented, with a cosmopolitan mindset. Instead of focusing on the most individual and personal experiences, it often takes a step back and looks at the broader picture. It is also a genre whose success has been a result of the development of various industrial revolutions, modernizations, and globalization, all of which involves complex global networks of capital exchange. The reason why Chinese science fiction is especially suited for a world literature approach is also because of its unique genealogy. Science fiction has been a borrowed genre in China from the very beginning (late Qing China). Throughout the twentieth century, its development and transformation has gone hand-in-hand with the introduction and translation of science fiction from outside of China, such as science fiction from Japan, Russia, UK, and the US, among others. Lastly, and most importantly, Chinese science fiction, like science fiction in the West, is a response to modern interactions with the
world, interactions that started with the country’s encounter with Western colonial powers and continued to include China’s deeper immersion into the world system and global capitalism.

The world literature approach is especially potent when it comes to the study of contemporary Chinese science fiction. Since we are in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world (at least before the COVID-19), contemporary literature overall tends to address this feature: texts have a closer relation to one another, they travel around the world at a faster-than-ever speed, and they deal with many issues that are common to countries around the world, such as the widening gap between poor and rich regions, environment pollution and global warming, migration (nationwide and internationally) and the various ensuing problems (such as discrimination against migrants), among others. Contemporary Chinese science fiction also addresses these issues and more. Since the 1990s, many Chinese science fiction texts are either direct or indirect reflections on the rise of China on the global stage and the blessings and curses of joining the global market; for the first time in its history, Chinese science fiction is travelling outside of its national boundaries and has been translated in a vast amount into various languages. Thus, a thorough study of contemporary Chinese science fiction calls for the world literature approach.

Some examples of my own practice of using world literature as an approach in the study of contemporary Chinese science fiction include the essays “Alien Encounters in Liu Cixin’s The Three-Body Trilogy and Arthur C. Clarke’s Childhood’s End” and “Imaginations of Globalization in Paolo Bacigalupi’s The Windup Girl and Chen Qiufan’s Waste Tide.” In the former, I compare Liu’s Three-Body trilogy against the generic features of golden-age alien-encounter science fiction represented by Childhood’s End, and argue that Liu’s alien encounter stories are best considered as a modern Chinese, postcolonial response to golden-age alien-encounter science fiction. In the latter essay, I look at how globalization is imagined in Chen Qiufan’s Waste Tide and Paolo Bacigalupi’s The Windup Girl. I argue that although the two novels have many similarities (for example, both present globalization from the perspective of the “receiving end”), they manifest one key differences when it comes to the critical theorization of globalization, especially in terms of the role of the nation state: whereas The Windup Girl reads like a novelization of the early theorization of globalization by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in Empire (2000), where they argue that the sovereignty of the nation state will be decomposed and replaced by transnational corporations as the new main players in world eco-politics, Waste Tide recognizes the important role the nation state continues to play in the global capitalist market, even as certain aspects of the state’s sovereign power have been relocated from nation states to global capital (just like how Hardt and Negri revised their own theorization of globalization in their later works, such as Multitude, Commonwealth, and Assembly). As can be seen, by using a world literature approach, some of the most important values of contemporary Chinese science fiction can be better parsed.

Since this is a very short essay, it is a pity that I can not elaborate further on many of the statements I have made. My main purpose, however, is to give a brief introduction of the value of using a world literature approach to study Chinese science fiction. World literature as an approach is by no means a fully developed theory. It needs more scholars to participate in the discussions.
and to refine it by asking more questions; questions such as: what does world literature as an approach mean, then, for the relation between world literature and comparative literature? Is there a difference, should there be a difference, and if so, what might that be? In conclusion, this essay is an attempt to initiate scholarly interests and discussions of world literature as an approach, especially when it comes to the study of Chinese science fiction. If it manages to raise questions in readers’ mind, or it prompts them to look into world literature and what it might mean, then I would consider my mission accomplished.

Works Cited

Mengtian Sun completed her PhD degree from the University of Melbourne. She is currently an assistant professor of English at City University of Macau. Her research interests include comparative and world literature, modern and contemporary literature, genre fiction (science fiction in particular), and gender studies, among others. She has published in journals such as *Science Fiction Studies* and *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China*. She also works as a literary translator.