Canon and World Literature

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Abstract

Canon or the classic refers to the best and most representative works in a literary or cultural tradition, and the rise of world literature now provides an opportunity for scholars of different literary traditions, particularly non-Western and the less well-known and insufficiently studied “minor” traditions, to introduce and present the canonical works they know best to form a canon of world literatures. World literature is not just all the works that happen to circulate beyond their culture of origin, but the collective body of the best canonical works from various literary traditions that circulate to constitute what we call world literature.

Keywords

canon – *jing* – sutra – classic – decanonization – postcolonialism – literary criticism

The word canon comes from the Greek *kanon*, which means “a straight rod,” “a ruler,” and thus “a standard,” and it was used by scholars in the Alexandrian library in the third and second centuries BC to refer to a list of exemplary books “as guidelines for student readers.” It was later adopted by Quintilian in his *Institutio oratoria* “to provide a reading list for students that will enrich their feeling for style, supply models to imitate, and provide knowledge of sources to which they can allude” (Kennedy 225). The *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Jewish Bible, according to the classicist George Kennedy, is “also a product of the Alexandrian library,” and therefore “the concept of a biblical canon was perhaps influenced by the existence of a literary canon” (226). From such close connection with a library and a reading list we may see that the concept of canon is from the very beginning pedagogical, a word used in educating young

scholars that refers to the best books as exemplars, as “a standard” of what is considered valuable in a literary or cultural tradition.

It is noteworthy that in China or East Asia, there is a similar concept of exemplary books for the education of the young, and in as early as the fourth century BC, the word 經 *jing* was already used to designate a limited number of books put in a special category as the most important texts for education. In the book attributed to the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi (369?-286 BC), Confucius was described as consulting with Laozi, saying that “I have been studying the six classics (*jing*)—*Poetry, Documents, Rites, Music, Changes*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and I think I have done it long enough to become familiar with their substances” (Guo 234). This is the first mention of *jing* as the Confucian canon in a Chinese text, and etymologically, as Jiang Boqian (1892–1956) argues by citing Zhang Binglin’s (1868–1936) philological explanation, the word *jing* “refers to tying things together with braided silk, just like what the Sanskrit word *sūtra* means in India.” Jiang further explains that “though *jing* originally was a general term for all books, it came to be the name of a special category, for in later times what was called *jing* was held in great reverence” (Jiang 2–3). In ancient China, silk threads were used to tie bamboo or wooden slips together to make a scroll as a book, so as a synecdoche the word *jing* came to mean book. In Sanskrit, the word *sūtra* etymologically comes “from *siv*, to sew, to thread, to string together,” thus a Buddhist text written on palm leaves strung together with a thread is called a *sūtra* (Soothill and Hodous 320b). When Buddhist texts were introduced to China in the first century and later, the Chinese word *jing* was used to translate the Sanskrit *sūtra*, and later it was used to translate the Western term canon or classic. *Jing* as book is thus also comparable to the word Bible, which is derived from “the Greek *ta biblia*, ‘the books,’” and “came into use during the early part of the Christian era” (Gabel and Wheeler 73). Though etymologically different from one another, the several terms mentioned here—canon, *jing*, *sūtra*, Bible, and the classic—all share the core meaning of the best and most important books in a particular literary, cultural, or religious tradition. These terms are more or less equivalent, synonymous, and thus translatable.

If in the Western tradition, as George Kennedy observes, a doctrinal canon was perhaps influenced by the prior existence of a literary canon, in China the Confucian canon, including *Shi jing* or the *Classic of Poetry* and *Yi jing* (*I Ching*) or the *Classic of Changes*, certainly emerged earlier and was regarded as a model for the literary canon. “What is called a classic (*jing*) is the everlasting ultimate *dao* and the unalterable great teaching,” says Liu Xie (465–522) in his well-known work in Chinese criticism, *The Literary Mind or the Carving of Dragons* (Liu 1, 21). The word *jing*, however, was not under a Confucian

monopoly, for it was also used for the Daoist canon and for books of other schools of thought, thus the *Laozi* is also known as *Dao de jing* (*Tao te ching*) or the *Classic of Dao and Virtue*, and part of the *Mozi* is named *Mo jing*. The word was also used for the best of literary works. A long poem by Qu Yuan (339?-277? BC) of the early third century BC, *Li sao* or *Taking Leave of Sorrow*, was called *Li sao jing* by the Han dynasty scholar Wang Yi in the second century when he published the poem with his annotations. Thus great literary works are gradually canonized in the long history of Chinese literature, and the concept of canon and the number of canonical works constantly expand to include more. In an influential critical work of the early thirteenth century, *Canglang's Remarks on Poetry*, Yan Yu clearly formulated a literary canon as required reading for anyone who wanted to study poetry. "First familiarize yourself with the *Songs of the South*, read it morning and evening and take it as roots," he gave the advice. Then he went on to provide a list of works from the Han to the Tang dynasty, ending with the greatest Tang poets of the eighth century: "Take the collections of Li Bo and Du Fu and put them right by your pillows and read, just like the way people nowadays study the Confucian classics" (Yan 1, 73). The literary canon continued to expand, and towards the end of dynastic history in the late nineteenth century, many more important works of different genres were added to Yan Yu's list. In China, as in any other country, the literary canon includes exemplary works and represents the best achievements in the literary tradition.

Canon, particularly literary canon, is changeable. Under different social and cultural conditions, some works may lose their value or prestige, while others may reveal their significance unrecognized or unappreciated before. In our time, scholars and readers alike are more interested than ever before in literary works by women and minority writers, writers from non-Western traditions, and what is admissible in the canon has expanded to include works overlooked by the traditional European canon. Expansion, however, is not everything, and literary works cannot become canonical simply because they have been overlooked or neglected in the past. Canon tends to be severely selective and stable, and before a literary work can be accepted as canonical, it needs the work of critics and scholars to convince people of its literary value and its significance in every other aspect. Canon formation is an important issue in the discussion of world literature, and the formation of a world literary canon must be the result of literary scholarship that explain how a particular work may appeal to readers in very different social, political, cultural, and historical conditions beyond its national origin.

It would seem only logical that with the rise of world literature, scholars from the world's different literary traditions should be able to select the best of

their works to form a canon of world literature. Indeed, this is what I see as the value of world literature for our time, because it provides a great opportunity for scholars of the world's various literary traditions, particularly non-Western and hitherto neglected and overlooked "minor" traditions, to introduce the best of their works to a global audience, to make their canonical works known to the world outside their limited national environment. This seems the right thing to do at the right time as the renewed interest in world literature today is based on a truly global vision beyond the biases and myopia of Eurocentrism, Sinocentrism, or any other ethnocentrism. With regard to world literature, we are all ignorant, for there is always something new and exciting for us to learn, always an ocean of undiscovered treasures lying before us while we stand on the seashore, holding just a few pebbles or shells in hand. Speaking for myself and of my ignorance, I would love to learn more about Persian and Arabic literature, about the mystic Sufi poets, and the *ghazals* of Rumi, Sa'di and Hafiz. I would want to learn more about Indian literature, the fantastic tales of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the enchanting poems of Rabindranath Tagore and many more. I would want to hear the voices of Egypt and Mesopotamia, of Africa and South America. And what about Europe other than the major literatures, about Nordic literature, Czech and Polish literature, and literatures of the "minor" languages? Indeed, wouldn't even the well-known major works of European literature appear in some new light when illuminated from a truly global perspective? There is so much we do not know, and we are missing so much of the best literary works that could have made our world and our lives spiritually and intellectually so much richer and so much more enjoyable.

In my view, it should be the task of literary scholars everywhere to introduce and present the canonical works they know best to the world beyond the culture of their origin. I say canonical works because these are by definition the best and most exemplary works of different literary traditions, works that have stood the test of time and proven to be valuable for generations of readers under very different social, political, and cultural conditions. *Ars longa, vita brevis*. Because there are far too many books to read, we cannot afford but to read the very best of the world's numerous literary works, and the only way to know what are the best books is to depend on critics and scholars of the world's different literary traditions to tell us about their canonical works, and to convince us why they are worth reading. Facing the impossibility of actually reading world literature, Franco Moretti proposes "distant reading" as a method "to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems" (162). But "distant reading" must be complemented by "close reading" of exemplary texts, and thus literary criticism becomes very important in forming a canon of world

literature. World literature is not and cannot be the conglomeration of books that happen to circulate widely in the international book market, not books on the bestselling list promoted by publishers or media for commercial profit or ideological interest. World literature is the integrated body of canonical works of the world's literary traditions.

And yet, in Western academic criticism, particularly in American universities, the idea of canon may be somewhat controversial. The article I quoted above from George Kennedy was published in a volume debating liberal education in America in the early 1990s, when there was a "controversy between neo-conservatives and postmodernists," in which, says Kennedy, "teachers of Greek and Latin have found themselves in a curious position." As classicists, the texts they teach were "great books" written by dead white males and under attack by feminists, postmodernists, and postcolonialists, but naturally "revered by traditionalists" (Kennedy 223). The division between the "neoconservatives and postmodernists" seemed clear-cut and the polemical tone over the "canon war" sounded intense. Literary works, including canonical works, may indeed have different interpretations, but the "canon war" and the ensuing "decanonization" in American academia of the 1990s went way beyond the usual difference of opinions and interpretive plurality. In a way the politics of literary criticism may well reflect the political reality of the United States as a fragmented multicultural society that has trouble coming to a consensus over the conflict of group interests and identity politics. For a period of time, literary criticism in American academia became so antagonistic that the traditional canon was "decanonized," the very concept of canon became, along with "great books," suspect of conservatism and traditional, repressive ideologies. So much so that when Frank Kermode delivered his Berkeley Tanner Lectures in 2001, he deliberately chose canon as a polemical topic and had a blunt exchange with his commentators, particularly John Guillory the celebrated cultural critic.

Change has always been a feature of canon, says Kermode, but in past debate "it was rarely or never suggested that the entire canon, whatever its members, should be decanonized." He found the situation in the 1990s quite different, for the very notion of canon was suspected of being "a wicked myth, designed to justify the oppression of minorities," and literary value was "set aside as without relevance or even derided as demonstrable nonsense" (Kermode 15). Kermode argued not only for canon, but also for aesthetic pleasure, which, he claimed, should be "a necessary though not obvious requirement of the canonical" (20). As a cultural critic, Guillory held very different views. He rejected the idea that a work of literature or art could give us aesthetic pleasure higher than any other kinds of pleasure people could experience in daily life. "The restriction of aesthetic pleasure to the certified work of art has been a consequential philo-

sophical error," says Guillory (Kermode 70). Aesthetic pleasure, he continues, "is no more nor less necessary to our humanness than the pleasure of sex, food, conversation, and many others" (75). Refusal of value judgment and rejection of any hierarchical relationships are typically postmodern, and rejection of the higher, aesthetic pleasure also meant rejection of canon as higher, "monumentalized" work. Thus Guillory recommended "to retreat from attempting to make the connection between the quality of pleasure and the judgment of canonicity, and further to withdraw the claim that aesthetic pleasures are in any defensible sense 'higher pleasures'" (74). Guillory seemed to regard the canonization or "monumentalization" of literary works a very bad thing, "the risk of their elevation to the status of canonicity" (75). Cultural critics would not give literature a privileged position, because the purpose of cultural criticism was to promote "a progressive politics," and for that purpose, it would make no difference at all whether the critic was using a literary work or any other work. In cultural criticism, "the encounter with a cultural work," says Guillory, was nothing but "an occasion for confirming or contesting the belief systems expressed in the work" (67). Thus literary scholars, according to Guillory, had "the disinclination to regard works of literature as the necessary or constitutive object of literary criticism" (65). This may not be true of all literary scholars, and Guillory's polemical statements may represent a radical position not shared by many other critics and literary scholars, but the debate between Kermode and Guillory, especially the intense polemical tone, certainly indicates that literary studies were having problems in the 1990s and the early 2000s in America.

Many literary scholars realized that the fading away of literature was a major problem. "In the last few decades," as Haun Saussy put it in the ACLA report ten years ago, "it has seemed possible to make a career in literary studies without making sustained reference to works of literature" (Saussy 12). As a remedy, Saussy called for a reexamination of "literariness" (17). It seems to me that the rise of world literature offers an opportunity to return to literature and to invigorate literary studies. But even today, many scholars still feel reluctant to speak of canon for fear of appearing conservative or even reactionary, for "the very topic of 'great books,'" as John Kirby observes, still "stirs such contestation, controversy, and even conflict" (Kirby 273). "Canon making of all sorts," he continues, "has been extensively criticized, even deplored, in recent decades" (277). Even in an effort to bring together postcolonial literature and world literature, Robert Young actually ends up showing how the two are more separated than related by precisely defining postcolonial literature against a notion of world literature as the world's canonical works.

If the idea of world literature is often traced back to Goethe in celebration of his cosmopolitan appreciation of non-Western literatures, including "his

enthusiasm for the Persian poet, Hafiz,” says Young, what the postcolonial critic emphasizes is the fact that the translator of Hafiz, Sir William Jones, was “a judge in the service of the East India Company; his translation from Oriental languages were in part intended to facilitate the exercise of colonial power” (Young 213). Unlike world literature with its “universal” claims, postcolonial literature is “literature of resistance,” unabashedly “partial, locked into a particular problematic of power” (216). A postcolonial writer “is less concerned with aesthetic impact than making a critical intervention,” and for postcolonial literature, Young argues, “aesthetic criteria come only at a secondary level” (217). The dichotomy between the universal and the partial, the aesthetic and the political, already seems simplistic and without a solid theoretical foundation, but more inscrutable is postcolonial literature’s claim to moral superiority, its special “relation to the ethical” (Young 218). But how can postcolonial literature monopolize all virtues of resistance and fighting against injustice, as if there were no pain, no suffering, and no injustice before or outside European colonialization? How can the postcolonial “literature of resistance” claim to be the only “ethical” form of literature? Isn’t it true that many of the world’s great works of literature also deal with the tragedies of the human world and call for justice and promote ethical values?

Postcolonial theory is a discourse generated in Western academic institutions, in UK and the US in particular, and has engaged in theoretical debate on many issues, but as Harish Trivedi notes, it is “the voluntary migration of the Third World postcolonial intellectuals to the First World which has almost exclusively defined the parameters of this debate, with relatively little attention paid so far to the much larger and wider subaltern diaspora of indigent labourers and farm-workers” (Trivedi xxii–xxiii). If so, then, why should a postmodern and postcolonial view of literature and canon formulated in Western academia, and self-consciously “partial, locked into a particular problematic of power,” be universally applied to other literatures outside the West? In China, for example, it is yet unthinkable that anyone would propose to “decanonize” Li Bo, Du Fu, the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, and all the other canonical works from the past, and even if purely hypothetically someone did make such a proposal, it is unlikely for that proposal to be taken seriously. But again, even in America, “decanonization” is more of a slogan than social reality. With the smoke of extreme claims and polemical rhetoric cleared out, what emerges clearly as the point of contention in most debates and critiques of traditional canon is to gain a foothold in the canon rather than to get rid of the canon altogether. It is more about canonizing new authors than excommunicating old ones, about teaching authors like Toni Morrison, Chinua Achebe, and Amy Tan, rather than Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, or Herman Melville. Established through time and

changes, canon is resilient and tenacious, and in actual course offerings, Shakespeare and many other canonical authors are doing as well as ever. The literary canon is expanding as it should be, and with the rise of world literature, it has the opportunity to expand even further and for the first time into areas unnoticed or even unknown before. The canon of world literature is yet to be established by the collaborative work of literary scholars the world over.

For me, world literature offers a good opportunity to go back to literature, which means back to reading and appreciation of canonical works of the world's literary traditions, to literary studies without apology. In fact, most Chinese would understand the dire consequences of radical "decanonization," because of our historical experience. The fate of canon in China has gone through radical changes, more radical than any "decanonization" in American academia. The Confucian canon was thrown into disuse at the beginning of the twentieth century during the May Fourth new culture movement, and during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, almost all books were banned and even burned, denounced as "poisonous weeds." Whatever came from China's past was condemned as "feudalist," whatever from the West was "capitalist," and whatever from the Soviet block was "revisionist," which pretty much put all human culture, including China's own, into the dustbin of wrong "belief systems." There was no canon, and even more thoroughly, there was no education, as all schools from primary to universities were closed in China for ten years in the fervor of the Cultural Revolution. Such self-hatred and self-destruction brought China to the brink of a total collapse economically, politically, and culturally, and that may explain in part why most Chinese would firmly embrace their culture and tradition today. The canon, despite all radical and violent critiques, survives. Time, it seems, is the only thing that makes or breaks a canon. But of course, critique of canon or skepticism of predecessors is nothing new in history. In the Tang dynasty in China, there were people picking on earlier poets and their works, and we may do well to remember what the great poet Du Fu (712–770) famously says in defense of tradition and the canonical (Du 2, 899):

爾曹身與名俱滅
不廢江河萬古流

All ye scornful are gone, body and name,
But forever the rivers will go on flowing!

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