World of Letters

Lu Xun, Benjamin, and Daodejing

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Abstract

While the discourse of national literature was fully espoused in modern China, many Chinese classics were transposed into Europe and had a unique impact on European modernist literature. Overshadowed by these oft-discussed dynamics are Chinese modernists' own engagements with the nation's classics. Focusing on *Daodejing*, the foundational work of the Daoist canon, this paper compares Lu Xun's modernist retelling of the legend of the birth of *Daodejing* with Walter Benjamin's commentary on Bertolt Brecht's poem featuring the same anecdote. This paper argues that both works, by reconstructing the scene of *Daodejing*'s first inscription, engage with this text in its lost original moment, which precedes any national identification. They open the text up to other configurations, thereby projecting alternative literary worlds. This paper thus questions the dominant conception of world literature as consisting of the circulation of nationally identified works of literature.

Keywords

World Literature – modernism – *Daodejing* – Lu Xun – Walter Benjamin – Bertolt Brecht

Introduction

What is world literature composed of? If one rejects a simple, static image of a collection of multinational Great Books, and conceives of it as a certain

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world-scale dynamics of literary creation, circulation, and reception, what, nevertheless, are the agents composing such dynamics? A standard answer, still, seems to be “national literatures,” where “nation” is understood broadly to designate not simply the modern nation-states, but also ethnic groups or cultures in general. “A work enters into world literature by a double process,” argues David Damrosch, “first, by being read *as* literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin” (16). Under this conception, a text must first be read and gain distinction as literature within its home culture before it can travel into distant host cultures. The literary distinction that the work obtains in its place of origin provides it with currency and fluidity necessary for crossing borders and engaging with a larger world. This twofold process seems to be a fair premise constituting an inherent “natural law,” as it were, of how world literature works.¹

Writers after Herder, indeed, particularly embraced the idea of national literature as a necessary means for creating a work of universal value: Herder held that each and every literature that reflected a particular nation’s aesthetic sensibilities would take part in a general history of humanity.² The modern concept of a national literature especially implies the desire for recognition of the world-literary relevance of that literature, while the right to be read as world literature is reserved for the works appreciated within a national context. In the case of modern China, for example, the debates regarding national literature in fact have always involved the question of what the universal value of literature would be. One instance that epitomizes this conceptual marriage between national and world literatures appears in the 1921 “Reform Manifesto” of the literary magazine *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小说月报 (Fiction Monthly).³ Drafted

1 An important exception to such a conception is the utopianism of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, where Marx and Engels argue that a single “world literature” will eventually replace “one-sided,” “narrow-minded” national literatures (Marx and Engels 76–7).

2 Herder suggests that one “[should] not blame any nation for preferring their poets to all others,” for “they are *its* [that nation’s] poets. They have thought in *its* language, have exercised their imaginations in *its* context; they have felt the needs of the nation within which they were raised and have answered them in turn.” The nation’s literature, at the same time, registers itself in “some kind of *progress*” of human culture; as he argues, “Does not the spirit of poetry, through all the oscillations and eccentricities in which it has so far bestirred itself among nations and times, increasingly strive to abandon all false ornament, all rudeness of sensation, and to look for the center of all human endeavor, namely the *true, whole, moral nature of humanity*, the *philosophy of life*? The comparison of eras makes this very plausible to me” (Herder 5; 8).

3 *Xiaoshuo yuebao*, first inaugurated in 1910, had been known for publishing popular fiction in

by a group of writers gathered around the young Mao Dun 茅盾 (1896–1981), who would become one of the most renowned writers of modern China, it proclaims: “We firmly believe that the literature of a nation is a reflection of its national character, and that only a literature that can express the national character is able to possess true value and occupy a corner of world literature” (Mao 21).⁴

On the other hand, largely independent of these movements in the home context, yet roughly contemporaneously, a range of Chinese classics were transposed into Europe and had unique effects on the development of European modernist literature.⁵ This paper focuses on one notable example, *Daodejing* 道德经, the canonical Daoist text also known as *Laozi* 老子. While variants of this text have been translated into European languages over 250 times, Daoism is also recognized to have been transculturated in works by writers such as the Zurich Dadaists, as well as Pound and Brecht.⁶ These are exemplary cases of a nation’s literature that traveled into a distant host culture and gained world-literary significance.

These dynamics of Chinese literary modernity—the creation of national literature and the reception of the nation’s classics in Europe—illustrate the process of a national literature engaging with a broader world, and vice versa. But what this configuration fails to address is the question of how modern Chinese intellectuals themselves revisited the nation’s classics at home. At the same time as China fully espoused the idea of national literature, the country saw a remarkable flourishing of aesthetic discourses seeking to devise various concepts and strategies to connect the millennia-long history of Chinese letters with literary values in a newly-conceived “world.”⁷ Writers of modern Chinese literature furthermore created works that conjured up the literary past in heterogeneous, highly idiosyncratic ways, redefining, dislocating, and even deconstructing their cultural identities. How can we understand the modernist

traditional narrative styles when Mao Dun and his peers assumed its editorship in 1921 and undertook to reform it into a prominent venue for new literature. The “Reform Manifesto” was published on that occasion.

4 Translations from Chinese in this paper are mine, unless otherwise noted.

5 For the general question of China and European modernism, see in particular Hayot.

6 For the translations of *Daodejing* into European languages, see LaFargue and Pas. For Daoism in European modernism, see Bramble (78); Sheppard (266–91); Qian (65–87); Hayot (71–5).

7 The aestheticians such as Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868–1940), Wang Guowei 王国维 (1877–1927), Zhu Guangqian 朱光潜 (1897–1986), and Zong Baihua 宗白华 (1897–1986) pioneered this under-studied yet crucial endeavor in the early twentieth century.

reception of Chinese classics in Europe once we compare it with the modernist rewritings of the same corpus of texts back in their place of origin? With this question in mind, this paper examines two modernist engagements with the *Daodejing*: the Chinese writer Lu Xun's 1936 short story "Chu guan 出关" (Leaving the Pass) and Walter Benjamin's 1939 commentary on Bertolt Brecht's poem "Legende von der Entstehung des Buches *Taoteking* auf dem Weg des Lao-tse in die Emigration" (Legend of the Origin of the Book *Daodejing* on Laozi's Way into Exile, 1938). By reinterpreting the legend of the birth of the *Daodejing*, these works bracket out the text's subsequent national identity, and reimagine it in its lost original form. A literary world that involves these two almost contemporaneous cases should, I argue, not be conceived of as one that merely consists of the foreign circulation of works of national literatures; instead, these works reconstruct a world in which the original inscription of *Daodejing*, prior to any national identification, would have existed. These modernist imaginations thus register the text in a literary world where hegemonic textual transmissions are suspended, and the text's primordial openness to other interpretative possibilities is recovered. I intend to explore the purely coincidental cases of Lu Xun's and Benjamin's engagements with *Daodejing* in a comparative perspective in order to consider parallel approaches to the historical material in these writers, thereby illustrating a modern fate of the Daoist canon in a wider context than the classic configuration of the interaction between the West and China, a configuration inherently premised on national identification.

The Lost Origin of *Daodejing*: Lu Xun's 'Chu guan'

In January 1936, in the inaugural issue of a short-lived literary magazine *Haiyan* 海燕 (Petrel), Lu Xun published "Chu guan," a short story featuring the ancient sage Laozi 老子. The work was later included in a volume entitled *Gushi xinbian* 故事新编 (Old Stories Retold, 1936), which collected the modernist rewritings of ancient Chinese myths and legends that Lu Xun had intermittently undertaken throughout his literary career. A leader of the May Fourth literary revolution, Lu Xun practiced "new literature" through a relentless critique of tradition. But if T.S. Eliot regarded literary modernity to be meaningless without a "historical sense" (114), Lu Xun's critique also put forward anything but a simple, progressive transition from the old to the new. What defined Lu Xun's modernism was instead a persistent and self-critical engagement with the cultural past. It was through a reflective critique of a self that embodied obsolete, "inhuman" aspects of Chinese tradition that he was able, in a utopian temporality, to

imagine what a modern Chinese subjectivity would be. The stories collected in *Gushi xinbian* encapsulate how Lu Xun's modernism engaged with history, through reinterpreting, rewriting, and reconstructing premodern letters.

Like the other *Gushi xinbian* pieces, "Chu guan" draws upon a variety of historical materials, including *Shiji* 史记 (The Records of the Historian), *Daodejing*, and *Zhuangzi* 庄子. The story features legendary anecdotes about the sage Laozi recorded in these sources. These legends are sedimented in Chinese cultural memory, and may readily evoke in the reader's mind a degree of familiarity with the subject matter. That horizon of expectation, however, is quickly betrayed by the work's thick narrative, whose unique formal characteristics—such as heavy repetition, anachronistic word choices, a self-mocking tone, and even absurdity—produce an effect of estrangement. The work thus insistently emphasizes the heterogeneity of the narrative to the familiar story it retells, revealing arbitrariness between the form and the content; it thus puts the truth value of the historical legends into brackets, fictionalizing them into a "story."

The story of "Chu guan" is centered on the well-known episode about the genesis of *Daodejing*. According to the chapter "Biography of Laozi and Hanfeizi" of *Shiji*, Laozi decided to leave the state of Zhou (c. 1046–256 BC) when he observed its decline. As he reached the Hangu Pass, Laozi was addressed by the border guard Yin Xi, who pleaded with him to write a book before going into seclusion. The legend has it that Laozi recorded his teachings in a two-volume book in five thousand words.⁸ In Daoism, this episode is of the utmost importance, as it explains the origin of its tradition, and Yin Xi, sometimes called *wenshi xiansheng* 文始先生 (Master of the Beginning of Letters), is worshiped as the privileged disciple who enabled Laozi's teaching to be passed on in the form of a text (see Kohn). But Lu Xun's retelling deconstructs this Daoist myth of origin.

Lu Xun's narrative combines this legend with another famous anecdote, in which Laozi teaches Confucius about "ritual" (*li* 礼). Recorded in the "Movement of Heaven" (Tianyun 天运) chapter of *Zhuangzi*, this philosophical anecdote is concerned with the question of language and communicability. Confucius believes in the practical efficacy of studying the Six Classics, yet he continues to wonder how puzzling the Way is, for even after he has mastered all of these Classics, no ruler has granted him an official position. Laozi claims that it is actually fortunate for his student not to have met a capable ruler, and bestows on him a higher teaching: the Six Classics, indeed, are nothing but "traces"

8 "Laozi Hanfei liezhuan 老子韩非列传" (Biography of Laozi and Hanfeizi) in *Shiji*.

(*chenji* 陈迹) of the Old Kings; they are not that which left those traces. “The words you’re now speaking,” Laozi declares, “are also like such traces. Traces are left by a shoe; they are not the shoe itself.”⁹ Elaborating on his depreciation of written language, Laozi insists that one should directly become one with the changes of nature in order to master the Way. Once it is obtained, everything will be done. Confucius is said to have then actually attained the Way, thanks to this wisdom.

The idea of combining this anecdote with the Hangu Pass legend came from the exegesis of ancient Chinese philosophy by Lu Xun’s mentor Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (1869–1936). Zhang’s idiosyncratic interpretation argued that it was precisely because Confucius mastered the Way that Laozi decided to leave the Zhou. As Zhang Taiyan contends, Confucius, whose teaching had originated in Laozi, did not want to worship Laozi as master, and was afraid that Laozi might come to uncover shortcomings in his understanding. Confucius then wanted to deprive Laozi of his fame. Realizing Confucius’s intention, Laozi began to feel anxious about his fate, suspecting that Confucius might terminate him, just as “Feng Meng killed Yi.” Laozi thus decides to go into seclusion (Zhang 5–6). Zhang Taiyan’s idea of explaining the Laozi legends as a tale of master-disciple rivalry is, to be sure, merely a fancy, as Lu Xun himself admits.¹⁰ But not only “Chu guan” but other stories in *Gushi xinbian* also deal with related themes. This topic is particularly foregrounded in the story of the murder of the legendary archery master Yi by his student Feng Meng, which Zhang Taiyan alludes to; Lu Xun rewrites and alters this myth into a story where the master successfully averts and survives the disciple’s attacks.¹¹ Lu Xun also features the mythological bladesmith Gan Jiang, who is assassinated by the king to whom he offered one of his two masterpiece swords, and yet is avenged by his son.¹² In each of these stories, someone who obtains an extraordinary art that language alone is unable to convey kills its original possessor in order to appropriate it. These are stories of violence that, driven by the desire to make transmission pure and complete, without the possibility of difference, eliminates the singular source of the message. Lu Xun’s narratives, then, tackle an impossible task, to seek justice against this irreversible violence. In the Laozi legends reimaged by Lu Xun via Zhang Taiyan, Laozi fights such schemes by going into exile

9 “Tianyun 天运” [Movement of Heaven] in *Zhuangzi*.

10 Lu Xun, “‘Chu guan’ de ‘guan’ 《出关》的‘关’” [The “pass” of “Leaving the Pass”] (Lu 6, 539).

11 Lu Xun, “Beng yue 奔月” [Fleeing to the Moon] (Lu 2, 370–84).

12 Lu Xun, “Zhu jian 铸剑” [Forging the Swords] (Lu 2, 432–53).

and, more importantly, by *writing down* and giving material embodiment to his teaching at the pass, despite his own disparagement of written language as mere “traces” inferior to the meaning of his teaching.¹³

“Chu guan” satirically dramatizes this self-contradiction, by emphasizing the precarious state of the text that Laozi leaves in the hands of Yin Xi. In the story, Yin Xi is a customs officer watching for smugglers at the pass, and demands writing from his teacher before allowing him to go through the gate. Bothered and reluctant, Laozi nevertheless writes down his teaching on two sets of wood strips, which Yin Xi and other officials collect and store together with other confiscated items like salt, sesame, and cotton cloth. But they are not sure if Laozi’s text was even worth acquiring, for they may not be able to resell it for a profit, as they do the other products. What Laozi leaves at the pass, then, is far from a canonical, or even a literary or philosophical work, but just one of those “goods” (*huose* 货色); or even worse, it is merely a set of uncertain, risky *letters* whose significance or value nobody is able to understand. Thus permitted to pass the gate, Laozi mounts his black ox and disappears into the desert. No one knows his destination.

Lu Xun’s rewriting of the Laozi legends dislocates the desire to appropriate the lost origin—the desire that is expressed, in a most dramatic way, in what Zhang Taiyan fictionalized as Confucius’s fatal scheme. Instead of identifying the two-volume, five-thousand-word book documented in *Shiji* with the beginning of a tradition, “Chu guan” thus satirically recreates the lost original text as a mere stack of strips of wood stored with other, probably more valuable, goods. This idiosyncratic representation, in fact, brings the classic text close to Lu Xun’s deeply self-doubting descriptions of his own work in the “Preface” to *Gushi xinbian*.¹⁴ Lu Xun finds himself in an age when textual identities are

13 One may want to recall the opening of *Daodejing*: “Dao ke dao, fei chang dao. Ming ke ming, fei chang ming 道可道，非常道；名可名，非常名,” which James Legge, for instance, renders: “The Dao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Dao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name” (Lao-tzu 1). In another interpretation, the first phrase is translated as “The Dao that can be *spoken of* is not ...” Laozi’s philosophy is premised on the fundamental heterogeneity of the primordial Way to language.

14 In the “Preface” to *Gushi xinbian*, Lu Xun self-mockingly states: “Most of the pieces [collected in *Gushi xinbian*] are only sketches, and do not deserve the name of fiction that may be discussed in an ‘introduction to literature.’ At times I base, to some extent, the narrative upon old materials; at others, my imagination simply roams free. And because I can’t convince myself that the ancients are as worthy of respect as my contemporaries, I’ve found myself periodically slipping into the quicksands of facetiousness. ... But as long as I

overdetermined after untraceable, entangled transmissions. This critical consciousness of modernity led Lu Xun in 1936 to disparage contemporary critics who tried to identify the figure of Laozi in “Chu guan” with, for example, a particular person. He criticizes such critics for “chasing after the buttocks of [Laozi’s] black ox” and commits to “holding them back at the gate” (Lu 6, 539). Thus resisting the desire to identify and appropriate the lost origin, Lu Xun’s fiction recovers those hypothetical original letters that Laozi is supposed to have written down, leaving the text at the “gate,” alone, and subjecting it to a precarious yet boundless itinerary of circulation and reading, just like Laozi’s solitary journey in the desert.

Daodejing and a Messianic Power: Benjamin’s Commentary

In April 1939, Walter Benjamin published a commentary on Bertolt Brecht’s poem “Legende von der Entstehung des Buches *Taoteking* auf dem Weg des Laotse in die Emigration.” Hannah Arendt calls this poem “among the stillest and ... most consoling poems written in our century.” According to Arendt, Benjamin visited Brecht in Denmark and brought this poem back to Paris in the spring of 1939, and “like a rumor of good tidings,” this poem quickly spread “by word of mouth” (Arendt 245).¹⁵ As Nazi Germany burned his books and deprived him of citizenship, Brecht was exiled in Svendborg. Benjamin’s involvement in helping publish this poem distantly yet clearly echoes the legend of the genesis of *Daodejing*.

Written only a few years apart, and without either author reading the other’s work, both Lu Xun’s and Brecht’s retellings of the Hangu Pass anecdote feature the figure of Yin Xi as a customs officer, and broach the question of relationship between writing and political power. But while Lu Xun’s short story sheds a satirical light on corruption involving the border officials who resell confiscated items for their gain, Brecht’s poem creates an unlikely solidarity between Yin Xi and Laozi, one enforcing the state’s power and the other expelled by it. What ties them together is a maxim in chapter 78 of *Daodejing*, which Brecht renders in the voice of a boy accompanying the sage: “That yielding water in motion / In the course of time overcomes [besiegt] the mighty stone. / You get me: the

haven’t made the ancients seem even deader than they already are, I suppose this book has a flimsy justification for its existence” (Lu 2, 354). I here quote, with some modifications, Lovell’s translation (Lu *The Real Story* 296–7).

15 For a general account of the relationship between Brecht and Benjamin, see Wizisla and Shuttleworth.

hard thing gives way" (Brecht *Werke* 33–4).¹⁶ After reflecting for a few moments on this saying, the customs officer halts the departing company:

And he yelled out: "Hey you, stop!

- 7 What's this about water, old man, that's so special?"
 The old man stopped: "Does it interest you?"
 Said the other: "I'm only a customs official,
 But who gets the better of whom, that interests me too.
 If you know and can tell me, do!
- 8 Write it down for me [Schreib mir's auf]! Dictate it to this boy!
 You don't take things like that with you. Have a care.
 Of paper and ink we've a copious supply.
 And there's a supper for you too. I live in there.
 Well, do you call that fair?"
- 9 Over his shoulder the old sage now
 Glanced at the man. Patched coat. Never owned a shoe.
 One deep wrinkle his brow.
 Oh, this was no victor. So much he knew.
 And he murmured: "You too?"

This petty official becomes interested in Laozi's teaching out of simple curiosity ("But who gets the better of whom, that interests me too"), and he receives the sage with hospitality, giving him ample time and the materials needed to write down his wisdom. Brecht implies class consciousness in their relationship ("Patched coat. Never owned a shoe. / One deep wrinkle his brow"), whereas Benjamin reads in it a moment of "friendliness" (*Freundlichkeit*).

Benjamin contends, "It might be untrue to say that friendliness is the actual content of the book, *Daodejing*; but it would be entirely true to say that, according to the legend, without the spirit of friendliness the book would never have been handed down to us." Teasing out a "special role" that friendliness plays in Brechtian poetics, Benjamin deems friendliness to be "the minimum program of humanity," which is manifested in "the hardest moments of existence." The three instances of "the friendliness of the world" are the mother putting diapers

16 I have consulted Anna Bostock's translation included in Benjamin's *Understanding* (70–2).
 I have also referred to Brecht's *Poems* (314–6).

on a child, the father taking the boy by the hand, and people throwing handfuls of earth on a man's grave. "And that is enough," Benjamin writes, and so one can forget anxiety about the future and be cheerful. For there is a promise hidden in friendliness, one that "has nothing to concede to the promise of a Messiah," which is articulated in Laozi's teaching: "the hard thing gives way." Defeating the hard-power relationship between the victor and the oppressed, and preventing political power from expelling Laozi's wisdom, the birth of *Daodejing* precisely testifies to the realization of such a promise. Benjamin thus calls the days Laozi spent at the customs officer's home, writing down his teaching, "world-historic days," which Brecht's poem imagines to have lasted "for seven days," an explicit reference to the biblical Book of Genesis (*Understanding* 72–4).

Political power regulates temporality by remembering the victor, preserving and transmitting the "document of civilization" which is always "at the same time a document of barbarism" (Benjamin *Illuminations* 256). Benjamin reads the genesis of *Daodejing*, represented in Brecht's poetic imagination, as a singular event allowing an exile to leave his writing, disrupting the hegemonic order of documentation and cultural temporality, and thus marking a new beginning. This gesture parallels Lu Xun's deconstructive fictionalization of the birth of *Daodejing*, which reconstructs the original moment of textual inscription prior to any cultural identification. If Lu Xun's historical sense is attuned to "yishi 逸史," or "deviation from history / deviated history" (Lu 9, 312), Benjamin's "historical materialist" reading "dissociates [itself] from [hegemonic cultural transmission] as far as possible" with "cautious detachment" (Benjamin *Illuminations* 256–7). Benjamin's gaze thus reads *Daodejing* in an alternative historicity, as a material realization of "friendliness" endowed with a "weak Messianic power" (254), a revolutionary promise for the oppressed to overcome the oppressor, thus overturning the dominant economy of cultural transmission.

Is reading a Messianic promise in the birth of the Daoist canon a perversion? Maybe. But Benjamin's commentary points to a particular mode of reading that can be compared with Lu Xun's engagement with the literary past. Benjamin's reading is grafted onto Brecht's poetic imagination, while Lu Xun's retelling manifests the fictionality of literary tradition. Both of them, inspired by the unique origin legend, reconstruct the primordial event of textual inscription—the moment in which the text, preceding its subsequent transmission, would have been open to other possibilities of mediation. If Benjamin uses Brecht's poem to draw a correspondence between Laozi's writing and a Messianic imagination, Lu Xun also, in a satirical light, sees in Laozi's original text an unlikely potential for communication. In "Chu guan," the border officials in fact ask Laozi to write down his teaching because no one was able to understand his

oral lecture. The audience became bored and fell asleep, not only because his language was exceedingly cryptic, but also because “his pronunciation was unarticulated since he did not have teeth. He spoke a Shanxi dialect mixed with Hunan sounds, so he could not distinguish ‘L’ from ‘N,’ and frequently used something sounding like ‘er’” (Lu 2, 459–60). The clerk among the audience speaks in a Suzhou dialect, while the accountant uses speech mixing northern and southern idioms. They cannot understand Laozi “because his national language [*guoyu* 国语] was not entirely pure,” and at the same time Laozi himself cannot understand their language, either. It is in this desperate malfunctioning of conversation on the borderland that the officials ask Laozi to “supplement [*bufa* 补发] the lecture” by writing it down—hence the birth of *Daodejing* (460). In “Chu guan,” the original writing thus becomes a figure of (mis)communication among disparate peripheral dialects, on the border where they interface with each other—an antithesis to territorializing communication by means of instituting a “national language.” The desert into which Laozi disappears at the end of the story is a metaphor for where such communication might take place—a place where conditions for communication are always uncertain, and yet communication is open to boundless destinations.

Conclusion

The origin myths that Lu Xun and Benjamin reconstruct are not stories of a religious tradition, a culture, or a nation, but rather of a borderland and an exile. Their modernist readings create figures of *Daodejing* that are heterogeneous to its established cultural identities. Lu Xun’s satirical narrative envisages a deterritorializing communication between peripheries without any stable “national language,” while Benjamin’s wild imagination reads in the Daoist canon an anachronistic, transcultural dissemination of a Messianic promise. The reimagined origin of *Daodejing* therefore implies a certain decentered universality, which in Lu Xun communicates peripheries, and in Benjamin transmits exiles’ voices.

The literary world in which Lu Xun and Benjamin intertextualize *Daodejing* is not simply to be pictured as a world composed of circulations of national literatures—one in which a Chinese canon is transmitted through centuries at home, and then circulated out into Europe. Rather, their works illuminate the condition of possibility for those very literary dynamics. In Lu Xun’s and Benjamin’s modernist imaginations, *Daodejing* is received as its lost original inscription, preceding any subsequent identifications and circulations. Encountering these modernists, *Daodejing* thus finds itself in an age that Niet-

zsche dubs “the age of comparison,” in which texts have lost their time-honored value and are subject to comparison for radical reevaluation (Nietzsche 33). With such a modernist consciousness, Lu Xun and Benjamin reduce *Daodejing*’s national identity and suspend its existing course of circulation, leading it to be posited in alternative configurations. Their approaches to *Daodejing* can be illustrated by the method of “historical materialism” as sketched by Benjamin:

Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad.

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In Lu Xun’s and Benjamin’s historical-materialist gazes, *Daodejing* does not exist as an object placed in a larger world, but it reflects, as a “monad,” a world itself. For Lu Xun, that world would have been one in which modern Chinese subjectivity finally emerges on the ruins of the nation’s hegemonic civilizational traditions; and for Benjamin, one that realizes a Messianic promise. In their engagements with the Daoist classic, Lu Xun and Benjamin exemplify an approach to literature that we may call “world literature.” It is a mode of reading literature that accounts for irreducible, boundless openness to a world that any text possesses prior to any cultural identification.

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