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Introduction

China and the Humanities Today

This special-focus section of *minnesota review* issue 79 is devoted to the peculiar place that China has come to occupy in the global humanities, especially in relation to the United States and Western Europe. American universities imported the humanities tradition from Europe, adapting it to changing times. The entry of a new superpower will no doubt upset the balance of intellectual trade. In the United States, China has become a hot topic beyond the business schools, slowly emerging into the humanities from the sinology ghetto, as evidenced, for example, by recent special issues of the prominent journals *boundary 2* and *Social Text*.¹ Simultaneous with this growing interest in China, humanities departments in the United States are suffering from diminished university support. American scholars mourn the end of the postwar expansion in higher education, complaining of a crisis in the humanities. At the same time, there is no shortage of new objects of study—texts, images (still and moving), ideologies, ideas. Globalization multiplied them, by expanding the Eurocentric humanities tradition to include content from the South and the East. Meanwhile, the booming Chinese state is pouring resources into its own humanities programs. Its scholars enjoy unprecedented institutional and financial support even as they assume a tradition of public intellectuals that the United States has never had (see Liu Kang in this issue). It remains to be seen how the humanities in the United States will adapt to the rise of China, especially given that the globalized content of the humanities is already bursting the seams of our shrinking language, literature, and culture programs, which have spent the last few decades absorbing works of critical theory, women, pop culture, gender minorities, ethnicities, the third world, the postcolonial world, and so on. Literary studies exemplifies the expansion-contraction dilemma also faced by disciplines such as art history, history, sociology, and political science. Because world literature is not merely an expansion of literary studies but also, and especially, its transformation, world literature is not an object but a problem, argues Franco Moretti (cited by Wang Ning in this issue). If there is such a thing as world humanities, and I think that if there is not then there should be, it faces analogous problems.

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As China enters into American comparative literature, cultural studies, and related fields in the humanities and interpretive social sciences, its situation resembles that of postcolonial studies during the 1990s, but with significant differences. It is no coincidence that both articles and the interview in this special-focus section mention postcolonial theory even though mainland China was never colonized. What postcolonial and Chinese studies share is their status as objects of knowledge that arrive in the United States accompanied by their own subjects of knowledge: just as the field of postcolonial studies was led by scholars from the Middle East and south Asia with close ties to Europe and North America, so Chinese studies is being led by scholars like those featured here. Wang is professor of English and comparative literature and director of the Center for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at prestigious Tsinghua University in Beijing and Zhiyuan Professor of Humanities at Shanghai Jiao Tong University. He has traveled extensively abroad to conferences and to give invited lectures and has published widely both in China and in top American journals, including *boundary 2* and *Critical Inquiry*. He has invited numerous North American and European scholars to speak in China. It was thanks to his invitation that W. J. T. Mitchell visited Tsinghua University, where he was interviewed by Wang's colleague Sheng Anfeng; their exchange is included in this issue. Liu is chair, professor, and dean of the Institute of Arts and Humanities at Shanghai Jiao Tong University and, in the United States, professor of Chinese cultural and media studies at Duke University as well as director of Duke's China Research Center. I am grateful to both Wang and Liu for inviting me to speak at Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Tsinghua University, and the 2011 meeting of the Chinese Comparative Literature Association. The CCLA provides ample evidence of China's adaptation of the comparative literature model, including literary and critical theory.

To what extent have these East-West exchanges among humanities scholars answered Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's quest for new disciplinary alignments? On the one hand, she calls for "a new Comparative Literature, whose hallmark remains a care for language and idiom" (2003, 5). We need, she says, to retain "the best of the old Comparative Literature: the skill of reading closely in the original." On the other hand, she urges us "to consider the resources of Area Studies, specifically geared for what lies beyond the Euro-U.S." (6). Area studies was born of the Cold War, but, admirably, it learned minority languages and rigorously pursued an interdisciplinary analy-

sis of specific regions. In contrast, comparative literature was born of the immigration of European intellectuals to the United States and has been slow to move beyond Europe. Meanwhile, Spivak continues, academic cultural studies has remained “a metropolitan phenomenon originating on the radical fringes of national language departments,” limited to “metropolitan language” and “presentist and personalist political convictions, often with visibly foregone conclusions that cannot match the implicit political cunning of Area Studies at their best” (8). However, Spivak’s remarks only partly apply to China, whose vertiginous economic growth has made it a metropolitan power in its own right. At the same time, Chinese leaders are acutely aware that they lag far behind the United States and Europe in their deployment of soft power, a point addressed by Liu in this issue. This is one of the motivations behind the Chinese government’s funding of the humanities and social sciences. However, Chinese scholars like Liu and Wang seek something else: full entry into the global humanities dialogue, which remains dominated by North American and European scholars. Despite the impressive intellectual and institutional efforts of such Chinese scholars and the embrace of many prominent American scholars, the integration of China into the global humanities remains uneven. As Wang notes, during the early twentieth century the great books of the Anglo-European canon were translated into Chinese, but not vice versa. Chinese literature remains available primarily to sinologists, which is a small group. In contrast, postcolonial literature was often written in English, Spanish, French, or Portuguese, and thus within the American academic landscape these works were able to enter into the larger existing national literature departments.

In order to advance in the era of globalization, the humanities must not only extend their geographical scope but also, and especially, face paradigmatic shifts. In order to do so, the humanities must work together with social sciences, as argued by Spivak. As if demonstrating this point, Liu maps out the shifting interplay among the humanities, social sciences, media, and policy makers in his article “‘Dinner Party of Discourse Owners’: China’s Intellectual Scene Today.” He divides present-day Chinese intellectuals into four categories, describing their trajectories since Deng Xiaoping initiated reform and the opening up of China in 1979. In “Translating Modernity and (Re)constructing World Literature,” Wang focuses on the problem of world literature. Instead of asking the world to learn Chinese, he calls for better translations and for more patience for foreignness among English-speaking readers.

I include Sheng An-feng's interview with W. J. T. Mitchell even though their discussion is by no means limited to China. Their conversation demonstrates the rapid globalization of academe, in which any study of literature or culture participates in both local and transnational conversations. If the humanities in the United States manages to emerge from the current crisis, its very survival will indicate that it has managed to thoughtfully and carefully preserve the best of comparative literature, area studies, and cultural studies while developing the new intellectual tools necessary to remain engaged with the contemporary world despite—if not thanks to—the humanities' heavy political and historical burdens.

Note

1. See the following journal issues: "China after Thirty Years of Reform: Critical Reflections," ed. Q. S. Tong and Jiwei Ci, special issue, *boundary 2* 38, no. 1 (2011); and "China and the Human," ed. David L. Eng, Teemu Ruskola, and Shuang Shen, special issue, *Social Text*, no. 110 (2012).

Work Cited

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 2003. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press.