

BRINGING STUDENTS INTO THE WORLD

Asia in the World Literature Classroom

By Melek Ortobasi

The term *Weltliteratur* (world literature) was first coined by German author Johann Wilhelm von Goethe in the late 1820s. Writing during a period of great political upheaval in Europe, he hopefully noted: *There has been talk for some time of a general world literature, and indeed not without justice. For the nations, after they had been thrown into confusion by the most terrible wars [ie, the Napoleonic Wars], could not return to their independent life again without noticing that they had unconsciously adopted some foreign ways.*¹

The idea that literature had a special ability to transcend national boundaries and could potentially lead to a greater understanding among peoples is what led to the establishment of the field of comparative literature in the late nineteenth century. World literature, which has recently grown beyond a concept into a discipline, is an outgrowth of comparative literature—but one that carries with it an expanded geographic mandate.

The “new, improved” discussion of world literature began almost twenty years ago and generally seeks to overcome the Eurocentrism that has characterized the field of comparative literature in the past. As a teacher, I particularly appreciate the work of David Damrosch, currently chair of the Comparative Literature Department at Harvard University, who has done more than anyone to promote the idea of world literature and reinvigorate the cross-cultural research and teaching of literature.² To supplement Damrosch’s investment in the popularization of world literature, which I agree is an effective medium for helping students live in an increasingly globalized world, I offer here some basic suggestions and further resources for incorporating Asian literary texts into the world literature classroom.

I am a Japanologist who earned her PhD in comparative literature just as the more recent discussion of world literature emerged; I am now housed in one of the very few world literature programs in the world. I am quite familiar with straddling disciplinary and linguistic boundaries both in my research and in the classroom. Of course, I cannot claim knowledge of all Asian literatures—but I strongly believe that with some good research and consultation with expert colleagues, nonspecialists can successfully and productively incorporate foreign and unfamiliar texts into the high school or undergraduate curriculum.³ The point is not to uncover “universals,” although surely there are themes and ideas that are widely shared among historical periods and geographical areas, but to encounter, negotiate, and learn from *difference*.

How can one focus on difference when teaching a foreign text that has been domesticated through translation? I propose a threefold answer: provide relevant historical and cultural context; explore compelling but complex comparisons; and, finally, *read closely*. Reading with an awareness of one’s own linguistic, cultural, and historical position, as well as being alive to what I very scientifically call the “lumpiness” (or the uneven texture) of the translated text, can lead to important insights into how intercultural/lingual communication actually happens—or *could* happen.

Next, how does one choose texts from the staggering (but, even so, limited) range of translated literature available? The latest and/or updated world literature anthologies that have recently been published are a good and readily available resource to help inform those choices.⁴ Of course, the organizational structure such collections (perhaps necessarily) pursue is conceptually inflexible. They tend to repeat some of the same classic Asian works—such as *The Tale of Genji* or *The Dream of the Red Chamber*—over and over again; finally, they are massive tomes and so can be difficult to



adopt as textbooks. Nevertheless, they introduce a variety of international materials one might not otherwise encounter. As such, they are useful resources for nonspecialists, especially because they have greatly expanded their inclusion of non-Western materials in their latest iterations.

In any case, when one is trying to construct a first-year syllabus titled “Introduction to World Literature,” there is really no question of covering an entire canon and/or chronology (to say nothing of the whole world). Instead, in the thirteen to sixteen weeks that compose the semester, it is preferable to present a loose “network,” rather than a list of texts. The connection(s) among texts can be thematic, stylistic, causal, etc. It is up to the instructor to figure out the “fit” among the texts—and then to work with the students to unearth the potentials and pitfalls of comparison across space and time. In my opinion, every good world literature syllabus should be more than a list of “greatest hits.” It should present not only important and fascinating works of literature, but *how* those works are, or could be, in dialogue (or conflict!) with each other. In other words, the syllabus is about method as much as it is about material.

The works presented below are not intended as an exhaustive—or even representative—list of literary masterpieces from Asia. Rather, they are a demonstration of how an instructor without area expertise can begin to build a network of texts through research and association. This is why I have moved out of my own comfort zone. I have purposely *not* selected Japanese works of literature as my starting point. Instead, I introduce four works from India, China, Korea, and Indonesia. I always research, as best I can, the original linguistic and local or national context for each. The list of resources I include below each entry reflect the importance of this foundational knowledge. In each description, however, I put an emphasis on “worlding” the text in one way or another. Some texts are born transnational, of course, which is a boon. However, others become so only through translation, sometimes very reluctantly. I offer the brief explorations below as an example of how I pre-read works with a view to teaching them in a world literature course.

INDIA

The Rāmāyaṇa

Thought to be composed almost 3,000 years ago, this multilayered, originally oral Sanskrit epic is still central to the popular and religious imagination in South Asia. One could also say that it is an archetypal work of world literature. It exists in many versions in many languages, as does the *Mahābhārata*, the other great Sanskrit epic. The story of Rama, a legendary prince and an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, the *Rāmāyaṇa* teaches its audience about the importance of fate, social order (caste), and family relations. Much beloved in South and Southeast Asia, the story follows the life of young Rama and his virtuous wife, Sita, as they are banished from the kingdom over a contest for the throne. Restored to his rightful place at the end of the narrative, Rama is a hero who subsequently leads his kingdom into an era of peace and order.

The text provides a wealth of opportunities for comparison, not least in terms of adaptations of itself. Many experts in the field introduce the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the classroom through writer R. K. Narayan’s modern, condensed retelling of the epic in English.⁵ One can then compare short selections from Narayan with much older sources, such as Vālmiki’s ancient Sanskrit text (usually referred to as the “original”) and Tulsidās’s



sixteenth-century Hindi version.⁶ Because the text is still so important in contemporary South Asia, there are also plenty of contemporary retellings to draw from, such as the seventy-eight-episode television series *Rāmāyaṇa* (director Ramanand Sagar), which enthralled the entire Indian nation when it started airing in 1987. Such adaptations, of course, are a great way to pique the interest of students, thoroughly immersed in media culture as most of them are.

In Southeast Asia, where Indian cultural influence is at its strongest, the *Rāmāyaṇa* has also influenced a variety of media; the most notable retelling is probably the eighteenth-century Thai national epic, the *Ramakien*. An East Asian example of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is the 1992 Japanese animated feature *Rāmāyaṇa: The Legend of Prince Rama* (*Rāmāyaṇa: Rāma ōji densetsu*), an Indo-Japanese coproduction. The mind-boggling diversity of these adaptations reveals an interesting facet of world literature: Whether they employ the original text to build nation or encourage international amity, the receiving cultures tend to make them into something new, appropriating them for their own local purposes.

Further afield, where the *Rāmāyaṇa* does not have as direct and demonstrable an influence on literary tradition, the text can be read comparatively with others as a more discrete cultural and textual object. Even if the classical Western generic label “epic” does not really apply to this ancient Sanskrit text, its exploration of the foibles of gods and humans clearly invites comparison with Greek texts such as *The Odyssey* or *The Iliad*.

One of the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s central attractions, the love between Rama and his wife Sita provides ample fodder for a nuanced discussion of gender in the high school or undergraduate classroom. One could also include the Greek epics here, because the kidnapping of Sita and the test of her virtue after she is rescued reminds us of the similar fate of Helen of Troy in *The Iliad*. While Sita is still often seen as the ideal wife, unlike Helen, both women are judged by many of the same values and have been reimagined in visual media countless times. What the comparison of Helen with Sita can add to the debate is the important insight that, while both women are actual individuals as well as symbolic concepts, they perform significantly different cultural and literary functions as characters.

RESOURCES

Doniger, Wendy. “The Shadow Sita and the Phantom Helen.” *Splitting the Difference: Gender and Myth in Ancient Greece and India*. Chapters 8–87. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Richman, Paula, ed. *Many Rāmāyaṇa: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. Particularly useful for a world literature course are Richman’s introduction and A. K. Ramanujan’s seminal essay “Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇa: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation.”

Smith, John D. “Old Indian: The Two Sanskrit Epics.” *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry*, Edited by A.D. Hatto, Vol. 1. London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1980. 48–78. This work functions as a good basic introduction to the *Rāmāyaṇa* (and the *Mahābhārata*).

CHINA

Song of Lasting Regret

BY BO JUYI (OR BAI JUYI, 772–846)

This oft-anthologized Tang dynasty poem, whose title is translated variously (eg. “A Song of Everlasting Sorrow”), treats the obsession of the Tang Emperor Minghuang (or Xuanzong, 685–762) for his beautiful consort, Yang Guifei. The people blamed her for the terrible An Lushan rebellion (755–763); the story goes that when the emperor tried to flee the capital with her, soldiers demanded she be executed first—which she was, right in front of the emperor. This tragedy about the conflict between love and duty has long been popular throughout East Asia, where Confucian values have

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generally dictated prioritizing the latter over the former. Nevertheless, the romantic and fatalistic aesthetic of beauty presented in this iconic poem has also been important within the rich East Asian tradition of poetry, which highly prizes intertextuality. As a result, Yang herself has become a prominent source of allusion throughout the region as the quintessential poetic symbol of femininity (whether admirable or abominable).

For connections beyond Asia, one might suggest the comparison between Yang and—again—Helen of Troy, the daughter of Zeus and Leda, whose seduction by Paris was purportedly the cause of the Trojan War. Of course, Yang Guifei was ancillary to the political fracture in the Tang state (simply because the emperor was apparently so distracted by her that he was not paying enough attention to matters of state). In the Greek example, Helen is more central because she was the object of the fight between Greece and Troy. Nevertheless, in both literary cases, the love of a woman (or at least the idea of her) is the source of political mayhem with wide-ranging consequences.

Both women have certainly featured in many literary texts beyond their origins; they have also been a favored subject in painting and sculpture (not to mention films). Selections from Homer’s *Iliad*, where Helen appears in several places, could work well with Bo’s poem, especially in conjunction with subsequent portrayals of both women in visual art; the images of these legendary women have clearly adapted to changes in cultural and historical context. The simultaneous fascination with and fear of female beauty is a leitmotif in multiple religious and cultural traditions and is an issue that still resonates strongly with students. The short length and expressive language of the poem make this text especially suitable for the high school classroom. Additionally, North American students may not recognize Yang’s name, but many of them have at least heard of Helen of Troy.

RESOURCES

Beauchamp, Fay. “East Asian Attitudes Towards Court Women: The Legend of Yang Guifei.” <http://bit.ly/12JcBKS>. Beauchamp’s wonderful and detailed teaching plan centers on the legend of Yang Guifei, focusing in particular on the poem and Murasaki Shikibu’s direct response to it a couple of centuries later in the famous Japanese courtly romance *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*, eleventh century). What binds these texts is their treatment of women at court.

Graham, Masako Nakagawa. *The Yang Kuei-Fei Legend in Japanese Literature*, Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998. Bo Juyi, while respected in China, is arguably much more revered in Japan. Indeed, Yang (*Yōkihi* in Japanese) has been so popular in Japanese literature, theater, and film that she merits her own study (note the alternate spelling of her name in the title). Newer examples from Graham’s study could extend the discussion into the modern age.

Maguire, Laurie. *Helen of Troy: From Homer to Hollywood*. New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. A bit broader in focus than Nakagawa’s study of Yang in terms of genre, this literary biography discusses numerous depictions of Helen in (primarily) Anglophone literature and popular culture. Both the topic and the style of this book are very accessible.



KOREA

From Wönso Pond (In'gan munje, 1934)

BY KANG KYÖNG-AE

SAMUEL PERRY, TRANSLATOR

NEW YORK: THE FEMINIST PRESS AT THE
CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK, 2009

Turning now to modern literature, this realist novel by a young female author views colonial, pre-World War II Korea from the perspective of women and the working class. Originally serialized in a newspaper and marketed as melodramatic fiction for women, this critically acclaimed, though long neglected work also reflects the attitudes of a politically aware, educated “new woman.” Following a number of young Koreans as they try to negotiate life, love, and identity in a part of the Japanese empire, *From Wönso Pond* is a socialist commentary on and engaging narrative account of Korea’s embattled but burgeoning modernity. Part of a growing movement to write a Korean national(ist) literature, even under the strictures of colonial rule, it represents part of a fascinating body of work written both in Korean and the colonial language, Japanese.

Perry’s translation, which makes this novel available to the English-reading public for the first time, is both fluid and accompanied by a succinct but informative introduction. The socialist, feminist tone of Kang’s work, as well as its historical moment, means that it resonates well with the writings of other Asian “new women,” such as Japanese writer Hayashi Fumiko (1903–1951)⁷ or Chinese writer Ding Ling (1904–1986).⁸ Proletarian works from Europe’s interwar period, especially those by women, would also offer fodder for discussion. For example, Irmgard Keun’s novel *The Artificial Silk Girl (Das kunstseidene Mädchen, 1932)*, about the life of a young factory girl in Berlin, bears some significant resemblances to Kang’s narrative, in which two of the young female characters also go to work at a factory. Newer writings by Koreans living in Japan (called *zainichi*) also provide an interesting transnational opportunity for comparison because they often present and explore the aftereffects of colonial Korean identity.⁹ The novel’s discussion of modernity, identity, colonization, and nation would also allow comparisons with Toer’s *This Earth of Mankind*, described below. In any case, Kang’s novel is suitable even for inexperienced readers of translated literature because of its modern style and character-centered story.

RESOURCES

Kim, Janice C. H. *To Live to Work: Factory Women in Colonial Korea, 1910–1945*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Robinson, Michael E. *Korea’s Twentieth-Century Odyssey*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007.

Weinbaum, Alys E., et al. *The Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. This collection of essays, the product of a longstanding research group, offers a global view of emerging femininities in the pre-WWII period.

INDONESIA

This Earth of Mankind (Bumi Manusia)

BY PRAMOEDYA ANANTA TOER

MAX LANE, TRANSLATOR

NEW YORK: PENGUIN, 1996

The narrative of this book, the first in the so-called “Buru Quartet,” begins in 1898 and features a young Javanese aristocrat who struggles to negotiate the Dutch East Indies colonial system. The multilingual, well-educated protagonist Minke embarks on a romance with the beautiful Eurasian Annelies. Their relationship ultimately falls victim to the cultural, gender, class, and racial power structures that control the lives of these young people in Dutch-dominated Java.

Toer (1925–2006) is a celebrated, award-winning author whose criticism of the Indonesian Suharto regime earned him fourteen years as a political prisoner in the Buru Island penal camp from 1965 to 1979. This novel was first related orally to his prison mates in 1973 and then committed to the page in Indonesian, the national language, in 1975. It was not published until 1980 and was promptly banned in 1981 for its supposed Marxist-Leninist agenda. All four books in the tetralogy were banned until 1998, when President Suharto was forced to resign. Toer’s novel can be read with other works banned for political purposes, of which there are many in contemporary mainland China: for example, *Dream of Ding Village (Ding zhuang meng, 2005)*, about a blood-selling ring and AIDS,¹⁰ or *The Fat Years (Sheng shi, 2009)*,¹¹ a near-future novel in which characters struggle to recover suppressed Chinese history.

The political turmoil experienced not only by Toer but also by Minke, his protagonist, speaks to Indonesia’s complicated cultural and religious makeup, not to mention political history. The novel can thus also be read in conjunction with many other (post)colonial novels from within Southeast Asia, for example, José Rizal’s famous nationalist novel about the Philippines, *Noli Me Tangere (1887)*. In many such novels, characters embrace ideas of national identity, even while they suffer from various types of double consciousness. The fine shades of racial and class hierarchy that the characters must navigate are reminiscent of some African literature from the same period, such as the short novel *Xala (The Curse, 1973)* by Sembene Ousmane from Senegal. Because Indonesia and Korea have both been dominated by colonizers in the past, Toer’s work can also be read with *From Wönso Pond*, described above. The prominence of female characters in both works, as well as in Sembene’s, demonstrates the particular problems of marginalization experienced by native women in colonial societies, even if their individual circumstances differ.

RESOURCES

Hellwig, Tineke, and Eric Tagliacozzo. *The Indonesia Reader: History, Culture, Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

Niekerk, Carl. “Modernity, Sexuality, and Gender in Pramoedya Ananta Toer’s *This Earth of Mankind* (1980).” *Symposium* 65.2 (2011): 77–98.

Toer, Pramoedya A., Andre Vltchek, Rossie Indira, and Nagesh Rao. *Exile: Pramoedya Ananta Toer in Conversation with Andre Vltchek and Rossie Indira*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006.

CONCLUSION

Once I have done the pre-reading you see above, I have to put together my course reading list, a process that will generally be framed by whatever limitations are dictated by the course outline (desired geographical range, issues of genre, historical period, etc.). Another limitation is, of course, my own interests: I know a good deal about issues of modernity, national identity, women’s literature, and feminist criticism, so my choices reflect that bias. Given the immense diversity of Asia, not to mention world literature in general, there are many other ways to approach the integration of Asian materials. For example, the role of capitalism in contemporary Asia could yield a fascinating reading list with sources from all corners of the continent: “business novels” from Japan,¹² the very latest in consumer culture (and critique) from China¹³ and contemporary crime novels from India,¹⁴ just to begin. The often-popular nature of such works makes them easier for younger students to read, too. It is also important to remember that world literature includes literature written in English. Border-straddling works, especially those dealing with Asia, such as Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American (1955)*, could also speak volumes about North American attitudes toward the foreign at various historical moments. Such works, starting as they do from a perspective closer to home, can be useful for easing students into more international (translated) materials. When I



use such texts, however, I always pair them with relevant literature by Asian authors in order to present more than one perspective on the issue in question.

Deciding where (and whether) to select texts by picking and choosing—and then developing—the fledgling connections I propose here, I am always conscious of the type of comparison I am implying through my final selections. The resulting network, honed further each time the syllabus is taught, can be not only fun to teach, but truly eye-opening as well. Learning how to negotiate difference in literary texts—whether cultural, linguistic, or temporal—is much more interesting and rewarding than uncovering how humans are “all alike.” More important, it can show students how rethinking and readjusting one’s own position in the world is a crucial skill—and one that, as teachers of world literature, we are well-positioned to teach. ■

NOTES

1. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Goethes Gespräche: 1811–1818*, ed. Woldemar Freiherr von Biedermann, vol. 3, 192. (Leipzig: F. W. v. Biedermann, 1889–1896), 192.
2. See Damrosch’s *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).
3. I gratefully acknowledge the invaluable input of Laura Brueck, Tineke Hellwig, Christopher Lupke, Si Nae Park, Ken Seigneurie, and Dafna Zur. I also thank Cam Fediuk, my research assistant.
4. The big three anthologies currently are *The Longman Anthology of World Literature*, eds. David Damrosch and David Pike, 6 vols. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004). A one-volume compact edition is available; *The Bedford Anthology of World Literature*, eds. Paul B. Davis, et al., 6 vols. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003–4). A two-volume compact edition is also available; *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, 3rd ed., eds. Martin Puchner, et al., 6 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2012). A two-volume compact edition is also available; Damrosch’s *How to Read World Literature* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) is a useful companion volume to the Longman anthology.
5. *The Rāmāyaṇa: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1998).
6. Vālmīki. *Rāmāyaṇa*, trans. Arshia Sattar (New York: Penguin Global, 2003); Tulasidāsa, *The Complete Works of Goswami Tulasidas: 1. Ramacharitmanasa*, trans. S. P. Bahadur (New Delhi: Munshiran Manoharlal Publishers, 1994).
7. Her short story “Vagabond’s Song” (*Hōrōki*, 1927) provides a single female protagonist’s critical but helpless view of the sordid underbelly of society. A translation can be found in Yukiko Tanaka, *To Live and to Write: Selections by Japanese Women Writers, 1913–1938* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1987).
8. Ding’s “Miss Sophia’s Diary” (1927) offers a similar perspective to Hayashi’s. A translation can be found in Tani E. Barlow, *I Myself Am a Woman: Selected Writings of Ding Ling*, ed. with Gary J. Bjorge (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).
9. See, for example, Melissa L. Wender, *Into the Light: An Anthology of Literature by Koreans in Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011).
10. Lianke Yan and Cindy Carter, *Dream of Ding Village* (New York: Grove Press, 2011).
11. Guanzhong Chen and Michael S. Duke, *The Fat Years: A Novel* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2011).
12. Tamae K. Prindle, *Made in Japan and Other Japanese “Business Novels”* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1990).
13. Hui Wei, *Shanghai Baby*, trans. Bruce Humes (New York: Washington Square Press, 2002). See also Guanzhong Chen, *The Fat Years*.
14. Ashok Banker, *Ten Dead Admen* (Calcutta: Rupa and Co., 1993).

MELEK ORTABASI is Associate Professor in the World Literature Program at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Canada. As a comparatist who specializes in Japanese literature and culture, her research interests include cultural studies, comparative folklore studies, children’s literature, and film and popular culture in contemporary Japan. She has coedited an anthology of literary translations titled *The Modern Murasaki: Women Writers of Meiji Japan* (University of Columbia Press, 2006). Her book, *The Undiscovered Country: Text, Translation and Modernity in the Work of Yanagita Kunio*, is forthcoming from Harvard University Asia Center. Inspired by Yanagita’s interest in children and education, a topic she examines in her book, she is starting a new project on world children’s literature and translation.

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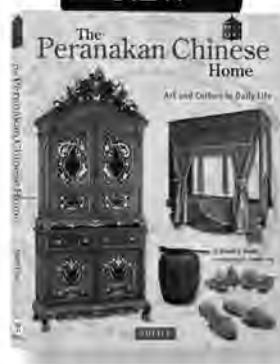
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