

WHY WORLD LITERATURE, WHY NOW?  
AN INTERVIEW WITH ZHAO BAISHENG

*¿Por qué literatura mundial, por qué ahora?  
Una entrevista con Zhao BaiSheng*

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In July 2011, Peking University and Harvard University joined forces to organize the first session of the Institute for World Literature (IWL), a four-week intensive summer school open to graduate students and faculty members from all over the world in all literary fields. The inaugural session of IWL was preceded by the first conference of the World Literature Association (WLA), with Peking University in Beijing playing the host. Professor Zhao BaiSheng, President of WLA, Professor & Director, Institute of World Literature, School of Foreign Languages, Peking University and Professor David Damrosch, Ernst Bernbaum Professor of Comparative Literature and Chair, Department Comparative Literature at Harvard University were key to bringing this idea to fruition. The following interview with Professor Zhao BaiSheng, host of the 2011 session, was conducted on email by B. Venkat Mani, Associate Professor, Department of German, former Director,

Global Studies, and co-Director of the Andrew Mellon World Literature/s Research Workshop at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.



Prof. Zhao BaiSheng.

B. VENKAT MANI. Given that the reading of a Chinese novel became the immediate cause for Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* (1836), it seems befitting that the very first conference of the WLA and the inaugural session of the IWL would take place at Peking University in 2011. Before I ask you more about the 2011 session, let me start with a question that must be asked, although all of us understand the significance of it: why world literature, why now?

ZHAO BAI SHENG. 2011 was a special year for us here in Beijing. It was the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Institute of World Literature at Peking University and the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our world literature program, and we wanted to do something historical to celebrate the occasion. Actually, I have been thinking for a decade about Chinese contributions to world literature studies and the roles that Chinese scholars should play in promoting world literature, also because as you have just mentioned that the inspiration of Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* came from his reading of a Chinese romance. Strategic thinking is crucial, especially for the development of a discipline. One day it occurred to me, why not found an international association? So for the two special occasions in 2011 I invited leading scholars and some major writers from five continents to Beijing to create the World Literature Association and to attend its first conference, which I hope will lay the foundational stones for the institutionalization of world literature.

The fact that the first conference of the WLA and the first session of the IWL (the Harvard-based summer institute) took place in the same year is a pure coincidence. Originally, the inaugural session would have taken place at Harvard in 2010.

B.V.M. Could you tell us a bit about the pre-history of the WLA? Where and how did you feel the need for the WLA and the IWL? How were you able to gauge the interest of your colleagues –both at home and your partners abroad (including David Damrosch at Harvard University, the Director of IWL)?

Z.B.S. The idea of founding the WLA came into being in 2009. At the annual conference of the American Comparative Literature Association held at Harvard in 2009, I announced that two years later a new international association of world literature would be founded in Beijing. The idea was received enthusiastically. In the two preparatory meetings of IWL in 2009 and 2010 organized by Professor David Damrosch, we also discussed the significance of having the Association in China. While the Harvard-based IWL is in the West, the PKU-based WLA is in the East. In this way, we are strategically positioned to do world literature in a truly global sense.

B.V.M. In the planning stages, what did you think were the main aims and goals of the WLA and the IWL? Who did you target as the IWL's potential constituents?

Z.B.S. As for the Institute, I think Professor David Damrosch is in a better position to answer these two questions. Perhaps it is wise for me to quote him regarding the main aims and goals of the Institute: «The Institute for World Literature (IWL) is created to explore the study of literature in a globalizing world... With its headquarters at Harvard University and partners around the globe, The Institute for World Literature seeks to provide real training in world literature in global perspective. Meeting for four weeks each July, the Institute will be global in its presence as well as its intentions, rotating among different locations around the world, from Beijing to Harvard to Istanbul and beyond» ([iwl.fas.harvard.edu](http://iwl.fas.harvard.edu)). One of the main aims of the WLA is to make world literature a true joint venture among writers, publishers and readers of the world. And its goal is to usher in a new age of world literatures, i.e., from one-civilization-dominated singular world literature to multi-cultural plural world literatures.

B.V.M. How was the response? Did you see any specific infrastructural or intellectual challenges during the planning stages?

Z.B.S. The response has been fantastic. So far we have five universities in three continents, which are interested in organizing the following WLA conferences. And because of the vision and leadership of Professor David Damrosch, the second session of the IWL at Bilgi University in Istanbul is immensely successful. Of course, as you know, our biggest infrastructural or intellectual challenges are funds and languages.

B.V.M. The website of the School of Foreign Languages, Peking University, states categorically: «The specialty of comparative literature and world literature is the nation-recognized key subject in China» ([http://english.pku.edu.cn/Schools\\_Departments/542\\_6.htm](http://english.pku.edu.cn/Schools_Departments/542_6.htm)). This sentence makes me, as your interviewer, but also as a fellow world literature enthusiast, extremely pleased. The image one has through western media of China in general and Chinese Universities in particular is one in which the focus is on hard sciences, technology, and business studies. Could you respond as to how Comparative Literature and World Literature Studies became a key subject? Did this help with infrastructural organization in terms of funding and other support?

Z.B.S. It is true that Chinese universities have their own priorities and agenda of development. After a three-decade long focus on hard sciences, technology and economics, they have begun to realize the importance of the so-call «soft powers» –arts and humanities. Still, arts and humanities are Cinderellas on our campuses. «How Comparative Literature and World Literature studies became a key subject?». Because of the ranking by the Ministry of Education. In the whole country, about two or three comparative literature and world literature programs are singled out as the «national key disciplines» for their academic excellence. Yes, there are special funds for such elite programs, but the fame is equally important for the reputation of a university. Again, the soft power game.

B.V.M. To what extent were the wla conference, and through its various lectures, seminars, and other activities, the IWL able to highlight the various meanings of *Weltliteratur* for the students?

Z.B.S. I love your phrase «the various meanings of *Weltliteratur*», that is why I prefer using the term «world literatures» (in the plural) and the title of the very first conference of the WLA in Beijing was «The Rise of World Literatures». Actually, we have discussed the relationship between the WLA conference and the IWL summer school. The ideal situation is that potential IWL participants will be able to attend the WLA conferences so that they can brainstorm about ideas and practices of world literatures in different parts of the world. But we also face a huge logistical problem: it is very hard for

us to organize the IWL summer school and the WLA biannual conference in the same venue. Location really matters when we do world literatures. So we have provisionally decided that WLA conference venue will be in a different continent from the IWL venue. IWL format, including seminars, lectures, affinity group workshops, and field trips, are employed to maximize the understanding of *Weltliteratur*. The IWL participants are mainly Ph. D students and junior faculty members, and their global perspective on world literatures can also be greatly enriched by the WLA conferences which focus on research and teaching, but also include literary exhibitions, writers' forum, translators' workshop, publishers' platform and worldlit performances, comprising almost the whole field of world literatures.

B.V.M. Were there any specific challenges that you faced? Through the language of instruction, for example? Or various degrees of exposure to theories of World Literature among the students, for example –who, as I understand, came from about a dozen different universities from around the world?

Z.B.S. Language, of course, is the biggest challenge we have faced. How can we do world literatures justice by adopting only one «official language», i.e., English? Can we use at least one Eastern language? Then which one? Possibly, we may change this situation at Harvard for the 2013 session by adding groups with Chinese as the language of instruction. For the first session of IWL in Beijing, we did not have enough funds to bring more participants from Africa, Latin America, Middle East and South Asia. The third challenge is: how to teach a group of participants with an age difference of more than 30 years. A few of our participants are M. A. students, some of them are faculty members. Finally, ideological differences.

B.V.M. If this were an interview in person, I would have asked you more to expand on ideological differences. But given the format of an email interview, let's move to the next set of questions, namely about the intellectual program of the WLA conference and IWL. The term «*Weltliteratur*» itself has «gained in translation» –to use a phrase by David Damrosch. But I do not think that we need to be derivative and assume that *Weltliteratur* was first pronounced in Germany and traveled out to the world. Different cultures and linguistic traditions have had comparable, if not identical expressions to denote global comparison of literature. I'd very much like it if you perhaps told us the Chinese (Modern Standard Mandarin) term for world literature. Are there any subtle semiotic differences from its English, German, Hindi, Spanish, Turkish or Italian counterparts?

Z.B.S. The Chinese term for *Weltliteratur* is *shijie wenxue* and not *shijie de wenxue* as mentioned in the recently published *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* (2012, p. xx). It is an odd practice here in China that when we talk about *shijie wenxue*, we mainly mean *waiguo wenxue* (foreign literature). Anthologies and literary histories of world literature published by major Chinese university presses such as Peking University Press and Fudan University Press all exclude Chinese literature. How can the Chinese *shijie wenxue* exist without China? This «World without China» model, I think, belongs to the first stage of world literature studies in China.

B.V.M. This is very interesting indeed. I could not agree with you more about world literature without Chinese literature. On that note, would you outline for us the intellectual landscape of Comparative Literary and World Literary Studies at Peking University? This would be too much to ask of you in an email interview –but are there ways in which world literary comparison operates in different ways on different Chinese campuses? What are the main aesthetic and political concerns? Are they different from those, say, in European, American or other Asian universities?



Z.B.S. It seems that a report on the state of the field is necessary here. A few years ago, Professor Zhou Xiaoyi, Vice President of the ICLA, published an article in English on Comparative Literary Studies in China (Xiaoyi Zhou and Q. S. Tong, «Comparative Literature in China», in *Comparative Literature and Comparative Cultural Studies*, ed., Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2003, pp. 268-283). World literary

comparison definitely operates differently on different Chinese campuses. But the amazing similarity is that as a result of bureaucratic intervention, the majority of Chinese comparatists are from departments of Chinese literature. This disciplinary reform in 1997 is catastrophic, in that scholars trained only in Chinese are linguistically ill-equipped to do comparative studies. Luckily, our Institute of World Literature at Peking University consists of scholars mainly from School of Foreign Languages. We adopt a new research and teaching model, which I call the Post 5/4 Paradigm. The May Fourth Movement is the most important cultural movement in modern China. It ignited a chain of revolutions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by introducing to China a new paradigm, i.e., Chinese-Western paradigm. Its true cultural agenda was to westernize China, so the mission of a Chinese intellectual was to go to the West to seek truth. What we are doing now at Peking University is to promote the Post 5/4 Paradigm. 5 means a study of literature and culture of five continents, i.e., Africa, Americas, Asia, Europe and Oceania, not Western literature alone; 4 refers to the minimum number of languages Ph.D students are required to learn with the emphasis of learning two Eastern languages. It is a kind of East-West Paradigm, or World Literatures Paradigm. Maybe you can tell me whether it is different from worldlit and complit programs in European, American or other Asian universities.

B.V.M. This is just a very unique and innovative model. While I cannot describe the US model in great detail right now, my biggest dissatisfaction with Comparative Literary Studies in the US is that they are still very much dominated by English, German, French. While Spanish increasingly plays an important part, also because of its prominent presence in the Americas, acquisition of non-European languages is still fairly limited, resulting, in my view, in a geo-constricted version of comparative world literatures. My last questions for now are about Chinese literature and its place in world literature/comparative world literature. Could you tell us a little about public sphere discussions (magazines, websites) of literatures from other languages in China? What do you think gets translated, what is more popular among readers? Second, how do you evaluate the position of literature from China in translation? In my own very small engagement, I see more and more representation of Chinese literature in book-fairs, bookstores, or magazines such as *World Literature Today*. These discussions are often prefaced around questions of political structures, human rights, and the generally perceived discourse of «resistance» of suppression of free speech. This is the received discourse. However, do you think that translation of contemporary literature from China into other languages: European, or African, or Asian (from Asian languages I can only think of Hindi, and I grew up on Hindi translations of Chinese folk tales available through Chinese

embassy, but cannot speak with authority on the state of contemporary translations) is making a sizeable body of literature from China available to the world readers? Are you happy with it? Is there one author that you think that has not been translated and should be?

Z.B.S. Your chain questions are chain killers. Again a long article is needed here. The key question is: Do we translate for a world literature or for world literatures? The answer is: in China we still translate for a world literature, i.e., a Westernized world literature.

B.V.M. Completely understand! Let us hope that through the WLA and IWL, many of these conversations will continue. Professor Zhao BaiSheng, thank you so much!