



Comparing cultural practices

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Published online: 2 October 2019
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In the August of 2018, a conference entitled *Comparative Cultural Studies* was held in Budapest, the result of cooperation between three international academic journals on comparative literature studies. Journals from three continents decided to cooperate to invite a geographically and culturally wide range of participants to discuss the relationship between comparative literature and cultural studies. One of the journals was *Neohelicon*, which more or less hosted the event, the others were *Comparative Literature Studies* published by Pennsylvania State University Press, and *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art*, published in Shanghai by East China Normal University. We would like to express our deep gratitude to Thomas Beebee, editor-in-chief of *Comparative Literature Studies*, and Feng Wei, the English editor of *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art*, for the immense work and energy they invested in the organization of the event, developing and distributing the call for papers, setting up the conference website, selecting the submitted abstracts for invitation to participate, and creating the conference program. After the highly successful conference, the three journals ventured thematic selections to invite participants to submit their articles for consideration. *Neohelicon* decided to invite those who had made comparisons between cultural or social practices in their presentations. The present collection has been selected from such submissions.

The contributions, as the present section stands now, represent different aspects of the culture-literature interface. Some of the papers analyse cultural practices of literary institutions, some cultural practices as represented in literature, but both do so in a comparative context. How can a complete literature be exported? How are importable oeuvres selected in big cultural markets? What happens when women migrate to a different culture, and how can they conserve or rebel against inherited gender roles in a new context through the generations? The connection between (literary) text and cultural issues (or issues of cultural interest) may have very different

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forms, and the studies in this section of this volume of *Neohelicon* represent a number of them. Just to give a short glimpse of the topics, first, the text itself is part of the cultural communication, it is produced, transferred and consumed in a cultural context; it is thus influenced by—and also influences—the cultural setting. Then a literary text may represent a cultural issue, in the sense that it gives account of the world represented as a matter of cultural interest. It may also represent the issue in the sense that the text itself raises or even formulates problems that have something to do with culture.

There may be several other sites of culture/text interrelation, and the studies that follow here are just a handful illustrating the complexity of the problems. The structure of this section of *Neohelicon* is, roughly, from the “outside” to the core, from the text as an object of transfer and communication to the inherent structure of the text itself. To begin with, literary works are subjects of cultural exchange: they may land in a culture different from where they were born, and this transfer, from one culture to another (or to one language to another) is not always easy. It needs, more often than not, an impetus and effort on the part of the “sender” institutions of literature, to promote and support the path of the literary work all the way through to the target culture, and sometimes even political pressure is needed. It is a fairly well known phenomenon that languages of lesser diffusion always have a desire to manifest their values in the medium of a different language or culture; thus, it is an issue of national self-esteem to “export” the greatest works of their literary production, and possibly to escort them on their way through translations, interpretations, explanations and evaluations.

The cultural transfer of literary texts (and their cultural problems), is discussed in the paper “Overseas translation of modern Chinese fiction via *T’ien Hsia Monthly*” by Yueyue Liu. Paradoxically, this study exemplifies problems similar to what was described in the previous paragraph in a language of perhaps the *biggest* diffusion, i.e. Chinese. Chinese literature has an enormous (potential) reading public—and, thus, there has been an institutional pressure to popularize or at least acquaint the most important Chinese literary works among Western reading public. Yueyue Liu shows the case of *T’ien Hsia Monthly* (1935–1941), which was founded especially for this cultural transfer. It is quite astonishing that a culture and literature with such a long tradition, wide reading public and elaborate literary institutions should still need an orientation, or even guidance from Western culture, and the manoeuvres to guide its literary treasures into another culture are very similar to those employed, for example in Eastern or Central Europe, in “small” countries; but this puzzle can be solved if one takes into consideration that *modern* Chinese literature was a young and relatively small literature when *T’ien Hsia Monthly* was established. One of the most important innovations of May Fourth cultural movement was to start producing literature in vernacular—i.e. contemporary instead of classical Chinese, i.e. basically a dead language, which used to be the exclusive practice until 1919. *T’ien Hsia Monthly* wanted to make the world know this new literature, which had also adapted some western ideas of literariness and genre system.

What is *not* at stake here is the aesthetic value of the work itself; and a work (valuable or not) may have a special movement *within* a culture. The paper “The making of world literature: Turkish fiction as a case study” by Hülya Yıldız concentrates on

the conditions of how and why non-English writers can find their way into the international canon; it needs quite a lot of work of translation, interpretation, positioning and market research, intertextual and paratextual considerations and the whole infrastructure of the publishing industry. Yıldız' paper, which is based of industrious "field work" of interviewing dozens of people working in the international publishing industry, contrasts two different cases of international success. While Orhan Pamuk, an internationally known and appreciated author, seems to have had everything the publishing trade was looking for in a non-English writer, Hasan Ali Toptaş achieved remarkable circulation against the odds.

Besides language and cultural barriers, gender differences may also have important role in both the production and reception of literature. Amy Tan and Bharati Mukherjee are the examples in the paper of Rima Bhattacharya "Negotiating the gendered ethnic self in selected fictions of Amy Tan and Bharati Mukherjee" to demonstrate that the authors, who both happen to be female and Asian living in the United States, must face the issues of assimilation, immigration, women's rights, class, religion, and nationality in addition to (and intersecting with) gender problems. Their works,¹ though different from each other, both contribute to the understanding of the special Asian-American existential problems of women and also to "native" American gender problems. One of the lessons of the paper is that conflicts of cultures may be represented within a language (and culture), and that literary texts both show the situations where these conflicts appear and also themselves are embodiments (in the text itself) of these collisions. Another important lesson is that one should be rather cautious with generalisation like "Asian." Some challenges immigrant women from Asia meet in North-America are similar; other challenges are different depending on which part of Asia they are from. The paper contrasts representations of female communities from South-Asia and East-Asia, or Indian-American and Chinese-American communities, and detects basic differences. It goes without saying that for a meaningful comparison one needs both similarities and differences, but it is important to keep in mind that cultural–geographical categories are generalisations that can and should be challenged time to time.

Although the main topic of Youguang Xie's paper "Birth control East and West: Reading eugenics in Mo Yan's *Frog* and Eudora Welty's 'Lily Daw and the Three Ladies'" is "a cross-cultural comparison of the eugenics movement in China and the U.S. South," translation is also a key issue here. In the footnotes one can see an ongoing discussion of Howard Goldblatt's translation of the *Frog*. Goldblatt's achievement as translator of Mo Yan's works has been much and rightly praised; it is rather probable that his good translations contributed to Mo Yan's Nobel prize, but Goldblatt categorically refused the hyperbolic claims that it was actually him, the translator, who won the prize.² It is interesting to see that even a widely celebrated, enormously successful translation can be challenged when the cultural implications

¹ Especially Mukherjee's *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *Darkness* (1990), "American Dreamer" (1997) and Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995).

² Oral communication at the conference *Chinese comparative literature and translation, 2013 forum*, held in Beijing, 14–15 October, 2013.

of a theme (or a subtext, if one wants to go so far) are focused on. Xie had to modify the translation many many times to make clear that the idea of eugenics is lurking in the background of surprisingly many utterances in *Frog*. It goes without saying that implications have the greatest difficulty in travelling through translation, but one may wonder if eugenics, the explicit topic of a 1941 short story by Eudora Welty, is such uncomfortable theme that American readers needed to be protected from facing it. Eugenics, however, is demonstrated by Xie to be a cultural or social practice that shows remarkable similarities in two quite different contexts: interwar USA and Cultural Revolution China. On the one hand, eugenics may be regarded as a typical movement of the modernity—not the nicest one, to be sure—and therefore one should not be surprised if it proves to be similar in different places striving for modernisation. On the other hand, one should keep in mind that what Xie analyses are not (only) social practices but (also) their literary representations, and what appears in a *novel* (which is a globally marketable commodity independently from its direct context of origin³) will be globally understandable, i.e. similar to many other phenomena around the globe.

Cultures manifest themselves in their objectifications, in buildings, for instance—thus, it is the proper field of architecture to demonstrate the hidden cultural pre-suppositions and meanings of the built environment.⁴ Ayşegül Turan, in her paper “Spaces of memory and memories of space in Alaa al-Aswany’s *The Yacoubian Building* and Elif Shafak’s *The Flea Palace*,” turns instead to the literary *descriptions* of architectural products, along with the people who live in the buildings, with their interrelations, social contacts and behaviours. Turan proves that culture is not only a tradition manifested in the structures of buildings or in a way of living as a sort of special communication among the inhabitants, but also an interwoven unity of the two (and also several other factors). Turan compares an Egyptian and a Turkish novel, which might suggest that such research, i.e. in “building-novels” or novels about a closed urban space, is most adaptable to the literatures of nations with Islamic tradition. It is highly probable that the influence of Maguib Mahfouz’ heritage is the strongest in that cultural area, and novels like *Midaq Alley* (1947) may have contributed to the popularity of such narrative strategies.⁵ However, comparative literature studies have great potential in comparing literary representations of limited metropolitan spaces around the globe.

Numbers, counting, and calculating are very deeply embedded in the modern culture, even if one rarely reflects on this fact; in some literary texts, however, calculation is a mostly hidden, subconscious operation of the minds revealed. László Bengi’s paper “Calculation as a cultural practice in modern literature” compares the attitudes towards computational thinking of several Central European authors (not in

³ For novel as a global commodity see e.g. Deckard et al. (2015).

⁴ In the first issue of the 2014 volume *Neohelicon* published a special cluster on the relationship of literature and the built environment of capital cities. For the theory see the introduction of the guest-editor (Matajic 2014), and also the text she quoted most frequently (Mullaney 1995, pp. 1–25).

⁵ It is a telling example that Christiane Schlote used Mahfouz as *post quem* to discuss contemporary literary representations of Arab urban space (Schlote 2011).

every case concentrating on literary texts per se but also on entries in diaries or correspondence). Probably none of the three strategies (assigned to Kafka, Kosztlányi, and Musil, respectively) was independently developed from the impact of the ubiquitous statistical approach of the Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy, as Bengi rightly emphasises. In future, his findings might hopefully ignite wider cross-cultural comparisons (made by him or others) to see the similarities and differences in the ways European and non-European authors react to the idea that social reality should be described numerically in statistics. Historically, statistical methods of governing can be linked to the panoptic ideals of supervision, the eighteenth-century development of which was so convincingly described by Foucault (1995). Statistics was the most useful/terrifying means to govern colonies too, begging the question why postcolonial literature (which seriously overlaps with magic realism) tries to resort to alternative, local sources of knowledge (cf. Deckard et al. 2015, pp. 74–78). It goes without saying that a comparison between European and non-European attitudes towards numerical thinking should not be simplified into a binary opposition of colonizers and colonized, since most of the European nations were not colonizers.⁶

The most general approach among the contributions is perhaps that of Jinghua Guo, “The multidimensional cross-cultural semiotic model from China to the West.” The paper, without any concrete analysis of texts, literary or other, and without references to literary periods, historical progresses or regional cultural differences, argues that since culture is partly defined as a dynamic generator of acts of signification, national cultures partly adopt international patterns and, in turn, they are themselves appropriated by other national cultures. The examples are the cross-media uses of some Chinese masterpieces; also, cross-cultural translations (with the interesting, evident and complex differences of European and Chinese semiotic systems) raise a number of interesting issues. There is a need to translate the products of one culture, along with all its peculiarities, to another—yet the obstacles are very considerable.

What we have tried to emphasise in this introduction is the rich potentials of comparative studies focusing on cultural practices. In many of the topics discussed by the authors of the present collection the work is far from complete; the contributors have rather made pioneering discoveries in a field that still offers much to be investigated.

Acknowledgement Thanks are due to the grant No K112415 of the OTKA (NKFIH, National Research and Development and Innovation Office, Hungary) which enabled both the Budapest conference on comparative cultural studies and the present publication of the papers.

⁶ For the conceptual and theoretical consequences of this simple but usually disregarded fact see Boldrini (2006).

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