
Reconsidering the World History of Literature as an Entanglement of Cross-cultural and Intermedial Transmissions

CHENGZHOU HE 

Nanjing University, Institute of Global Humanities, Nanjing 210093, People's Republic of China. Email: chengzhou@nju.edu.cn

While the previous studies of the world history of literature are mostly concerned with the cross-cultural dissemination of literature, this article intends to analyse the intermediality of world literature in light of intermedial studies. It argues that the cross-cultural transmissions of literature are often entangled with and empowered by the intermedial interactions between literature and different forms of art. Under the theoretical framework of cross-cultural and intermedial studies, two representative Chinese literary works are discussed at length, namely *Mulan ci* (*The Ballad of Mulan*, sixth century) and *Hong gaoliang* (*Red Sorghum*, 1987). In addition to a careful analysis of their respective history of overseas transmissions, a comparative study of the two, an ancient poem and a modern novel, is carried out to show how the evolution of media has contributed to the cross-cultural transmissions of literature.

Introduction

In their 'General Introduction' to *Literature: A World History*, Anders Pettersson and David Damrosch, along with the collective editors, write: 'Texts have long travelled far beyond their original home, and even in the absence of traceable historical links, fundamental qualities of literature can often best be elucidated by looking beyond the regional level' (2022: lxxix). The world history of literature examines the trajectories of literary communication and reception that transcend the

boundaries of nations, states and ethnicities. While cross-cultural approaches are typically embedded in the study of the world history of literature, the means by which texts are transmitted and the media involved are often unclear. Under the influence of contemporary media and with intermedial studies in mind, there has been growing interest in identifying the materiality of media and intermedial interactions in literary transmissions. Thus, several questions arise: How were literary works transmitted, transferred and made to interact across interrelated media? How do these intermedial interactions shape historical and contemporary cross-cultural communications of literature? How does the evolution of media transform the processes by which literature is communicated?

To address these questions more effectively, this article proposes an integrated perspective merging cross-cultural and intermedial approaches to the study of the world history of literature. To develop a more sophisticated theoretical framework, it is not only necessary to bring cross-cultural and intermedial studies into dialogue, but also to engage with Karen Barad's theory of agential realism, Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory and other approaches. Then, two important Chinese literary works and their histories of overseas transmissions will be discussed, namely *Mulan ci* (*The Ballad of Mulan*, sixth century) and *Hong gaoliang* (*Red Sorghum*, 1987). A comparative study of the two, an ancient poem and a modern novel, demonstrates how the transformation of intermedial practices over history has impacted the cross-cultural transmission of literature. More importantly, this study focuses on how the cross-cultural and intermedial approaches have become entangled and mutually reinforcing in the process, with the aim to reflect on the active power of literature 'in the making of worlds' (Cheah 2016: 2).

A Cross-cultural and Intermedial Approach to Literary Transmission

The very notion of world literature has been challenged and criticized for its (at least suspected) collusion with Eurocentrism and cultural hegemony. The most vehement critiques come from Gayatri Spivak and Amir R. Mufti. Spivak points out that the translation of third-world literature into English follows the 'law of the majority', an ostensibly 'democratic ideal' which ironically reflects and enforces 'the law of the strongest' (Spivak 2012: 315). Mufti situates the development of world literature within the context of global capitalism and contends that 'the ongoing institutionalization of world literature' represents yet another form of cultural hegemony, 'disseminating its discourse' of Western democracy behind the guise of a universalist narrative (Mufti 2016: 10).

These critiques have informed recent efforts to rewrite the world history of literature. Most prominently, Pettersson and Damrosch, together with a collective of editors, rejected 'a single "world system"' in favour of 'view[ing] the world as consisting of six macroregions', with 'various "contact zones" that straddle two or even three macroregions' (Pettersson and Damrosch 2022: lxxviii). Revising

Damrosch's much-criticized criterium of 'translatability' as a defining feature of world literature (Damrosch 2003: 288–289), the editors of *Literature: A World History* adopt the concept of 'transferability' instead. Both the concepts of inter-regional 'contact zones' and 'transferability' shift focus away from the local/global and inclusion/exclusion binaries towards a more region-neutral model of 'intra and inter-regional interactions', steering further away from Eurocentrism (Thorner 2014: 461). Take *The Ballad of Mulan* as an example. Although it travelled from its Chinese homeland to the East Asian macroregion over centuries, most interpretations within this macroregion share the themes of patriotism and filial duty, suggesting cultural affinities predating modern nation-states.

Traditionally, texts as world literature would emerge from a specific region and then spread outward over time. In contrast, contemporary intermedial adaptations, such as film and television, can introduce literary works worldwide almost immediately. The adaptation of Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* into Zhang Yimou's award-winning film (1988) exemplifies this phenomenon. With the advent of global mass media, the conventional text-centric approach to literary transmission has become increasingly obsolete, ceding priority to 'relations between (that is, "inter") various media' (Jensen 2016). Werner Wolf significantly advanced the application of intermedial studies to literary studies, noting the role of the visual arts in 'transmitting literary content' (Wolf 2011: 3–4), especially post-nineteenth century. Two prominent categories of intermediality exist: 'temporal transformation', e.g., novel-to-film adaptations; and 'synchronous combination', e.g., theatre's amalgamation of text, music and scenography (Bruhn 2016: 26). Both embed different sensory experiences into the literary works, enabling comprehension without contextual knowledge. By employing widely resonant visual language, the film *Red Sorghum* attained global recognition, regardless of whether viewers had any previous knowledge of the original Mo Yan novel.

Media interactions generate 'multiple discourses and modalities of experience and representation' bounded by historical, material, and institutional relationships (Jensen 2016). In *Meeting the Universe Half Way* (2007), Karen Barad invoked the theory of quantum entanglement to propose a new framework for observing the intricate relations among various actants. Her neologism 'agential realism' shifts the focus 'from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality [...] to matters of practices or doings or actions' (Barad 2007: 78). Accordingly, intermedial research of literary transmission should de-emphasize textual analysis in favour of examining how medial intra-actions iteratively reconfigure temporality and spatiality 'in the materialization of phenomena and the (re)making of material-discursive boundaries and their constitutive exclusions' (Barad 2007: 235). Thus, in the transmission of *The Ballad of Mulan* and *Red Sorghum* their associated media and interactions formed part of a broader socio-historical and cultural network.

The interplay between cross-cultural and intermedial communications accounts for 'events' in the history of world literature. For Gilles Deleuze, events are ideational singularities that elude pre-existing models (cf. Deleuze 1990: 52). Slavoj Žižek describes events as 'the surprising emergence of something new which

undermines every stable scheme' (Žižek 2014: 8). Hence, events designate occurrences that disrupt the status quo and compel its reconsideration. Dan and Wojno-Owczarska fittingly deem world literature as 'a world-changing event' that 'rises from its tenacious struggle against the contemporary world it finds fault with' (Dan and Wojno-Owczarska 2018: 253). The history of world literature excavates such events to identify cultural ruptures and opportunities for constructing alternative worlds.

In analysing varied events of literary transmission, diverse interacting factors across the literary, cultural, economic, political and social spheres are considered. The General Introduction to *Literature: A World History* stresses how literary institutions shape the creation and reception of literary works by setting norms and genres amongst the myriad actants involved in transmitting a literary text. In view of Bruno Latour's Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), interactions between related actors across fields and disciplines constitute a dynamic network, where non-human elements such as ideas, processes and objects qualify as actors if they 'transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry', thus becoming 'mediators' (Latour 2005: 39). Regarding the *Mulan* story, the advent of printing technology in ancient times and cinema in modern days both facilitated the tale's diffusion, sparking distinct cultural and social responses. Meanwhile, *Red Sorghum* showcases a complementary modern trajectory across film, television and other performative media. This entangled cross-cultural and intermedial approach allows us to re-examine world literature by rethinking the interactions amongst various agents.

The Ballad Of Mulan in East Asia and Beyond

As one of the seminal works in Chinese, *The Ballad of Mulan* has undergone numerous adaptations across various literary and artistic forms and in different cultures. Its diffusion exemplifies Pettersson and Damrosch's assertion that 'any given literature will find its primary discussion within its macroregion, even though it may well come into consideration elsewhere as well' (Pettersson and Damrosch 2022: lxxviii). While the *Mulan* story has mainly circulated within East Asia since the very beginning, its reach has gradually expanded to the wider world, notably Southeast Asia and North America, over the past century.

Academic consensus remains ambivalent regarding the precise origins of *The Ballad of Mulan*, with dominant perspectives pointing to either the Northern Dynasty (386–581 CE) or the Sui and Tang Dynasties (581–907 CE). Analogous to her Western counterpart, Joan of Arc, Mulan becomes a Chinese heroic figure who assumes a masculine guise to enlist in the military in lieu of her aged father. Upon the army's eventual victory, Mulan earns imperial commendations for her valour. Against the backdrop of traditional Chinese patriarchy, the ballad symbolizes loyalty to one's nation and filial duty to one's parents.

Mirroring shifting literary trends, the Mulan legend has yielded numerous Chinese adaptations – the popularity of novels in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) catalysed fictionalized renditions, while in various folk theatres stage and operatic performances proliferated, some of which remain widely available today. Unsurprisingly, the ballad was also adapted cinematically as early as 1927, presumably directed by Li Pingqian and produced by Tianyi Film Company. Despite controversies, the 1939 war film *Mulan Joins the Army* drew a large Chinese viewership. Since the 1980s, Mulan's prevalence on television has further popularized the tale, alongside the recent emergence of video game adaptations.

The Mulan legend began circulating in China's neighbouring countries early on. Advances in book-printing during the Song Dynasty (960–1279) disseminated the ballad through ancient texts to Goryeo (today's Korea), Japan, and Annan (today's Vietnam). Two literary categories transmitted the ballad overseas – works containing the full transcript, and others excerpting selected passages. The rise of a colloquial novelistic tradition in the Ming Dynasty, notably among the burgeoning bourgeois readership, propagated Chinese works – including fictionalized Mulan variants – in Korea and served to promote its literary culture following the 1446 Korean script reform. Moreover, Li Panlong's *Selected Poems of the Tang Dynasty*, in which the Mulan poem was included, reached extensive circulation and a sizable readership in Japan from the early Edo era (1603–1868) to the first decade of the twentieth century. Over 40 distinct Japanese transcriptions of Li's poem collection were in circulation. Additionally, a 1639 Japanese edition of a Song dynasty poetry anthology, entitled *Shiren Yuxie (Selected Works of Poetry)* emerged, incorporating meticulous textual analysis of the Mulan poem and scholarly inquiries into the ballad's disrupted authorship and chronology.

In the twentieth century, Mulan's overseas dissemination through stage and screen marked a new phenomenon, especially across East Asia. Mei Lanfang, among the most renowned Peking Opera performers, pioneered the promotion of this quintessential Chinese art form abroad. His performances and cultural diplomacy in Japan, the United States, and the Soviet Union garnered Peking Opera international prestige. It is worth noting that following Mei Lanfang's celebrated Peking Opera tour in Japan in November 1924, a film crew adapted selections from his live repertoire, including the 'Zoubian' scene from his iconic staging of *Mulan Joins the Army*, into short films, marking the inaugural screen portrayal of the Mulan legend. Subsequently, in 1926, eminent Peking Opera songstresses Liu Shaorong and Xiao Yang Yuelou also included the performance of Mulan in their repertoire performed in Tokyo, Osaka and other Japanese cities.

The transmission of Mulan's legend in Japan has intensified in the new millennium. In 2009, Peng Liyuan, spouse of Communist Party of China (CPC) General Secretary Xi Jinping, performed *Mulan Shipian (Mulan Poem)* in Tokyo. Shenyang Peking Opera House staged *Hua Mulan* in Tokyo, Fukuto, Nagoya, and Osaka in 2009 and 2019. The Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre hosted the collaborative Sino-Japanese musical dance drama *Mulan* in 2010, featuring first-class artists from

China and Japan. Undeniably, *Mulan* has become a symbol of bilateral friendship and cultural exchange between the two countries.

With extensive cultural connections, East Asia harbours a longstanding civilizational community. The shared literary heritage of Chinese scripts cultivated a 'Han Cultural Circle' characterized by a similar spiritual ethos and cohesion from the Han Dynasty up to the mid-nineteenth century. As Kim Dong-uk elucidates, Korea's pre-1446 classical Chinese literary tales infused Korean culture with Confucian values while complicating the delineation between influence and originality (Kim 2013: 42). Notwithstanding divergent modern political systems, certain cultural traditions and identities persist, informing valuable perspectives on regional literary transmissions as embodied in *The Ballad of Mulan*. Rather than a static perspective, Zhang Bowei proposes the 'Han Cultural Sphere' as an essential methodology to examine both commonalities and diversities in East Asian cultures (Zhang 2014: 114–118).

Mulan has also been widely transmitted in Southeast Asia, especially in modern times. During the Republican period (1911–1949), substantial Chinese communities in British India spurred demand for Chinese cinema. Myanmar, with the region's largest Chinese populace, screened 57 Chinese films from 1925 to 1927 out of 221 total, including *Mulan Joins the Army* from the leading Chinese film company Minxin. In the 1920s, the Tianyi Film Company of Shaw Brothers released their 1927 rendition of *Mulan Joins the Army* across Southeast Asia. Amid rising nationalism among Indonesian Chinese in the 1950s, the Overseas Chinese Art Troupe was invited to perform the Yu Opera *Mulan*. The Shaw Brothers' 1964 *Mulan* film starring Ling Bo as the heroine also resonated widely, winning Best Actress at the eleventh Asian Film Festival. With the translation of Chinese novels of the Ming and Qing Dynasties proliferating in Indonesia and Singapore in the 1980s, novelized versions of *Mulan Joins the Army* also circulated extensively.

In the past half century, *Mulan* further reached the US and the West through multifarious media. In her 1975 novel, *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston refashioned *Mulan* to critique Chinese sexism in America. Disney released two animated *Mulan* films in 1998 and 2004 respectively, in which the portrayal of the heroine was substantially modified to reflect American concepts of gender and individuality, a change that is reminiscent of the narrative strategy of Maxine Hong Kingston. Nevertheless, the heterogeneous, diversified and often contradictory images of *Mulan* have successfully epitomized the richness and vitality of the legend as world literature.

The Cinematic Adaptation and Global Diffusion of *Red Sorghum*

Upon its 1986 publication, Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum* gained only negligible overseas attention until Zhang Yimou's 1988 film adaptation claimed the Golden Bear Award at the Berlin Film Festival, placing second in the International Film Guide's 'World's Top Ten Films' rankings and thereby strongly promoting the novel

internationally. In the aftermath, *Red Sorghum* was promptly translated into several foreign languages, including Japanese, French, English, and German. The June 2000 issue of *World Literature Today*, an eminent American literary journal, published a series of articles assessing Mo Yan's oeuvre, consolidating his stature as an ascendant figure in world literature.

As proliferating translations disseminated Mo Yan's oeuvre worldwide, his international renown accelerated, garnering eminent accolades, including France's Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, Italy's Nonino Prize, Japan's Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize and the Newman Prize for Chinese Literature. To date, *Red Sorghum* has been translated into dozens of languages as disparate as Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian and Serbian. Additionally, the foreign translations of *Red Sorghum* have increasingly become subjects of debate, in particular Howard Goldblatt's controversial English translation. Critics frequently highlight Goldblatt's omission of original passages alongside the occasional interpolation of content meant to appeal to American readers, evident in his translations of *Red Sorghum*, *Tiantang suantai zhi ge* (*The Garlic Ballads*, 1988) and *Jiu guo* (*The Republic of Wine*, 1992). Undeniably, Zhang Yimou's cinematic adaptation played a formative role in propelling *Red Sorghum*'s global translation while elevating Mo Yan's literary stature, ultimately culminating in his winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2012.

Scholarship on the overseas reception of Mo Yan's oeuvre credits his global distinction to the limited yet influential English translations, catalysed by the cinematic renditions of his novels, especially *Red Sorghum*. Analysing Mo Yan's international circulation and readership, Ning Ming attributes *Red Sorghum*'s western popularity to its film adaptation, while emphasizing the barriers posed by Chinese political allegories, cultural traditions and literary techniques for non-Chinese audiences (cf. Ning 2016: 74). Surveying critical reviews of Mo Yan's novels across journals worldwide, Shao Lu concludes that his global renown as a leading Chinese author stems largely from the success of *Red Sorghum*'s film and television versions (cf. Shao 2011: 49). Mo Yan himself publicly acknowledged the pioneering role of cinematic adaptations by directors such as Zhang Yimou in disseminating Chinese literature globally (Mo and Li 2006). The international visibility of contemporary Chinese literature and film continues fuelling each other, demonstrating that while excellent writing lays the foundation, a successful adaptation generates a chain reaction of related cultural products, especially translations. Undeniably, the novel *Red Sorghum* and its film adaptation constitute 'a singular event that has contoured contemporary apprehensions of Chinese cultural identity, both domestically and globally' (He 2020: 441).

The intermedial life of *Red Sorghum* extends far beyond Zhang Yimou's 1988 film. In 2013, *Red Sorghum* was adapted into a dance drama which toured China and Australia, with more than 150 performances, before arriving in the United States in 2017. Renowned Chinese painter Tiefei Liu won top honours at an international landscape painting competition in 2021 for his work *Magical Red Sorghum*, part of a series inspired by the novel. As *Red Sorghum* permeates different media, all these

various versions continue referring back to the original text, collectively mapping its literary terrain.

The novel *Red Sorghum* and its intermedial adaptations have informed global perceptions of contemporary China. In *Xiangxiang zhonguo de fangfa: lishi, xiaoshuo, xushi* (*Ways of Imagining China: History, Fiction, Narrative*), David Der-wei Wang conceives literature and film as not merely vehicles for mass culture but as socially symbolic activities. Accordingly, he contends that reconstituting Chinese imaginaries necessitates discerning ‘the subtle complexities of China illuminated by the imagination, words and images of the literary and cinematic works’ (Wang 2003: 355). Undeniably, the intricate cross-cultural and intermedial dissemination of *Red Sorghum* has proven instrumental to its influence on international imaginings of China. In this process, the interplay of intermedial storytelling and localizing translational strategies across publishing, cinema and cultural institutions transforms ‘original’ Chinese signifiers. The entanglement of disparate sociocultural forces undermines simplistic inclusion/exclusion dichotomies, opening up possibilities for re-envisioning the past and present of China.

Conclusion

As an ancient literary work, *The Ballad of Mulan* gradually spread from China to East Asia and Southeast Asia over centuries, until theatre and film adaptations in the twentieth century rapidly disseminated the tale to global audiences. In contrast, the cross-cultural transmission of *Red Sorghum* intrinsically relied on its inaugural filmic adaptation to promote international circulation and translation. Despite divergences, both cases exhibit intertwined, reciprocal processes of cross-cultural and intermedial transmissions. While the former cross-cultural approach has drawn critical attention within literary historiography, including the four-volume world history of literature for which Pettersson and Damrosch wrote the introduction, intermedial dynamics remain underexamined. Amidst the new media and intermedial practices burgeoning at present, elucidating how mediation and ‘intermedialization’ shape cross-cultural literary communication proves profoundly significant yet complex, demanding scrutiny extending beyond media or intermediality toward multifaceted interactions amongst actors within this entangled hybridity.

The integration of the two approaches dismantles enduring binaries of fiction/reality, message/form and text/context within world literary history, reconstituting historiographic reflections in literary studies. Reframing literary transmissions as discrete, generative ‘events’ represents a decisive departure from standard literary historiographic conventions, which remain tethered to the insular domains of literary texts, authors and abstract notions. Instead, a focal reorientation emerges centred upon the renewed aggregation and interrelation of diverse actors implicated within the variegated processes of transmitting and receiving literature, enacted as concrete,

historical phenomena that persist in catalysing vibrant cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural exchanges.

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About the Author

Chengzhou He is Yangtze River Distinguished Professor of English and Drama at Nanjing University School of Arts and School of Foreign Studies, and a Foreign Member of Academia Europaea. His research focuses on modern drama, performance studies, comparative literature, and critical theory. He won the Ibsen Prize in 2002 and is a former President of the International Ibsen Committee. His most recent monograph is *A Theory of Performativity* (in Chinese, 2022).