

Masterworks of Asian Literature in Comparative Perspective

A Guide for Teaching

EDITED BY BARBARA STOLLER MILLER
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“Dad,” one of my sons said to me when he was a college sophomore, “I wish I knew Chinese.” I eagerly explained just how he could arrange to learn it, and was ready to go on to talk about Mandarin, Cantonese, and the rest, when he interrupted: “You weren’t listening to me. I didn’t say I want to *learn* Chinese; I said I wish I *knew* Chinese.”

That’s the problem. Separated from most of us by our ignorance of Chinese, Hindi, Bengali, Japanese, Korean, Sanskrit, Urdu, and the like lie wonderful literatures that could deeply enrich us as individuals and as a culture, and deepen our understanding of our own complex culture—if we knew how to read them. But most of us don’t have the linguistic and interpretative skills with which to read them in the original. Of course, the problem is not all that different from that of Greek and Roman culture, which has been addressed variously by training small elites in those languages, by developing the arts of translation and teaching, and by planning curricula around the study of “classics in translation,” ancient culture, and the like. But we are much more used to thinking of indirect means of approaching those and contemporary European literatures than we are the literatures of Asia. And given the richness and diversity of Asian cultures and languages (only three general traditions of which, Indian, Chinese, and Japanese, are represented here), it looks like a far greater challenge than the one we have only partially overcome with respect to European classics.

The authors of the volume under consideration believe that we can and should become acquainted with Asian literature and culture, and that one way to do so is through reading major works of Asian literature in translation in core curricular courses. It is primarily the work of scholars and translators associated with Asian Studies at Columbia, especially the Columbia Project on Asia in the Core Curriculum. Not surprisingly, the framework implicitly suggested for reading these works is courses in Asian literature that resemble the long-standing Humanities courses in European literature at the heart of the Columbia undergraduate curriculum.

The collection of some forty-five essays on these works grew out of seminars conducted by the Columbia scholars for the benefit of teachers in the humanities who by and large do not read the original languages and have little training in the literatures. The seminars

were modeled partly on the Asian Literature in Translation courses in the Columbia curriculum. The strategy was, in effect, to expose participating Western humanists—of whom I was one—to the literature by reading works in translation and drafts of critical essays on the works. The essays collected here are the final versions of those drafts.

Wisely, the project does not address curricular issues directly (they are, of course, formidable, and ultimately need to be thought about). The project is primarily concerned with providing basic information and intelligent critical discussions of the works. At the heart of the effort lies a sophisticated general notion of translation, ably explained in the introduction by the volume’s editor, Barbara Stoller Miller:

Most of us [in the United States] live in multi-cultural environments in which we are constantly faced with ideas and practices that challenge our personal values. To be truly educated in the modern world demands the ability to make translations from one time frame to another, from one language to another, from one code of communication to another. Human communication in its highest forms involves the translation of ideas, emotions, and forms across barriers of time, place, and language (xxv-xxvi).

The chief obstacle to our understanding Asian literature becomes one of the main advantages of studying it, even when we do not know the original languages. Reading the Asian classics provides practice in the arts of translation we all must employ on a regular basis, given the multiplicity of the cultures in which we exist. (Even the few works of modern Indian literature written in English that are discussed in the volume challenge us to make certain kinds of translation.)

This volume accurately conveys the intrepidity and inventiveness of the scholars who work to inject Asian literature into the bloodstream of American culture. No one will become expert in Asian literature as a result of reading these essays and the works they discuss; there is no pretense that it will, and all due recognition is given of the difficulties unschooled readers face when confronting, for example, *The Travels of Lao Can* or *The Mahābhārata*. On the other hand, few neophytes encountering these approaches to the literature of Asia will fail to feel some of the exhilaration Keats expresses in “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” a sense that whole new worlds of literary and cultural experience have opened up, worlds as new and fresh and puzzling as those discovered by the great explorers of oceans and skies.

As there is no typical work of Asian literature, there is no typical essay in this volume. Some are quite involved with linguistic details; some with explaining genres or conventions that will be unfamiliar to most Western readers; some with critical questions; some with elements of history or culture. I have favorites, but found them to be of almost uniformly high quality, especially in facing the difficult task of being given some of the most basic information about works and background and introducing some relatively

sophisticated critical questions. These essays are intended for readers who may never have heard of Lu Xun or Sei Shōnagon but who may spend a great deal of their time on Foucault or Wittgenstein. To be informative but not patronizing, and to be sophisticated but not obscure, presents considerable challenges, which are more than adequately met here.

For many readers of this volume and participants in the seminars, the primary benefit will be the light cast on Western literature, critical assumptions, and cultural categories. (At a time when core curricula are not particularly popular, it's hard to imagine that new core courses in Asian literature or non-Western literature will be initiated, although teachers of current courses in Asian or World Literature will certainly benefit from them.) We inevitably assume that our own culture's way of doing things is the natural one, and reading these works and essays helps us to understand the arbitrariness of our norms. We tend to assume with Pope that 'Nature and Homer are the same':

Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem;
To copy Nature is to copy them.

Even when we think we have moved beyond such assumptions, it is useful to discover (as David Damrosch points out in a paper quoted from but unfortunately not included in this collection) that the "ancient rules" observed or modified in Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton are not visible in the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana*; and that there is essentially no epic tradition in Chinese literature, where the lyric seems to be the foundational genre. At the other end of the time scale, to hear Bharati Mukherjee and Anita Desai talk about what Salman Rushdie's use of language has meant to them as Anglo-Indian or to read of how Desai has drawn on "Asian imagistic genres in which the physical and emotional landscapes are one" (p. 152) is to understand that what we now think of as post-colonial literature or anglophone literature draws deeply on ancient as well as modern sources.

None of the essays in the volume offers a stronger flavor of the richly complex interaction of East and West and of specialized scholarly and general readership than Lucien Miller's "East-West Literary Relations: The 'Wisdom' of the East," which serves as a postscript to the volume. "Anachronistic language such as 'East' and 'West,' 'Orient' and 'Occident,'" he notes, "is both arbitrary and revealing, belonging to what Edward Said has called 'imaginative geography'" (p. 526). To explore this imaginative geography, Miller looks at the ways in which a number of non-Asian writers, from Marco Polo through Jung to Thomas Merton, have looked to and drawn upon Asian literature. In every case, the representation of Asian works, whether in the form of translation or of commentary or of allusion, is entangled in a quest for self-definition, originating in the writers' non-Asian experiences and needs. Even if they do not finally produce "the real Asian texts," our own intentions to find Asian wisdom, or Asian culture more generally, at whatever level of skill or knowledge, are part of a long-standing pattern of Western culture.

Along with pleasure and enlightenment, this volume brings a deep sense of loss. Barbara Stoller Miller, who led this part of the Project, became ill as the seminars were occurring but continued to

work on until her untimely death in 1993. She is the volume's editor, organizer, and largest contributor, so much a living presence in it that it comes as a shock to discover that it is also dedicated to her memory. Among many ways in which she will be remembered, this volume is a fit memorial in several regards: throughout it one senses her love of Asian literature, her high scholarly and linguistic standards, her extraordinary energy, and her passion for communicating her knowledge of and pleasure in the literatures of Asia. ■

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