


Greek, Latin, and the Origins of "World Literature"

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Alexander Beecroft,
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Abstract: In his article "Greek, Latin, and the Origins of 'World Literature'" Alexander Beecroft argues that while it is hardly new that the models of contemporary comparative and world literature(s) are Eurocentric in their origins and structures, the precise nature of Eurocentrism is less discussed. Beecroft argues that far from representing (as Goethe had wished) the end of national literature, the era of comparative and world literatures has, from its beginnings, been structured specifically around the notion of "national literatures." Beecroft explores the national basis for the study of comparative and world literatures in the nineteenth century with particular attention to the anthologies of Noël and La Place and de Staël's *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* and the representation in each of Greek and Latin as "national literatures." Beecroft argues that the failure of the national literary system to recognize the distinctive nature of these classical languages led to particular challenges to speakers of non-European languages such as Chinese whose own literatures failed to match the national model as they sought to enter the system of world literatures.

Alexander BEECROFT

Greek, Latin, and the Origins of "World Literature"

The question of what constitutes world literature(s) as to the total literary production of the world in a global system which mediates the circulation of literature is and remains a topic of discussion. In "World Literature without a Hyphen: Towards a Typology of Literary Systems" I argue that for the value of "world literature" as a way of talking collectively about all texts which can potentially be described as literature wherever and whenever they were produced and to whatever extent they circulate beyond their immediate context — not to suggest that the latter concept has no value still less because I have ignored or elided the distinctions between the two (see Graham, Niblett, Deckard). Certainly, the system of "actually-existing" world literature circulation, mediated through such things as translation and publication, curricula at the school and university levels, and literary prize-giving is a subject worthy of study and analysis. Indeed, it, and not the "total literary production of the world" is the meaningful definition of world literature within many practical contexts. I argue for the value of my own definition, then, not to replace other definitions, but to insist that the system-based definition is always and necessarily drawing on a much larger body of texts which circulate in other ways and which presents, I believe, a meaningful object for a different sort of study (see Beecroft, *An Ecology*). In the discussion which follows, I confine my remarks to the narrower, systemic notion of world literatures in order to highlight an aspect of that system which I believe is worthy of discussion: the dependence of that system on a model of literary circulation which assumes that literature is organized spatially through the vehicle of the nation-state (on micro- and macro-systemic approaches to literature and culture see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári). I argue that the notions of "world literature(s)" and "comparative literature" emerge alike in the early nineteenth century contemporaneously with the concept of the "national literature" as distinct yet parallel means for re-aggregating those national literatures into larger assemblages.

That world literatures and comparative literature should alike take the national literature as their building-blocks was not inevitable, but I suggest that the product of the historical moment in which these concepts emerged in the early nineteenth century during the era in which the post-Westphalian project of the nation-state was becoming consolidated, "national" models of cultural identity were emerging across Europe. In this initial phase, the literatures included within the parameters of comparative or world literature were necessarily few in number and for the most part were equivalent to the list of national languages of the nations (not all yet, of course, nation-states) of Europe: French, English, German, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Hungarian, Polish, etc. There were, of course, two potential exceptions to this pattern of national languages, two literatures not defined by the nation yet too important to leave out of the system altogether: Ancient Greek and Latin. Each belied the notion that state=nation=language=literature. Greek, since most of the literature most valued in the language had been produced in tiny city-states within a larger cultural world (or, alternatively, within large cosmopolitan empires), Latin, since its literature was itself the product of, successively, a city-state with imperial ambitions, a cosmopolitan world-empire, and a continent of complex feudal polities. And yet the entry of Greek and Latin into this world-system was negotiated by means of the same national-literature model, assimilating both to the status of virtual "nations," rather than allowing the prestige of either or both to allow for non-national entrants into the emerging literary system. This choice had consequences for the later entry of non-European literatures into the same system and particularly for those (such as Arabic and Chinese) which themselves could not readily be assimilated to the model of the nation-state. In particular, the national orientation of European literature shaped not only the reception of these non-European literatures in Europe, but also (especially in China) the debates surrounding the entry of these literatures themselves into (presumptively European) modernity. I begin by illustrating the emergence of the world literary system in Europe as a phenomenon organized nationally, before examining the reception of Greek and Latin within this system and I close with a gesture towards the reception of this system in China in the early twentieth century.

The use of the term *Weltliteratur* by Goethe in his famous 31 January 1827 conversation with Johann Peter Eckermann, has been cited with such frequency in discussions of world literature that to

discuss it again may seem redundant (see, e.g., Birus <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1090>>; Damrosch; Sturm-Trigonakis). And yet I believe there is at least one important aspect of that letter that has remained underexplored, which is the connection Goethe draws between national literatures and world literature in his celebrated phrase, "National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of World literature is at hand" (Goethe and Soret 175) ("National-Literatur will jetzt nicht viel sagen, die Epoche der Welt-Literatur ist an der Zeit" [Goethe, Eckermann, Deibel, Soret 329]). Although others have discussed the relationship between national literature and world literature in Goethe, what has gone largely unremarked is that the term "national literature" itself, far from falling into desuetude in Goethe's own era, is in fact just beginning to come into its own. This is, of course, as one would expect in the era of nationalism, in which the notion that there should be a one-to-one mapping between cultures and polities was gaining ground rapidly. This early nineteenth-century era of emergent nationalism is also, and not coincidentally, that of the emergence of literary history, an autonomous discipline for the first time, and one organized around the principle of national literatures.

René Wellek identifies in particular the *Geschichte der neuern Poesie und Beredsamkeit* (1801-19) of Friedrich Bouterwek, Friedrich Schlegel's *Geschichte der alten und neuen Literatur* (1815), Abel-François Villemain's *Tableau de la littérature au moyen âge en France, en Italie, en Espagne et en Angleterre* (1830), and Jean-Charles-Léonard Simond de Sismondi's *De la littérature du Midi de l'Europe* (1813) (see *A History* 1, 29). Wellek claims that the earliest works of literary history were specifically national in character and motivated above all by patriotism. Certainly, there is much of the patriotic in these writers. Schlegel praises the strength, richness, and flexibility of the German language and regrets that national traditions have been preserved only in scattered, fragmentary form (4). For his part, Simond de Sismondi accounts for his decision not to discuss French literature in terms which emphasize both that literature's dominant position and its uniquely successful appropriation of the stylistic merits of the Greek and Latin traditions 2, 683). Such examples could, of course, be multiplied indefinitely. It is thus all the more interesting that each of these works is in fact international in scope (see Wellek, *A History* 3, 83). At a minimum, each of these works deals with multiple modern European literatures and in addition to those works whose titles announce their international scope, Simond de Sismondi includes literatures in Portuguese, Spanish, Provençal, and Italian, while Bouterwek's twelve volumes covers the *Nationalliteraturen* (a term for which Bouterwek is an early source) in Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, English, and German, and Schlegel (3) promises his reader an overall picture of the development and spirit of literature in the principal nations of antiquity and modern times (3; note that ancient literature is here divided into "nations"). Not only do these histories recount the glories of the national patrimony, they also construct European literary space as a series of national literatures each possessing a parallel history of development from the middle ages to the present. Goethe's report of the imminent demise of the national literature, then, is not only greatly exaggerated: it is in fact only through the recent construction of the "national literature" that Goethe's *Weltliteratur* will be possible and will have to be understood. Only once literature has been broken down into national units can those units be recombined to constitute a "world literature."

That the nation-state should be the paradigm around which literature should be organized would, I argue, have been as absurd as it would have been anachronistic in any previous era: certainly not in the medieval and early modern eras, when many great authors wrote in Latin or in vernaculars not their own and frequently dwelt in small-scale polities (such as those in Italy) subject to frequently-shifting outside control. To the extent that "literature" in previous eras referred to the state of being well-read or to the books the reading of which were essential to that state (see Williams 183-88), it necessarily included works in multiple languages, originating in an even larger number of polities across a the length of European history. Only in an era in which "literature" had been confined to a smaller body of imaginative works, excluding philosophy, history, and science (among other things), did it begin to be possible to imagine literature as "national" — and, as Goethe's remarks themselves make clear, it is only when literature begins to be "national" that it can yearn to transcend those bonds, and to belong to the world.

It is still less surprising to discover that "comparative literature" as a term emerges in this context. Clearly, only when literature has been subdivided can the divisions be compared. The first usage of the term "comparative literature" in any European language is generally agreed to be found

in the 1816 edition of the *Leçons françaises de littérature et de morale*, edited by François-Joseph-Michel Noël and Guislain-François-Marie-Joseph de La Place. This work, an anthology of excerpts from French literature of the preceding two centuries selected both for the excellence of their style and for their moral worth, was intended for the use of students at university. For all its status as the *locus classicus* of the name of a discipline famously obsessed with self-reflection, this work has received relatively little attention over the years. Wellek observed that the subtitle was "otherwise unused and unexplained" ("The Name" 3) while Owen Aldridge in conceding historical primacy to Noël and La Place argues that the term "Comparative Literature" is used for the first time in anything like its modern sense only in the 1870s, with Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett's *Comparative Literature* (39). Sheldon Tageldin has discussed the work of Noël and La Place at somewhat greater length, seeing their introduction of the subtitle *littérature comparée* to the 1816 edition of their work ("One" 423-26) (it had been absent from the original edition, in 1804) as an attempt to reassert the centrality of French within the European literary system in a post-Waterloo world.

All three of these writers, however, seem to be operating from an incomplete sense of the extent of Noël's and La Place's comparative project. Tageldin, whose discussion is the fullest, characterizes the project as encompassing Greek, Latin, French, and English literatures (each literature receives its own title, thus "leçons françaises, latines, grecques, anglaises de littérature et de morale," respectively). In fact, the project encompasses three additional literatures, Italian, German — and "Latin moderne," or literature composed in Latin since the Renaissance. These extra literatures, especially the latter, transform the structure and logic of the project considerably. Where the triple comparison of Greek, Latin, and French might be seen simply as a continuation of the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns, situating French literature as superior to its classical antecedents, and the addition of English might be merely a pragmatic bow towards the victor of Waterloo, the addition of German and Italian moves us close to a complete set of the literatures of modern Western Europe that would (and do still) form the core of the discipline. Conspicuous in its absence from this sequence is Spanish literature, an omission later remedied by a consciously similar text (see Rendu, *Leçons espagnoles*), while Noël and La Place (vii), in their introduction to their first Modern Latin volume, refer also to a *Leçons Hollandes*, by another, unnamed, author (the work in question may be Raoul's *Leçons de littérature hollandaise*) with the addition of these volumes on Spanish and Dutch literatures, a survey of the major national literatures of Europe as it would have looked from Paris in 1816 would seem to be complete.

It is, in fact, the volumes on "Modern Latin" literature (to preserve Noël and La Place's term) which represent the most startling departure in that this volume identifies a "literature" which is neither the product of a single "nation" nor of an ancient world prior to the nation. Rather, their literature in Modern Latin is an explicitly transnational project composed in all the great nations of Europe and as at home in London, Vienna, or Rome as it is in Paris. In their preface, the editors betray their anxieties surrounding the very need for such an anthology, insisting somewhat defiantly "let us not consider Latin to be a dead language, when it is a language which continues to live in some fashion" ("ne regardons pas [le latin] comme une langue morte, une langue qui n'a pas cessé d'être vivante en quelque sorte" [Noël and La Place xv]), and acknowledging that the universality of French in their own era leaves many of their compatriots indifferent to the riches of literature in Modern Latin. More specifically, they note that the critical weight of Boileau and d'Alembert discourages the reading of Modern Latin literature in France, a fact they deplore (x). In spite of these obstacles, Noël and La Place argue for the significance of Modern Latin literature as a vehicle for the expression of great minds over the centuries, and, through the publication of this volume, argue for the need to consider Modern Latin as a literature fully equal to the great national literatures of their day. Even here, in the discussion of this great transnational literary project, Noël and La Place are not immune to national chauvinism, proclaiming the Modern Latin literature produced in France to be second only to that produced in Italy and saying somewhat patronizingly of that produced elsewhere "we make no attempt to calculate the rankings for other nations, but each has been called to do its part, and there is none that has not contributed to the development of this new collection" ("nous n'entreprendrons pas de régler les rangs entre les autres nations; mais toutes ont été mises à contribution; et il n'en est aucune qui n'ait concouru à la formation de ce nouveau recueil" [xii]). Noël and La Place therefore transform Modern Latin literature — the one literature of Europe which must be understood as

transnational (and which therefore is absent from almost all other surveys of its period and being notably absent from, for example, Bouterwek, Schlegel, and Simond de Sismondi) — into itself a reflection of national pride and glory.

The prefaces to neither the (Ancient) Latin volume nor the Greek volume identify explicitly the literatures they contain as properties of a "nation" in the way that Schlegel, for example, does. Moreover, had the project of the *Leçons* been restricted to French, Greek, and Latin, such a structure would not even have been implicit — these three languages, "the most beautiful that have existed in all creation" ("les plus belles qui aient existé dans l'univers" [xvi]) would have represented instead the glory of the French language, reflected in part through its debts to the glories of the two ancient languages. The presence, however, of volumes in English, Italian, German, and "Modern Latin" changes the picture considerably, representing Greek and Latin instead or in addition as "national literatures" of their own. As with English, German, or Italian, the appreciation of Greek and Latin literature requires mastery of another language and like these three modern languages, the two ancient literatures become points of reference and comparison for understanding and appreciating French literature the more clearly.

All that said, I argue that the anthologies of Noël and La Place represent an early stage in the "nationalization" of Greek and Latin literature. As national borders become more fixed over the nineteenth century and as Italian and German literature acquire nation-states worthy of their status, I suggest that the borders of Greek and Latin begin to be fixed more clearly as well in time as much as in space. Modern Latin literature, already something Noël and La Place feel the need to defend, disappears almost entirely from the European literary system, stateless now rather than transnational. Ancient Latin and Ancient Greek likewise go on to acquire chronological limitations more strict than those observed by Noël and La Place, whose anthologies are noteworthy for offering more space to later authors than would be canonical in later eras. The volume on Greek verse, for example, devotes much space to late Classical and Hellenistic poets (Callimachus, Theocritus, Antiphanes, Oppian) and to those of the Imperial and Byzantine eras (Nonnus, Tzetzes, Nazianzus) than would be the case in a later anthology. The Greek prose selections are even more skewed towards later eras with Plutarch, Lucian, Aelian, Athenaeus, Chrysostom, Maximus of Tyre, and others assuming great prominence. Likewise, the Latin verse and prose anthologies also (although to a lesser extent) contain later authors than the twentieth or twenty-first century canon would expect, such as Florus and Justin for prose and (extensive selections from) Claudian for verse.

That these temporal boundaries should later emerge for the "national literatures" of Greece and Rome is not surprising. If each state is to correspond to a nation, and each nation to have one and only one literature, then in the case of the historical succession of languages chronological boundaries will need to be drawn, limiting the legitimate literature in a given language to a specific era. In the case of Latin, the boundary drawn by Noël and La Place (effectively around the year 400) leaves plenty of room for the earliest vernacular literatures of Europe to emerge from a literary vacuum, the more so since their Modern Latin volume resumes the narrative around the time of Petrarch, nine centuries later. Later, narrower definitions of the Latin canon have the effect of separating the glories of classical Roman literature still further from the emergence of European vernaculars, obscuring completely the continuity of literature in Latin. There is a still larger change between the borders drawn between Greek literature as anthologized by Noël and La Place, which extends, albeit patchily, into the eleventh century AD, and the boundaries established in our time, where, after a handful of Hellenistic poets seen as canonical (itself a smaller group, arguably, than in this anthology), few authors other than Plutarch are read for anything other than evidentiary purposes.

In making these claims about what is or is not read from the ancient past, I am of course generalizing considerably and speaking rather more to the authors who might appear on an undergraduate curriculum (even in translation) than to those who receive scholarly interest, although in so doing I am also conforming to the audience Noël and La Place imagined for their anthologies. The fact remains that just as Noël and La Place allow room for Modern Latin literature to co-exist with the great modern national literatures of Western Europe, they allow Greek literature to co-exist with Latin, a phenomenon the awareness of which is limited in later times by processes of canonization. Noël and La Place thus represent merely the beginning of the process of "nationalization" of Greek and Latin literature, a process which will gradually have the effect of limiting each literature to a much shorter

(and mutually exclusive) time period. As the national-literature system evolves and matures, there is only room for one literature at a time in any given place. To the extent that they both register the broader, transnational sweep of both Greek and (especially) Latin literature, and yet seek to contain those literatures within discrete volumes paralleling those of the modern national literatures, Noël's and Laplace's anthologies represent a significant transitional moment in this history.

If the anthologies of Noël and La Place provided a practical and pedagogical basis for the nationalization of literature, the theoretical underpinnings for such a project may be found in Madame de Staël's *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* of 1800. That de Staël "pretty much invented comparative literature" is something approaching a commonplace (Bedell <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/feb/13/biography.features>>) and that the method she invented presumes literatures organized nationally may require some emphasis. de Staël outlines her general approach at the outset: "It has been my intention to examine the influence of religion, customs, and laws on literature; and of literature on religion, customs and laws." ("Je me suis proposé d'examiner quelle est l'influence de la religion, des mœurs et des lois sur la littérature, et quelle est l'influence de la littérature sur la religion, les mœurs et les lois" [28]). The thought that literature and its religious, social, legal, and political contexts should exert reciprocal influences on each other hardly comes as a surprise to a modern reader and indeed it is difficult to imagine, in a practical sense, any context in which these influences would not exist in some form or another, whether an author is working in a tiny city-state or in a cosmopolitan world-empire. In the specific historical context in which de Staël is writing, however, as Napoleon consolidates his power and German national identity evolves rapidly in reaction, the relationship here constructed between literature and these other phenomena suggests very strongly one particular context: that of the nation. Indeed, it is as a nation that de Staël speaks of the Greeks: as, for example, when she observes that "A nation which encouraged noteworthy talent in so many ways, must needs give rise among them to great rivalries" (unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine) ("Une nation qui encourageait de tant de manières les talents distingués, devait faire naître entr'eux de grandes rivalités" [108]). A few lines above, as many times in her discussion of the Greeks, she refers to them as well as "un peuple," a term whose usage seems to reinforce the claim of Greek nationhood. To be sure, at times in her discussion of the Greeks, there is a slippage between Greece and Athens as the locus of the nation, as when she claims that "Greece, and within Greece Attica, was a small civilized country in the midst of a still-barbarous world" ("La Grèce, et dans la Grèce l'Attique, était un petit pays civilisé, au milieu du monde encore barbare" [104]). This may, however, say as much about the Athenocentric nature of our sources for Greek civilization as it does about de Staël's interest in recognizing Athens or Attica as a kind of polity rather different from the *nation*, *pays*, or *peuple* her era is so interested in. de Staël acknowledges the existence of the *polis* as the organizing structure of the Greek order obliquely in the nicely aphoristic line "The Greeks enjoyed the double advantage of small states and large theatres" ("Les Grecs réunissaient le double avantage des petits états et des grands théâtres" [105]). Otherwise, however, and in spite of her theme of the mutual relations between literature and social institutions, she betrays little interest in the question of how the fact of these small states might shape the literature produced therein, though she does note that the comparatively small size and democratic nature of the Athenian state facilitated a greater degree of citizen participation in government than was the case in the great monarchical states of the Europe of her time (146). Her work allows for great variety in the content of national institutions, but with the Greeks, can see no alternative but for those institutions to be national, even though, when she later turns to German literature, she readily identifies the literary consequences of political fragmentation.

As de Staël turns from the Greeks to the Romans, she discusses the relationship between indigenous and borrowed elements in Roman culture, observing: "We must distinguish in all literatures that which is national from that which belongs to imitation" ("Il faut distinguer dans toutes les littératures ce qui est national de ce qui appartient à l'imitation" [157]). The Romans, like the Greeks, are thus for her a "nation" from the beginning. She divides Latin literature into three conventional phases: before, during, and after the reign of Augustus, with the latter phase culminating in the rule of the Antonines (that is, through the second century AD) and throughout the first phase especially, she lays considerable emphasis on contrasts between the Greek and the Roman national characters, contrasting for example the Athenian love of honor with the Roman desire for self-mastery. These

characters, as de Staël argues throughout, shape the literature their nations produce, even at the expense of individual talent: "certainly, literature must be less varied, since the route taken by the spirit of each man is traced by the national spirit, and since individual efforts all strive towards the perfection of a single genre, rather than each man guiding himself towards the genre for which he has the most talent" ("il est certain que la littérature doit avoir moins de variété, lorsque l'esprit de chaque homme a sa route tracée par l'esprit national, et que les efforts individuels tendent tous à perfectionner un seul genre, au lieu de se diriger vers celui pour lequel chacun a le plus de talent" [181]).

For de Staël, the national character of the Romans changes, as we move through her three periods of Roman literary history under the increasingly savage and erratic yoke of imperial tyranny. That the nature of that nation itself is simultaneously undergoing a drastic transformation, from small city-state on the fringes of the Hellenistic world to world-empire with (by the end of her third phase) universal freeman citizenship, and that the authors working in Latin are being drawn into the capital from an ever-increasing circle of Roman provincial cities, are phenomena which pass unnoticed in her narrative. Just as strikingly, and even as she insists that the human spirit took great strides forward during the middle ages (as she says, owing both to the mingling of northern and southern peoples, and to Christianity), and although she sees philosophy as having made great progress during the same era, she describes the literature of the middle ages as having done nothing more than to "regress to the most absurd brutalities" ("reculer vers la plus absurde des barbaries" [245]), and she surveys the era in a few pages, and without naming any individual authors. Even when she arrives at Italian literature, she characterizes Petrarch as the first poet in Italian, as well as the most admired (even as she bemoans his influence on later poets). She says of Dante that his numberless defects are, undoubtedly, a product of his age (282, 288). It is instead the great epicists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries — Boiardo, Ariosto, Tasso — with whom she identifies the apogee of Italian literature. "Modern" literature for de Staël, then, may begin tentatively in the fourteenth century, but is securely established only around 1500. Her interest in French literature begins even later, in the mid-seventeenth century with the reign of Louis XIV and with Corneille. In the case of northern Europe, de Staël reaches further back, making passing reference to Chaucer, to Icelandic saga, to the ever-popular Ossian, but again the major focus of her attention is directed to the three centuries immediately prior to her own time.

This move, curtailing the early history of the vernacular literatures of Europe, is invaluable to efforts to police the "national border" between the Greco-Roman past and the present of national literatures in modern languages. The national literature model spatializes the question of language choice for authors — if they are citizens of a given nation, they should compose literature in the language of that nation. By 1800, this spatialized model was coming closer and closer to reality, but it obscures the cultural realities of medieval and early modern Europe, where authors chose not only between Latin and the vernacular, but between different vernaculars, depending on genre, audience, and other factors. By placing sharp temporal boundaries around Latin literature (ending in around 200 AD) and around the modern national literatures (beginning around 1500), de Staël's work does away with this messiness, making the spatial borders of the nation better guides for the literature she chooses to discuss (which is, to a great extent, that which we discuss as well). By examining modern European literatures only when they have had some time to develop, of course, de Staël is also all the better able to observe and identify the differences in national character which inform her comparative project: the lassitude, licentiousness, and vengefulness of the Italians; the sincere emotions of the Spanish, sometimes pompous, but never subtle or insipid; a certain Nordic melancholy, more intellectual among the Germans, more detached among the English; the gallantry and stylistic perfection of the French, far removed from the active interests of human life. Alongside these characteristics of modern nations, her model of comparison can juxtapose on equal terms the Greeks with their agonistic desires for fame, their solemn rituals, their contempt for bodily pain, and the Romans, with their Stoic self-control and calm dignity.

The organization of comparative and world literatures along national lines we have seen in theory in de Staël's text and in practice in Noël and La Place, is of course the organization that European modernity would soon impress upon a larger world as the mercantilist adventures of earlier centuries of European empire-building gave way in the nineteenth century to overt political and economic

domination, which in turn led in many cases to the desire to emulate European cultural models. That colonialism should have this result is perhaps inevitable, but the particular history of emergence of the European literary system (of which the treatment of Greek and Latin literature is an index) shaped in decisive ways the content of that emulation.

China, as its new Republican era dawned early in the twentieth century, faced particularly acute challenges in adapting to the national-literary system, both as a cosmopolitan empire transitioning to nation-state status and because the only language readily available for national literary purposes was the classical and cosmopolitan language. For twenty-one centuries the rulers of the Chinese people had aestheticized their rule in terms of a cosmopolitan rhetoric rooted in the classical Chinese literary and philosophical tradition much as Europeans had done the same with Greek and Latin traditions, although with the crucial difference that in China this work was done in the classical language itself. That rhetoric had survived many changes of dynasty and remained largely unaffected even by the emergence of foreign dynasties such as the Manchu Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). Certainly, ethnically Chinese subjects of the Qing were aware of the special relationship they bore to the classical tradition (and of the dynasty's own, more precarious, relationship to it), but under the logic of Chinese dynastic history there was no particular vehicle through which that awareness could be expressed in "national" terms. Moreover, while vernacular registers were found in the literary language from the Han Dynasty onwards, and were particularly common elements in genres such as fiction and drama by the late imperial period, there existed no sense of a vernacular language (as opposed to a continuum of regional spoken dialects), which might likewise have aided the emergence of a national identity. Even the vocabulary of the "nation" was problematic. As the western concept of the nation-state emerged in China, as well as in Japan, the ancient term *guo* (國), originally used to refer to the regional states of the ancient Spring and Autumn and Warring States eras (eighth through third centuries BC), was adopted as a translation. The term was rarely used prior to the twentieth century to refer to China as a whole, with the term "all under heaven" (*tianxia* 天下), being preferred.

A key early theorist of China as a nation was the scholar and writer Qichao Liang (1873-1929), who, in the third chapter of his *Discourses on the New Citizen* titled "Explaining the Meaning of the 'New Citizen'" (1906), described the difficulty of adapting Western terminology to the Chinese context:

Is it enough to hone the things we already have? I say, not at all! Our world is not the world of the past; our men are not the men of the past. In the past our China had townfolk (*bimin*), not citizens (*guomin*). It's not that China was not capable of creating citizens, but simply because of circumstances. Our nation once stood majestically in the great East, surrounded on all sides by *man* and *yi* (barbarians). We had no communication with other great nations (*guo*), so our people frequently saw their nation (*guo*) as all under heaven (*tianxia*). Everything that reached our eyes and ears, everything which tinged our brains and muscles, all that our sages and philosophers taught us, everything our ancestors passed down to us—all of this served as the qualities we needed to become individuals, to become people in families, to become people in villages or clans, and to become people in "all under heaven" (*tianxia*); it was insufficient only for becoming the citizens (*guomin*) of a nation. Now the qualities sufficient for being citizens, need not be far superior to these other qualities, but today, with the various nations (*lieguo*) existing side by side, where the strong exploit the weak, in this era where the excellent profit and the inferior lose out, if we lack these qualities of citizenship, then surely we will lack the means to position ourselves between heaven and earth:

僅淳厲固有而遂足乎? 曰: 不然! 今之世非昔之世, 今之人非昔之人。昔者吾中國有部民而無國民, 非不能為國民也, 勢使然也。吾國夙巍然屹立於大東, 環列皆小蠻夷。與他方大國, 未一交通, 故我民常視其國為天下。耳目所接觸, 腦筋所濡染, 聖哲所訓示, 祖宗所遺傳, 皆使之有可以為一箇人之資格, 有可以為一家人之資格, 有可以為一鄉一族人之資格, 有可以為天下人之資格; 而獨無可以為一國國民之資格。夫國民之資格, 雖未必有以遠優於此數者, 而以今日列國並立, 弱肉強食, 優勝劣敗之時代, 苟缺此資格, 則決無以自立於天壤。(54-55)

Particularly interesting, in the context of what I am saying here, is Liang's claim that the qualities possessed by traditional Chinese civilization were sufficient to found strong families, villages, and clans, and to create a universalizing civilization — but not to found a nation-state. He is not arguing for the deficiency of these values *per se*, but rather for the difficulties of applying them to the context of the European nation-state. While the rhetoric of the cosmopolitan classical Chinese tradition was supple enough to be adopted by a variety of other regional polities, in Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and the northern steppes, each of which in its own way was able to appropriate the universal claims of traditional Chinese culture as a marker of its own distinctive community, this very reproducibility of the properties of Chinese civilization, however, was what for Liang and others made this civilization

inadequate as a response to the pressures of nation-state formation in the early twentieth century. The irony here, of course, is that (for similar although not altogether identical reasons) this model of the nation-state was also inapplicable to Europe's own classical and universalizing past, that is, to Greece and to Rome. Both Ancient Greece and Rome went through several major reconfigurations of their political and cultural orders, but no phase in their histories resembled in any way the nation-state of post-Westphalian Europe. Had the history of literary history been otherwise, these non-national formations might have been more explicitly thematized, the linguistic pluralism of European literature in the Middle Ages and early Modernity recognized, and the system of national literatures operative in early nineteenth-century Europe might have been seen the more clearly as an exceptional evolution, rather than as a methodological given. That Europe, the one which, in the early decades of the nineteenth century could recognize that the era of national literatures was being born rather than fading away, would in turn have presented to the rest of the world a much more readily assimilable paradigm, one in which the classical and cosmopolitan past was not another country, but dwelt among us.

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