

# World Literature and World History of Literature in Transnational Context: An Interview with Theodoor L. D'haen

Wan Xiaomeng & Theodoor Louis D'haen

**Abstract:** Theodoor Louis D'haen is Professor Emeritus of English and Comparative Literature at Leuven University, Belgium. An elected member of Academia Europaea and editor-in-chief of the journal *European Review*, D'haen has authored, co-authored and edited over fifty books on postcolonialism, American literature and world literature, including *The Routledge Concise History of World Literature* (2012), *American Literature: A History* (2014), and the latest *Literary Transnationalism* (2018). In May 2019, Dr. Wan Xiaomeng interviewed D'haen during his academic visit to Shanghai Jiao Tong University. In this interview, D'haen illuminates such issues in world literature as transnationalism, nationalism, and translation. In addition, D'haen also shares his experiences in compiling a world history of literature, in which he and his colleagues put transnationalism into practice. D'haen claims that world literature studies depend much on American academe, while new academic trends and forerunners should be welcome in the future.

**Keywords:** world literature; transnationalism; literary history

**Authors:** Wan Xiaomeng is a Ph. D candidate at School of Foreign Languages, Shanghai Jiao Tong University (Shanghai 200240, China). She is currently engaged in the study of narratology and David Foster Wallace. (Email: wanxm1993@sjtu.edu.cn); Theodoor Louis D'haen is Professor Emeritus of English & Comparative Literature at Leuven University, Belgium, an elected member of Academia Europaea and editor-in-chief of the journal *European Review*. His scholarly interests include postcolonialism, American literature, and world literature. (Email: theo.dhaen@kuleuven.be)

**标题:** 跨国主义语境下的世界文学与世界文学史：西奥多 L. 德汉访谈录

**内容摘要:** 西奥多·路易斯·德汉，比利时鲁汶大学英语文学与比较文学教授、欧洲科学院院士、《欧洲评论》主编，其主要研究方向为后殖民主义、美国文学和世界文学，出版《劳特利奇简明世界史》(2012)、《美国文学史》(2014)

和《文学跨国主义》(2018)等相关著作五十余部。2019年5月,德汉教授在上海交通大学外国语学院讲学期间,接受了万晓蒙博士的访谈。访谈中,德汉教授阐释了跨国主义、世界文学、民族主义和翻译等一系列世界文学相关问题。此外,德汉教授还分享了他所在的团队在编纂世界文学史中克服障碍、践行跨国主义的经历。他认为,现阶段世界文学研究的动向主要取决于美国的学术机构,但对于未来可能出现的各种新发展,我们亦应拭目以待。

**关键词:** 世界文学; 跨国主义; 文学史

**作者简介:** 万晓蒙,上海交通大学外国语学院博士生,主要从事叙事学和大卫·华莱士小说研究; 西奥多·德汉,比利时鲁汶大学英语文学与比较文学教授、欧洲科学院院士、《欧洲评论》主编,主要研究方向为后殖民主义、美国文学和世界文学。本文系国家社科基金重大项目“当代西方叙事学前沿理论的翻译与研究”(17ZDA281)的阶段性成果。

**Wan Xiaomeng (Wan for short hereafter):** Good afternoon, Professor D’haen. Let’s begin with a very general question. What do you think about the relationship between national literature and world literature?

**Theodoor Louis D’haen (D’haen for short hereafter):** I think people will always go on studying national literatures because that’s part of their own identity, of their own background and of their own history. Obviously, it’s usually the language they are most at ease in, to read and to write and to speak. At the same time, with globalization and the growing role of China and many other countries joining in world commerce and in world politics, it’s a good thing to also know a little bit about other cultures. One of the things that can help is to read novels, poems, also other things about other cultures. World literature is precisely one discipline or one course of studies in which you could become acquainted with many different cultures from around the world through their literature. I think that makes you not only a citizen of your own country, but also a little bit a citizen of the world, which is a good thing.

**Wan:** Yes, almost everyone dreams of being a citizen of the world. In your latest book *Literary Transnationalism* (2018), you place much emphasis on the concept of “transnationalism” which is “generally considered to be very closely related to globalization” (Vandebosch & D’haen 2). What is the difference between transnationalism and globalization? What are the key issues of transnationalism?

**D’haen:** Globalization is usually interpreted with respect to international trade, with the doing away with trade barriers or trade tariffs, making it possible that people can buy products from other countries without having to pay many taxes,

but also with the possibility of moving production around the world, very often to countries with lower wages so that products can be produced cheaper and therefore be sold to more countries. Transnationalism, in the particular sense in which we use it in that particular book, has to do with breaking through the barriers precisely of national literatures and looking at literature not from a national point of view, but precisely from outside. In other words, it is to look in on another literature from your own point of view. Somebody else asked me the question with respect to American literature, because I've also written a history of American literature, and she asked me whether I looked at American literature differently than Americans themselves do. Unfortunately, I had to reply that in that particular book, we basically wrote an American literary history from an American perspective. Even though my co-author and myself, we are Europeans, but we have been studying American literature for a long time, and we have more or less adopted the way of looking at the Americans as themselves do. But I also said that if I were to write another literary history of the United States, I would probably do it differently, and I would do it precisely informed by a transnational point of view. I would look at what parts of American literature have been important, meaningful, significant to people from other countries, what parts of American literature they feel appeal to them and mean something to them. That would probably give a different kind of American literature. In Nanjing University, I gave a talk in which I show that what some critics and literary historians have been doing over the last ten or fifteen years is looking at canonical works from outside, and that gives a different interpretation. One example is Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, which is a book that every American child has to read. Mark Twain is usually seen as the archetypal, a very typical American author. But what has been overlooked very often is that Mark Twain has also written other things. Some of the things he's written early in his career were stories that dealt with the Chinese immigrants to California and San Francisco. He wrote short stories about that. He also wrote a play about it together with another American author, Bret Harte. In these early stories, Mark Twain is very negative about Chinese immigrants to California. But forty years later, after he'd been around the world and after he had visited among other places China, he came back to the United States and was interviewed. They expected him to be on the side of imperialism. You should also know that at this particular moment, what was happening in China was the so-called Boxer revolt. This was basically a peasant revolt around 1900, supported by the empress against foreign powers, especially against, for instance, the French, the Germans and the English that have concessions in Shanghai, Guangdong and a couple of other places. This revolt

aimed to do away with foreign influence in China. The Germans, the French and the Americans sent troops to China to suppress the revolt, and they did so very bloodily. When Mark Twain came back to America and he was interviewed, his interviewers expected him to support sending American troops to China. Instead, he said “I think this is very wrong. China should be for the Chinese, and we shouldn’t meddle in what they do in their own country.” In other words, in these forty years he had changed his ideas about China completely. I also mentioned another writer, a German writer, Karl May, who was a writer of adventure stories, many of them set in the so-called “Far West” of the United States, the same time as Mark Twain, who in his early career also wrote a couple of stories about China in which he was very negative about China. He also traveled and visited China around the same year that Mark Twain did so. Karl May also spoke out against sending foreign troops to China. He also said that China should be for the Chinese. So he changed his mind too. I mean, this is interesting for Chinese, but it is also interesting for Americans to know. It is also interesting for Germans to know. It is also interesting for Europeans to know. And that gives a different idea of American literature or of German literature, for instance. You know, not only looking at Mark Twain and Karl May what they said about America, but also how they related their own culture and their own country to other countries—in this particular case, China. Of course, there could be other examples that do not have to do with China. But since I am in China, I thought those were two particularly relevant examples. So if you talk about transnationalism, that’s precisely an example where you can look at how authors that occupy a specific place in a national literature can change face. They can become different if you look at them from outside, from another culture, or from another literature. The book *Literary Transnationalism* contains essays that deal in one way or another with looking at a literature from a non-national point, but looking at it in a way that involves at least two or three literatures, and usually even more than that.

**Wan:** Peter Morgan sees “transnationalism” as “a means of bringing American literary discourse into a new relationship with the world that it inhabits” (Morgan 3). Does this mean that transnationalism is born with a sort of Western superiority? Will it produce controversies by enhancing Wallerstein’s world system?

**D’haen:** No, the aim or ambition of the purpose is not to impose a Western or an American point of view. I mean, the aim is precisely to get away from that. I’m not even sure whether it’s actually introduced in American literary discourse. Very often the Americans think that they have invented something when actually it was

invented somewhere else, but they always think that they have invented it. So I'm not even sure whether this actually does not originate from France or something like that. But the idea is precisely to get away from imposing one view upon everybody else, the idea is to achieve some kind of equality.

**Wan:** In "Routes, Roads, and Maps (of) Literature" (2018), you argue that world literature often resorts under the aegis of comparative literature, and that its actual practice came to shadow the organization of Wallerstein's economic and political world system (D'haen 153). Does this problem still exist in today's world? What should we take into consideration when dealing with comparative literature and world literature?

**D'haen:** The relationship between comparative literature and world literature has always been a difficult one. Usually, world literature has been seen as one part of comparative literature, but precisely between the present proponents of world literature and those of comparative literature there's very often disagreement, and that usually has to do with the issue of translation. In orthodox comparative literature, the idea was always that you study usually two or three literatures in the original, for instance, Spanish, Italian, French, English or German or whatever languages in which you can read literature in the original. Then you can work across borders, so to speak, but in different languages. In world literature, at least as it is being practiced now, that is simply impossible. I mean, who could read literature in all the languages of the world? It is just impossible. So actually the necessary instrument for historians of world literature is translation. If you want to read works from many different cultures and literatures, you have to read at least part of them in translation, otherwise you wouldn't be able to read them. That's also the standpoint of somebody like David Damrosch in his book, *What Is World Literature* (2003). But things are different for some adherents of orthodox comparative literature, somebody like Gayatri Spivak, for instance. She says this (translation) is a bad thing, because it makes all the world look as if it exists in English, because the translation, of course, is in English. So in a sense, it anglicizes, it makes everything English. One should also say that most of these, especially anthologies of world literature, which is what she's talking about in translation, they are mostly for American students doing an undergraduate degree, who very often have to take one or two courses of world literature as mandatory part of their education. What Spivak says is that it supposedly brings all of the world to America in translation, but because it is in English, American students get the idea that all of the world is actually America. That is one of her big critiques of what these people

are doing. Of course, there's something to be said for both sides. On the other hand, again from the point that David is making, even if it must be an English translation, at least it's available in translation, people can read it. Maybe they cannot read the original, but at least they can get some idea of what it is in translation. If you can't read it because it's in the original and there is no translation, you will never read it. You will never know anything about it. I'd rather be on the side of David Damrosch, although I must say in my own practice I have tried to deal as much as possible only with literatures that I can read myself. But for instance, if I do want to know something about Chinese literature as I do, especially since I've been here quite a lot over the last years, of course I have to do it in translation because I simply don't know any Chinese.

**Wan:** I am very interested in your current project on world history of literature. How do you understand the world history of literature? What are the distinctive features in writing such a history?

**D'haen:** The idea of a world history of literature is not new. For the last 200 years, there have been many attempts actually to do that, either in volumes written by one person or in sets of volumes written by many collaborators. They exist in German, in Russian, in Danish, for instance. One thing that most of these world history volumes share is that they originate from Europe, or from the west but actually from Europe. I know no examples from the United States even. They are written by Europeans, or in any case, Westerners, even if they are writing about Japan or China or India, or things like that. But in general, eighty percent or more of these works is taken up by European literature. There's only twenty percent or less left for all other literatures, including Chinese, Indian, Japanese, etc. Usually in these histories literatures other than European literatures are only treated in their early phases – for Chinese literature Confucius, Laozi, maybe Du Fu, maybe Li Bai, just not much further than that. For Indian literature it is the Vedas and the Rayana, writings in Sanskrit and things like that, usually nothing contemporary, nothing even what we would call remotely modern. Referring to what we want to do in this new world history of literature, actually I'm not one of the main editors of that. The main editors are a number of Swedish scholars, David Damrosch and also Longxi Zhang from the City University of Hong Kong. But the idea behind this new history is precisely that it will not be Eurocentric. To begin with, we have divided the world not into Europe and the rest. We have chosen six big geographical regions, which will be dealt with on an equal basis. Europe is only one of the six. The Americas, north and south together, is another one of the six. Africa is one of

the six, the three others are Asian. One is East Asia—Japan, China, Korea; another one is south Asia and southeast Asia, which includes India, Myanmar and Malaysia, and maybe Vietnam, Cambodia and all the rest. We will also include Australia and New Zealand here, because they were too small to make into a separate region. Then there's Western Asia with Iran and Turkey and also Arabia, as there is a lot to be said about that. In other words, the explicit aim is that this is not a Eurocentric history where European literature takes up most of the space, and the others are only treated peripherally. It's going to be the other way around. Another new thing is that we draw on a large set of contributors and these contributors come from the regions themselves. In other words, it's not going to be Europeans and Americans writing about the literatures of other regions. Of course there's going to be some of that, but in principle, it's not going to be Americans writing about Japanese literature or Germans writing about Chinese literature. It's going to be Chinese writing about Chinese literature, Koreans about Korean literature, Japanese about Japanese literature and so on. In that sense this is very different from other kind of world histories of literature that we have had until now. I must say the whole project does have its own problems. To begin with, we are already at least five years behind our original schedule. Some of it has to do precisely with the fact that the we are dealing with a lot of contributors from a lot of different regions, but also from a lot of different cultures that sometimes have different ideas about what writing literary history is. There are coordinators on the level of the regions, but also on the level of the divisions we have made in time. We first have all the old classical literatures, not just Greek and Latin, but also classical Chinese, Indian, and all the rest until 200 CE, basically the end of your Han dynasty, which actually was the cut-off point that we took. And then 200-1500, because that's when the voyages of discovery change power relations in the world. That's when America comes into the picture, and then 1500 to 1800, and 1800 to 2000, basically. There's going to be four books according to the four periods. But in each of the four books, we are going to deal with those six macro regions. We have geographical coordinators, but we also have period coordinators. They all have to work together in order to make sure that this is a fair literary history. The total thing should be about two thousand five hundred pages. I will give you an idea of how it's not going to be Eurocentric. I have written a great part of the European history and a Swedish colleague has written also a big part, actually, the two of us together. We have written all of Europe, everything about Europe, but we only have four hundred pages, because the total is two thousand five hundred. If you divide it by six, you end at about four hundred. The idea is precisely that all of the regions get the same amount of

pages. Now, this is not evident. For instance, to be quite frank, there is much less literature from the Americas, maybe nothing to present before 1500. There is not much literature, at least written literature, of Africa before 1800, because in most Africa there was no writing system. They did have oral literature, but these oral literatures are usually only recorded maybe a hundred years ago by anthropologists. So we run into problems with certain questions, especially if we want to give as much space to Africa or to the Americas in the very first volume. Why do we do with that? If they get a hundred pages, just like European literature does, first of all, what are they going to say? Because there basically isn't anything. This has led to big discussions among the group. If they get a little bit less pages in the first one or two volumes, maybe they can get some more pages in the later volumes. But the later volumes are precisely of the period when there's very much to say about European literature, very much to say about Chinese literature, very much to say about Japanese literature. What are we going to do with that? Maybe we will have to arrive at some point, but I'm only speculating now, at some point where the first volume should be smaller than the others. Maybe there should be more pages in the others. We should divide it differently. But we haven't finished yet. We should have finished five years ago. A number of contributions and a number of texts have not yet been delivered. With some of them, we have doubts whether they actually will be delivered because some of the contributors are getting on in age, like me. But I'm one of the younger ones. I think the idea behind it is very solid. There is need for such a world history of literature, but the practicalities are sometimes a little bit troublesome to manage.

**Wan:** To manage a long period of history in limited pages is rather challenging. What narrative forms do you employ?

**D'haen:** The first thing to say is that this world history of literature is, in an important sense, not meant for specialists. Obviously, in two thousand five hundred pages or in four hundred pages on European literature, I cannot say very much, because most national literary histories are more than four hundred pages. You should stop to think that in Europe there's about thirty-five different languages and literatures. If I have to deal with all of these in four hundred pages, there's a lot I cannot say. The same goes for Chinese literature, Korean literature, Japanese literature and so on. Basically, it is going to be a history for non-specialists, in a sense that anybody that knows already about European literature is not going to read what I wrote about European literature or what my Swedish colleague wrote about European literature. The idea is that people from other regions that are



specialists in their own region, but may want to know something about European literature, would read the part about European literature. Just as I, who know something about European literature but may be interested in literature in Western Asia or in Eastern Asia, may turn to the part on China, Japan, and Korea and things like that. If you are interested in particular aspects of what you read there, you will have to go to more specialized histories of Chinese literature, of Japanese literature and so on. Secondly, we of course cannot deal with all authors. We cannot even deal with all major authors or even all canonical authors. Obviously, we try to cover those authors that we cannot avoid, so to speak. I mean, we cannot not mention Shakespeare, to give an example. But there are others like that. In general, also we try to make clear what literature means in a particular time and in a particular area. For that reason, we also say things about what is literature in a given society at a given moment. We also ask who and what authors are, in a given society at a given period, as well as who and what readers are, what are their expectations, how do literary institutions function—publishers, journals, universities, schools, critics, academies, everything that has to do with that. We always give a sort of general introduction to the area and period at the beginning of each part dealing with region, because it's important that readers know at least a little bit about the history of the particular region during that particular period. But the emphasis is still always on the literature. After all, it's a literary history. But we try to illustrate all these points by referring to specific authors and specific texts, and making all of that a narrative that explains things to our readers. Here and there we also analyze a short bit of poetry or of prose.

**Wan:** As you have mentioned earlier, “changes in world history also led to changes in the ways literature is studied” (D'haen 154). In the age after postmodernism, what are those changes in world history that influence the ways literature is studied?

**D'haen:** I'm now talking basically about the development of literary studies in the West. Because that's what I know best of course. You have had postmodernism in the 1960-1980s. After that, what we get is two things that are basically two sides of the same coin. One is postcolonialism, and the other one is multiculturalism. They both have to do with the growing importance of writers that are not male and not white, that are not from the center from Europe or from the US. When I say postcolonialism, that mostly relates to literatures emanating from countries that once were colonies of European powers. Multiculturalism initially had to do with Canada and the United States. That has to do with people that for the longest time

were minorized or minorities, in Canada and the United States. But in many ways they are the same, whether they are postcolonial or multicultural. It springs from the same desire to now fully be part of the culture and the society in which they are living. I think that was particularly strong during late 1980s and the 1990s, maybe even the beginning of the 2000s. I'm not so sure whether that's still the case. Things change after 2001, that is why we get world literature. World literature is an attempt to transcend the oppositions that are an innate part of postcolonialism, because postcolonialism, by definition, opposes literature from the center and literature from the old colonies. And multiculturalism, by definition, is opposed to the old canonical literature of the United States. I think that very often led to adversarial points of view, and also methodologies that in the end became a little bit predictable, where you could read almost any work coming from the ex-colonies as wanting to emancipate people, wanting to accuse the old colonizers. The same thing applies to multiculturalism in the United States. So I think world literature is precisely an attempt to get away from these oppositions and to try to look at literature again in a more global way, not in an oppositional way. That's also of course, one of the reasons why world literature studies are usually very much opposed by, for instance, adherents of postcolonialism. They say that the main thing about postcolonialism or multiculturalism is precisely that it has a political background, because it comes from people that have been discriminated and that now want to get or achieve their place in the world and in society. So there has to be this element of resistance, whereas world literature precisely does away with that, and tries to look at literature both from the colonies and from the colonizer, both white, male and black, female, and all the rest from the same perspective. It's not as political as postcolonialism or multiculturalism.

**Wan:** You have been editor-in-chief of *European Review* for quite a few years. How the future of world literature studies is focalized from that position?

**D'haen:** Well, I'm not sure whether I should say this. First of all, the *European Review* does not only deal with literature, it's actually a very general journal. Basically, it's the official journal of the European Academy, and the Academy has members from all sciences and all kinds of scholarship. The journal publishes in all fields, from physics and mathematics, through music to sociology, political science and everything else, but also occasionally on literature, then, on world literature. According to my own experience, what is happening right now, or has been happening with it over the last twenty years or so, has mostly to do with the development of literary studies in the United States. In many ways what happens

in US academe has very much determined what is going on in the rest of the world, at least since the Second World War. For the last 70 or 80 years, then what I've seen is a succession of movements in literary studies or of approaches in literary studies that sort of keeps step with generations. Right after the second World War, we have New Criticism, which is a particular mode of reading literature, especially close reading and text analysis, that basically lasts until the late 1960s. Then that is followed by what often has been called poststructuralism and deconstruction—Derrida, Foucault, Paul de Man, Lacan and all the rest, that lasted until the 1980s. Poststructuralism and deconstruction largely ran parallel to postmodernism, to the point that very often they have been interpreted as being the same almost. Then we get multiculturalism and postcolonialism side by side. But we have had those now for more than twenty-five years. So they are at an end. I think we have now had world literature for something like ten or fifteen years. I would expect that in five or ten years world literature is at an end too, and we will get something new. I don't know what it will be, but it's probably something that a new generation will invent and propagate. As I say, I have no idea what it will be. But as far as I can see, sort of every twenty to twenty-five years you get something new in American literary scholarship. So if you figure twenty years of New Criticism, (actually it started before the second World War, but I'm only reckoning after the Second World War. Let's say twenty years of New Criticism, twenty years of poststructuralism, twenty years of multiculturalism and postcolonialism. We have now had almost twenty years of world literature. So, it's maybe time for something new, time for a new generation and for something new.

**Wan:** So, you choose not to make predictions.

**D'haen:** Yes, well, I can't say what it will be, but as I say, I would not be surprised if something changes in a few years' time, though that may be another five or ten years from now. Usually what you see in these movements or approaches is that there's a couple of instigators, in this particular case Pascale Casanova, Franco Moretti, and David Damrosch. Although it actually started a little bit before them with Sarah Lawall in the university of Massachusetts who was my supervisor, but Casanova, Moretti and Damrosch made it popular again. Then a lot of people start doing it. But it takes another five or six years before it's in full swing. You can see that by 2012, a lot of people, including me, are publishing on this, and now there's scores of books on it. But at a given moment, there are too many books on it, and people start looking for something new, for something else. So as I say, I can't predict what it will be, but I can almost certainly predict that there will be

something new and something else in a few years' time.

**Wan:** There are infinite possibilities.

**D'haen:** Well, I don't know. I mean, something may change because of political conditions changing. I've often thought that one of the reasons for the recent success of world literature in the United States has been the attacks on the world trade center in 2001, because that made Americans aware that they were not immune, that they were not isolated from the world and, as they had always thought, safe behind their two oceans. This was the first time that a foreign power attacked and succeeded in hurting America on its own soil. It caused a great shock all through America politically, militarily, but also intellectually. I think world literature is partially a response to that, or at least, the generalization of world literature studies in American teaching and thought is partially a reply to that—trying to bring America more into contact with the rest of the world, to integrate with the rest of the world. Just as in creative literature, we have also seen changes with sort of a return to more realistic fiction—Jonathan Franzen and other people like that, and their popularity. So there's no predicting what will happen in that respect, whether we will have another such shock or whatever. I hope not, of course. Maybe the presidency of Trump and what follows from that may cause changes in attitudes that lead to changes in literary studies approaches.

**Wan:** Thank you very much for taking this interview.

**D'haen:** Thank you.

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