Wang Ning and Shakespeare

Simon C. Estok

Abstract: There are a great number of similarities between Wang Ning and Shakespeare. Each, in their respective time and place, have sought to bring their culture (and their enthusiasm for that culture) to the world stage. To be compared with Shakespeare seems the very height of flattery, but such is not the intent of this article; rather, the intent here is to see the work of Wang Ning for the complexity that it is, a complexity of process and product on a par with the work of Shakespeare. Wang's corpus is many things, sometimes a combination of opposites, at times both extensive and focused, objective and opinionated, nuanced and blunt, but always revealing. Like Shakespeare, Wang is acutely attuned to his audience and brings to the global platform a richly vibrant culture. To appreciate fully this work is to be critical and not simply to glorify, to see the missteps and the achievements, the visions and the realities, and to see these both within the contexts of their performance and within larger historical contexts. To do so with Wang Ning, as has been done with Shakespeare, reveals the immense depth and value of this still swelling body of work.

Keywords: Chinese literary scholarship; world literature; Wang Ning; Shakespeare

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标题：王宁与莎士比亚

内容摘要：王宁与莎士比亚有许多相似之处。在各自的时代和国家，他们都充满热情地试图将自己国家的文化带入世界舞台的中央。虽然将王宁与莎士比亚相比较有褒奖过高的嫌疑，但是这并不是本文初衷。本文意在探讨王宁的学术成果及其创作过程与莎士比亚作品相媲美的复杂性。王宁的学术成果中包含多种对立，既广博又集中，既客观又有主观判断，既细腻又坦率直接，总的来说非常发人深省。像莎士比亚的戏剧一样，王宁的学术成果与读者紧密联系，并为国际舞台带来了丰富而有活力的文化。只有通过批评性的阅读而非直接的褒扬，同时考察其成就与过失、讨论其视野与现实的关系，并将它们同时置于创作的学术与历史语境中才能得出王宁学术成就的全貌。正如人们对莎士比亚著作的全面研究一样，此文对王宁学术成就的全面考察揭示

了其广博深度与巨大价值。
关键词：中国文学学术；世界文学；王宁；莎士比亚
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It is hard not to notice some of the remarkable similarities between Wang Ning and Shakespeare. Wang Ning has, for much of his storied career, sought to bring Chinese culture and scholarship to the forefront of the global stage. The degree to which he has succeeded (or failed) is not the concern of this article; rather, "the process rather than the result," to cite Wang out-of-context (2002a: 284), is not only fascinating but points to an important emerging trend in Chinese literary scholarship—namely, a trend that aims toward a global readership and impacts. Like Shakespeare, Wang magnifies and reflects the trends of his time, unabashedly articulating his personal and professional hopes and visions, all the while acutely aware of his audience and its needs.

In his discussion about *Hamlet*, Wang describes how Shakespeare re-tells a story that others have told: "Before Shakespeare, other writers had also tried to write about this legendary story. But it was Shakespeare who has endowed this old story with new spirit [*sic*] of the time, thus making it a great work" (2019a: 19). It is "his completely new way of representing this old story […] with new elements of the spirit of the time" (2019a: 20) that make Shakespeare's play a success. Wang's discussion of the lack of interest in Shakespeare's history plays among Chinese scholars is very relevant to the discussion here. Wang suggests that most Chinese scholars of Shakespeare "still focus on his tragedies and comedies, simply neglecting the historical significance of his history plays. Perhaps to them, Shakespeare's history plays merely describe what had happened in a remote country long time ago [*sic*] far from the current Chinese reality" (2019a: 19-20). From this set of observations, Wang wonders about Chinese writers and their readership and raises several issues:

> Chinese writers should also question themselves: do they write for all the readers of the world or merely for their native fellow readers? If they merely want to restrict their writings to the domestic reading public, as some of these writers expressed, we will not be able to go on with our discussion. If a writer writes not only for his own contemporary readers, but rather for all the readers of the world, he will at least think over whether the subject matter he deals with is his own initiative, and whether it is of certain universal significance.

(2016a: 390)

It is with the question of "universal significance," then, that Wang is grappling. For Wang, it is "universal" themes that allow "works [to] transcend the limits of given national literatures becoming world literature" (2013a: 391)[1]. Some of his arguments are surprising.

Among the arguments Wang makes is that "China […] does try to prevent its culture from being 'globalized'" (2002b: 112). This is obviously more an opinion than a verifiable fact, and Wang offers no examples of government mandates, public proclamations, media campaigns, or legislative policies to support the claim. Certainly it is a daring move (perhaps, one might even venture to say, seditious) to make a claim against China in such a manner, but it is not initially clear precisely what purpose such an accusation serves. One thing, however, is certain: it is a provocative statement that seems to fly in the face of the facts, since even in 2002, China was clearly not shunning the international cultural stage. Two films were entered that year at the Cannes International Film Festival (where they had been making regular appearances since 1983), renowned translator Howard Goldblatt had already translated a dozen or so Chinese classics into English (and had started his work on Mo Yan's *Red Sorghum*) without any resistance from the Chinese government, and China had already entered the WTO (an event that clearly had important global implications for Chinese culture). Wang goes on to argue that China should encourage its culture globally, that "its first step should be 'decolonizing' itself in the 'homogenizing' context of globalization" (2002b: 112). It is here, then, that his purpose in using the straw man fallacy becomes clear: it is to bring attention to his key point—namely, about globalizing Chinese culture. Clearly, since I am commenting on it here, the strategy is an effective one, and it is a daring one in that it seems wrongly to malign the Chinese government. While I perhaps would not go as far as to suggest that Wang courts controversy in order to popularize or expand the reach of his work, it does seem that his strategies of reaching a broad constituency are, for the most part, effective. He is, I dare say, the Shakespeare of "worlding" Chinese literature.

Wang's opinion is that "China ought to make greater contributions to world civilization and the construction of world culture not only economically but also

1 The philosophical problems associated with "universals" and "universalist" beliefs have a very long history in Western thinking, ranging from the time of Plato to the present day. Wang uses the concept of "universals" unproblematically and writes, for instance, about "a universal criterion by which to evaluate literature of the greatest world significance" (2010a: 4), but he does so without explaining how to determine such a criterion.

culturally and intellectually" (2002b: 116). Wang is, without a doubt, at the very head of the movement to promote Chinese literature and literary scholarship to a world that is very much ignorant of the spectrum and vibrancy of this material. For him, "Chinese literature has largely been marginalized on the map of world literature since the late Qing Dynasty" (2016a: 384). Wang himself is a staggeringly erudite scholar of enormously diverse interests and critical capacities. He writes on ecocriticism, Shakespeare, comparative literary theory, Ibsen, Earl Miner, Chinese fiction, Chinese drama, globalization, postcolonialism […] and the list goes on. What is equally remarkable is that he has his finger on the very pulse of Western scholarship. He is, I must repeat, the Shakespeare of "worlding" Chinese literature. It is difficult to calculate the growing immensity of his impacts, both in established scholarly areas and in newly emerging ones.

Among the most recent concerns in Western literary and cultural scholarship has been the work done in ecocriticism and the Environmental Humanities, and it is therefore not surprising to find Wang involved with these issues. Alert to the realities that "ecocriticism, environmental studies, and eco-ethics [by 2014 had become] largely talked about in China not only by literary scholars and humanities intellectuals but also by ordinary people" (2014a: 739), Wang seeks to bring (as he does in virtually all of his work) China to the rest of the world. Because "there are rich ecocritical resources in classical Chinese philosophy and thought, especially in Daoist (Taoist) and Confucian doctrines" (2014a: 740), resources that are virtually foreign to most Western scholars, Wang could hardly be timelier. His 2014 Special Cluster in the flagship journal of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) brings together a collection of articles that, along with his introduction, Wang hopes will allow readers "to learn about the state of ecocritical studies in China" (2014a: 747). Wang begins his introduction to the special cluster with a few comments about the clear skies of Beijing that he was experiencing while writing, skies made clear by the government's temporary shutdown of factories for the APEC meeting. Six years later, in 2020, and continuing sporadically throughout the entirety of 2021, the skies were again clear—and as abruptly. There are several issues that require comment here. One has to do with misconceptions about China. As everyone knows, the air quality in much of eastern China is poor, and, to be sure, as Wang observes, "in the capital city Beijing and its surrounding areas, people often endure hazy, smoggy air, seldom seeing blue sky and white clouds" (2014a: 739). Yet, I worry about not addressing the remarkable difference between China and the rest of the world in terms of per capita pollution. Wang does *not* mention these. To put things in perspective, China (considered by many to be one of the

worst polluters) has a per capita CO_2 emission rate of 7.38 tons; Canada (considered by many to be one of the cleanest nations on earth) has a per capita CO_2 emission rate of 18.58 tons (see Worldometer, Works Cited). Per capita, China is remarkably clean; Canada, filthy. The other thing that really stands out about the clear skies of Beijing, both in 2014 and at the turn of the decade, is that "we can do it," to borrow a phrase from Barack Obama. Without a doubt, we *can* shut things down, stop the madness, and get ourselves onto a better trajectory—but there will be economic consequences, and we are more frightened of these than we are of climate change. That's a problem. Wang Ning is clearly a part of the solution in how he brings the world together and teaches the West lessons from the East. Yet, the binary such a comment suggests is misleading. Indeed, hybridization is an important topic about which Wang theorizes, though he does not seem to use the term very much—even so, it is clear in his scholarship that he is familiar with the concept (see 2013b: 6). He talks about the importance of dialogue and of the cross-fertilizations that happen when cultures meet, about "glocalization" and "Sinicized" theory.

A global influencer of the very meaning of "world literature," Wang fashions himself an objective commentator. There seems an impulse to work within a kind of objectivity (one we imagine driving the hard sciences) in Wang's message: "literary history should only be written as the history of literature rather than as that of ideology or political movement [*sic*]" (2004a 57). This kind of a statement is obviously open to accusations of naïveté and tautological thinking, for surely literature is first and foremost ideological (how can it not be?), while literary history itself must therefore be, whether we like it or not, a history of ideology and its discontents. Perhaps Wang's comments are really about the need for scholars and critics to keep an eye on the potentials for literature to be used for the purposes of propaganda. Yet, when Wang goes on to state that "politically oriented literary historians always identify literary history with political or ideological history, thus ignoring the internal logic and law of development of literature and culture proper" (2004a: 58), it is clear that Wang either misunderstands theories about new historicism and cultural materialism or simply disagrees with them. It is a mistake to argue that these theories are in opposition to or ignore "the internal logic and law of development of literature and culture." Another problem here is that Wang isn't simply talking about literature and culture but, to use his words, "literature and culture *proper*" (emphasis added), as if literature and culture exist in some ethereal zone outside of ideology. If indeed it is possible to view, as Wang does, "Chinese literature as a code of the time and culture" (2004a: 58), which I firmly believe it is, then we must also recognize that there is no time or culture outside of the ideologies

that produce and are reproduced by them.

While there should be no doubt that the work of Wang, like that of Shakespeare, has global impacts, Wang is far from being a detached or objective voice—no more than was Shakespeare. Indeed, Shakespeare's bigness of spirit and his inclusive thinking are well documented, but he was, nevertheless, all too human in his prejudices. The credulous Moor, the bloodthirsty and spiteful Jewish money-lender: one does not need to look too far to see Shakespeare's prejudices. Perhaps he was simply reflecting the prejudices of his time, but this does not exculpate him. His deeply humanizing portrait of Shylock is a perfect, if ambivalent, example:

> Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. (Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* 3.1.59-68)

One short phrase, as any Jew will know (and I am a Jew), gives the lie to Shakespeare's magnanimity here: Jews are *not* fed with the same food—no pork, no sirloin steaks, no rabbits, no oysters, no shrimp, no lobsters, no crabs, no squid, no octopus. No, we are *not* "fed with the same food."

Wang Ning's all too human prejudices are, like Shakespeare's, just below the surface. His work is unmistakably peppered with a nationalist enthusiasm that perhaps sometimes may seem out of place in a scholarly article. For instance, in one set of discussions, he explains that "the Chinese economy has become the second largest world economic entity and will hopefully surpass the United States in the years to come" (2017a: 34). Why "hopefully"? I would imagine that the Chinese response would be swift and condemnatory to an American author expressing a hope for China to fall behind in any way. It is a small phrase, like those we find in Shakespeare, that reveals a lot about the author's nationalist footing, and it is something to keep an eye on. The anti-Semitism of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* was not lost on history. In an article entitled "Shylock and the Pressures of History," James Bulman explains that "the Third Reich exploited [*The Merchant of Venice*] as comic propaganda against Jews who—hook-nosed devils all, intent on bringing Germany to financial ruin—were being herded toward the Final Solution" (143). One can never tell what uses history will have for even the very best minds,

to be sure, and the work of Wang Ning, like that of Shakespeare, is positively brimming with wit and wisdom and should be weighed judiciously for the good that it does rather than the bad that it *could* do—even so, some may find the nationalism chilling.

One of the things that characterizes a lot of Wang's work is the notion that there is something pernicious going on in the world, some xenophobic force that is marginalizing Asia. He states, for instance, that "Chinese literature has largely been marginalized on the map of world literature since the late Qing Dynasty" (2013a: 393), but the passive construction here leaves out the agent. Later in the same article, he answers the implied question about *who* is doing this marginalizing and for what reason, explaining about the prejudices of the Western audience. We should note at the outset that this is an essentialist and misleading statement in that it assumes a monolithic stance and argues for a oneness, and this is just not a very honest representation of the diversity of the West. Surely the Norwegian audience is as different from the American as Chinese cultures[1] are from the Japanese? To say that "the Western audience has some long-standing bias against the Orient and Oriental people" (2013a: 394) and that "Chinese people are uncivilized" (2013a: 395) in the eyes of this mono-racial, monolithic constituency that Wang imagines simply lacks credibility. Wang does not specify to whom he refers when he talks about people "many of [whom] have never been to China, [and to whom] the country is backward" (2013a: 395). It seems to me that rather than flailing in dithyrambs of his own racist abstractions, it might be better to cite how specific examples of racism in the United States work in the continuing global marginalization of Asia in general. The lack of representation of Asians in film and television in the twentieth century (except as stark stereotypes) would be one place to start, but Wang does not seem much interested in this matter. He talks about how "numerous Western literary works [are] available in Chinese, but very few excellent Chinese works [are] translated into other languages" (2013a: 393), and he wants to "bring [Chinese] culture and literature to the world" (2013a: 393). It is a noble goal, one would suppose, despite its ringing overtones of nationalism, and to achieve this, there is a clear need to understand why the flow of culture has been largely one-way. For Wang, there are three reasons. One of these has to do with the racism Wang sees, the "long-standing bias against the Orient and Oriental people"

1 I use the plural, since there are many different ethnic groups—some recognized, some not—in China. It is surprising and troubling that Wang does not recognize the diversity in his "West," since he clearly recognizes the folly of assuming cultural homogeneity in China: "Since China is a large country containing multiple nationalities, its cultural identity should be multiple" (2004b: 595).

described above that Wang imagines in "the Western audience." There is certainly anti-Asian racism in the United States, as there is in New Zealand and Germany, but it would perhaps not be prudent to see them as being the same. Surely, as there are multiple cultural identities, so too must the kinds of biases be understood as multiple and complex. Wang's over-simplification is a liability, not a valuable addition to thinking on this topic. Moreover, one has to challenge the notion that it is *all* of the Western audience that has a "bias against the Orient and the Oriental people." Wang's unqualified statement that "the Western audience" is racist is surely an example of precisely the kind of broad generalizing that Wang is supposedly criticizing. Wang's second theory about the uni-directionality of cultural flows has to do with "the disability and absence of excellent translation" (2013a: 395) of Chinese works into English. To me, this looks tautological: the reason for the lack of translation is a lack of translation. Wang's third reason is that classical Chinese literature is "far from the reality of the current consumer society [and therefore] may not be attractive to contemporary readers even if English translations are available" (2013a: 396). This does not make much sense to me either, since surely Homer and Beowulf are similarly distant. Of Wang's three reasons for the uni-directionality of cultural flows, it seems to me that the premise of anti-Asian racism needs the most attention, even though his discussions clearly miss the precise target.

It is curious to me how Wang misses what seems to be obvious—namely, that it is less that mainstream America imagines China as being backward and uncivilized than as being a potent threat. Isn't it precisely a fear of the power of Asia that is being expressed in the racist "Yellow Peril" (a phrase coined in 1897) cultural phenomenon? And isn't it less simply a racist fear of the number of Asians in the world than of the economic power of Asia in general, and isn't it this the fear that is behind racist anti-Asian advertising? Renault certainly exploits this message

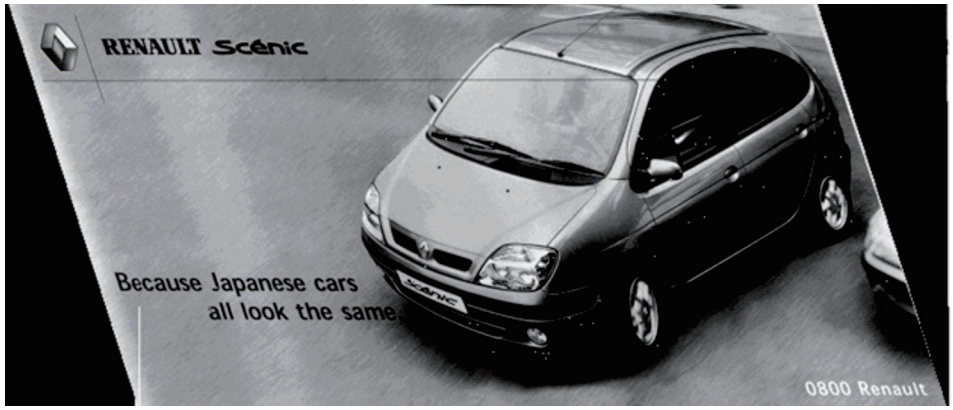


Figure 1: Racist Renault Car Advertisement

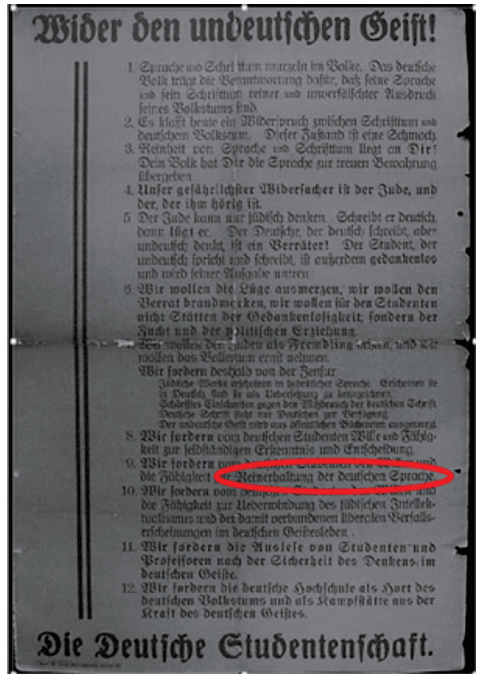
in their advertising (see Figure 1). In the summer of 2000, the Renault car company ran an advertisement that appeared on a billboard in downtown Auckland, New Zealand (and presumably in magazines and other places as well), with a picture of a car called "Scénic," the words beside it reading "Because Japanese cars all look the same." The comment "they all look the same" (a comment with which the Renault advertisement bears a striking similarity) is one that rolls easily and frequently off of the tongue of racists. The xenophobic, anti-import sentiment of the advertisement is clear. Anti-Asian sentiment in America is neither new nor based in literary matters.

One of the most profoundly understated comments of Wang has to do with the question about how to have literature "be appreciated by the reading public" (2016a: 386), for without this, there is no market for the literature and therefore no possibility for it to be recognized as world literature. For David Damrosch, "world literature" can "encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language," and "a work only has an *effective* life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture" (4). That it can survive translation and yet still be enlisted to convey "its original culture" seems a compromise of sorts. Yet, Wang seems to agree with Damroch's position and argues that "any valuable work of art, whether written in Chinese or any other foreign languages, could become part of world literature through translation" (2016a: 388). He identifies lack of translation from Chinese into English as "one of the reasons for the current marginal position of Chinese literature in the world" (2016a: 384).

Why, in Wang's words, "contemporary Chinese literature has not produced excellent masterpieces of world renown" (2013b: 7) is a topic with which Wang struggles throughout has vast body of work. For Wang, translation seems to be the lynchpin of the problem. Yet, the racist "Yellow Peril" xenophobia, the Renault advertisements, the concentration camps, the absence of interest in (and often, indeed, the contempt and fear for) Chinese literature and culture—these are *not* based on translation. It might be more fruitful to look at the fundamentally different cultural values between East and West, between the "me culture" that characterizes Western individualism and the "we culture" that characterizes so much of Asian philosophy. One has to wonder, therefore, how this widely recognized and enormously consequential cultural difference plays out in the *structure* of various literary forms—a topic about which Wang is silent.

Bringing Chinese literature to the West is surely *not* simply a matter of translating stories, plays, and poems as they are but re-writing them to suit the tastes of the target audience, a point Wang accurately understands. Wang argues that "even

if translation is part of a process of 'colonisation', this process is not uni-directional" (2002a: 287) and that translation of Chinese material for Western constituencies "will in turn inspire and influence the West" (2002a: 288). Yet, unless we are going to play fast and free with the definition of "colonization," we will need to slow down a bit here and recognize that "inspire and influence" are certainly not examples of colonization. We have to think about whether the importing of words from one culture to another is really *on any level* an example of colonization, as Wang seems to argue that it is (2002a: 289), because if it is, then we will need to revise the entire global history of language formation. Many words simply have no translation and are therefore absorbed into other languages. Try, for instance, to translate "kimchi" into English. Surely absorbing the word into English is not colonization? Indeed, Wang's understanding of how languages develop is nuanced, but absorption of words from other languages is clearly not the "colonization" that he imagines it to be. Moreover, his concept of "purity" seems deeply flawed. When he talks of "the purity of Chinese" (2010c: 159), one wonders about what he means by "pure." Does he use "the purity of Chinese" in the same sense that the Germans used the phrase "the purity of the German language" (Reinerhaltung der deutschen Sprache) in 1933 (see Figure 2)? Again, the nationalist overtones and the choice of words are chilling. Wang nevertheless understands that hybridization is part of the growth of a language and its becoming "a major world language" (2010c: 167). There is, therefore, a larger issue here that seems to require comment, and it relates with Wang's observation that "there are few non-Chinese who fully understand Chinese and comprehend all the nuances of Chinese culture and the subtlety of Chinese aesthetics" (2002a: 288). Given the close relationships between cultures and the structures of their narratives, it thus becomes important to consider how Chinese short stories, novels, drama, and poems are to be translated in terms of the formal aspects of the literature: how do literary structures themselves figure into all of this?


Wider den undeutschen Geist!

1. Sprache und Schrifttum wurzeln im Volke. Das deutsche Volk trägt die Verantwortung dafür, daß seine Sprache und sein Schrifttum reiner und unverfälschter Ausdruck seines Volkstums sind.
2. Es klafft heute ein Widerspruch zwischen Schrifttum und deutschem Volkstum. Dieser Zustand ist eine Schmach.
3. Reinheit von Sprache und Schrifttum liegt an Dir! Dein Volk hat Dir die Sprache zur treuen Bewahrung übergeben.
4. Unser gefährlichster Widersacher ist der Jude, und der, der ihm hörig ist.
5. Der Jude kann auf jüdisch denken. Schreibt er deutsch, dann lügt er. Der Deutsche, der deutsch schreibt, aber undeutsch denkt, ist ein Verräter! Der Student, der undeutsch spricht und schreibt, ist außerdem gedankenlos und wird seiner Aufgabe untreu.
6. Wir wollen die Lüge ausmerzen, wir wollen den Verrat brandmarken, wir wollen für den Studenten nicht Stätten der Gedankenlosigkeit, sondern der Zucht und der politischen Erziehung.
7. Wir wollen der Juden als Fremdling [illegible] und wir wollen das Volkstum ernst nehmen.
Wir fordern deshalb von der Zensur:
Jüdische Werke erscheinen in hebräischer Sprache. Erscheinen sie in Deutsch, sind sie als Uebersetzung zu kennzeichnen.
Schärfstes Einschreiten gegen den Mißbrauch der deutschen Sprache.
Deutsche Sprache darf nur Deutschen zur Verfügung.
Der undeutsche Geist wird aus öffentlichen Büchereien ausgemerzt.
8. Wir fordern vom deutschen Studenten Wille und Fähigkeit zur selbständigen Erkenntnis und Entscheidung.
9. Wir fordern [illegible] die Fähigkeit zur Reinerhaltung der deutschen Sprache.
10. Wir fordern vom [illegible] die Fähigkeit zur Ueberwindung des jüdischen Intellektualismus und des damit verbundenen überalten Verfallserscheinungen im deutschen Geistesleben.
11. Wir fordern die Auslese von Studenten und Professoren nach der Sicherheit des Denkens im deutschen Geiste.
12. Wir fordern die deutsche Hochschule als Hort des deutschen Volkstums und als Kampfstätte aus der Kraft des deutschen Geistes.

Die Deutsche Studentenschaft.

Figure 2: The Twelve Theses (see de Klein, Works Cited)

It is surely important to translate the structure and to ask if *re-structuring* is tacitly understood as part of the entire process. If the latter, then what cost translation? Certainly at the level of the essay, Wang's work largely follows the Western essay model. It is a foreign model in much of Asia. In my quarter of a century of living in Asia, some of it in China, if there is one thing that I have learned, it is that the Western essay structure does not come easily in much of Asia. One of my colleagues in China told me simply "we don't like to start arguments or fights. An essay needs an argument. The Chinese essay is more about explaining data and details than starting and finishing an argument." When Wang examines the "re-writing" that is involved in translation (see 2013c), what is missing for me are comments about the differences between literary structures, East and West. His seemingly spurious claim that "no one has so far dealt with the issue of world drama from a theoretical and comparative perspective" (2019b: 7) results in a disappointingly empty verdict: "we could conclude … that world drama … has different versions along with the huge difference between different cultures, especially between Eastern and Western cultures" (2019b: 20). So what?

There are clearly many issues at play, one of which is what Wang describes as "China's long-standing isolation from the outside world and its conservative attitude to foreign influences" (2012a: 618). In addition, precisely what defines the parameters of "world literature" remains problematical, and Wang very usefully outlines at least some of the questions that need to be addressed.[1] His conclusion is that "there is no such thing as the singular form of world literature" (2011b: 296). Again, this is a rather obvious statement that seems to lack analytic rigor, leaving the reader wondering again, "so what?"

What is it precisely, for instance, that is missing in C-Pop but that is driving the international appeal of, say, K-Pop? What is the Chinese equivalent of Hallyu (The Korean Wave, 韓流)? To what degree do the economic formations and political ideologies of each country play a role in the international marketing of their

1 In his "Introductory Remarks" to a *Neohelicon* Special Issue entitled , Wang identifies ten questions that need consideration: (1) To what extent does world literature exist in the age of globalization? (2) What is the significance to reconstruct world literature by expanding the literary boundary? (3) What is the dynamic role played by translation in reconstructing world literature? (4) Is it possible to write a new history of world literature in different languages, especially in English and Chinese? (5) What works should be regarded as world literature? (6) What is the criterion in judging the quality of world literature? (7) What contributions has postcolonial writing made to the reconstruction of world literature? (9) What contributions has Chinese American literature made to canon reformation? (10) Is it necessary to anthologize world literature as literature proper is severely challenged by other means of representation in the present era? (2011a: 247) Even though Wang articulated these questions a solid decade ago, they remain very relevant still.

cultural products? To what degree does unfettered self-expression play a role? If "a challenge against [*sic*] elite culture and literature" (2004a: 56) is a pre-requisite for literature, music, or other art to become a part of a globalized body, then where exactly does this leave Chinese art? Will it all dilute in the waters of global consumer culture?

Wang worries about consumer culture and notes that "some humanities scholars and critics in China are now very much worried about the prevalence of consumer culture and art" (2012b: 510). China's involvement in the development of consumer culture is, for Wang, unquestionable: he argues that "dialectically speaking, the rise of consumer culture is symbolic of postmodern society and a direct consequence of China's involvement in the process of globalization" (2014b: 245). He notes that "today, in an age of globalization, Chinese literature, like literatures elsewhere, is severely challenged by the rise of popular culture and consumer culture" (2010b: 327) but that "we should realize that globalization has, in homogenizing national cultures, also offered China a precious opportunity to bring its culture and literature to the world" (2016a: 384). Wang discusses some very material aspects of China's cultural expansion, including the enormous infrastructural "Belt and Road Initiative" of Xi Jinping that seeks to physically and diplomatically connect China with other countries. Wang, correctly I think, maintains that this initiative "appeals to economic development, but also to cultural development" (2017a: 34). Indeed, "global popular culture and consumer culture" *do* offer China great opportunities to hit a global audience; therefore, it is odd for Wang to ask without much hope of a positive answer, "How shall we face the severe challenge caused by the rise of popular and consumer culture?" (2006: 156). The answer to me seems self-evident: we use it. We use it to as a strategic step to bring Chinese culture to a more global audience. Admittedly, commodifying and fetishizing cultural products is reductive and essentialist, but it is a strategic reductionism, a strategic essentialism, a temporary thing—like offering a taste of a food item in Costco rather than offering the entire product. If people like it, then they will buy the whole thing.

There is undeniably a global impulse to buy the whole thing, to invest the time and energy to get a more comprehensive taste of China—to wit, the global impulse to learn Chinese, as a language, an impulse promoted at least in part by Hollywood films that feature sophisticated heroes who unexpectedly break out into Chinese. Within Chinese media itself, the term "Chinese fever" (中文热 zhōngwénrè) has come into vogue to describe this phenomenon. Wang references "Chinese fever," which he sees "as a direct consequence of the globalization in culture" (2010c: 159)—presumably he means here the globalization of Chinese culture. My guess

is that there is a little bit more involved here. A short anecdote will illustrate this well. I met a man wearing a t-shirt with UCLA emblazoned on it in HongSeong, a small town in South Korea. I asked if he knew what it meant. He said "uck rrah" and paused and then added "mee gook" (미국 , which means "American"). Clearly, he thought that UCLA was a word and not an abbreviation (and thus he tentatively pronounced it for me), but of one thing there was no doubt: it stood for the USA—like Levis or Coke. I thought about the commodification and fetishization of culture and was reminded of the how young Americans sometimes tattoo Chinese words on their bodies. The commodification and fetishization of American objects in HongSeong and of Chinese words in the West are perhaps worthy of attention here. Children used to run up to me when I lived in HongSeong to say "Hello, pleased to meechoo," and they clearly thought that this made them look cool in the eyes of their friends. They had acquired cosmopolitan sophistication because they could speak English—as an American does by suddenly breaking out into Chinese in a movie. One thing is certain, and Wang could not be more accurate: "the recent popularization of the Chinese language and culture worldwide should […] be taken into serious consideration, for it will contribute a great deal to the remapping of the world language system and the rewriting of literary culture by pointing out a new orientation of literary historiography" (2010c: 160). This is a fabulously exciting time to be alive indeed, and as Chinese becomes more and more a global language, the kinds of exchanges of information and culture are unfathomable. It sometimes takes small steps across ugly terrain to get to beautiful places, and perhaps these steps—among them, the commodification and fetishization of culture—will indeed take us to a world where we communicate better not by translation but in the very source language itself. This is the goal, and it is one that Wang Ning is taking us toward. Wang states, however, that "we should still admit that the position of English as a world lingua franca cannot be changed" (2010c: 164). I am not entirely convinced of this. Nor, I think, is Wang. I certainly hope not.

Wang's breadth of theoretical discussion is impressive, to say the least. Some of this is nuanced and profound in its insights; some not. Of the former category, his work on global Chinese(s) shines, with deep reflections about implications and complications from the spread of the Chinese language and the "Chinese fever"; of the latter category, the unabashed nationalism he at times articulates reveals a singular uninsightfulness and perhaps even deafness to some of the historical resonances of his words. Wang is, nonetheless, like Shakespeare, and we may nitpick at his foibles and his all too human prejudices, but his growing global canon articulates hope and growth. Wang is aware of the resilience and spirit of

hopefulness that has long characterized China and stresses, for instance, that when we recollect the World Wars in China, "we are actually reflecting on the bitter past history and pointing to a bright future" (2019c: 131). After all, within a few years of the end of the First World War, the Chinese Communist Party was founded (it was 1921), and within a few years of the Second World War, Mao Zedong affirmed the creation of the People's Republic of China (it was 1949).

There are clearly many, many issues involved with the topic of cultural migration that Wang addresses, and he is often subtle in his discussions. One of the subtle issues that comes out of Wang's discussions, to give but one example, has to do with respect: simply dropping the cultural material from one place to another will not work, and the transfer of cultural material absolutely must be done with respect for the receiving culture. Nowhere is this more clear than in the case Wang gives of the Chinese college students using Ibsen's *Enemy of the People* "as a weapon to fight against environmental pollution and social corruption in contemporary China" (2017b: 134). They were met with "interference from different levels of the local government" (2017b: 134). What is an acceptable form of protest in the political and cultural terrain of one country is not necessarily so in another.

Like Shakespeare, Wang Ning traverses terrain littered with potholes and puddles as he steps across cultures and continents in his scholarly work. The products that Wang and Shakespeare have fashioned reflect intimate understandings of their respective contemporary worlds, reveal a wealth of personal and national aspirations and visions, and document virtually unparalleled sensitivities to the needs of their audiences. The brightness of this work should neither blind us to some of the missteps of Wang and Shakespeare nor render these men infallible in the eyes of history. As an ongoing process, the work of Wang Ning indeed shares remarkable similarities with the work of Shakespeare. As Shakespeare did, Wang is bringing the products of a richly vibrant culture to the global stage. He is making the world listen. He is making the world one.

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