BRINGING STUDENTS INTO THE WORLD
Asia in the World Literature Classroom

By Melek Ortabasi

The idea that literature had a special ability to transcend national boundaries and could potentially lead to a greater understanding among peoples is what led to the establishment of the field of comparative literature in the late nineteenth century. World literature, which has grown beyond a concept into a discipline, is an outgrowth of comparative literature—but one that carries with it an expanded geographic mandate.

The new, improved discussion of world literature began almost twenty years ago and generally seeks to overcome the Eurocentrism that has characterized the field of comparative literature in the past. As a teacher, I particularly appreciate the work of David Damrosch, currently chair of the Comparative Literature Department at Harvard University, who has done more than anyone to promote the idea of world literature and reinvigorate the cross-cultural research and teaching of literature. To supplement Damrosch’s investment in the popularization of world literature, which I agree is an effective medium for helping students live in an increasingly globalized world, I offer here some basic suggestions and further resources for incorporating Asian literary texts into the world literature classroom.

I am a Japanologist who earned her PhD in comparative literature just as the more recent discussion of world literature emerged; I am now housed in one of the very few world literature programs in the world. I am quite familiar with straddling disciplinary and linguistic boundaries both in my research and in the classroom. Of course, I cannot claim knowledge of all Asian literatures—but I strongly believe that with some good research and consultation with expert colleagues, nonspecialists can successfully and productively incorporate foreign and unfamiliar texts into the high school or undergraduate curriculum. The point is not to uncover “universals,” although surely there are themes and ideas that are widely shared among historical periods and geographical areas, but to encounter, negotiate, and learn from difference.

How can one focus on difference when teaching a foreign text that has been domesticated through translation? I propose a threefold answer: provide relevant historical and cultural context; explore compelling but complex comparisons; and, finally, read closely. Reading with an awareness of one’s own linguistic, cultural, and historical position, as well as being alive to what I very scientifically call the “lumpiness” (or the uneven texture) of the translated text, can lead to important insights into how intercultural/lingual communication actually happens—or could happen.

Next, how does one choose texts from the staggering (but, even so, limited) range of translated literature available? The latest and/or updated world literature anthologies that have recently been published are a good and readily available resource to help inform those choices. Of course, the organizational structure such collections (perhaps necessarily) pursue is conceptually inflexible. They tend to repeat some of the same classic Asian works—such as The Tale of Genji or The Dream of the Red Chamber—over and over again; finally, they are massive tomes and so can be difficult to adopt as textbooks. Nevertheless, they introduce a variety of international materials one might not otherwise encounter. As such, they are useful resources for nonspecialists, especially because they have greatly expanded their inclusion of non-Western materials in their latest iterations.

In any case, when one is trying to construct a first-year syllabus titled “Introduction to World Literature,” there is really no question of covering an entire canon and/or chronology (to say nothing of the whole world). Instead, in the thirteen to sixteen weeks that compose the semester, it is preferable to present a loose “network,” rather than a list of texts. The conclusion(s) among texts can be thematic, stylistic, causal, etc. It is up to the instructor to give the “fit” among the texts—and then to work with the students to unearth the potentials and pitfalls of comparison across space and time. In my opinion, every good world literature syllabus should be more than a list of “greatest hits.” It should present not only important and fascinating works of literature, but how those works are, or could be, in dialogue (or conflict!) with each other. In other words, the syllabus is about method as much as it is about material.

The works presented below are not intended as an exhaustive—or even representative—list of literary masterpieces from Asia. Rather, they are a demonstration of how an instructor without area expertise can begin to build a network of texts through research and association. This is why I have moved out of my own comfort zone. I have purposely not selected Japanese works of literature as my starting point. Instead, I introduce four works from India, China, Korea, and Indonesia. I always research, as best I can, the original linguistic and local or national context for each. The list of resources I include below each entry reflect the importance of this foundational knowledge. In each description, however, I put an emphasis on “worlding” the text in one way or another. Some texts are born transnational, of course, which is a boon. However, others become so only through translation, sometimes very reluctantly. I offer the brief explorations below as an example of how I pre-read works with a view to teaching them in a world literature course.

INDIA
The Rāmāyaṇa

Thought to be composed almost 3,000 years ago, this multilayered, originally oral Sanskrit epic is still central to the popular and religious imagination in South Asia. One could also say that it is an archetypal work of world literature. It exists in many versions in many languages, as does the Mahābhārata, the other great Sanskrit epic. The story of Rama, a legendary prince and an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, the Rāmāyaṇa teaches its audience about the importance of fate, social order (caste), and family relations. Much beloved in South and Southeast Asia, the story follows the life of young Rama and his virtuous wife, Sita, as they are banished from the kingdom over a contest for the throne. Restored to his rightful place at the end of the narrative, Rama is a hero who subsequently leads his kingdom into an era of peace and order.

The text provides a wealth of opportunities for comparison, not least in terms of adaptations of itself. Many experts in the field introduce the Rāmāyaṇa in the classroom through writer R. K. Narayan’s modern, condensed retelling of the epic in English. One can then compare short selections from Narayan with much older sources, such as Vālmiki’s ancient Sanskrit text (usually referred to as the “original”) and Tulsidās’s
sixteenth-century Hindi version. Because the text is still so important in contemporary South Asia, there are also plenty of contemporary retellings to draw from, such as the seventy-eight-episode television series Rámâyana (director Ramanand Sagar), which enthralled the entire Indian nation when it started airing in 1987. Such adaptions, of course, are a great way to pique the interest of students, thoroughly immersed in media culture as most of them are.

In Southeast Asia, where Indian cultural influence is at its strongest, the Rámâyana has also influenced a variety of media; the most notable retelling is probably the eighteenth-century Thai national epic, the Ramakien. An East Asian example of the Rámâyana is the 1992 Japanese animated feature Rámâyana: The Legend of Prince Rama (Rámâyana: Rāma ōji densetsu), an Indo-Japanese coproduction. The mind-boggling diversity of these adaptations reveals an interesting facet of world literature: Whether they employ the original text to build nation or encourage international amity, the receiving cultures tend to make them into something new, appropriating them for their own local purposes.

Further afield, where the Rámâyana does not have as direct and demonstrable an influence on literary tradition, the text can be read comparatively with others as a more discrete cultural and textual object. Even if the classical Western generic label “epic” does not really apply to this ancient Sanskrit text, its exploration of the foibles of gods and humans clearly invites comparison with Greek texts such as The Odyssey or The Iliad.

One of the Rámâyana’s central attractions, the love between Rama and his wife Sita provides ample fodder for a nuanced discussion of gender in the high school or undergraduate classroom. One could also include the Greek epics here, because the kidnapping of Sita and the test of her virtue after she is rescued reminds us of the similar fate of Helen of Troy in The Iliad. While Sita is still often seen as the ideal wife, unlike Helen, both women are judged by many of the same values and have been reimagined in visual media countless times. What the comparison of Helen with Sita can add to the debate is the important insight that, while both women are actual individuals as well as symbolic concepts, they perform significantly different cultural and literary functions as characters.

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CHINA
Song of Lasting Regret
By Bo Juyi (or Bai Juyi, 772–846)
This oft-anthologized Tang dynasty poem, whose title is translated variously (eg, “A Song of Everlasting Sorrow”), treats the obsession of the Tang Emperor Minghuang (or Xuanzong, 685–762) for his beautiful consort, Yang Guifei. She was beloved of the emperor in a manner that left him distracted from his duties, and her ambition fueled the rebellion of An Lushan (755–763); the story goes that when the emperor tried to flee the capital with her, soldiers demanded she be executed first—which she was, right in front of the emperor. This tragedy about the conflict between love and duty has long been popular throughout East Asia, where Confucian values have generally dictated prioritizing the latter over the former. Nevertheless, the romantic and fatalistic aesthetic of beauty presented in this iconic poem has also been important within the rich East Asian tradition of poetry, which highly prizes intertextuality. As a result, Yang herself has become a prominent source of allusion throughout the region as the quintessential poetic symbol of femininity (whether admirable or abominable).

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Graham, Masako Nakagawa. The Yang Kuei-Fei Legend in Japanese Literature. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998. Bo Juyi, while respected in China, is arguably much more revered in Japan. Indeed, Yang (Yōkihi in Japanese) has been so popular in Japanese literature, theater, and film that she merits her own study (note the alternate spelling of her name in the title). Newer examples from Graham’s study could extend the discussion into the modern age.

KOREA
From Wonsō Pond (In'gān munje, 1934)
By Kang Kyōng-ae
Samuel Perry, Translator
New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2009

Turning now to modern literature, this realist novel by a young female author views colonial, pre-World War II Korea from the perspective of women and the working class. Originally serialized in a newspaper and marketed as melodramatic fiction for women, this critically acclaimed, though long neglected work also reflects the attitudes of a politically aware, educated "new woman." Following a number of young Koreans as they try to negotiate life, love, and identity in a part of the Japanese empire, From Wonsō Pond is a socialist commentary on and engaging narrative account of Korea's embattled but burgeoning modernity. Part of a growing movement to write a Korean national(ist) literature, even under the strictures of colonial rule, it represents part of a fascinating body of work written both in Korean and the colonial language, Japanese.

Perry's translation, which makes this novel available to the English-reading public for the first time, is both fluid and accompanied by a succinct but informative introduction. The socialist, feminist tone of Kang's work, as well as its historical moment, means that it resonates well with the writings of other Asian "new women," such as Japanese writer Hayashi Fumiko (1903–1951) or Chinese writer Ding Ling (1904–1986). Proletarian works from Europe's interwar period, especially those by women, would also offer a framework for discussion. For example, Irmgard Keun's novel The Artificial Silk Girl (Das kunstseidene Mädchen, 1932), about the life of a young factory girl in Berlin, bears some significant resemblances to Kang's narrative, in which two of the young female characters also go to work at a factory. Newer writings by Koreans living in Japan (called zainichi) also provide an interesting transnational opportunity for comparison because they often present and explore the aftereffects of colonial Korean identity. The novel's discussion of modernity, identity, colonization, and nation would also allow comparisons with Toer's This Earth of Mankind, described below. In any case, Kang's novel is suitable even for inexperienced readers of translated literature because of its modern style and character-centered story.

INDONESIA
This Earth of Mankind (Bumi Manusia)
By Pramoedya Ananta Toer
Max Lane, Translator
New York: Penguin, 1996

The narrative of this book, the first in the so-called "Buru Quartet," begins in 1898 and features a young Javanese aristocrat who struggles to negotiate the Dutch East Indies colonial system. The multilingual, well-educated protagonist Minke embarks on a romance with the beautiful Eurasian Annelies. Their relationship ultimately falls victim to the cultural, gender, class, and racial power structures that control the lives of these young people in Dutch-dominated Java.

Toer (1925–2006) is a celebrated, award-winning author whose criticism of the Indonesian Suharto regime earned him fourteen years as a political prisoner in the Buru Island penal camp from 1965 to 1979. This novel was first related orally to his prison mates in 1973 and then committed to the page in Indonesian, the national language, in 1975. It was not published until 1980 and was promptly banned in 1981 for its supposed Marxist–Leninist agenda. All four books in the tetralogy were banned until 1998, when President Suharto was forced to resign. Toer's novel can be read with other works banned for political purposes, of which there are many in contemporary mainland China: for example, Dream of Ding Village (Ding zhuang meng, 2005), about a blood-selling ring and AIDS, or The Fat Years (Sheng shi, 2009), a near-future novel in which characters struggle to recover suppressed Chinese history.

The political turmoil experienced not only by Toer but also by Minke, his protagonist, speaks to Indonesia's complicated cultural and religious makeup, not to mention political history. The novel can thus also be read in conjunction with many other postcolonial novels from within Southeast Asia, for example, José Rizal's famous nationalist novel about the Philippines, Noli Me Tangere (1887). In many such novels, characters embrace ideas of national identity, even while they suffer from various types of double consciousness. The fine shades of racial and class hierarchy that the characters must navigate are reminiscent of some African literature from the same period, such as the short novel Xala (The Curse, 1973) by Sembene Ousmane from Senegal. Because Indonesia and Korea have both been dominated by colonizers in the past, Toer's work can also be read with From Wonsō Pond, described above. The prominence of female characters in both works, as well as in Sembene's, demonstrates the particular problems of marginalization experienced by native women in colonial societies, even if their individual circumstances differ.

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CONCLUSION
Once I have done the pre-reading you see above, I have to put together my course reading list, a process that will generally be framed by whatever limitations are dictated by the course outline (desired geographical range, issues of genre, historical period, etc.). Another limitation is, of course, my own interests: I know a good deal about issues of modernity, national identity, women's literature, and feminist criticism, so my choices reflect that bias. Given the immense diversity of Asia, not to mention world literature in general, there are many other ways to approach the integration of Asian materials. For example, the role of capitalism in contemporary Asia could yield a fascinating reading list with sources from all corners of the continent: "business novels" from Japan, the very latest in consumer culture (and critique) from China and contemporary crime novels from India, just to begin. The often-popular nature of such works makes them easier for younger students to read, too. It is also important to remember that world literature includes literature written in English. Border-straddling works, especially those dealing with Asia, such as Graham Greene's The Quiet American (1955), could also speak volumes about North American attitudes toward the foreign at various historical moments. Such works, starting as they do from a perspective closer to home, can be useful for easing students into more international (translated) materials. When I
use such texts, however, I always pair them with relevant literature by Asian authors in order to present more than one perspective on the issue in question.

Deciding where (and whether) to select texts by picking and choosing—and then developing—the fledgling connections I propose here, I am always conscious of the type of comparison I am implying through my final selections. The resulting network, honed further each time the syllabus is taught, can be not only fun to teach, but truly eye-opening as well. Learning how to negotiate difference in literary texts—whether cultural, linguistic, or temporal—is much more interesting and rewarding than uncovering how humans are “all alike.” More important, it can show students how rethinking and readjusting one’s own position in the world is a crucial skill—and one that, as teachers of world literature, we are well-positioned to teach.

NOTES
3. I gratefully acknowledge the invaluable input of Laura Brueck, Tineke Hellwig, Christopher Lupke, St. Nae Park, Ken Seigneurie, and Dafna Zuar, and thank Cam Fedniuk, my research assistant.
8. Ding’s “Miss Sophia’s Diary” (1927) offers a similar perspective to Hayashi’s. A translation can be found in Tani E. Barlow, I Myself Am a Woman: Selected Writings of Ding Ling, ed. with Gary J. Bjorge (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).
9. See, for example, Melissa L. Wender, Into the Light: An Anthology of Literature by Koreans in Japan (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2011).
The lurch into virtual learning has been jarring for both students and educators. "The transition was so unbelievable, I practically got whiplash from it," says Steven Miller, a professor of journalism and media studies at Rutgers University in New Jersey. "We unbundle that for students, say, and bring more interactivity and flexibility to classrooms using features such as breakout rooms." So-called breakout rooms are a common feature on Zoom, which Ilona Posner gladly used when teaching students at the University of Toronto's computer science department. By incorporating technological into the classroom, such as Schoology, Erica believes the increased interactive collaboration can make learning meaningful, where "ideas are not only heard, but ultimately integrated in their own way into everyone’s experience." Creating Honest, Open Dialogues for Learning. Besides the conventional uses for Schoology, Erica sees the program as a conductor for honest, open dialogue with and between students about the actual subjects. I highly suggest inserting images, podcasts, and video into the tests you create. Students find the material that is being assessed engaging, practical, and fun. Personally, I love karaoke and will always try to find music videos that contain a specific learning point and add them to a question." With Expeditions AR, teachers can bring the world into the classroom to help engage students with immersive lessons. Expeditions AR uses Google's Tango technology to map the physical classroom and place the 3D objects for students to observe and interact with. Expeditions AR is coming to schools in Fall 2017. Interested teachers and schools can sign up at g.co/expeditions/ar. Student Feedback "It opened my eyes to things I didn’t understand or know about - why the dollar depreciates or appreciates - how corporations effect our economy or other economies - a lot of info - that I think everyone should be aware of. The learning modules changed my entire view of the world and how we can help people. Some of the videos [the professor] showed made me cry. Before this class I didn’t know any of this stuff."