

## Geopolitics, Migration, and Transcultural Processes

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My 2018 book, *Literatures of Liberalization: Global Circulation and the Long Nineteenth Century*, begins “To study literatures in which global processes criss-cross distinct environments requires (1) translators and transculturalists who know diverse literary histories and history of genres, and (2), the disciplines relating to environments of nature (natural sciences), culture (the humanities), and technology (social sciences, engineering, and medicine)”.<sup>1</sup> Literature can give us precise, authentic accounts of life as felt or experienced in each specific niche of nature, culture, and technology at a particular moment. The study of global literatures therefore requires collaborators who know their own respective literary histories, genres, and styles within their specific environments. Since 2004 I have been cultivating such collaborations.<sup>2</sup>

This seems to point to a method adequate to a period of such extreme technological and geopolitical change as that covered by *Cusp*'s remit c.1880–1920. Distinct cultures have their own temporalities, yet this period was transformative across many cultures. Before we return to methodology, it may be worth recapping a few of the features of the world at that time. Technical innovations gave rise to what is commonly called the second industrial revolution. Britain and the US saw the rise of Taylorism, Fordism, the first monopolies and corporate consolidation, trade unionism and strikes, the rise of consumer culture and women shopping rather than farming/gardening/cooking, eugenics, and social Darwinism (as noteworthy in China and Australia as in Britain). Metal detection, machine gun, AC motor,

aeroplane, tractor, sonar, electric ignition for automobiles, pop-up toaster, lightbulb, cash register, motion picture camera, electric trolley, and radio transformed private as well as public life; and even the spheres themselves, private and public, were transformed as more women worked outside the home up to and during the First World War. Multiple innovations enhanced railway safety thus leading to more mobility, global time standardization, and a reification of “the working day.” Britain saw the effects of massive immigration following on Russian pogroms, education became compulsory for children under ten, electric lights were introduced into homes, women won the franchise, Boer Wars, the National Insurance Act covers sickness and unemployment, the Easter Rising in Ireland, the “Spanish flu” epidemic, and the First World War.

If Anglophone history reveals an interconnected world, interconnectedness is equally manifest elsewhere. From 1898, modern western thought entered China in force. The Hundred Days’ Reform, the Boxer Rebellion, and anti-foreign unrest led to the fall of the Qing and founding of the Republic in 1912. The *New Youth* magazine, New Culture, and May Fourth Movements sought to liberalize Confucian culture, as did publication of Lu Xun’s monumentally critical “Ah Q,” amounting to the greatest rejection of a three-thousand-year-old tradition in world history. The Communist Party of China (CPC) was founded, with perhaps the greatest influence on China being the Russian October Revolution under Lenin of 1917. It is noteworthy that henceforth every major Chinese modernist was a professional translator: Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, Guo Moruo, Mao Dun, Ba Jin, Lao She, Bing Xin. Meanwhile, in the US, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first significant restriction of free immigration in US history.

In South Asia, other ancient cultures now subalterned to a British rule initiated by a trading company saw the founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885; Nehru, Bose, and Ambedkar were born 1889--91; in 1905 Bengal was partitioned; in 1906 the Muslim

League formed in Dhaka; in 1911 the capitol was moved by the British from Calcutta to Delhi; in 1915 Gandhi returned from South Africa; the Bengal Renaissance flourished in the arts, literature, and spiritual guidance.

Africa and the Middle East 1881–1914 suffered the New Imperialism under the so-called Scramble for Africa by seven western European powers, with 90 percent of its population under European control entailing a massive destruction of the continent's cultures. The Kingdom of Benin was plundered for the artworks that inspired Picasso, Matisse, Gauguin, Derain, and Klee. Central Africa, usurped by the Congo Free State, was plundered for ivory and rubber, and Zulu South Africa for diamonds. Other kingdoms encroached upon by Europeans included the Asante federation; Tukolor, Sokoto, and Kongo Empires; Yorubaland; and the Kingdoms of Ijebu and Dahomey. Reflection on the African diaspora inspired Cuban Fernando Ortiz's theory of transculturation in his *Los negros brujos / Black Sorcerers* (1906) and *Los negros esclavos / Black Slaves* (1916).<sup>3</sup> In 1882 Egypt is made a British protectorate; in 1917 Arthur Balfour approves a Zionist "national home" in Palestine; modernization under Tanzimat reforms, discovery of oil, dissolution of the Ottoman empire, rise of the Young Turks in 1890s, Atatürk's national movement and founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. Fin de siècle revolutions spread through the Middle East from the 1880s to Iran in 1906, as British, Belgian, and Russian capitalist companies bought up and distributed among themselves key sectors in agriculture, industry, and infrastructure. Pan-Hellenism against the Ottomans; Pan-Africanism, Pan-Asianism, and Pan-Islamism against the Europeans; and Zionism all rose during this period.

In South America, after winning independence from Spain and Portugal, independent states are threatened by the Big Stick Doctrine of Roosevelt and the US from the north. The US invade Cuba in 1898, followed by military occupations, and the Mexican revolution breaks out in 1910. Nonetheless, after the War of the Pacific 1879–83, Argentina, Brazil, and

Chile emerge as major continental powers. Not only is this world interconnected, but it is a modern globalized world, and its technological innovations and geopolitical struggles are identifiably the sources of our own hotspots, partitions, and diasporas.

A methodology adequate to such geopolitical and technological change differs from comparative literature, which begins with expertise in two or more national languages and literatures and then compares them. The work of understanding global processes of transculturation is rather centered in the actual moments of contact, when two or more cultures meet, either through voluntary or coercive means, and learn from, borrow from, admire, use, exploit, or dominate one another. Understanding these moments requires additional skills to the comparatist expertise in language and literature. It also requires knowledge from other disciplines about how society works within specific niches of nature, culture, and technology.

This is where my original specialty, the political economy of Britain since the industrial revolution, was helpful in understanding other cultures going through similar processes of modernization. Many of the elements studied in nineteenth-century Britain have arisen in most cultures since then: empires, science and the rationalization of knowledge, new technologies, religion and epistemic justice, intensive urbanization and the marginalization of nomadic and agricultural peoples; gender, class, caste, and race inequalities and aspiration; almost universal hope that better lives were possible, and then resentment when the hopes did not materialize (what I have elsewhere called, after the South African specialist Rita Barnard, “living in the aftermath of anticipated futures.”)<sup>4</sup> All cultures have local specificities, but the modernization process often brings similarities, and informed specialists from different regions often find commonalities as well as differences.

Two truisms appear when studying global processes of transculturation. First, no identity, race, gender, ethnicity, or culture is pure, but all modern identities are mixed. (The

current practices of identity politics are based not in purity but in strategic abstractions deriving from histories of exploitation and domination.) Second, rather than literature being untranslatable, communication during this period is everywhere. The majority of people throughout history have been multilingual, and the crystallization of “a language” seems to be largely a product of modern nationalisms. Communication is altered through transculturation, and the processes of alteration are the focus here. I here give two examples.

In the final chapter 6, “Towards Modernity,” of his classic *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* (1989), the late Li Zehou writes of the transformation of classical aesthetics under the forces of modernization. By the late Tang and Five Dynasties (618–979 <sc>CE</sc>), philosophers saw

sensual debauchery, instinctive outbursts, and the sudden outpouring of long-suppressed subconscious desire—these are the stuff of this new modern trend. . . . Their open pursuit of the interesting, coincidental, shallow, odd, vulgar, romantic, humorous, shocking, deviant, and unexpected takes them quite a distance away from the traditional poetic ideal of “gentleness and sincerity” and the Confucian standard of moral and ethical instruction.<sup>5</sup>

By the middle of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 <sc>CE</sc>), desire (*yu*) merged with expressions of sexual love, explicit sexual scenes, and the development of urban consumerism. Philosophers began to ask, does principle or feeling come first? Reason or passion? Is the social the aesthetic realm, as it was in Confucian aesthetics, or the individual as an instinctive, sensuous anomaly? Confucian aesthetics had aimed at emotional stability (feeling at ease) over a lifetime, rather than merely good/pleasurable instantaneous emotions, and something like a group or collective psychology.

In this new, modern aesthetic, the individual becomes an unrepeatable, irreplaceable, unique sensuous life. Art and aesthetics are significant in and of themselves rather than as “vehicles of The Dao, or Way.” After the Hundred Days’ Reform, Schopenhauer’s negative, Buddhist-inspired philosophy of pessimism met with Kant’s positive philosophy of the Beautiful, both playing their part in Sinicized aesthetic *sedimentation*, which is Li’s term for how cultural processes mix and are transformed through contact. Since then, in contrast to classic Beauty, but similar to western cultures, whole industries have made fortunes representing species of the ugly: crime, shock, horror, the foolish, ignorant, angry. Li’s book ends with the 1920s, when art began to serve the revolution, citing the influential Russian thinker Chernyshevsky’s “art is life.” As the revolution against Confucianism began its long march, Confucianism remained in the form of art for the state, with its emphasis on the good (beautiful) society.<sup>6</sup>

We now move from the cusp of the twentieth century to that of the twenty-first with a related example of the fruitfulness of understanding languages, literatures, and cultures dialectically at the moment of contact. Since he first came to global visibility, the controversial artist Ai Weiwei has been typically known in the west as a victim of an authoritarian regime and in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as a tax evader. In 2013, the British playwright Howard Brenton published *The Arrest of Ai Weiwei*, a complex production that was, the publisher heralded, “an affirmation of the centrality of art and freedom of speech in civilised society,” i.e., an indictment of the CPC and vindication of western “freedoms.” Yet a critical transcultural approach sees the play as more dialectical, in which the CPC and the artist both have right and wrong. The Party knows that the people need small happinesses while their lives are hard, that suppressing the artist will be counterproductive, and that tax evasion is a crime against the good society. The character Ai knows that modern life requires arts of the ugly to describe it, not merely the dulcet effects of

classical Beauty. At the play's climax, Ai invokes individualism and what he calls free speech: "Without individual voices or the free exchange of information, there can be no common interests for humanity; you cannot exist. The people, the proletariat, the country cannot really exist. Authentic social transformation can never be achieved, because the first step in social transformation is to regain the power of freedom of speech."<sup>7</sup>

The play and Ai only hint at the limits of bourgeois individualism and of the western practice of free speech, but the audience should know that ugliness on the internet abounds, that the West produces more commodified mimics than genuinely free individuals (with all the material and educational appurtenances that genuine freedom requires), and that Western society is, as the CPC knows, largely a consumerist, rubbish culture that endangers global sustainability. A paternalistic, authoritarian Party that thinks that it can care best for its people versus a materialistic western culture that allows anyone to say anything no matter how violent or revolting. However debased communism may be here, free speech and individualism in their current manifestations in the West are hardly salutary.

And art in the West, *pace* Ai, does not fare better. As I write, Michael Steinhardt, the American hedge-fund billionaire who looted one hundred eighty illegally smuggled antiquities valued at \$70 million from eleven countries—Bulgaria, Egypt, Greece, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, and Turkey—after a years-long investigation was acquitted by the Manhattan District Attorney's office without any charges.<sup>8</sup> Add this to the obscene commodification of art under capitalization regularly documented on *Artnet*.

At one point, under threat of imprisonment, Ai quotes Chairman Mao's *Red Book*, "dialectical materialism, which demonstrates the constant struggle between opposites in an empirical setting, is the best method toward constant improvement," and his prison guards, acknowledging that he knows much more than they do, admire and sympathize with him.<sup>9</sup> Rightly, for the struggle between ideologies cannot be comprehended with knowledge of one

side only; only the dialogue will reveal the true state of both. This is equally true of the study of literatures.

When I wrote my 2000 book on how Western culture had moved from classical Victorian political economy to neoclassical economics and neoliberalism, Howard Brenton was an heroic Leftist writer exposing the lies of Thatcher and Reagan. I then quoted him as follows:

Thatcherism, like all authoritarian dogmas, was brightly coloured. Writers were trying to get at the darkness, the social cruelty and suffering behind the numbingly neon-bright phrases—"the right to choose," "freedom under the law," "rolling back the state." It was as if a hyperactive demon was flitting about amongst us seeking with its touch to turn everything into a banal conformity, a single-value culture with one creed—"by their sales returns we shall know them."<sup>10</sup>

The terms are the same as in *The Arrest of Ai Weiwei*—authoritarianism, darkness, cruelty, suffering, bright meaningless slogans (today, Take back control, Get Brexit done, Make America Great Again, Global Rules-based Order—at least Mao's slogans purposely had the goal of teaching an illiterate population how to read, which they did)<sup>11</sup>—except that then Brenton was writing about Britain. Ai added a romantic view of the individualist artist whose righteousness pierces the deep array of tyranny—a romanticized view that has been repeatedly deconstructed in the west, but still serves his purposes in criticizing the PRC's ruling party. What is illuminating is to bring the dual perspectives to bear on the meeting between East and West here; neither to reify nor glorify one or the other, but to see that each



is struggling with modernity in its own way, so that the scope and limits of both are critiqued through their dialectical performance.

As we view the cusp of the twentieth century from the cusp of the twenty-first, as we are now in the third, digital, industrial revolution, reviewing the second, we can see how technique and technology have hammered our ethics and politics. Contrary to the tech oligarchs, we don't need new ethics and politics to keep up with technology. The good old-fashioned ethical theories (love your neighbor, honor guests, do unto others, increase happiness and minimize pain, eat the rich) are perfectly adequate to the modern world; they just don't want to uphold them. It is worth reconsidering the roads not taken, especially those outside the West, and those that had proposed more cosmopolitan, less nationally based, futures.<sup>12</sup> Today the demographic (the age and gender balance of populations) of the Global North is deteriorating, while the Global South is still growing, and the Global South will suffer first from climate change largely inflicted by the North. In *Move: How Mass Migration Will Reshape the World—and What it Means for You* (2021), the human geographer Parag Khanna argues that the combination of demographic imbalance (aging North and youthful South), technological disruption, political upheaval, economic dislocation, climate change, and connectivity (a global exoskeleton of logistics, electricity grid, internet cables, and other forms of communication) will ensure mobility accelerated beyond anything we have seen previously. The modern subject is young, single, childless, urban, and struggling. Among the values of such youth, nationality is much less significant than connectivity, sustainability, and mobility. Khanna believes that ultimately these will win, that current far-right nationalists and nationalists are often elderly and, in any case, a minority that will die out. We have a choice to move from far-right ideologies of natives versus foreigners to welcoming locals and newcomers, and the latter could be enabled by far-sighted states' assimilation spending. The states that will survive are those that open borders, welcome young energy and talent, and

balance their aging populations.<sup>13</sup> The age of nationalisms was merely three centuries; creative humans have been migrating for sixty thousand years and they are not likely to stop any time soon. Modern literatures are literatures of migration. A modern criticism adequate to it must be collaborative, multilingual, critical, self-critical, and forward-looking: *Cusp*.

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<a>Notes

1 Regenia Gagnier, *Literatures of Liberalization: Global Circulation and the Long Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2018), v.

2 See the Global Circulation Project of *Literature Compass*  
[https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/17414113/homepage/global\\_circulation\\_project.htm](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/17414113/homepage/global_circulation_project.htm).

3 Regenia Gagnier, “The Geopolitics of Decadence,” *Journal of Victorian Literature and Culture* 49, no. 4 (2021): “” 607–20.

4 Regenia Gagnier, “From Barbarism to Decadence without the Intervening Civilization; or, Living in the Aftermath of Anticipated Futures,” *Feminist Modernist Studies* 4, no. 2. (2021): 166–81.

5 Li Zehou. 2016, 2019. *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, trans. Maija Bell Samei (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 2009), 202.

6 Regenia Gagnier, “The Geopolitics of Beauty,” *19. Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* (in press, 2022).

7 Howard Brenton, *#aiww: The Arrest of Ai Weiwei* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2013), 70.

8 Dalya Alberge, “Rapacious US billionaire gives up \$70m of plundered artefacts,” *The Guardian*, December 8, 2021, 30.

9 Brenton, *#aiww*, 56.

10 Brenton cited in Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 182.

11 Between 1949 and 2000, the PRC went from 1 percent literacy to 96 percent, one of the great achievements of world history.

12 Cosmopolitanism is a well-established research area within *Cusp*'s periodization. See, e.g., Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-De-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence, and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Tanya Agathocleous, *Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination in the Nineteenth Century: Visible City, Invisible World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (London: Verso, 2019); Stefano Evangelista, *Literary Cosmopolitanism in the English Fin de Siècle: Citizens of Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

13 Parag Khanna, *Move: How Mass Migration Will Reshape the World--and What it Means for You* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2021).