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Lu Xun contra Georg Brandes: Resisting the Temptation of World Literature

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Título / Titre / Titolo

Lu Hsun contra Georg Brandes: resistiendo la tentación de la literatura mundial
Lu Sin contre Georg Brandes: résister à la tentation de la littérature mondiale
Lu Xun contra Georg Brandes: resistere alla tentazione della letteratura mondiale

Abstract / Resumen / Résumé / Riassunto

Two architects of the modern breakthrough. Two transreaders of historical context and intellectual legacy. Both reimagine “world literature” while wrestling with conformity and fame. Each travels an idiosyncratic, though profoundly intertwined, path. Georg Brandes (1842-1927) captivates Europe and Asia with a work designed for Denmark; the moment he fashions it for the universe however, he loses ground. Lu Xun (1881-1936) devotes his translator’s life to unrecognized works in the construction of an alternative frame for *Weltliteratur*; these tune his writer’s voice that bestows upon him unrequested stardom in modern classics of the whole world. Brandes’s ironic paradox and Lu Xun’s iconoclastic prejudice allude to mirrored discoveries. Exploring their individual cases enables us to discern decisive moments in the evolution of comparative literature. Placing them in juxtaposition reveals a contrast between kindred spirits—an intricate distinction that informs our actions as comparatists.

Dos arquitectos del avance moderno. Dos transgresores del contexto histórico y el legado intelectual. Ambos reimaginan la “literatura mundial” mientras luchan con la conformidad y la fama. Cada uno recorre un camino idiosincrásico, aunque profundamente entrelazado. Georg Brandes (1842-1927) cautiva a Europa y Asia con un trabajo diseñado para Dinamarca; sin embargo, en el momento en que lo modela para el universo, pierde terreno. Lu Xun (1881-1936) dedica su vida de traductor a trabajos no reconocidos en la construcción de un marco alternativo para la *Weltliteratur*; ésta sintoniza su voz como escritor, otorgándole un estrellato no solicitado entre los clásicos modernos de todo el mundo. La paradoja irónica de Brandes y el prejuicio iconoclasta de Lu Xun aluden a descubrimientos que se reflejan el uno en el otro. Explorar sus casos individuales nos permite discernir momentos decisivos en la evolución de la literatura comparada. Colocarlos en juxtaposición revela un contraste entre espíritus afines: una distinción intrincada que informa nuestras acciones como comparatistas.

Deux architectes de l’avancée moderne. Deux transgresseurs du contexte historique et de l’héritage intellectuel. Les deux réimaginent la «littérature mondiale» alors qu’ils luttent contre la conformité et la renommée. Chacun passe par un

chemin idiosyncratique, bien que profondément lié. Georg Brandes (1842-1927) a captivé l’Europe et l’Asie avec une œuvre conçue pour le Danemark; cependant, au moment où il la modèle pour l’univers, il perd du terrain. Lu Xun (1881-1936) consacre sa vie en tant que traducteur à des travaux non reconnus dans la construction d’un cadre alternatif pour la *Weltliteratur*; ces travaux accordent la voix de son auteur, lui conférant une célébrité non sollicitée parmi les classiques modernes à travers le monde. Le paradoxe ironique de Brandes et le préjugé iconoclaste de Lu Xun font allusion à des découvertes qui se reflètent l’une dans l’autre. L’exploration de leurs cas individuels nous permet de discerner des moments décisifs dans l’évolution de la littérature comparée. Les placer en juxtaposition révèle un contraste entre les esprits semblables: une distinction complexe qui informe nos actions en tant que comparatistes.

Due architetti dell’innovazione moderna. Due trasgressori del contesto storico e dell’eredità intellettuale. Entrambi reinventano la “letteratura mondiale” mentre lottano con la conformità e la fama. Ognuno percorre un percorso idiosincratice, benché profondamente intrecciato. Georg Brandes (1842-1927) affascina l’Europa e l’Asia con un’opera progettata per la Danimarca; nel momento in cui lo modella per l’universo, tuttavia, perde terreno. Lu Xun (1881-1936) dedica la sua vita come traduttore a opere non riconosciute con l’obiettivo di costruire una cornice alternativa per la *Weltliteratur*; queste sintonizzano la sua voce di scrittore e gli conferiscono la fama non richiesta tra i classici moderni della letteratura mondiale. Il paradosso ironico di Brandes e il pregiudizio iconoclastico di Lu Xun alludono a scoperte speculari. Esplorare i loro casi individuali ci consente di discernere i momenti decisivi nell’evoluzione della letteratura comparata. Collocarli in giustapposizione rivela un contrasto tra spiriti affini: una distinzione complessa che informa le nostre azioni come comparatisti.

Keywords / Palabras clave / Mots-clé / Parole chiave

Lu Xun, Georg Brandes, *Weltliteratur*, Comparative literature.

Lu Hsun, Georg Brandes, *Weltliteratur*, Letteratura comparada.

Lu Xun, Georg Brandes, *Weltliteratur*, Littérature comparée.

Lu Xun, Georg Brandes, *Weltliteratur*, Letteratura comparata.

Prologue

Ever since Goethe prophesied in 1827 the era of *Weltliteratur* and demanded contributions to its fruition, “world literature” has enticed intellectuals from diverse backgrounds, both cultural and political, to respond. Two conspicuous revisionists are Georg Brandes and Lu Xun, acknowledged as the architects of the modern breakthrough in Scandinavia and East Asia, respectively. Exploring their individual cases enables us to discern decisive moments in the evolution of comparative literature. Placing them in juxtaposition reveals a contrast between kindred spirits—an intricate distinction that informs our actions as comparatists.

Case 1: Georg Brandes's Ironic Paradox: An Open City or a Fortress

In the winter of 1871, a 29-year-old man began a lecture cycle at The University of Copenhagen on the *Main Currents in 19th Century Literature* (*Hovedstrømninger i det 19de Aarhundredes Litteratur*), which was described as follows:

The lecture cycle created a peculiar thrilling sensation. People stormed the building; people stood outside for one hour in rain and snow to obtain a seat; people talked for weeks in astonishment and perplexity about nothing but the novelty of the ideas revealed in these lectures, nothing but the boldness of the man who dared to expose so frankly the defects of their idolized native literature.¹

This man was Georg Brandes (1842-1927). His mission hitherto was to use the stimulants of an equally fierce and unbiased critique to waken the Scandinavian intellectual life that had sunk into sleep. He succeeded.

¹ “Editor’s Introduction” (Vorwort des Herausgebers), in: Brandes, *Die Hauptströmungen der Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts*. Übersetzt und eingeleitet von Adolf Strodtmann. Leipzig, 1897, vol. 1, pp. V-VI. Unless otherwise noted, throughout this essay all translations are my own.

The stormy lecture cycle and its Danish publication in four volumes from 1872 to 1875 launched and enhanced the modern breakthrough not only in Denmark, but throughout the rest of Scandinavia.

Brandes’s triumph extended beyond his mission. In Germany, he proved to be one of the three Danish intellectuals—alongside Hans Christian Andersen and Søren Kierkegaard, yet far more immediate in his impact—who dramatically rebalanced the long unbalanced German-Scandinavian cultural dialogue. The almost simultaneous German publication of his lecture cycle (*Hauptströmungen der Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts*), with empathy and intensity translated and introduced by Adolf Strodtmann, established Brandes as the advocate of a problem-oriented literature that transvalues all conventional schemes.

The same spirit took Asia by storm. In 1915, Brandes’s *Main Currents* was first translated into Japanese by a Japanese scholar of German Studies. In 1933, the reprinting of this edition was purchased by Lu Xun (鲁迅), who read both Japanese and German. Brandes’s 1872 preface, by then sixty years dated, lost no potency. It prompted Lu Xun to publish an article in the September 8th issue of the avant-garde *Forum for Free Spirits* hosted by China’s oldest newspaper *Shen Bao*, titled “From Deafness to Dumbness” (由聋而哑). Railing against China’s “deafness” and “dumbness,” Lu Xun begins his own polemic by citing Brandes’s laments for the decay of Danish literature at the time of his Copenhagen lectures:

Literary production has entirely died away. No matter what problems of a human or social nature arise, they neither arouse interest and emotion nor evoke discussions and debates. We never see intensely original productions. Now this is aggravated by the absolute lack of any assimilation of foreign intellectual life. Such mental “deafness” has thus led to our “dumbness.” (Brandes’s self-preface to *The Main Currents of 19th Century Literature*) This remark may well be transferred to current China to criticize our own literature and art.²

² Lu Xun: “From Deafness to Dumbness,” in: Lu Xun, *Complete Works* (鲁迅全集), Renmin wenzue Press, 2012, vol. 5, pp. 294-95; here p. 294. The Brandes quote exists in the German version—as well as in the Japanese translation from German—of *Main Currents*. By contrast, the quote is absent from both the English version and the currently popular Chinese

Curiously enough, Brandes's remark in his 1872 preface cited by Lu Xun in his 1933 manifesto is absent from the English edition of the *Main Currents in 19th Century Literature*—an edition that has been circulating since 1901. Does the absence result from sporadic omissions by Brandes's English translators? I had assumed so, until I made two discoveries.

Discovery I: the absence of this remark exposes, contrary to my assumption, a radical, systematic cut of Brandes's 1872 preface to the Danish and German editions of his *Main Currents*. The original text that fills 21 and 22 pages in its Danish publications in 1872 and 1877, and 22, 15, and 16 pages in its German publications in 1872, 1894, and 1897, shrinks to no more than 4 pages in its English publication.³

Discovery II: the removal of ca. 5/7 of the 1872 preface was, likewise contrary to my assumption, not the translators' betrayal of the original, but a calculated choice by the work's original author. Between the 1872 Danish and German versions and the 1901 English version, Brandes composed an alternative preface to an allegedly "original" German edition (*Originalausgabe*), actually a revision of the influential translation by Strodtmann. As the first volume of this edition appeared in 1882, the title was altered from *The Main Currents of 19th Century Literature* (*Die Hauptströmungen der Literatur des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*) to *The Literature of 19th Century in Its Main Currents* (*Die Literatur des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts in ihren Hauptströmungen*). By switching the word order, the author claims a broader focus.

A meticulous comparison shows that the 1882 version consists of eight paragraphs identical or nearly identical to those of the 1872 version. These in general more abstractly ponder such "universal" themes as the nature of literary history, the psychology of cultural progress, and the advantage of a comparative view. In contrast, the other twenty paragraphs exclusively avail

se translation from English.

³ Danish 1872 and German 1872 as well as 1894 are identical. Danish 1877 (slightly expanded) and German 1897 are identical.

able in the 1872 version start with, center on, or refer to the problems Brandes perceives in contemporary Danish literature, including its "stiffest orthodoxy," "regressive attitude," "shallow and hollow humor," "ecstatic and unrealistic ideals," "abstract caricature," "childish naivety," "bloodless humanity," "aesthetic indifference towards events of the outside world," "infinite contempt for all social movements," and the "desperate limpness and worthlessness characteristic of the European reactionary period."⁴ With the deletion of this language, the preface takes on an entirely different tone.

These deletions reveal Brandes's first and foremost impulse to speak in advocacy for his native land, which, in his view, not only missed the French Revolution that aimed to transcend local purposes and enlighten humankind, but even more problematically, languished under tyrannical anti-revolutionary reaction long after it ceased and vanished elsewhere. In response to this double-damned situation, Brandes promotes the idea of a literature that possesses the intellectual boldness to challenge the contemporary Danish social vision and bring current issues to debate. Consequently, Brandes ends his preface with a mission statement: "to lead into Denmark through numerous canals the main currents that have sprung from the Revolution and the progressive ideas and to halt the Reaction in every respect, where its task historically expired."⁵

This original 28-paragraph version combines Brandes's concrete observations and theoretical contemplations. It engages the readers by sharing the author's fury and passion, awareness of and sensitivity to problems, as well as courage and commitment to sol-

⁴ To name one example, when discussing the intellectual situation in contemporary Denmark, Brandes creates an analogy to China that illustrates "the stiffest orthodoxy" resulting from an enormous theological impact upon literature: "If one imagines a country of Denmark's size ruled as if it were a sort of China and then conceives of a law according to which for a certain length of time only theological candidates should have the voting right in literature and the authority to edit impressions of the outside world, it might be an interesting task to investigate how such a literature, composed by candidates for the clergy, would distinguish itself from the bulk of our literature over a long stretch of time." In: *Die Hauptströmungen der Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts*. Leipzig, 1897, vol. 1, pp. 13-14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

ve them. Indeed, the preface engages the readers within and beyond Denmark by sharing the author's genuine desire to engage himself fully in a crucial lecture cycle—in a monumental task for his nation and his people. That's why it found loud echoes, instantly and continuing on after his death, in both Europe and East Asia.

As Brandes revisited his own writing, however, he found it inappropriate and began a revision to fulfill his new mission. In a letter to his publisher dated June 22, 1887, Brandes explains that “when he wrote the original work, he was engaged in active warfare with an intellectual tendency prevailing in Denmark, and that his book was a participation in that strife. ‘It was a polemical work [...]; and every line was calculated for Denmark and Danish conditions.’” The new edition, in contrast, “was intended for a wider field” and thus subjected to “a series of delicate touches,” the effect of which Brandes describes as follows: “The object of the work, which was primarily agitative, became entirely scientific: it *was* Danish, it *is* universal.”⁶

What a striking irony it is that the regretfully “Danish” work was universally embraced, while its conceptually “universal” revision was not. As Brandes's English translators started rendering the *Main Currents*, they followed the new, more ambitious edition, i.e. Brandes's own German translation of his Danish original, through which Brandes attempted “to conquer territory in a foreign land and a foreign literature.”⁷ Against his expectations, this new edition did not help enlarge his long established reputation in Germany: it was reprinted only once in 1900. Strodtsmann's translation, by comparison, had meanwhile been reprinted eight times and appeared in its 9th edition in 1904 and 1914.

Neither did the new edition help Brandes gain an enthusiastic audience elsewhere. In contrast to Germany's and China's impassioned responses to his

initial work, the English-speaking world responded rather lukewarmly to his “entirely scientific” or “universal” revision of *Main Currents in 19th Century Literature*. Upon the release of its first volume in 1901, *The New York Times Saturday Review* characterized Brandes's approach with suspicion: “Literature is as complex as life and does not lend itself to obvious classification. It is a proverb that labels are libels. Some of Mr. Brandes's in his first volume tend to that character and others will do so as he proceeds.”⁸ Upon the appearance of all six volumes in 1906, *Edinburgh Review* voiced its unflattering opinion of the set:

His intention—over and over again he reiterates the statement—is to generalize, to treat each individual book and author in group-fashion; to regard each group merely as the expression of the direction of thought-currents. With Taine criticism became a philosophy; with Bourget . . . a psychological study . . . of some few individual authors. With Brandes it became a history of psychological phases expressed in transitions of ideals, in fluctuations of moral, emotional and theological creeds . . . Books are the pulses by which the scientist may interpret conditions of human life, thought and sentiment. . . This science of literature is his province, all else is subsidiary.⁹

Isn't this a paradox? When Brandes tolls the bell for his native land, calling for its response to a crisis, the whole world listens to it and responds. When he tolls the bell for the whole world, calling for its attention to his own work, the sound dies away in the distance and the message ceases to penetrate.



On October 1, 1899, Brandes published an article titled “Weltliteratur” in the German magazine *The Literary Echo* (*Das literarische Echo*), pondering the past, present, and future of world literature. He opens his argument by differentiating the works of scientific inventors and

⁶ In: “Brandes and His Detractors,” Washington, May 7, 1888, *The Nation*, Number 1194, p. 402.

⁷ Brandes, “Foreword” (Vorwort), Berlin, Sept. 1881, in: *Die Literatur des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts in ihren Hauptströmungen* (Leipzig, 1882), pp. V-VI. His “Preface” (Einleitung) shrinks to 4 pages in this German edition, which he claims to have “completely rewritten.”

⁸ John White Chadwick, “Modern Literary Currents. Georg Brandes's First of Six Volumes Dealing with Those of the Nineteenth Century,” in: *The New York Times*, July 27, 1901.

⁹ “ART. VI.—Literary Criticism, Esthetic and Psychological,” in: *Edinburgh Review*, Oct 1906, pp. 400-423; here p. 411-412.

discoverers from those of historians. For him, both types of writing belong to world literature, yet from opposite approaches: the first type orients itself directly toward the human race and enriches it as a whole; the second bears a highly personal stamp and thus orients itself more toward the writer's compatriots who stand close to that personality. Hence, historical writings as works of scholarship are not definitive; but as works of art they are nuanced and inexhaustible and can travel across geographical and cultural boundaries.

Following this differentiation Brandes makes a bold statement: the "world" in "world literature" implies neither universal fame nor universal accessibility, but a necessarily multilayered architecture. As an exhibition of startling distinctions in cultural identity and mentality, the architecture of world literature offers eye-opening, horizon-broadening alternatives. The works that the world ultimately decides to own for itself are those that expose, subvert, and tackle the current social and intellectual situations of their respective nations. On the contrary, the works that turn their back on this mission and desire instead to entice the universe by writing for a vast, abstract audience will ultimately be rejected by world literature and excluded from its castle. To illustrate the temptation of world literature and the sacrifice made in its name, Brandes uses Emile Zola as an example:

His great series of novels, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, was written for the French and is therefore carefully and concretely executed. His trilogy *Loures, Rome, Paris*, composed after he had achieved great fame, was written for the whole world, and for this reason is far more abstract than before. In this trilogy he wrote as Sarah Bernhardt acts—whether she is performing in Peru or in Chicago. If a writer wants to have a powerful effect, he must have his surroundings before his eyes, he must be active there where he was born, he must write for his compatriots, whose stage of development he knows well. Whatever is written for the whole world sacrifices strength and vigour for the sake of universal comprehensibility, it no longer carries the flavour of the soil.¹⁰

¹⁰ Haun Saussy (tr.), "World Literature," in: Mads R. Thomsen: *Mapping World Literature*, pp 143-147; here p. 146.

In Brandes's view, Zola is just one of the writers who, after becoming worldwide celebrities, have paid homage to some foreign tastes that are less refined than the taste of their own people. The desire for world fame and world literature, therefore, involves a risk.

As a counter-example Brandes names, above all, Kierkegaard.¹¹ Despite his having been unknown in Europe in his day, Brandes acknowledges him as the greatest religious thinker of the Scandinavian North. This recognition echoes the entry on Kierkegaard in the *Concise Dictionary of Religious Knowledge*, first published in 1889 in New York:

...having never left his native city more than a few days at a time, excepting once, when he went to Germany to study Schelling's philosophy. He was the most original thinker and theological philosopher the North ever produced. His fame has been steadily growing since his death, and he bids fair to become the leading religio-philosophical light of Germany. Not only his theological, but also his aesthetic works have of late become the subject of universal study in Europe.¹²

The case of Kierkegaard shows that world literature becomes its own judge—though sometimes with delay—as to which particular work truly deserves a place in its castle. Further, it demonstrates the subtle and complex relations between a writer and his native land. To "write for his compatriots" does not mean to compromise, nor unconditionally to accommodate their aesthetic taste or educational level. As the *Concise Dictionary* points out, Kierkegaard speaks of "that which but few know and fewer still can express." Moreover, he "defiantly declared war against all speculation as a source of Christianity, and opposed those who seek to speculate on faith—as was the case in his day and before—thereby striving to get an insight into the truths of revelation."¹³

¹¹ Other writers whom Brandes advocates include Jacobsen (Denmark), Ibsen (Norway), Strindberg (Sweden), Nietzsche and Hauptmann (Germany), Pusckin, Dostojewsky, and Tolstoy (Russia). They have all become essential figures of world literature.

¹² C. H. A. Bjerregaard, "Kierkegaard," in: *Concise Dictionary of Religious Knowledge*, NY 1889, Edited by Samuel Macauley Jackson, pp. 473-475; here p. 473.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 474.

Nietzsche, another writer whom Brandes promotes, likewise suffers and benefits from this kind of ‘loneliness and strangeness at home.’ On the one hand, Nietzsche is aware of his eccentricity in the eyes of the German public and its lack of accessibility to his works. He hence wishes for himself “a few readers whom one cherishes in his own circle—or else no readers at all.”¹⁴ This character is termed by Brandes “aristocratic radicalism.” On the other hand, Nietzsche never lives completely free of resentments for not having been acknowledged in Germany—a country that he, despite all his reproaches and disappointments, loves.

But the most paradoxical case turns out to be Brandes himself. On the one hand, he stands alongside the isolated, misunderstood, stupidly and unforgivably ignored ‘free spirits’ like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, fighting with them and for them. In this respect, “aristocratic radicalism” is self-referential. “My fighting life,” he once confides to Nietzsche, “though not comfortable per se, is nevertheless gratifying, in so far as it proves to me that I have not yet languished, nor on any point made peace with the tyrannical mediocrity.”¹⁵ Nietzsche writes back: “Ultimately, you, too, with the instinct of the Northerner, have chosen the strongest of all stimulants to endure the life in the North: the war, the aggressive passion, the Viking expedition. I divine in your writings the veteran soldier; and not only the ‘mediocrity,’ but perhaps especially the more independent and peculiar natures of the Northern spirit may be that which constantly provokes you into fighting.”¹⁶

On the other hand, when we examine Brandes’s 1872 and 1882 prefaces to his *Main Currents* in the light of his article on world literature, the irony of ‘tolling the bell’ doubles. In courting world fame, Brandes stumbles at two levels: First, his attempt to tailor his lecture cycle to an inconceivable, abstract audience—the universe—re-

sembles Zola’s sublime failure with his trilogy *Lourdes, Rome, Paris*. Second, Brandes’s surrender to the temptation of world literature is even more alarming than Zola’s, considering that he is fully aware of the pitfalls and warns the world with the explosive ending of his 1899 manifesto: “what is written directly for the world will rarely qualify as a work of art. No, the work of art is not an open city, but a fortress!”¹⁷

Case 2: Lu Xun’s Iconoclastic Prejudice: Undercurrents over Mainstreams

Lu Xun (1881-1936) is considered one of Asia’s greatest authors and the founder of modern Chinese literature. In 1924, he composed a monologue for a self-referential “shadow” who bids farewell to his native land that has sunk into a deep sleep:

When in sleep the time comes that Man no longer knows the time, Shadow will come to bid farewell, saying—
If there is that which I do not want in Heaven, I am unwilling to go; if there is that which I do not want in Hell, I am unwilling to go; if there is that which I do not want in what you all call the coming Golden World, I am unwilling to go.
Yet *you* are that which I do not want.
Friend, I’m no longer willing to follow you, I am unwilling to stay.
I am unwilling!
O woe! O woe!—I am unwilling, I would rather wander across free-falling ground.

These few lines encapsulate Lu Xun’s iconoclastic spirit, a spirit that reminds us of Brandes’s aggressive passion, Nietzsche’s aristocratic radicalism, and Kierkegaard’s declaration of war against all speculation. In Lu Xun’s case, he is unwilling to follow the long-established religious concepts of Heaven and Hell, nor

¹⁴ Cf. Nietzsche’s letter to Brandes on Dec. 2, 1887. In: Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Briefe, Kritische Studienausgabe*, Band 8, p. 205-207; here p. 205.

¹⁵ Cf. Brandes’s letter to Nietzsche on Mar. 8, 1888. In: Curt Paul Janz: *Biographie: XIV. Janz-Nietzsche* Bd. 2, p. 586.

¹⁶ Cf. Nietzsche’s letter to Brandes on Mar. 27, 1888. In: *Sämtliche Briefe*, Band 8, p. 278-280; here p. 279.

¹⁷ Brandes, “Weltliteratur,” in: *Das literarische Echo: Halbmonatsschrift für Literaturfreunde* (Berlin), Oct. 1, 1899, pp. 1-5; here p. 5. The final sentence appears only in the German version, not in the Danish; cf. “Verdenslitteratur (1899),” in: Brandes, *Samlde Skrifter*. Vol. 12, Copenhagen, 1902. I thank Per Dahl, Svend Erik Larsen, and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen for hosting my research stay at the Georg Brandes Archive, Aarhus University, Denmark, in the summer of 2011.

the newly popularized communist ideal of the Golden World. Rather, he is determined to “venture far alone” and dive into “a world that is wholly mine.”¹⁸ Lu Xun’s ‘Viking expedition’ leads to a string of discoveries, one of which is an alternative panorama of world literature that he constructs for his compatriots.

A witness of the late Meiji era, Lu Xun studied in Japan from 1902 to 1909 and saw firsthand the political, economic, and social changes that led Japan into modernity. Living in Japan not only granted Lu Xun insight into the Japanese vision of world literature, but insight into the German vision as well. This is because Meiji Japan enthusiastically embraced Western concepts, especially German ones; thus there were rich German sources available. This is also because Lu Xun’s own concerns and pursuits resonated with his German predecessors and contemporaries.

An investigation of Lu Xun’s home library in Beijing reveals that his personal collection of world literature is composed primarily of German- and Japanese-language publications. While his use of Japanese sources has been frequently examined, the effect of Lu Xun’s German library on his outlook is perhaps a more promising perspective for analysis.

As far as primary sources of world literature are concerned, the Japanese translations focus on five national literatures—Japanese, German, Russian, French, and British. The German translations, however, are wider-ranging. Apart from those listed above, Lu Xun also accessed, through the German language, classic and contemporary works by Polish, Hungarian, Czech, Romanian, Bulgarian, Yugoslav, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, Belgian, Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Greek, Italian, Icelandic, and American authors. Moreover, while the German translations are all direct renditions from the original languages, a substantial percent of the Japanese translations—especially of Scandinavian literature—were rendered from German versions.¹⁹

¹⁸ Lu Xun: “The Shadow’s Farewell” (影的告别), in: Lu Xun, *Complete Works*, vol. 2, pp. 169-170.

¹⁹ To name just a few: Japanese renditions from the German versions of Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time*, Brandes’ *Main Currents in 19th Century*

Regarding secondary sources of world literature, Lu Xun’s theoretical horizon was almost entirely German. Not only did he build a constellation of German scholarship on world literature, but his selection of Japanese scholarship was mostly derived from German sources as well.²⁰ We see, for example, Fritz Strich’s *World Literature and Comparative History of Literature* (*Weltliteratur und vergleichende Literaturgeschichte*), Paul Wiegler’s *History of World Literature* (*Geschichte der Weltliteratur*), Johannes Scherr’s *Illustrated History of World Literature* (*Illustrierte Geschichte der Weltliteratur*), Adolf Stern’s *Studies on Contemporary Literature* (*Studien zur Literatur der Gegenwart*) and *Outline of the General History of Literature* (*Grundriß der allgemeinen Literaturgeschichte*). In addition to absorbing the German concept of world literature, Lu Xun became acquainted with two specific landscapes through German lenses. Josef Karasek’s *Slavic Literary History* (*Slavische Literaturgeschichte*) and Felix Poppenberg’s *Nordic Portrayals from Four Empires* (*Nordische Porträts aus vier Reichen*) contributed to Lu Xun’s lifelong interest in Slavic and Nordic literature. Concerning the latter, Brandes’s critical narratives, translated into German and then again into Japanese, played a decisive role in shaping Lu Xun’s vision of German culture as well as his German vision of world literature.²¹

All these details about his home library suggest a *Germanized* Lu Xun. This alternate identity becomes clearer still, as we examine his self-imposed mission as translator. By the time he died at age 54, Lu Xun had translated into Chinese the works of more than 110 authors from approximately 15 countries through their German and Japanese editions. His rendition of world literature constitutes at least one half of his complete works. Moreover, he translated from all genres, inclu-

Literature, Hamsun’s *Hunger*, as well as Strindberg’s *Confession of a Fool* and *Dance of Death*.

²⁰ German scholarship on world literature by, among other scholars, Josef Karásek, Gustav Karpeles, Ella Mensch, Felix Poppenberg, Johannes Scherr, Adolf Stern, and Paul Wiegler; Japanese scholarship derived from German sources by, among other scholars, Ernst Elster, Franz Schultz, Julius Peterson, Fritz Strich, and Georg Brandes.

²¹ Lu Xun read Brandes in both German and Japanese translations. At least three volumes of the Japanese version of Brandes’s *Main Currents* were translated from German: vol. 1. The Emigrant Literature, vol. 2. The Romantic School in Germany, and vol. 6. Young Germany.

ding novels, novellas, short stories, fairy tales, dramas, poems, essays, biographies, journalistic and polemical articles, as well as theoretical and philosophical writings.

Why did Lu Xun spend his finite time translating the infinite ocean of foreign works? Was he as idiosyncratic a translator as he was a writer? What difference did he make, or seek to make, in modern China's reception of world literature? And how important was it that his reconfiguration of world literature was so thoroughly mediated by what I call his German vision?



While still a student in Japan, Lu Xun regularly contributed by invitation to the Tokyo-based journal *Henan* (河南), which, as an influential revolutionary forum, circulated throughout China. His comprehensive article “The Power of Demonic Poetry” (摩罗诗力说), composed in classical Chinese in 1907 and published in two successive issues in *Henan* in 1908, contains observations of Chinese literature and culture against the background of global modernization, aiming to overcome the then chaotic situation in China and break its profound, desolate silence. Nietzsche, thanks to the attention paid to him by Brandes, became an essential source for Lu Xun. Citing Nietzsche's Zarathustra, Lu Xun prefaced “The Power of Demonic Poetry” with the anticipation of “new springs”:

He who has grown wise concerning old origins, behold, he will at last seek new springs of the future and new origins.
O my brothers, it will not be long before *new peoples* shall arise and new springs rush down into new depths.²²

Lu Xun not only predicted new springs, new origins, new peoples, and new depths, but engaged himself in cultivating them as well. His translation career began a decade earlier than his writing career: his first story “Nostalgia” (怀旧) was published in *Monthly Fiction* (小说月报) on April 25, 1913; his first translation “La-

²² Nietzsche, “Of Old and New Law-Tables, 25;” in: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, tr. by Hollingdale, Penguin Books, 2003, p 228.

mentations over the Dust” (哀尘) appeared in *Zhejiang Tide* (浙江潮) on June 15, 1903. This classical Chinese version of “Origine de Fantine” from *Choses vues* is, in fact, not just Lu Xun's first translation, but also the first ever Chinese translation of Victor Hugo. From then until his death, Lu Xun remained devoted to cultural transfer. As time went by, he became more determined to “seek new voices in foreign lands,” an assignment announced in his “Power of Demonic Poetry,”²³ and to “build new canons in foreign fashions,” a mission stated in his simultaneously composed article, likewise published in *Henan* in 1908, “Cultural Prejudices and Extremes” (文化偏至论).²⁴

It was within this context that Lu Xun opened his 1933 newspaper polemic “From Deafness to Dumbness” with the afore-cited excerpt from Brandes's 1872 preface to his *Main Currents*. After pondering Brandes's critique of contemporary Danish literature, Lu Xun asserted its applicability to the current issues of Chinese literature and once again declared an urgent need to seek sources from abroad:

All paths to foreign thought, all routes to world literature, have now been blocked by the manufacturers of deafness and dumbness... They intend to cover the ears of China's young people and lead them from deafness to dumbness—to those which Nietzsche characterizes as “the last men.”²⁵

We see here that Lu Xun continued to engage Brandes and Nietzsche nearly three decades after he first encountered them. Their appeal to Lu Xun lies not only in their keenness and ferocity in detecting and revealing the ‘cultural codes’ of their respective nations, but also in their attempts to cure the deafness and dumbness of their own peoples. As Nietzsche puts it:

To be a good German means to degermanize oneself . . . For whenever a people goes forward and grows it bursts the girdle that has hitherto given it its *national* appearance; if it remains stationary,

²³ Lu Xun, “The Power of Demonic Poetry,” in: Lu Xun, *Complete Works*, vol. 1, pp. 65-120; here p. 68.

²⁴ Lu Xun, “Cultural Prejudices and Extremes,” *ibid.*, pp. 45-64; here p. 57.

²⁵ Lu Xun: “From Deafness to Dumbness,” in: Lu Xun, *Complete Works*, vol. 5, pp. 294-296; here p. 295.

if it languishes, a new girdle fastens itself about its soul, the crust forming ever more firmly around it constructs as it were a prison whose walls grow higher and higher... He therefore who has the interests of the Germans at heart should for his part see how he can grow more and more beyond what is German. That is why a *change into the ungermanic* has always been the mark of the most able of our people.²⁶

Lu Xun, intensely concerned about what he termed “the Chinese national character,” resonated with Nietzsche’s critique of German national identity, with his longing for the un-Germanic and his proposal of de-Germanization. In Nietzsche’s view—as well as in Goethe’s admiration of Byron and of Kālidāsa, a classical Sanskrit writer—Lu Xun recognized a particularly German vision.²⁷ Impressed with its systematic import of world literature, Lu Xun prized the openness of Germany, considering it “the top nation that is willing to introduce foreign works.”²⁸

Lu Xun’s German library is strong proof of this openness. It grew largely from such wide-ranging series as the “Universal Library” (Universal-Bibliothek, Leipzig/Reclam), the “Complete Library of Native and Foreign Literature” (Bibliothek der Gesamtliteratur des In- und Auslandes, Halle/Otto Hendel), as well as a series edited by Brandes, “Literature: A Collection of Illustrated Individual Portrayals” (Die Literatur: Sammlung illustrierter Einzeldarstellungen, Berlin/Bard-Marquardt & Co).²⁹ Also, Lu Xun’s German collection contains journals attentive and dedicated to

world literature such as the afore-mentioned magazine *The Literary Echo*.³⁰

Although famously disillusioned with many ideals, Lu Xun never abandoned his faith in the transformative power of literature. Considering the stifling intellectual climate of China—especially claims that the Chinese people should turn its back on the world community—Lu Xun felt compelled to fling wide open the windows of cultural exchange and force China to dive into the stream of global intellectual life.³¹ Translation for him was, therefore, a historical task associated with cultural improvement.



With nearly thirty national literatures in German rendition, Lu Xun’s private collection offered him a discriminating view of world literature.³² What actually got translated? Anyone who examines the 110 authors translated by Lu Xun might wonder why he seemed to be obsessed with the utterly unknown writers of obscure countries, while keeping away from the mainstream, i.e. the internationally acclaimed masterpieces of French, British, Russian, and German literatures, although they were all available to him in German. Clearly Lu Xun the translator had tastes no less idiosyncratic than Lu Xun the writer. He once said that “British literature is often boring (the British mentality as a whole is not my cup

²⁶ Nietzsche: “Assorted Opinions and Maxims. 323;” in: *Human, All Too Human*, tr. by Hollingdale, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 287.

²⁷ In “The Power of Demonic Poetry,” Lu Xun comments on Goethe’s reception of Byron: “Only a great man can recognize another great man” (*Complete Works*, vol. 1, p. 84). Kālidāsa’s *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, translated into English and then from English into German, was one of the first works of Indian literature to become known in Europe. It was received with fascination by a group of eminent German poets including Herder and Goethe. For Lu Xun’s mention of Goethe’s comments on Kālidāsa see *ibid.*, p. 65.

²⁸ Cf. Lu Xun’s letter to Tang Tao on July 27, 1934, in: Lu Xun, *Complete Works*, vol. 13, p. 184.

²⁹ In addition: “Meyers Volksbücher” (Berlin und Leipzig/Bibliographisches Institut), “Die Dichtung” (Leipzig und Wien/Schuster und Loeffler), and “Kleine Bibliothek Langen” (München/A. Langen).

³⁰ In addition: journals *Die literarische Welt* (Berlin/Willy Haas) and *Internationale Literatur: Zentralorgan der Internationalen Vereinigung Revolutionärer Schriftsteller* (Moscow); newspapers *Frankfurter Zeitung und Handelsblatt*, *Berliner Morgenpost*, and *Heidelberg Nachrichten*.

³¹ In his 1918 newspaper essay “Impromptus 36” (随感录三十六), Lu Xun mocks the absurdity of a popular notion, “Somebody cries: ‘We must grow separately; or else, how can we be *the men of China*?’ // Therefore, the men of China want to turn their back on *the men of the world*. // Therefore, the men of China will have lost the world, while still living in the world! —This is my big panic.” In: *Complete Works*, vol. 1, p. 323.

³² The German-language section of Lu Xun’s home library includes works by, among other writers, Dostoevski, Chekhov, Andreev, Turgenev, Tolstoi, Pushkin, Lermotov, Gorki, Gogol, Chateaubriand, Mérimée, Maupassant, Hugo, Diderot, Rousseau, Voltaire, Zola, Baudelaire, Sienkiewicz, Petöfi, van Eeden, Cervantes, Maeterlinck, Strindberg, Björnson, Hamsun, Ibsen, Andersen, Brandes, Jacobsen, Aristotle, Apuleius, Dante, and Wilde.

of tea).³³ Yet personal taste cannot explain everything. The primary reason lies elsewhere.

Lin Yutang (林语堂), a contemporary of Lu Xun and the author of *My Country and My People*, initiated a public debate in 1935. Aware of Lu Xun's prejudice, Lin Yutang mocked him in a journal essay, titled "Eight Defects of Literature Today" (今文八弊):

Today he introduces Polish poets, tomorrow Czech masters, while considering the big-name writers of Great Britain, the United States, France, and Germany stale or obsolete and thus unworthy of exploration. This is just like women following fashion, always desirous to ingratiate themselves with others.³⁴

Lu Xun's counterpunch offers insight into his individualistic selection criteria:

It was some thirty years ago—in my "Power of Demonic Poetry" namely—that I "introduced Polish poets." At that time, China was in a situation similar to Poland's, and their poetry resonated with my soul. How could this be ingratiating? Later on, the Shanghai-based *Monthly Fiction* dedicated a special issue to the "literatures of injured and humiliated peoples." This movement seems out of date now. The happy youth in the Republic of China are ignorant of it, not to mention those who chase power and gold. Even if I am still introducing Polish poets and Czech masters, how can this be "ingratiating"? Do they not have their own "big-name" writers? Apropos "big-name": Who have heard of the *big names*? How have these big names been *heard*? Sure, "Great Britain, the United States, France, and Germany" all have their missionaries in China—and their colonies of the present and the past, and their scattered armies and warships, and their swarming merchants and servants—so that ordinary people in China have only heard of "Great Britain," "Stars and Stripes," "France," and "Germany," but do not know that the world also includes Poland and Czechoslovakia. The history of world literature, however, judges through the eye of literature, not through the eye of power and gold.³⁵

³³ Cf. Lu Xun's letter to Hu Feng on May 17, 1935, in: Lu Xun, *Complete Works*, vol. 13, p. 458.

³⁴ Lin Yutang: "Eight Defects of Literature Today," in: *Renjian Shi* (人间世), No. 28, May 20, 1935.

³⁵ Lu Xun: "Untitled Drafts" ("题未定"草), in: *Literature* (文学), No. 5:1, July 1935. The special issue of *Monthly Fiction* (小说月报) mentioned by Lu Xun was No. 12:10, published in 1921. In it, Polish, Czech, and other underrepresented literatures were introduced.

This response illuminates Lu Xun's attitude towards popular notions and widespread paradigms: his non-conformist prejudice springs from his unflinching resistance to the temptation of academic norms and intellectual fashions. During the New Culture Movement centering on the events of 1919, Lu Xun advocated a chain of those whom he deemed "foreign iconoclasts," including Stirner, Nietzsche, and Ibsen. Lu Xun's skepticism of icons continued to lead him to independent judgments.

In the China of the 1920s and 30s, the dominant visions of world literature were a domestic, China-centered sort, along with the visions of students returning from abroad. Lin Yutang's standpoint was indicative of the latter. Despite the rivalry among diverse visions and subdivisions, the Chinese reception of world literature was in general the reception of English (both British and American), French, German, Russian, and Japanese literatures. Within this context, Lu Xun's deliberately aberrant translations created pathways of resistance to the dominant trends.

As illustrated above, Lu Xun's German library is characteristic in its scope and vista. The literatures that were obscure or unknown to others became comprehensible and conspicuous to Lu Xun, once they acquired a German voice. In this sense, not the German literature as a canon, but rather the German perception as an approach, inspired Lu Xun to construct an alternative panorama of world literature—the solitary and peculiar scenery of the less visited world and its less appreciated literatures.

In *What is Modernity?* the Japanese Sinologist and cultural critic Takeuchi (竹内 好) interprets Lu Xun's choice as an effective challenge to the monolithic body of Western power. According to Takeuchi, German was a medium through which Lu Xun accessed the literatures of the oppressed countries, despite his recognition of their second or third quality.³⁶ I agree that Lu Xun intends to confront the mainstream visions of

³⁶ Cf. *What is Modernity? Writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi*, tr. by Calichman, Columbia University Press, 2005.

world literature; but German is by no means just a tool, neither are the works translated by Lu Xun all second or third-rate.

Regarding linguistics and philology, Lu Xun appreciates German for its precision and economy, considering it an appropriate target language of European-American literature and a better source language for the Chinese rendition than Japanese. Regarding theory and methodology, Lu Xun respects German scholarship for its comprehensive range and comparative nature. When re-translating a work via German translation, Lu Xun includes both the accompanying German notes and the commentaries that he discovers elsewhere in German scholarship and considers pertinent to that particular work.³⁷ If we imagine a foreign literary text as a painting, what Lu Xun delivers for his Chinese audience is not only the painting, but also a frame—crafted and tailored by Lu Xun using his German sources—which contextualizes the painting within the global landscape.

³⁷ *Little Johannes (De Kleine Johannes)* by the Dutch writer Frederik van Eeden is a perfect example. In 1906, Lu Xun came across its fifth chapter in German, published in *The Literary Echo* (1:21, 1899), and was instantly intrigued. In 1926, he rendered the complete novel into Chinese from the 1892 German translation by Anna Fles, *Der kleine Johannes*, along with Paul Raché's substantial preface to this translation. Moreover, Lu Xun integrated into his Chinese version an enthusiastic review of van Eeden's oeuvre by the Belgian poet Pol de Mont, which he read in German in *The Literary Echo*.

Epilogue

The iconoclastic prejudice of Lu Xun the translator echoes the idiosyncratic voice of Lu Xun the writer. The undercurrents exposed in his translations sculpt the personal signature evidenced in his writings.³⁸ Ironically, Lu Xun's unyielding resistance to world fame has led to his increasing visibility in the fortress of world literature—

2005: Mo Yan (Nobel laureate in literature 2012) deemed Lu Xun “China's Strindberg.”

2009: *Time* spotlighted the essay “China's Orwell,” calling an English edition of Lu Xun's stories “the most significant Penguin Classic ever published.”

2016: *The Week* featured “Best books chosen by Yan Lianke,” juxtaposing Lu Xun with Cervantes, Gogol, Orwell, Heller, and Vargas Llosa.

Brandes forged a manifesto. Lu Xun delivered it.

³⁸ In order to recognize the simultaneity and interdependence of Lu Xun's activities—close reading, literary translation, creative writing, and cultural hermeneutics, I have coined the term “transreader.” In Lu Xun as well as in Goethe, Brandes, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, we see the integration of four roles into one: reader, translator, writer, and critic.