

New World System and New World Literature Framework: A Comparative Analysis of Wang Ning and David Damrosch's World Literature Studies

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Abstract: The past two decades have witnessed the renaissance of debates about “world literature” in both the East and West. Wang Ning is one of the most important and productive scholars in this international debate. This article compares Wang’s world literature studies with that of another important critic, David Damrosch, focusing on Wang’s deconstruction of the western-centrism in Damrosch’s world literature studies. It argues that Damrosch’s construction of world literature demonstrates traces of “enlightened conservatism” to reduce the appeal of the radical cultural movement of Third World countries after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and maintains the running of the traditional Euro-American world system; Wang’s world literature studies deconstructed Damrosch’s world literature framework by first revealing the referential crisis in Damrosch’s theory and then re-establishing the referential connection by reconsidering the ordering principles, interpretation framework, and agencies of world literature according to newly emerging world structures. These analyses show that Damrosch’s notion of world literature is, actually, an expanded version of the previous Euro-American centred world literature outlook; Wang’s world literature studies, at the beginning, were inspired and influenced by Damrosch, but he later went beyond Damrosch’s framework by bringing forth a more balanced notion of world literature which takes into account literatures of all countries and regions and at the same emphasizes the quality and world influence of certain literary texts.

Keywords: Wang Ning; David Damrosch; world literature; enlightened conservatism; referential re-connection

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标题: 新世界体系，新世界文学框架：王宁与大卫·丹穆诺什的世界文学构

建比较研究

内容摘要：世界文学概念和框架的构建成为新世纪东西方文学批评家关注的焦点。王宁是当今世界文学批评领域最为重要和成果最为丰富的学者之一。本文将王宁的世界文学研究与另一位著名学者大卫·丹穆诺什的世界文学框架进行比较研究，重点关注王宁对丹穆诺什世界文学研究中西方中心主义倾向的解构。研究认为丹穆诺什的世界文学框架存在明显的“明智保守主义”特征，即通过对第三世界国家文学的有限吸纳来减少反资本主义世界文学和文化体系的情绪和运动，从而维持欧美主导的世界文学文化体系的运行；王宁的世界文学研究揭示了以欧美为中心构建的世界文学体系与新世纪多元化的世界体系之间的指涉危机，以及重构世界文学的组织原则、学术逻辑、形成中介和阐释框架来解构西方中心主义的世界文学体系，并构建与新世纪世界文学文化体系相适应的世界文学框架。由此可见，丹穆诺什所主张的仍是一种“西方中心主义的”世界文学的有限扩展版，而王宁虽然开始从事世界文学时受到丹穆诺什的启迪和影响，但很快超越了后者的思维定势，提出了一种真正既兼顾世界各国文学的分布同时又注重文学本身的质量和世界性影响的世界文学愿景。

关键词：大卫·丹穆诺什；王宁；世界文学；明智保守主义；指涉连接

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The past two decades have witnessed the emergence of a large amount of world literature scholarship both in the East and West to address the newly configured global system of literary production, consumption and exchange in the 21st century. Wang Ning and David Damrosch are two of the most important and productive critics in this international debate. This article delivers a comparative study of their construction of world literature, focusing on the ways Wang deconstructs the western centrism in Damrosch's construction of world literature. It argues that while Damrosch's views on world literature demonstrate clear evidence of "enlightened conservatism" to maintain the US-led world system, in a wide range of essays published in both English- and Chinese-language journals, Wang has communicated to a global audience that traditional Western assumptions about the production and consumption of world literature texts is not compatible with the changing world situation and that the newly emerging structure of the world system calls for a new world literature framework.

Wang is considered as "one of the most prolific" and "almost 'seismographic'"

interpreters of the relation of Chinese literary scholarship to Western theory and practice”(D’haen 171). He served as president of the Chinese Comparative Literature Association between 2017 and 2021. As well as publishing more than 20 books, including *Globalization and Cultural Translation* (2004), *Translated Modernities: Literary and Cultural Perspectives of Globalization and China* (2010) and *After Postmodernism* (2022) in English, he has published research articles in English, according to Hillis Miller, in “an impressive array of journals” such as *Critical Inquiry*, *New Literary History* and *Modern Language Quarterly*. Damrosch is another leading critic in comparative literature and world literature studies and a past president of the American Comparative Literature Association. He has written widely on world literature; for instance: *What is World Literature?* (2003), *How to Read World Literature* (2008) and *World Literature in Theory* (2014). And some of his books and articles have been translated into Chinese and published in China.

Wang and Damrosch had face to face discussion about the notion of world literature (2011) and their world literature studies share many similarities. For instance, both of them emphasize cross-cultural and cross-lingual translation as the major agent of world literature formation (Damrosch, “World Literature, National Contexts,” “Toward a History of World Literature,” “Global Comparatism and the Question of Language;” Wang, “World Literature and Translation,” “World Literature and the Dynamic Function of Translation,” “Translating Modernity and Reconstructing World Literature”). Nevertheless, in this comparative analysis, I mainly focus on their differences in order to consider how world literature scholarship from the East and West interact with each other. While world literature has become a focus of contemporary literary studies, to my knowledge, mine is the first published comparative analysis of world literature scholarship from different countries and cultures. This article first analyzes the “Enlightened Conservatism” in Damrosch’s world literature studies, and then examines the ways Wang Ning deconstructs the “Enlightened Conservatism” in Damrosch’s world literature framework and establishes the referential link between world literature theories and the sociocultural realities.

Anti-system Movements, Enlightened Conservatism and David Damrosch’s World Literature Studies

Before exploring Damrosch’s views in detail, I will briefly analyze the historical context and its role in shaping his arguments on world literature. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the United States became the only superpower in the international community and the US-led capitalist world system achieved

hegemonic status. Especially after the Iraq war in 1990, the United States secured political control over almost all Middle Eastern countries, which are the major oil suppliers for the world economies. In this way, the US guaranteed its dominance in the world financial system by making sure that these Middle Eastern countries would use the US dollar as the primary source of revenue in the oil trade.

The continuous dominance of the US in the world political and financial system resulted in severe anti-system movements, and these movements led to crisis in the maintenance of the world system. For instance, on September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda terrorists conducted four coordinated assaults against the US that caused thousands of casualties and huge economic loss. In response, the US launched the second Iraq war in 2003. These events opened a new epistemology of the structure of knowledge for both parties. As for the Western countries, Edward Said notes that in this period a “simplified view of the world” proposed by the political elites of the US government, such as “terror,” “pre-emptive war” and “unilateral regime change,” became the continuous focus of media debate and dominated American social discourse about the conception of Middle Eastern countries (xix). Said further notes that these conceptions of Western people, formed from the anger of the attacks and patriotism, “celebrate American or western exceptionalism” and broke the connections between the realities of Middle Eastern countries and the dominant ways of knowledge production about these countries (xix). Similar patterns of knowledge production about the Western world also happened in the Middle Eastern countries. The local governments were not able to cope with America’s unilateral foreign policy and chose to repress the anger and opposition from their own populations. These repressive government practices led to anti-American sentiment such as “resentment, anger and interpretations” that show “little understanding of what the US is really like a society” (Roula Khalaf, qtd from Said xxi). These broken connections between knowledge production and reality and between the Western world and other regions damaged the equilibrium of international society and led to crisis in the maintenance of the Western-led world system.

Partly as a response to this epistemological crisis, David Damrosch in 2003 published his influential book *What Is World Literature?* to propose a new notion of world literature, or, in a broader sense, a new understanding of world culture, so as to change this defective pattern of knowledge production and maintain the current world system. In his construction of world literature in this book, Damrosch demonstrated traces of what Immanuel Wallerstein termed “Enlightened Conservatism,” so as to fix this epistemological crisis and at the same time maintain the dominant status of North American literature and culture in international

society. After examining the political strategy that European powers adopted amid the revolutions in the 19th century, Wallerstein notes that many Western countries, inspired by the strategy used by English royalty to successfully avoid revolution in 1848, chose to make timely but limited concessions in the face of radical socio-political movements in order to maintain the preeminence of traditional institutions and reduce the potential “long-term appeal of radical action” (Wallerstein 64).

In resonance with Wallerstein’s observation, Damrosch in his book attempts to bring forth a pattern conceptualizing the current world literature system, which encourages cross-cultural communication and seeks the co-existence of different peoples and cultures, and thus solve the epistemological crisis. Damrosch posits world literature as an elliptical refraction of national literatures that juxtaposes the local context of literature of different regions with the Euro-American cultural ideologies as the two foci of the elliptocytosis. With this understanding of world literature, Damrosch explains that, while reading world-reaching literary works, both the local history, culture and socio-economic contexts that shape the production of these literary works and target culture should be seriously considered. While discussing the scope of world literature texts, he maintains that the traditional bank of world literature, which mainly contains canonical works from Euro-American countries, should be expanded to include popular forms of literature and literary works from Third World countries such as the Middle East, China and Japan. By emphasizing the real situations of both parties and including literature from Third World countries, this conception of world literature provides a possible way of establishing the referential link between language and reality and demonstrates a knowledge production pattern that could bridge the divergence between different countries.

Meanwhile, reading the structures of world literary space portrayed in this book, we find that Damrosch assumed US cultural politics, academics and the capitalist market as the central agents in defining the ordering principles of world literary texts. This assumption is evident from his description of the formation of the traditional body of world literature to his construction of world literature in the current era, which he termed “elliptical refractions.” In the chapter “From the Old World to the Whole World,” in analyzing the genesis of major traditional world literature anthologies, such as *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, *The HarperCollins World Reader* and Frank Magill’s *Masterpieces of World Literature in Digest Form*, Damrosch shows that US cultural political logic plays a decisive role in defining what is world literature instead of the characteristics of literary works being “good” and “beautiful,” which traditional humanity scholars

emphasize. He specifically notes that the preference of the editors, the financial interest of the publishers, the public concern to assist educating “a new and better American citizen” (Damrosch, “*What is World Literature?*” 120), and the rise of the US as a superpower in the middle decades of the 20th century became the premises and assumptions shaping the frame of world literature in these anthologies. Damrosch especially made a detailed comparative analysis of the assumptions and logic of the multivolume world literature anthologies edited by American Senator Henry Cabot and Harvard’s president Charles W. Eliot. According to Damrosch, both anthologies were projects that were initiated by American publishers and “designed for a general-interest public” (Damrosch, “*What is World Literature?*” 120), suggesting the important role of the interest of market players in bringing forth these two serials.

By describing US cultural politics, academics and the capitalist market as the central agents in shaping the structure of the situation in which the concept of world literature applies, Damrosch shows that the North American academic factory functioned as what Carl Schmitt termed a “sovereign power” in generating and guaranteeing the situation where the law of world literature assumes its validity. Schmitt notes that sovereignty has the monopoly to decide the framework of “a juridical and a territorial ordering” and what should be taken out of the juridical-political order (qtd from Agamben, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen 16, 19). In a similar sense, by emphasizing the role of the American editor, market, and the needs of American public concern in the formation of world literature, the American academic factory defined world literature as those works that are mainly read in the American classroom, appeared on American bookstore shelves, on American course syllabi and in anthologies for American students and public readers. This definition of world literature suggests that literary works read in the literary and public spaces of Third World countries have been taken outside of the framework of world literature and are prohibited from acquiring recognition and meaning in the world literary space, and, thus, deprives the right of Third World countries in participating in constructing the map of world literature.

These assumptions and ideological principles exemplify their “sovereign” or regulative power not only by making exclusions in the process of world literature production, as shown in the two cases analyzed above, but also by “creating the sphere of its own reference in real life and make that reference regular” (Agamben 26). In Damrosch’s descriptions, all through the 20th century, the cultural political interests of the US regulated the interpretation of world literature. At the beginning of the 20th century, in his selection of the world literary giants for the US’ Library

of Congress, the librarian in charge, Ainsworth Rand Spofford, as mentioned above, gave an emphasis to American writers and complied with the assumption that American writers in the 18th and 19th century were a better representation of modernity (Damrosch, “*What is World Literature?*” 118). Thus, among the nine selected writers, six were from the US, including figures such as Emerson, Irving and Benjamin Franklin, accounting for two thirds of the whole. No writers from the UK, France or other countries of the same period are included in his consideration to represent the modernity of world literature.

This sovereign power of US cultural politics, academics and the capitalist market continues its presence in Damrosch’s construction of the notion of world literature in the contemporary era. As mentioned earlier, Damrosch proposes world literature in the current time as an “elliptical refraction of national literatures,” cross-cultural translation and a mode of reading (Damrosch, “*What is World Literature?*” 281-282). Within this framework of world literature, he further maintains that literatures of other cultures and regions should be included. However, in order to be included in the running of the current world literature system, it has to “objectify itself, constituting himself as a subject,” and at the same time binding himself to the violent reshaping of the mechanisms and calculation of the Anglo-American cultural political power. This view about the relationship between literature from Third World countries and this world literature “regime” means that the spaces and recognition won by the literary works from Third World countries in their encounters with Western literary powers always at the same time require a “tacit” reframing of their content and forms according to Western premises and assumptions about the Third World. In this case, the appearance of Third World literature in the world literature system, rather than overcome the division dividing the western and third world countries, in a sense, functions as a means to reinforce the structure of the Anglo-American-dominated world literature system and to strengthen the difference between the culture of the West and other parts of the world.

Restructured World System, Referential Re-connection and Wang’s World Literature Studies

By portraying the assumptions, working ideological principles and central actors in the world literature field, Damrosch views the world literature system as an international structure/society dominated by the North American academic industry. Non-Euro-American national literatures are members of this society on the basis of complying to the values, norms and rules of the distribution system of this

international literary structure. This understanding of the global literary system does not recognize the possibility that the rise of non-Euro-American countries could bring changes to and restructure the current world literature system. Wang's world literature studies, at the beginning, were inspired and influenced by Damrosch. Nevertheless, he went beyond Damrosch's framework later and worked constantly to undermine Damrosch's Euro-American-centered assumptions by inventing and practicing new approaches of inquiry for the world literature system.

Wang begins by deconstructing the assumed constant structure of the world system in Damrosch's arguments. In the article "Globalization as Glocalization in China: A New Perspective," he proposes that the world system is an unstable structure through analyzing the shifting roles and identity of developing countries in international society. He notes that in the context of globalization, China and many other developing countries changed their relations with international society by expanding their wealth and material capabilities, and that this newly gained economic power and intellectual capacity such as the "innovation and renovation of China's high-speed rail technology and other high technologies" was transformed into "institutional power" and cultural influence in the world's literary, cultural and intellectual arenas (2063). This view about the transformative power of developing countries' intellectual achievement and economic development shows that the world system is an unstable structure and the changing presence and role of its components, in the words of Xiaoming Huang and Robert G. Patman, can exert influence, produce visible outcomes and result in a new equilibrium through re-balancing and restructuring the relations between the member constituents (1-13). Wang's analysis of the new status quo of China and other developing countries' relations to the world system was echoed by the seismic shifts in China's role and influence in international society in the past two decades. In 2001, China joined the WTO and began its process of transitioning from being an outsider to being an insider of the Euro-American-dominated world system. In the following years, China's economy experienced robust growth as it soared past major Western powers such as France, Britain, and Italy in 2005, Germany in 2008, and Japan in 2010, becoming the second largest economic power in the world next to the US. This economic rise and its increasing integration with the global economy expanded China's presence in the world system and enabled it to take on more international responsibilities and play a more active role in global governance. These practices reshaped China's position on the world map as well as in the overall world system.

After offering a map of the new status quo of the world system, Wang set out to deconstruct the referential link between the Euro-American-centered cultural and

literary views and the newly emerging world social-cultural realities. He carefully analyzed the seven aspects of the phenomenon of globalization in China in the current era, namely: 1) globalization as a means of global economic operation, 2) globalization as a historical process, 3) globalization as a process of financial marketization and political democratization, 4) globalization as a critical concept, 5) globalization as a narrative category, 6) globalization as a cultural construction, and 7) globalization as a theoretical discourse (Wang, “Globalisation as Glocalisation in China: a New Perspective” 2063-2066), and suggested that the change of China’s position and role in the global division of labor and the world political cultural system and the destruction of national boundaries in the flow of capital forged new ties among Eastern and Western cultures, literature and intellectual productions. These new ties between the East and West and the globalization of cultural and intellectual production and studies, according to Wang, deconstructed and illegalized the referential power of all the artificial constructions of cultural and literary centers. Therefore, the world literature knowledge production practices, institutions and methods for understanding world literature that emerged on the sole basis of the Western socio-economic context are deficient both “institutionally and epidemiologically” to understand the present global intellectual productions (Wang, “Globalisation as Glocalisation in China: a New Perspective” 2061). In this regard, in order to re-establish the referential link between the world literature framework and the newly configured cultural and literary situations, Wang insists that we should take into account the diversified forms of globalization and the role performed by developing countries such as China in the current globalized world.

As a response, Wang devoted his energy to examining the premises, ordering logic and principles, interpretation framework, and agencies of world literature that are compatible with the reconstituted and restructured global literary and cultural equilibrium, in an attempt to re-establish the referential link between the epistemological framework of the world literature system and the global socio-cultural realities. In the article “‘Weltliteratur’: From a Utopian Imagination to Diversified Forms of World Literatures,” Wang brought forth his major arguments about world literature in the current era and maintains that the world literary status of certain texts should be viewed from the following five perspectives:

- (1) Whether it grasps the *Zeitgeist* of a given historical period with its high aesthetic quality;
- (2) Whether its influence has gone beyond the boundary of national languages and cultures;
- (3) Whether it is included in an authoritative anthology edited by major literary scholars;
- (4) Whether it is taught in

universities and imitated by writers of different countries in different languages; (5) Whether it invites critical studies in other cultural and literary contexts (Wang, “‘Weltliteratur’: from a utopian imagination to diversified forms of world literatures” 298-302).

The crux of Wang’s intervention in re-establishing the referential link first takes shape in his attempts to prevent the standardization and homogeneity of world literature and those unilateral reductive assumptions about the literature and culture of a foreign other in order to retain an original vision of what they are. Wang explains that, by the first criteria, he means that literary works belonging to the category of world literature should be ordered according to the extent to which they “feel the pulse of the time and represent with high literary quality its true cultural and aesthetic spirit” (Wang, “‘Weltliteratur’: from a utopian imagination to diversified forms of world literatures” 299). The emphasis of its connection to the time, culture and history in this criteria is a suggestion that literary works should be interpreted within the context of concrete individual human history and experience for their own sake rather than allowing imperial ideologies to work their way into literature studies to create collective identities and achieve control and domination of other regions. After delineating the necessity of avoiding the production of distorted knowledge about other culture and literature, Wang deploys ideas drawn from Marx’s critique about economic and cultural globalization and Douwe Fokkema’s research about cultural relativism and cultural universalism to conceive a formation of world literature as a community that foregrounds the coexistence, process of intellectual exchange, and the working together of different literatures. He notes that “today the traditional boundaries of national literatures are increasingly obscured” (Wang, “World Literature and the Dynamic Function of Translation” 3) and that world literature manifests itself in two forms, namely: world literature in general addressing the common aesthetic qualities of different national literatures, and world literature in particular regarding the diversified but equally valued faculties of national literatures (Wang, “World Literature and China” 5). In doing so, Wang invested the conception of world literature with a dimension of respecting human individuality and “subjective intuition” of people of different regions as represented in their literary productions. He made a forceful call for the translation of these varied forms of literature so as to facilitate the working together of these literatures in order to increase the interdependence of different forms of literature and to expand world horizons. Translation, he explains, could give a literary work an “afterlife” or a continued life, using Benjamin’s term, in

other languages and cultures and could open up the possibility of it becoming international or cosmopolitan (Wang, "On World Literatures, Comparative Literature, and (Comparative) Cultural Studies" 6). By boosting the transcultural and transnational flow of literary works, such acts are beneficial in presenting the overlapping of humanistic productions of different regions, providing the chance for people of different countries to borrow from each other and "invite critical studies from other languages and cultures," and eventually help the emergence of the category of literature shared by people of different nations.

After highlighting the working together of literatures of different regions and the need to retain their original visions as the ordering logic and principles and interpretive framework for the world literary texts in the new era, Wang continues to re-establish the referential link by examining literary agencies in the process of world literature formation. Wang departs from a vision of the role and function of the institutions in both Western and developing countries as equally valued agents in the world literary community. He notes that world literature anthologies edited by both eminent Western scholars, such as Stephen Greenblatt and David Damrosch, and Chinese scholars such as Zhou Xiliang play a critical role in "canonizing world literature or individual national literatures" (Wang, "'Weltliteratur': from a utopian imagination to diversified forms of world literatures" 300). The selection of these works by these prominent editors and publishers delivers a message to world readers that these are "excellent works of certain international influence" and help these works to reach a wide range of readers across the world (Wang, "'Weltliteratur': from a utopian imagination to diversified forms of world literatures" 300). Wang further identified the formation of world literature as a process in relation to a wide range of other institutions, such as universities and literary-prize-awarding organizations. Not only have these institutions served as the official and authoritative speaking organs to introduce and justify the quality and influence of literary works into the consciousness of students and the public by including certain literary works in university textbooks or officially declaring certain literary works as the most eminent works of a certain period across the world (e.g. the Nobel Prize for Literature awarding academy), but also their interventions in the world literature arena have reorganized the discourse about how to value eminent literary works. Wang especially addressed the heterogeneity of these institutions by mentioning the function of teaching world literature in Chinese universities in shaping the canon of world literature. He notes that "in the Chinese context, we have a tradition of teaching world literature in the Chinese department" and "with such a framework of world literature, scholars of Chinese literature major could

evaluate our own literature in an objective, international and comparative way” (Wang, “‘Weltliteratur’: from a utopian imagination to diversified forms of world literatures” 301). By bringing the important role of both Chinese and Western agents in the world literary field to public attention, Wang brought forth a more balanced perspective on the formation of world literature than those Western-centered views.

New Situations and New World Literature Framework

During the virtual summit of G20 leaders hosted by Saudi Arabia on November 21–22, 2020, China’s president Xi Jinping proposed a “global mechanism that would use QR codes to open up international travel” (BBC News 2020) to the global community amid the Covid-19 pandemic, based on China’s successful experience of using QR codes to restore its social and economic orders. President Xi’s efforts to restore the global order during the pandemic shows that emerging countries such as China in the current era not only changed their position in the world system in terms of economic strength, but took on a new role in maintaining and facilitating the running of the current world system by structuring their useful experiences into the global system. Therefore, the contributions and experiences of these nations should be seriously counted while considering any global issues, including the construction of the world literature system.

However, Damrosch’s enlightened conservative construction of world literature, as mentioned earlier, only emphasizes cross-cultural communication and the co-existence of different peoples as a complement to his overall world literature argument. What lies at the center of his arguments is that North American universities, publishers, scholars and markets are the decisive factors in the process of world literature formation, with little space given to voices from Third World countries. This enlightened conservative view of world literature, which overlooks emerging countries, especially China’s increasing presence and role in shaping the map of both the world market and the cultural industry, indicates that the American intellectual field still puts its faith in the socio-cultural structures of developing countries and refuses to acknowledge the equal rights of Third World countries to participate in leading the cultural and literary changes of the world. These characteristics of Damrosch’s world literature studies shows that his outlook of world literature is, actually, an expanded version of the previous Euro-American centred world literature framework.

New situations emerge with the increasing presence and participation of non-European countries in the world system and require a corresponding reform of the organizing principles, logic and interpretation framework of the world

literature system. Wang's view of world literature responds to these changes and poses resistance to the conservative views first by deconstructing the legitimacy of American's assumption about the Euro-American-centered ordering principle and logic of the world literature system, which makes possible the social mobility of literature from Third World countries to the center of current world system. Wang notes that the global system of literary exchange today has become a mutual and bilateral communication rather than the one-sided flow from the core countries to the periphery (Wang, "The Double Sided Travel of World Literature"), and emerging countries such as China should provide their own map of world literature to the international community on the basis of their understandings and experiences in the new world system (Wang, "World Literature as an Issue-driven Concept"). Especially, after the "artificial centres" are destructed, Wang argues, literary scholars could explore "the fundamental national problems in a broad cosmopolitan context with regard to human concerns at large" (Wang, "Cosmopolitanism, World Literature and the Cosmopolitan Quality of Chinese Literature"), and thus provide new perspectives to the international community of humanity studies. Moreover, the emphasis of the role of literary specialist and institutions from non-European countries in his world literature framework, such as Zhou Xiliang and Chinese universities' role in forming the world literature body, expands the scope of players and the access to lead changes in the process of world literature formation. These practices in Wang's research indicates that he has gone beyond Damrosch's world literature framework and brought forth a more balanced outlook of world literature which takes into account literatures of all different countries and regions and at the same time emphasizes the quality and world influence of certain literary text.

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