"STAND FIXED IN STEADFAST GAZE": AN EDITORIAL NOTE

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In this issue, we hereby present to our readers a group of four essays on literary studies from young scholars. While they are arranged in alphabetical order of the authors' last names, we would like to offer a brief introduction to them in the chronological order of their topics.

Such articles are inclined, in general, to focus on the subject matter of their object of study, i.e., authors, works, etc. Ryan J. Harte, however, devotes the first half of his essay to an extensive and intriguing discussion of his own task, as a comparatist, *per se*, comparing it to, surprisingly, poetry, as both are what he considers to be "imaginary constructions" that rely on the creativity of the comparatist and the poet. In adopting a comparative approach in literary studies, Harte argues, the scholar follows a personal interest and confronts the world with its multifaceted features, and attempts to mold them into something manageable for his own use, and that is exactly what the poet chooses to do in the process of poetry composition. Harte identifies a number of similarities between the two apparently different activities, and observes that comparison, like poetry, begins from intuition, a flash of understanding, or a vague feeling. Then, the objective and analytical rigor of scholarship offers the comparatist the chance to capture such a poetic impulse, and sort it through in language. In the second half, as an illustration of the above argument, Harte presents a comparison of *Bacchae*, a tragedy by the ancient Greek playwright Euripides (ca. 480-406 B.C.E.), and the *Zhuangzi*, the Chinese classic that defies easy classification. Notwithstanding the vast cultural and generic differences between the two works, Harte demonstrates, through close textual reading, that they both start out to unsettle our fixed suppositions, or knowledge, via the common theme of forgetting, and in the process invite the audience and the readers to relinquish the previously accepted knowledge, and eventually come to the realization that human nature is not only tenuous, but also subject to changes.

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Chinese readers know about the Roman poet Ovid (43 B.C.E.-17 C.E.) primarily through a prose translation of his major work *Metamorphosis*, the long narrative poem in fifteen books, written originally in Latin in the epic meter of dactylic hexameter, that incorporates into it hundreds of miniature stories from Greek mythology. One of the best known figures of Greek mythology is Medea, who marries Jason, the legendary hero of the Argonaut in its quest for the Golden Fleece, but later, after being deserted by Jason, takes her revenge on him by murdering not only his new wife and her father, but also, in some versions of the legend, her own children with Jason. While most modern readers are familiar with Medea in the story-line recounted by Euripides in his famous tragedy, Chun Liu 刘淳 directs her attention instead to Ovid's *Heroides* , a less known work of the poet's that consists of fifteen fictional poetic epistles, written in the first-person singular voices of epic or mythical heroines, including such famous women like Helen of Troy and Penelope, the wife of Odysseus. Through a close examination of two of the letters in the collection, Liu reveals how Ovid, well aware of his readers' familiarity with the mythical tradition and possibly also previous literary works, plays on the image of Medea as an outcast and outsider. In letter VI, from Hypsipyle, a former mistress of Jason's, Medea is represented as a barbarian; in letter XII, in her own voice, Medea mocks orthodox "Greek" values and practices. Through intertextual references to each other and to the prior literary tradition, as Liu points out, Ovid manages to portray a complicated, self-reflective woman, whose multiple potentials are brought out when confronted with a diversity of life experiences; and in creating a literary character who breaks ethical and moral boundaries of the time, the Roman poet also breaks the boundaries of texts and genres. Incidentally, it is a meaningful and remarkable coincidence that the Chinese translation of *Metamorphosis* (《變形記》), which has familiarized Ovid to the Chinese readership, was made by the distinguished scholar and educator Yang Zhouhan 楊周翰 (1915-1989), a venerable predecessor of Liu's, by half a century, at the English Department of Peking University.

On the surface the essay from Bao Huiyi 包慧怡 concentrates on *The Golden Targe*, a love poem in Middle English by the late medieval Scottish poet William Dunbar (ca. 1460-ca. 1525), but it actually moves way beyond that to involve an exploration of symbolism and allegory, the two major rhetorical devices in medieval poetry. Bao maintains that both correspond to, or rather originate from, a way of thinking that tends to understand the world and

everything in it as a "mask." Informed by C. S. Lewis' observation which clearly differentiates the functioning process of symbolism from that of allegory, Bao discloses how Dunbar's poem, in its allegorical characterization, exemplifies the core spirit of allegorical poetry as a literary genre. We would like to remind our readers that this is one of the very few scholarly articles on Middle English literature from Chinese scholars these days. Reading the essay, we could not help but recall that at one time or, more precisely, in the second half of the last century, China prided on a few eminent scholars of English literature, including Fang Zhong 方重 (1902-1991) in Shanghai and Li Funing 李賦寧 (1917-2004) in Beijing, who were conversant with Middle English and made solid contributions to its study and research. With their decease around the turn of the century, the field has been deprived of its leaders in China for quite a while. We are thereupon happy that a young scholar like Bao is now able to take on the arduous and daunting task, with her brilliant and solid research and teaching, to fill that vacuum.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), the Indian writer and winner of the 1913 Nobel Prize in Literature, made a visit to China in 1924. The black-and-white photograph of Tagore, with his snow white hair and beard, standing in the company of two of his Chinese hosts, the handsome poet Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 (1897-1931) and the beautiful female architect Lin Huiyin 林徽因 (1904-1955), has become a vivid lasting image of early twentieth century Chinese cultural history. While many Chinese readers are fond of Tagore's poetry, rendered in numerous Chinese translations, they remain largely strangers to his novels or his political and social thought. The article from Nan Zhang 張楠 provides a close reading of Tagore's novel, *The Home and the World*, in particular a study of its protagonists and major characters, as well as that of the "spatial tropes" used therein, against its background of the clash of patriotism and cosmopolitanism, critically recognized as one of the novel's central themes. Based upon her thorough research of theoretical approaches and Tagore studies from both Western and Indian scholars, from Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) and Raymond Williams (1921-1988) to Amartya Sen (b. 1933), Martha Nussbaum (b. 1947), and Kwame Anthony Appiah (b. 1954), Zhang shows how Tagore draws on Buddhist thinking in postulating his vision of *svadeśsamāj*, a form of social collectivity that integrates inner life with traditional Indian ways of communal existence, and conveys important cosmic consideration to foster broader sympathy with the entire humankind.

Literary studies, like humanities in general, are more in danger of being marginalized these days than any time before, against the rise of materialism, ideological indoctrination, and money worship that have run rampant, all around the world, since we moved into the new century. Under the circumstances, we are very glad to notice how, as the popular Chinese saying goes, "In the Yangtze River the waves behind drive on those before," a new generation of scholars have stepped forward and made their strong presence felt, as clearly displayed in these essays. Moreover, those of us in the field of comparative literature are only too familiar with the often-cited, ill-boding lines of the India-born English poet, Rudyard Kipling (1865-1935), who was no stranger to the cultural differences between East and West:

> Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
> Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgement Seat; ...
>
> *The Ballad of East and West* (1892)

Such pessimistic warning notwithstanding, we have devoted our studies, teaching, and research to facilitating the meeting of the East and West, because we hold the firm belief in the common virtues and universal values of human kind, all endowed with, to use a Buddhist expression, the "seven emotions" of joy, anger, sorrow, fear, love, hate, and desire. In this sense, we feel gratified indeed to see how these young scholars, one American and three Chinese by nationality, have taken such an attentive and careful deliberation of the rich heritage of East and West, from ancient Greek and Roman poets to the Chinese classic of the *Zhuangzi*, from a late medieval Scottish poet to a modern Indian author, in the way depicted by John Milton: "The stars with deep amaze / Stand fixed in steadfast gaze" (*On the Morning of Christ's Nativity* 1645). We have no doubt in our mind that such a "steadfast gaze," in due course, will certainly lead to further and better understanding between East and West, and in spite of the tumultuous "sound and fury" around us today, to a brighter and more peaceful world for all to share tomorrow.