

Humboldt as a Fountain of Inspiration: An Interview with Ottmar Ette

translated by Ottmar Ette and Haiyan REN

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Im Mittelpunkt dieses Interviews stehen die Motivation für die Gründung des Humboldt Center for Transdisciplinary Studies im chinesischen Changsha und die modellierende epistemologische Kraft, die von Humboldt für die wissenschaftliche Arbeit im Bereich von TransArea Studies sowie allgemein transdisziplinärer Wissenschaftskonzepte ausgeht. Hierin zeigt sich Humboldt als Quelle wissenschaftlicher Inspiration.

ABSTRACT

This interview is about the motivations behind the foundation of the Humboldt Center for Transdisciplinary Studies at Hunan Normal University in Changsha (China) and about the epistemological power created by Alexander von Humboldt in the field of TransArea Studies and, in general, in transdisciplinary scientific approaches. Humboldt is seen as a fountain of inspiration.

RESUMEN

Esta entrevista discute las razones que llevaron a la fundación del Humboldt Center for Transdisciplinary Studies de la Hunan Normal University en Changsha, China, y la fuerza epistemológica que ejerce la práctica científica de Alejandro de Humboldt sobre los Estudios Transareales así como sobre concepciones transdisciplinarias en el campo de las Humanidades. Se enfoca a Humboldt como una fuerza inspiradora en este campo.



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Ren Haiyan (Ren for short hereafter): Many people are curious about the rationale behind the establishment of the Humboldt Center for Transdisciplinary Studies (HCTS) in 2020 at Hunan Normal University in Changsha, China. Could you please briefly elucidate the conceptual framework and vision underpinning the creation of HCTS? Furthermore, what significance does the legacy of Humboldt hold for China, and how pivotal is this significance in your eyes?

Ottmar Ette (Ette for short hereafter): Alexander von Humboldt has outlined and brought forward not only the first theory of accelerated globalization, he is without doubt a global figure himself. More than two hundred years ago, he studied, traveled and worked not only in Prussia and Germany, in France, Spain or Great Britain, in Poland or in Russia but also in many countries in Latin America or in the United States of America. He worked on China for several decades, throwing new light on Chinese garden culture as well as on mining experiences, on Chinese travellers as well as on temporal conceptions and on Asian calendars. For me, it seems absolutely necessary to introduce to Chinese readers and specialists the manifold scientific connections between Alexander von Humboldt and China.

Humboldt, for many reasons, was resolutely against colonialism. This was the reason why the British did not allow him to enter the British Empire in Asia. His travels through the Russian Empire in 1829 allowed him to reach the Chinese border, thus fulfilling one of his heart’s wishes. I am convinced that China, with its traumatic history of colonial occupation and anti-colonial fights, is an ideal country where Humboldt’s ideas and the Humboldtian Science can feel at home. The high esteem and respect that Alexander von Humboldt always expressed towards Chinese culture provide a good and solid foundation for mutual exchange and transcultural relations between China and Germany, China and Europe, and – in the spirit of TransArea Studies – between China and Latin America. There is no better moment than now to forge strong ties and relations on this basis.

Ren: Your professional journey commenced with a dissertation on José Martí, the Cuban poet and journalist of the late 19th century. Subsequently, you pursued a habilitation focusing on Roland Barthes, the renowned French essayist and literary critic of the 20th century. Presently, you are recognized not only as a prominent Romanist and comparatist but also as a leading scholar in Alexander von Humboldt studies. Each step in your career to the eyes of ordinary people marks a huge transformation, suggesting a continual pursuit to walk out of the comfort zone. I am wondering how you see the changes yourself and what is the internal consistency, or the logic behind the choices you have made?

Ette: The logic behind all these transformations is simply curiosity, which is a necessary ingredient of science. For if you’re not curious, you’re not scientific. And it’s an expansion. The choice of Jose Marti as a topic was a leap for me, as it took me out of my comfort zone. When I first went to Cuba and told the young people there of my plan to write a Ph.D. dissertation on José Martí, everybody said, “It doesn’t make sense. You’re German and you will never understand what José Marti means for Cubans.” This kind of response always stimulates me. As a result, I started writing my dissertation with a particular emphasis on Martí’s global significance. A year later, a group of great Latin American authors including Gabriel García Márquez, Mario

Vargas Llosa, Carlos Fuentes visited Berlin. Standing in front of a statue of a German, they were struck by the realization that the person so well-known to them, Alexander von Humboldt, was largely unknown to the German public.

That was a very important moment for me as well. When I started preparing my Ph.D. on José Martí, I was aware of the connection he had with Alexander von Humboldt. And I wrote a proposal for a project, my first proposal on Humboldt. With this proposal, I went to one of the most prestigious publishing houses. They told me, “Wilhelm von Humboldt might perhaps do, but not Alexander von Humboldt. It doesn’t make sense. We would not sell any copies of him!” Again, this was stimulating for me. I am captivated by the notion that if there is such a direct refusal, there must be something lurking beneath the surface. There could be something new in the field.

Then I continued to work on my PhD thesis on José Martí and at the same time engaging with Alexander von Humboldt. Initially, I found this dual focus too complicated, but I later discovered that these two figures, though distinct, shared an array of topics. This revelation granted me a multifaceted perspective on the world, not only on literature, but on the relation of literature to the world. Finally, it helped me along in a wonderful way. This is why they are still with me on all my routes. My acquaintance with Jose Marti began over 42 or 43 years ago, and with Alexander von Humboldt, more than 40 years as well. They always come and try to teach me different understandings of the world.

From the very start, I was very lucky and happy to have these two visions: one from a Cuban, a Latin American, trying to understand the whole world akin to José Rizal from the Philippines; and the other, from a Prussian and German researcher who became European through his travels, relinquishing the confines of his native land to grasp the world more profoundly. He traveled to the West, to the Americas, and 30 years later, to the East, in order to understand the world much better because he knew that changing perspectives enriches his awareness of the things that he never saw before.

This is the logic behind my choices. Both José Martí and Alexander von Humboldt were prodigious travelers and I came to understand that I would not be able to understand anything without traveling myself. Of course, social media allows you to be more present than ever today. But you have to see it and live it. You have to live different perspectives in order to understand. Yesterday I was reading Li Shizhen and all of a sudden, I understood something very specific about doctors in Germany. Changing perspectives can reveal aspects that are once invisible. You can see something that is absolutely normal, familiar, and natural to your environment. When you change the perspective, all of a sudden you can see something, you can detect something, you can understand something that is all along but you could not see before. It is like the blind spot in your vision. By changing your perspective, you can eliminate that blind spot.

Ren: Curiosity is also the force that entices Humboldt to embark on adventurous journeys. That is what you and Humboldt have in common. I think we just touched upon a pivotal theme, that is the value of literature. Your experience with these writers enable you to think and rethink about the relation between literature and the world. For instance, literature allows you to change your perspective; and it is through engaging with these literary works that you recognize the significance of travel and it is through travel that you expand your world. Could you share some other insights or revelations you have gained?

Ette: Of course, literature is not merely about reality. It is more about lived reality. Literature is capable to lead you to a lived reality hundreds of years ago, to other linguistic and cultural contexts, and to realms where languages and cultures may even no longer exist. Literature contains the knowledge of life, the knowledge for living, and, as Marcel Proust puts it, it makes your life more intense. At the same time, the literatures of the world not only shed light upon the past. They enlighten the future, make us understand, in a prospective way, what our life could be in the future. As you know, no other discursive human expression crosses such a vast expanse of languages, cultures, areas and regions, and epochs. We are still able to grasp the rhythm and the rationale of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, of the Chinese *Shi Jing (The Book of Poetry)*, of *1001 Nights* today. These texts remain present in the literatures of the world through intertextual connections that enrich our different cultures and our ways of understanding the world.

Ren: In addition to José Martí and Alexander von Humboldt, you also dedicated significant scholarly attention to Roland Barthes. Your habilitation is on him. What does theory mean to you? Theory holds considerable importance for Chinese critics, with many scholars and students relying heavily on established theoretical paradigms in their academic writing.

Ette: Roland Barthes is a figure that is very important to my thinking in many ways. I always appreciate Roland Barthes' thought for its openness; it is not limited and it does not freeze you in a system. I never consider theory as a given or fixed system. But I understand that you need to have a clear vision and cultivate different perspectives. At the same time, the most important thing is to establish a kind of similar proceeding and procedure. Roland Barthes in a way is opening this. More than a theorist, he was always theorizing and taught us to theorize.

There is a second point that is very important for me – take literature as the most advanced theory that you can imagine. Roland Barthes is truly a theorizing theorist, but he believes in literature. Believing in literature, he is in a way highlighting the fact that as one of my favorite sentences suggests, “La littérature est toujours en avance sur tout”. Literature is always ahead of everything, including theory. If there is a literary theory, it must be based upon literature. It is not so much based upon other systems, such as philosophical system, historical system, understanding and so forth. It must come from literature. All these novelists and poets, writing in so many different languages, are still grappling with how we can understand literature, the world, and the future of our lives. Again: literature is not about reality; it is about lived reality. This makes a huge difference. Historiography may talk about things that are very general, and even oral historiography is going closer to literature. But literature in itself is creating a form to understand how we live a certain reality or how we can live different realities at the same time. Of course, dreams are part of that literature, of that reality. They are as real as reality in a way.

This is perhaps why I became so interested in *Hongloumeng (The Dream of the Red Mansion)*. It is based on a dream, *meng*, and Daguanyuan, a grand garden, or an island. It is a dream and it is more than reality. It is lived reality because it gives you the whole – it gives you China as a whole. Many aspects are still present today. That is why I regard Cao Xueqin as a sort of leading theorist because he has not established a clear system of a theoretical framework.

Ren: That is why I admire your writing. It transcends the confines of any singular theoretical framework. Personally, I view literary theories as tools. Or they are windows in a house, each offering unique views of this world. Instead of restricting, they should enrich our understandings of the world.

Regarding *Hongloumeng*, its foundational dream motif is deeply rooted in Chinese thought. In Buddhist sutra, there is the notion that, “人生如梦幻泡影” (Life is like a dream, a bubble, an illusion). This sentiment resonates throughout the novel, evident from the outset with the depiction of a Buddhist monk and a Taoist monk walking together – a thematic starting point shaped by Chinese perceptions of life itself. This worldview illuminates much about Chinese perseverance and tolerance towards various challenges.

And you just mentioned “lived reality,” a phrase recurring in your writing. I noticed that DeepL once translated it as “experienced reality.” But I sense a distinction between these terms. How would you define “lived reality,” and how does it differ from reality?

Ette: Experienced reality is already a reflection. For example, it is a term in philosophy. It is disciplined. The academic discipline is taking care of it. But lived reality is not a disciplined term. It is just the presence of life. Thus there is a huge gap between experience and life, or between experienced reality and lived reality. Experience is the reflection of something, of a given reality. But a lived reality is you give the central aesthetic dimension when you read and feel something. You can feel it with your brain. You can feel it with your bones. You can feel it with your body. This is what literature does. It is a central aesthetic expression. You can say that experience is a kind of translation of a given reality as well. But it is already a chosen and a disciplined experience.

Literature is much more open than experience. For me, personally, it is superior to the experience. It is the expression of a given reality as lived, as something on the move, as something moving, both emotionally and aesthetically moving. Meanwhile, experience is something frozen or systematic. It is toward systematization and stabilization. Yet lived reality is always on the move. It is always changing. It invites you to come with this lived reality. A classical Chinese text of the 18th century invites you to join a specific reality it creates and recreates, in order to make your senses be aware of how this kind of life was in the 18th century. This is something superior to an experience of life. It is not just the frozen result of a given reality, but an ongoing reality. You can share it; you can enter it; you can live it. This is what literature does. It makes you live a lived reality, a lived reality by some other person, by some other author. This is just wonderful. It at the same time echoes the saying of Roland Barthes – literature is always ahead of other thoughts. So there is a seismographic relation of literature to reality. It makes you not only familiar with what at a given moment can be lived in a given society, but what the future or what the prospective aspects of this reality is. You can see in a way, for example, what this reality was in the 18th century, and what is the outlook for the future development of this given society, of this lived reality. You can read in *Hongloumeng* a kind of future or the consequences of this kind of lived reality. This is something invaluable. It is something that you cannot find in any kind of discipline. This is what I love most in literature. It is not discipline. It is not reduced to a framework. It is completely open.

Ren: The way you phrase “lived reality” reminds me of history. Traditional Chinese classics do not distinguish literature from history. For example, *Shi Ji (The Book of History)* is considered a literary classic. In contrast, Aristotle posited a clear distinction between literature and history, asserting that history concerns itself with the past while literature explores possibilities. How do you view this distinction between history and literature, particularly in the context of your studies?

Ette: This distinction is extremely intelligent because it opens up a huge field. History is about the general. Literature, or poetry, as he says, is about the particular. But through reducing to the

particular, reducing your understanding of the world to the particular, literature paradoxically gives you the whole picture. It is by coming to a specific person, a specific character, or a certain set of characters, as in *Honglouloumeng*, that you can see immediately that it is not merely about these characters. It is not merely about the particular. If there is the constellation of love, it is not just about this kind of relationship. It is about general relationship. This is what constitutes literature, in a paradoxical way. It tells you about something particular, but it tells you much more about the whole world: it allows you to live this world. Even if it is reduced to a garden, a closed shop, circle or island, it turns out that you have the whole world there. That is how the particular becomes, paradoxically, the general, a very complex world in itself.

Ren: In that way, the garden is a fractal of the world.

Ette: Fractal is perhaps the best model for understanding the world and how literature is designing and creating this world. That means it is a miniature. It is miniaturized. It is a reduced version. At the same time, it is a model. This is something it shares with science. In science, we create models in order to understand better a given phenomenon.

But meanwhile, writers like Guimarães Rosa in Brazil, or William Faulkner in the US, or García Márquez in Colombia, created landscapes of theory by reducing the whole world to a given landscape. This is exactly what happens in *Honglouloumeng* in the 18th century. It is exactly a reduction to a given landscape of theory, to a given place, and this creates something new. It creates something that is able to create a model of the whole world, a world fractal. I am fascinated with the idea of a world fractal because I think that from the very start, it was a metaphor allowing us to understand much better the model of a world we are living through. Let us say, in *Can Xue*, we have the same idea of a model, the Yuelu Mountain. The Yuelu Mountain is a kind of idea. It may not signify so much for somebody in northern China or southern China. It means a lot for Changsha, for somebody coming from Changsha. But you don't need to have the experience of the Yuelu Mountain in Changsha in order to understand what *Can Xue* is describing and is working with. There is something, a development where the Chinese idea of a huge garden of an island is then transformed later in the 20th century in a kind of archipelagic world, different islands, trying to talk about the disconnection. There is, of course, a development, a progression in literary history.

To add something to this, the difference between the 18th century and the 20th century, between Cao Xueqin and *Can Xue*, is that she is transareal, that is, she is familiar with writing models and fractals coming from other parts of the world. She is familiar with Kafka, with European literature, and with Latin American literature. That is the difference between the 18th century and the 20th century. There is much more relationship between different areas of the world, and so there is always something new in literature. I am always fascinated by this. In Europe we have concentrated much on the transatlantic relationships, and Europeans in general concentrate on Europe. If they want to know more about the world, they look towards the west, towards the U.S. and Latin America. They do not think much about trans-Pacific relationships. But trans-Pacific relationships are very important as well. In order to truly create a world, a globe, something round, you have to think the west as the east, and the east as the west, and then you can create a literary system that is not centered.

Ren: Yes, it is perpetually on the move, and it is always dynamic, thus the east is not the east.

Ette: At the same time, it is discontinuous, and therefore relational. I am quite fascinated by my reading of Li Shizhen. It is very interesting, because it is a little bit like the Bible, as Auerbach

says about the Bible. It is taken from different paths, from a very long tradition, and it reassembles these different paths to a continent, a whole continent of knowledge. This is very interesting for me, because it is a continental vision based upon heterogeneous paths coming from the earliest periods of Chinese medicine until the 17th century. At the same time, we are going towards relational understanding. This relational understanding will lead us, I am sure, to the century of a non-centered world. In literary theory, it is the same. For instance, the concept of world literature, as coined by Goethe, saw Germany or Weimar as a kind of center; literary theory by the French critic Pascale Casanova in the late 20th century saw Paris as the center; David Damrosch saw exactly New York as the center.

Ren: And Walter Benjamin wrote that Paris was the capital of the 19th century.

Ette: Absolutely. The concept of world literature always implies a kind of center. Let us always play around this kind of center. We have to think about possibilities to conceptualize our world without a center. Literature is creating this. Literature gives you the possibility to think about the world without a center.

Ren: That is the reason why you emphasize that we should use the term “literatures of the world” instead of “world literature.”

Ette: Yes. It makes a huge difference because the plurality of different literatures is there. It is not a unique, homogeneous concept that necessarily centers the world and centers the literature. They are very different literatures. The era of world literature, of *Weltliteratur*, has faded away during the second half of the 20th century.

Ren: The ICLA conference in Macau in 2019 adopted “literatures of the world” as its theme. But I do not think they used the term as you see it. I have talked to a number of scholars about this difference between literatures of the world and world literature. Some maintain that the plural form is inherently encompassed within the concept of world literature. For them, discussions of world literature, translation, and the literary canon inherently imply a plurality of literatures. They do not acknowledge that the problem lies in the center, a centralized worldview.

Ette: Exactly. We have to leave that behind. We have to go beyond this conceptual, centralized conception of the world. We have to understand the huge world of differences, of differences between different literatures.

Secondly, there is something in literature I hold most dear, that is, it enables us to live together. There are different logics in different literatures. Taking Can Xue’s work as an example. It integrates different logics, such as those by Franz Kafka or by Jorge Luis Borges, without leaving China behind. This integration results in a unique literary creation that builds upon what Borges and Kafka said and wrote. Thus there is a kind of living together between different logics in literature. How I wish that human beings would be able to do what literature does, just living together in difference!

Ren: In recent years, the study of history has experienced a notable paradigm shift, transiting from a “world” framework to a “global” framework. At its core lies the opposition to any form of centrism. Your seminal work *TransArea: A Literary History of Globalization* clearly adopts a global perspective. I am curious how the emergence and conception of “literatures of the world” intersect with this shift. While discussions of world literature often trace back to Goethe, does “literatures of the world” have a similar traceable origin?

Ette: In the context of the establishment of various Centers for Area Studies in the Berlin region, i.e. the Center for Latin American Studies, the Center for East Asian Studies, the Center for the Study of Modern Orient etc., it was evident that new disciplinary boundaries were rapidly established. In the decade preceding the creation of TransArea Studies, it became increasingly clear that Latin America or East Asia were perceived as absolutely isolated objects of research, disregarding or overlooking the manifold relations between these Areas. Over the course of more than fifteen years, I have organized TransArea symposia, formed a group of researchers dedicated to TransArea Studies, and published a multitude of books on ArabAmericas, on AfricaAmericas, on EuroAmericas and on AsiaAmericas among other, that address both the challenge and the necessity for TransArea Studies.

The outcomes of these encouraging research endeavors inspired me to write a general book about TransArea Studies which has since been translated into English and French. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to delineate the epistemological underpinnings of TransArea Studies in detail. However, the main challenge was to understand the global as a complex set of relations between different Areas, defined not by their spatial stability but by their vectorial mobility. Consequently, the global construction of TransArea Studies is centered on mobility and a changing relational structure, perceiving spaces as the outcome of movements traversing a given spatiality. In these constructions of the global – paralleling with Global Studies – we no longer need a center, we do not need centered spaces and conceptions of the global.

Yet something similar occurs when we think of the historic shift from the concept of world literature towards the literatures of the world. In every construction of the concept of world literature, since the beginning of the Goethean understanding of this term, there is a hidden guest: the construction of a center. This hidden guest pops up when we less guess it. Thus there is a deep link between TransArea Studies and the Studies of the Literatures of the World. It is a polylogic system based upon mobility and relationality, highlighting the changing relations between different literatures – for instance, those of Brazil and Japan, of China and Mexico, of Morocco, France and the Caribbean, of Central America, Central Africa and the Philippines – and the specific logics developed in each of these literary Areas. Today, of course, we have moved beyond and after world literature even if the commercial level is still characterized by a centered conception of what literature should be. This is why there is a sharp opposition between the centered concept of world literature and the non-centered and emancipating concept of the literatures of the world.

Ren: The vast corpus of global literature poses a challenge for literary scholars. David Damrosch turns world literature into a manageable concept by defining it with terms such as translation and circulation. If we employ the term “literatures of the world,” how do we navigate this complexity? Besides, it appears that reading itself has become problematic in contemporary times. And literature is experiencing a crisis. This is a critical moment. How are we supposed to make the concept “literatures of the world” operational?

Ette: Literature is always in a crisis. Let us think about the position of literature in medieval European societies. Or let us say the classic period in French literature at the court of Versailles in which Racine, Corneille and Moliere lived. Literature was in a crisis, under pressure. Literature has always survived. There is no reason why literature should not survive today. Not because of the declaration of different U.S. American departments that this is the end of literature or literature will just fade away. The truth is, literature is always transforming this kind of crisis into something new. What is about creation? It is the creation of a kind of situation out

of the chaos in order to create the cosmos. You need a kind of mess, a kind of chaotic structure in order to overcome this.

Ren: I completely agree. The inherent drive in narration to weave stories reflects our impulse to impose order upon the world. It is an embodiment of the value of literature. I recall my conversation with Marshall Brown in 2015, regarding the decline of literature and its utility. I was very naive at the time and stated “This is not a Chinese question. Literature is in our blood.” Afterwards I realized this was a big issue in the U.S. academy. There has been debate over this.

Ette: I would say that a couple of years ago, I was closer to American ways of thinking about literature than I am today. Now I am closer to non-centered ways of thinking about literature. For me, it is a challenge in a way. It makes perfect sense that seen from an American perspective, literature may come to an end, or may be seen as a phenomenon coming to an end given so many cultural and sub-cultural issues and systems, social media and forms of expression. But seen from different perspectives, it is absolutely clear, as I would say, that there will always be a human sitting in front of a white page, with something to write in his or her hand in order to recreate the world. May this piece of paper resemble something from centuries ago in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, like writing signs on a clay tablet. All that is required is a person being in front of a given screen, a given support for inscriptions.

This is how literature works. It is different from film where many people and even a whole industry is needed to produce a film. Literature is something intimate. This elevates literature, spanning thousands and thousands of years across diverse cultures, in myriad cultural settings, across various ages, in different tongues and languages, to a robust cultural practice that truly expresses the totality of life for human beings. This is what makes me smile when I hear something about the end of literature.

Ren: I share your feelings as I too believe that literature, or the innate desire for narrative expression, is ingrained within us and manifests in diverse forms – whether through novels, computer games, or other mediums. However, this observation raises a contemporary challenge within literary studies: the issue of the canon. I understand that your extensive reading extends beyond canonical texts. Yet, when considering “lived reality,” does it intersect with the canon?

For instance, in present-day China, there is a widespread fascination with short videos, immensely popular despite their lack of coherence in plot and character development. Do these videos reflect lived reality? Their appeal seems to lie in serving as a conduit for expressing suppressed desires or emotions. Yet, they are often categorized as popular literature in today’s context.

Ette: I would say that I have a very ambivalent relation with canon. First of all, I love to read other canons, or say the canons of other people. My first PhD thesis on Martí was on a writer completely unknown in Germany. But he is at the center of the canon in Cuba, and a very important person in Latin America. In this sense, I was reading the canon, which was not a canon for my surroundings. For Alexander von Humboldt, I tried everything to get him into the canon because he was not in the canon. But I wanted him to be in the canon. This has to happen. He tells so many important things to Germans, to Europeans that we have to bring him to the canon. So I am not against the canon.

But the question is, how can you have different canons? Again, I would say that my Chinese exemplar Li Shizhen is part of the canon because his book serves as a foundational text on

Chinese culture and medicine. *Honglouloumeng* is a classical novel in the Chinese context. I am sure Can Xue will be part of the canon in the future. I ask myself and ask the canons, articulate questions for the canon in other cultural surroundings. Dealing with the canon is something important for literature, for creation. You can deal, from the point of view of literature, with different kinds of cultural expressions, as you have mentioned, like short video clips, blogs, or whatever kind of expression. But when you write, you always have to have a certain experience, a kind of created understanding of what literature is, in order to transcend this canon. When you write, you are not trying to obey, to follow the canon. But you have to know a kind of canon. You do not have to know the whole canon. That is an academic exercise. But you have to have an idea, a general idea of what the canon is, in order to transcend it, to change it, to leave it behind. That is the important thing.

For personal reasons, I am less inclined to explore the relationship between literature and film, for example. Nevertheless, it is a huge issue and a vital cultural expression. Literature has in a sense given rise to film, as film has adopted literary techniques and structures into its own framework. However it was not long before the film began to influence literature and exerted a deep impact. But I am less intrigued by the influence of film on literature.

My understanding goes the other way around. I am always interested in the relationship between literature and life. Naturally, film – along with video clips, rock songs, pop culture, classical music, and medieval European expressions – holds great importance for literature. But I see these expressions as part of the life, of a given society, of a given culture. Let us come back to *Honglouloumeng*. The music, poetry and other forms of expression are all expressions of life. This is what matters to me. My interest does not lie in examining how music is integrated into Daguanyuan. It is not at this level that I am concerned. I believe that the cultural artifacts present in literature are always already transformed into lived reality. They are not there as kind of cultural artifacts as such. They are already transformed.

Ren: I completely agree. Your interpretation of *Honglouloumeng*, with your frequent references to Daguanyuan as an island and your use of terms such as “continental” and “archipelagic,” provide a heterogeneous framework of thinking that allows me to view this narrative from a fresh angle. For me, or even for the Chinese imagination, when we think about utopia, we rarely conceive of it as an island. For instance, there is the Chinese utopian story of Taohuayuan. By the way, this is also a story related to Hunan province. Maybe next time when you come, we can go there. It is pretty close to Changsha. In the Taohuayuan story, a fisherman navigates through a narrow cave to discover a secluded place isolated from the world for centuries, where people live in a archaic manner without knowledge of the outside world. That is our conception of the ideal world, of the utopia. It is not an isolated island. For me, the metaphor of island is inherently tied to the sea. Even the continent is connected to the sea. The Chinese civilization however constantly emphasizes an agricultural foundation. We emphasize rootedness in a place, often downplaying our past high mobility. It is very interesting.

Ette: The differences and the parallels between the East and Europe, China and Europe fascinate me. Chinese culture is, generally speaking, a territorial culture that has been there. You see it when you travel through China. You see that there are thousands of years of culture at a given place. The alteration of the landscape by human labor is palpably evident. You can feel it. It is so strong. You see it in every place. But European culture is based upon movement and transformation, going from one place to another. Let us say *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, placed in a completely different setting, in the Mesopotamian region. Then you have all the Egyptian traditions, the Greek traditions, the Italian, or the Roman traditions in Italy. Then you have different parts

of Europe. It is moving all the time. It is not, in a way, anchored or rooted. I would subscribe to the definition of human beings by the Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf, who says, “We have no roots. Human beings have feet. And we are not rooted. We are walking. We are walking. And we are moving.” My metaphor of archipelagic writing is deeply influenced by Caribbean writers who consider this, the structure of islands and the sea, as something basic for human life.

Archipelagic, or *archipelagos* in Greek does not mean the islands. It means the sea between the islands. In a way, I often find that many aspects of Chinese culture are strikingly familiar, albeit from a different point of view. There are numerous parallels between European and Chinese cultures. We share a wealth of experiences, and we share many kinds of lived reality. When I read about the medicine in China, the human body is the same, yet the perspective is vastly different. But you can compare it to medieval visions by Hildegard von Bingen, for example. These differences and shared convictions stimulate me to read Chinese culture, Chinese literature and see what is going on in China.

To gain a deeper understanding, I endeavor to comprehend Chinese culture and literature as thoroughly as possible. In turn, it enhances my understanding of European and Latin American cultures. Changing perspectives, as we discussed at the outset of our interview, is essential for understanding the world as a whole. Traveling plays a pivotal role in changing perspectives, changing landscapes, landscapes of theory. It is a crucial element in enhancing our understanding of the world.

Traveling through China, you can see multiple layers of culture embedded in the Chinese landscape. Traveling through Latin America, there is no such thing as multiple layers in the landscape, except for the wonderful work indigenous cultures did. It is a different presence of nature, not transformed into culture in parts. In cities like Mexico City or São Paulo, with 20 or 30 million people, the landscape outside of these cities is starkly different from that of China, because after the destruction of the agricultural works done by indigenous cultures, there was no such thing as an ongoing agricultural framework, going on with different layers of culture. The word “culture,” in Latin, means agriculture. It means really working on the land, really transforming the land in order to make it productive for the human being.

Ren: I agree that literature plays a significant role in altering our perspectives. If a key aspect of literature’s value lies in its ability to provide diverse viewpoints, then what is the value of literary criticism?

Ette: I always imagine the origins of literary criticism emerging from the authors themselves, as reflections on their own creative endeavors.

Ren: I sometimes enjoy reading literary criticism authored by writers themselves far more than that written by professional literary critics.

Ette: I love the idea that it is kind of self-reflection of literature that creates literary criticism. Of course, in today’s complex and subdivided society, literary criticism in a way has become completely separated from literature. It is the object of criticism, but the subjects are not only dealing with the object in a professional way. And the separation between literary criticism and literature is rather pronounced in Germany. For example, it is not considered a very healthy practice to engage in literary criticism while also creating literature. This contrasts with the situation in France, and even in Europe more broadly. In Latin America, the separation is not as pronounced; many critics there also write literature such as poetry and the like.

This gives you an idea of the strict separation and the discipline that maintains literary theory outside of literature. It is not literature that prohibits literary theory, but literary theory that prohibits literature. I believe literary theory should aim to guide people towards literature, helping them to better understand literature in a conceptual way, even though literature itself operates in a non-conceptual manner. Thus, the role of literary theory is somewhat didactic. It is about how we can engage with and explain literature, making it more accessible to readers. Sometimes I sense that the subdivisions and the complex constructs of literary criticism have led it away from this intended purpose. I sincerely lament this shift in the direction of literary theory.

As we know, after the Second World War in Germany, as a consequence of the political events, technical universities were compelled to integrate humanities as a corrective to the purely technical and applied dimensions of the sciences. Today, we witness the humanities diminishing within these technical universities in Germany. I would not attribute this solely to society's waning appreciation for importance of the humanities, but rather, in part, to a misapprehension among many in the field, especially in the field of literary criticism, regarding their responsibility to counterbalance the realms of technical and scientific reasoning. This is an unfulfilled duty of the humanities that has been neglected during the last 20 or 30 years.

It may seem a little bit old-fashioned, but the duty of literary theory is to make us understand much better the importance of literature. In a sense, literature is a gift to human beings, offering protection against the repercussions of scientific advancements. In this era of technological innovation, humanity's prowess in technology is remarkable and rapid. But our humanistic endeavors, our humanistic goals, and our humanistic achievements, those that specifically guide us in living together in peace, have not progressed at the same pace. Some people say that they have not advanced at all in thousands of years. The chasm between technological innovation and humanistic standstill is widening, and this growing divide poses an increasingly dangerous threat to the survival of humanity.

In both literary theory and literary criticism, we must confront this issue, for it is a formidable challenge. I have observed over many years in the United States and Europe a continual reduction in investment in the humanities. I am heartened by the fact that in China, there is an investment in the humanities, which I believe is of paramount importance. We must reorient humanities, reinvigorating their sense of duties, as specialization has caused this sense of duty to wane. We are prone to forget our responsibilities all too quickly. However, the less we invest in the humanities, the more likely we are to create conflicts born from a misunderstanding of other cultures. This is the imperative duty of the humanities in our current era.

Ren: I agree. A couple of weeks ago, at an academic conference held in his honor, Chen Zhongyi eloquently expressed his concerns regarding the discipline of foreign literature studies in China, which he posited is facing an unprecedented crisis. As I see it, this crisis is intrinsically linked to what you call separation or the unfulfilled duties, or what I would label "disjoints." It seems to me that the realm of literary criticism and its practitioners are increasingly engrossed in their own endeavors, neglecting the imperative duty we owe to society and to humanity at large.

You just mentioned that this is a world being subdivided. It seems that the various academic disciplines are becoming ever more insular, fixating narrowly on their specialized domains of research while disregarding the broader context of the world around them. But I have taken note of the assiduous endeavors of Alexander von Humboldt to strike a balance between

engaging professional and general audiences. During my time in Berlin, I observed that the Academy and your esteemed team are dedicated to making professional knowledge accessible to the populace beyond the confines of academia as well. This commitment to bridging the gap between the scholarly community and the public is, I believe, what we are currently lacking in China. This absence is a significant factor contributing to the sense of crisis within our discipline.

Ette: I fully agree. Based on what you have just mentioned, that serves as a compelling reason for a deeper relationship between China and Europe, or China and Germany, because we can learn so many things from each other mutually.

Ren: Yes, as you said, the more we read, the more similarities we will find and we will recognize. For instance, your usage of the prefix “trans” suggests a totality and a holistic view of the world. This resonates with what we Chinese have historically cherished. I am intrigued by how you have cultivated this holistic view and sense of totality.

Ette: I think a very important impetus for this line of thought came from Alexander von Humboldt. That is for sure. I think there is a profound sense of duty and responsibility evident in his writings. He does not focus extensively on Prussia or France, rather, he often addresses the world and human beings. Humboldt was resolutely opposed to colonialism and, in particular, to slavery, as well as to all forms of slavery. He recognized the increasing specialization of different disciplines and sciences, yet his aim was to forge new transdisciplinary connections among them to establish an ethically grounded comprehension of the cosmos. Therefore, there is a deep insight in his writings and actions aimed at improving the world. This, of course, is also the duty and responsibility of literary criticism. In the realm of literary criticism, it is this sense of responsibility that holds great importance.

Ren: Allow me to add one final observation concerning similarity. I know that you just re-invented another identity, the writer, and you are now working on your third novel. In China, there is a venerable tradition of critics also being writers, particularly within the Institute of Foreign Literature at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Those who have both identities are highly admired and celebrated as “才子”, individuals of exceptional talent and intellect. For the Chinese, these two identities are considered inherently complementary. Possessing both is seen as the ultimate embodiment of literary prowess, characterized by sensibility and sensitivity. And what underlines this admiration is the conviction that one should have the sensitivity of a writer to be a good critic.

Ette: I fully agree. And I suffer in some ways. Even some of my friends look at me strangely, “Oh, so you’re writing novels. What the hell do you want to do with that? It’s that kind of highly specialized world where you separate from all the rest of the activities.” Literature, from its very inception, is related to literary criticism. And literary criticism, of course, must be related to literature. I have learned a lot about literature by writing about it. It is absolutely stimulating. There is a kind of knowledge in literature that you might find uninteresting in literary criticism. But when you want to create fiction, you need certain information about how a character pronounces, perhaps with a dialect, or what kind of voice they have. This may not be of interest to literary theory. However, you need a different kind of knowledge about life to create fiction. Not infrequently, you need things that you create in dreams. And dreams become a reality.

Ren: Perhaps it is time for us to envision a new form of literary criticism. As literary critics, our role transcends merely producing, inheriting, or disseminating knowledge. There is more to it.

This, I suppose, is part of the reason why those who delve into your academic accomplishments and visit your website may notice something distinctive about the way you categorize your field of interest: life knowledge, literary studies as a life science. I have hardly seen anyone else listed their special fields of interest like that. Typically one might expect to see, for instance “my special field of interest is the 18th-century English literature or literary theory.” Behind these terms, I perceive a strong desire and wish to share knowledge of life.

Ette: Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Ren: When I think of you, exceptional and noble are the words that immediately spring to my mind, especially exceptional. This is not due to the volume of your publications nor to the breadth of global influence you have, but rather because you do not follow conventional protocols. You are exceptional in the sense that you never admit the existence of boundaries; exceptional in the sense that you never stop learning and adapting yourself to new environments and to new developments. You never stop. All of these connects you in a special way to Alexander von Humboldt.

Ette: Yeah, this is exactly what I want. I always want to learn. Living is learning. And one can constantly learn from Alexander von Humboldt how to change cultural and scientific perspectives, how to create new relations between different topics that, at first glance, seem very distant from each other, how to bring together different disciplines to create a new kind of knowledge – and of Life Knowledge – capable of coping with the challenges of a new era. This is why Alexander von Humboldt is a continuous fountain of inspiration, creating new and necessary relations in a world that is more complex and challenging than ever.