# *THE MAKING OF BARBARIANS: CHINESE LITERATURE AND MULTILINGUAL ASIA* BY HAUN SAUSSY

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A work of specialism at its most accessible, Haun Saussy's latest book is a masterclass in rigor. Spanning the breadth of several millennia and disseminating over four decades of the author's scholarship in East Asian literatures and languages, *The Making of Barbarians* investigates why foreign translations in pre-modern China were so vanishingly rare. The amiable economy of Saussy's style also strays into more general reflections on the role of translation, comparison, and the need for scholars to 'break frame' between contexts. For this purpose, he first eliminates all diplomatic documents, followed by the large number of Buddhist translations from the era leading up to 1850, and focuses on a series of literary translations. Before 1850, Saussy argues, 'writers in China never thought of themselves as being under a cultural or social deficit' (11). Reconstructing and cataloguing these literary translations from the surrounding peripheries, for Saussy, reveals how the same literature 'extolled as indispensable to the founding of civilization in one cultural system' was nonetheless perceived as representative of 'an unassimilable barbarism in another' (136).

Indeed, literary history itself comes under scrutiny throughout. 'The more we familiarize ourselves with the lived multiculturalism of Chinese history,' the Chicago-based Sinologist at one point reflects, 'the more we learn to distrust literary history, which comes to appear to be a device for asserting identity despite change' (37). In this grand historical tapestry, China, as an expansionary cultural centre, receives the following observation: 'There is no essential limit to its expansion, as can be seen from its spread to areas far outside the Central States, where different languages were displaced, extinguished, or overlaid by Chinese character' (132). Saussy describes Eurocentrism as an epistemological failure, from which his account here seeks to be situated apart. Distancing himself from Eurocentrism, notably, does not stop the author from referring to the imperial element of non-Western states and the interrelationships with foreign literature this created in a monolingual kingdom. 'In this sense,' he writes, 'the vocation of Chinese literature to be a world literature is coeval with the universalistic tendency of Chinese political philosophy and the state expansions for which it provided intellectual justification' (132).

The historical scope of the texts in question means the separation of sometimes centuries between (and within) his chapters. Across rich landscapes and over the course of five chapters, Saussy explores the translations from Hu languages in Chapter One, oral court songs in Chapter Two, the *Hanzi Wenhua Quan* of the Northern 'shaggy borderlands' (58) in Chapter Three, the gradual reconciliations of North and South in Chapter Four, and finally the range of literature by exiles and emissaries in Chapter Five. Each chapter is not so much an isolated analysis of a particular literary text, but more of a wayward teleology of these imposed categories. The sheer scope of material, in each case, is enormous. In other words, one should not look to this book for an intimate account of any single piece of literature under analysis, but rather as a broad-ranging thematic exploration of those literatures through translation.

In the space of a few pages, for example, the reader encounters Malaysian translations from 1389, to *The Secret History of the Mongols* (an anthology published between 1403-1405), Fang Xiobiao's Manchurian exile in 1659, all the way to translator Ogyu Sorai's work leading up to 1728 (62-66). This is representative of the 'distant reading' throughout. For certain, it is dizzying and impressive, but it does somewhat defy this reviewer's ability to summarise it

substantially within the present constraints. Nonetheless, underlying these accounts of literary translation is a steady thematic continuity of recognising China's inherent multiculturalism and the subsequent forms of harmonisation this has come to motivate over time. As Saussy emphasises, this was institutional as well as linguistic:

> On several occasions in Chinese history, the court intervened to forbid the export of canonical books. […] In the case of the Classics and Histories, language and translation are not the problem at all. It is taken for granted that foreigners can read and understand Chinese. Rather, a social barrier was imposed to make the circulation of information asymmetrical. (74)

Along the way, Saussy makes some interesting observations on the broader disciplines of comparative literature and translation, to which this reviewer is more qualified to respond. He considers literary translation 'a means of public education,' that 'does for readers at large what language-learning does for individuals. It connects centres and margins at many scales' (14). Notwithstanding the simplicity this analogy may well contain, the author's more general reflections provoke consideration and deserve elaboration here. Comparative literature as a discipline is, to Saussy's mind, about 'finding counter-examples, edges and bits of texture that fall somewhat out of frame. They help us see the frame as a frame' (135). Another memorable comment, in particular, observes an inexplicable but persistent conservatism in contemporary students—reducing many national literatures to an 'often hyper-selective canon':

> The intelligent young people that come to me to write papers […] turn out comparative studies of Sima Qian and Herodotus (but not the Nuremberg Chronicle, Garcilaso de la Vega, or the Kirhiz epic of Manas); or Can Xuequin and Marcel Proust (and not Ann Radcliffe or Abdelkébir) – I make no promises as to the fertility of those alternative suggestions, though something can be learned from any comparison; the question is why some comparisons are always made and others are seemingly never made. (7)

This is an important point, that all comparative scholars and educators could think upon. If some comparisons are never made, the answer must lie not only with scholars individually but with the broader circulation of journals and published scholarship. If one talks about a 'growth of the discipline,' then 'growth' has an unusually vague meaning in this context. Have too many of us made the mistake of thinking that, if they broaden their reading, they should shorten their framework? Why should a small handful of authors be rendered as conventional literary representatives of their country of origin? What does the framework of our own comparisons tell us about our own contemporary moment? For some, it may also raise deeper questions of whether there is some sort of compensation or redistribution of energies at work in these cautious encounters. This serves as relevant to the more specific enlargement of China itself in the Western university and the Western mind. With the inevitable rise of Chinese culture as an emergent academic space, those contributing to that end should bear in mind the narrow bottleneck of translations and therefore the selectivity with which foreign culture is transferred. Such scholars will have much to gain from Saussy's considerations on breaking the 'frame' through which old assumptions, left unchecked, tend to continue.

Even for those unfamiliar with ancient Chinese texts, this book is an outstanding introduction into the field of East Asian culture, considering it through the notions of translation and comparison with which the field has resurfaced. With exceptional clarity, *The Making of Barbarians* allows us to marvel at the wealth of literature emanating and being rediscovered from this part of the world.