From Ithaca to Beijing: Hu Shih's Peripheral Centrality

David Damrosch
Harvard University

In his *Routledge Concise History of World Literature* and in several related talks and essays, Theo D'haen invites us to think freshly about the complex relation between "major" and "minor" or semi-peripheral literatures. Within the European and North American context, even major cultures in other parts of the world have often been relegated to a peripheral or at best semi-peripheral role, and in the case of Asian literatures, until recently it was almost exclusively premodern works that figured within Western world literature anthologies and courses. The modern literatures of China, Japan, and India—indeed, any works written there during the past three hundred years—hardly had even a peripheral presence in these courses and anthologies, and even the field of "East/West" comparative literature was skewed heavily toward the premodern. This situation is beginning to change, but a fundamental reorientation will have to go beyond the inclusion of neglected works; the discourse of world literature needs to open up to a more truly global range of critical perspectives, including non-Western appropriations and transformations of Western literary discourse itself. Here I would like to take up Theo's challenge to broaden our understanding of world literature by looking at a key Chinese intellectual from the early twentieth century: Hu Shih, a leading figure in the creation of modern Chinese literature and criticism.

We can begin in the summer of 1915, when a small circle of Chinese students at a rural university hotly debated the crucial literary and linguistic questions of their day. Should classical Chinese be abandoned in favor of the vernacular language spoken by common people? Should the Chinese script itself be retained, or simplified, or replaced outright by Romanization? Should contemporary writers continue to use classical literary forms, or did new social conditions require new modes of writing, inspired by European novels and plays? Far from Beijing or any other center of Chinese culture, the friends were hammering out their ideas with great inten-

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée
CRCL SEPTEMBER 2016 SEPTEMBRE RCLC
0319–051x/16/43.3/360

sity, and their discussions would soon have a tremendous impact on China's "New Culture" movement. Yet for all their modernism, like centuries of literati before them, they pressed their points home in poems as readily as in late-night drinking sessions. Brilliant and polemical, arrogant and self-mocking, they were testing the limits of language and of friendship alike.

Their debates continued throughout the school year, and reached a climax the next summer when a classically-minded member of the group, Mei Chin-chuang, accused his friend Hu Shih of merely recycling stale ideas from Tolstoy. Hu replied with a long poem written entirely in the vernacular, at once demonstrating the possibilities of a supposedly sub-literary language and also trying to lower a little the temperature of debate:

> "The man has leisure, the weather is also cool,"
> Old Mei has entered the battlefield.
> Banging on the table, cursing Hu Shih,
> Saying that his words are really too ridiculous.
> [...]
> Old Mei rambles on, old Hu laughs heartily.
> Let's regain our calm equanimity, what kind of a debate is this!
> Words are not new or old, but they may be dead or alive.
> (Hu, *Autobiographical Account* 171-72)

Mei was not persuaded. Nor was their friend Jen Shu-yung, who called Hu's poem "a total failure" and asked: "Considering your great talents and capacities, why do you reject the main road and insist on frivolous bypaths, to plant beautiful flowers among the thorns?" (173-75). Undaunted, Hu formulated his ideas for a "literary revolution" in a manifesto, written in formal literary Chinese, based on eight succinct principles: "Don't use clichés [...] Don't groan without being sick [...] Don't imitate the ancients" (Chou 149). Writing under his Darwinian pen name, Hu "Shih," or "fittest" (as in "the survival of the fittest"), published his "Preliminary Discussion of Literary Reform" in January 1917 in the new Shanghai journal *La Jeunesse*, whose French title proudly announced its Westernizing internationalism. There would be no turning back after that.

What is particularly striking about the exchanges between Hu Shih and his friends is that they did not take place outside Shanghai or in rural Szechuan, but at Cornell University. They continued the debate via sporadic meetings and frequent letters after Mei went on to graduate study at Harvard and Hu moved to Columbia to pursue a PhD in philosophy under the direction of John Dewey. Their debate had heated up after Hu criticized Jen for using archaisms in a poem about a boating mishap on Lake Cayuga, involving Jen, Mei, and "Miss Ch'en Heng-che" (169). Hu had originally come to Cornell from Shanghai in 1910 to study agriculture, but his assigned area of focus, pomology, while no doubt useful for apple farmers in upstate New York, had come to seem irrelevant for life back home in China. He had changed to literature and philosophy in his second year and, after receiving his BA, he had begun graduate

studies in philosophy before transferring down to Columbia. His manifesto for a literary revolution became a rallying-point for cultural reform, and Hu found himself a celebrity when he returned to teach in Beijing in 1917. As his friend Lin Yutang wrote in a memoir, "Hu Shih returned with national acclaim to join Peking University, and I was at Tsinghua to greet him. It was an electrifying experience" (*From Pagan to Christian* 44).

It is possible to tell this story as a conversion narrative, in which Hu Shih comes to America, discovers European literature and American pragmatism, then returns home to spread the gospel of Westernization. Certainly he learned a great deal from his Cornell courses in French, German, and English literature—a virtual major in Western world literature—and then from Dewey at Columbia. Yet as we can see from Hu's exchanges with Mei and Jen, he was developing his ideas first and foremost in a circle of fellow émigrés concerned with China's own cultural history and modern needs. When Mei accused him of promoting warmed-over Tolstoyism, Hu later wrote, "I laughed aloud when I heard this. I said that I was talking of Chinese literature entirely from the Chinese point of view, and that I was not [at] all interested or concerned with the opinions of the European or Western critics" (*Autobiographical Account* 168).

Emigrants have always played a major role in the history of comparative literature, from Madame de Staël writing *De l'Allemagne* during her Napoleonic exile down to such influential contemporary critics as Edward Said, George Steiner, Julia Kristeva, Gayatri Spivak, and Franco Moretti. The case of Hu Shih and his friends shows us that these emigrations did not begin only in mid-century and they did not only involve Europeans. Nor was it always a question of permanent resettlement. Hu's seven years in the United States gave him a decisive period of reflection on his home culture, to which he always intended to return.

Hu Shih was a born comparatist, raised amid interwoven and competing cultural strands. His father was a Neo-Confucianist, a believer in science and progress who also taught his children calligraphy and the Confucian classics, including the *Book of Songs* as well as the *Analects* and the *Classic of Filial Piety*. Poetry and filial piety merged in "Poems for Learning to Become a Man," a collection that he assembled for his son and copied out with his own brush. These poems promoted Confucian precepts as giving timeless guidance in life:

> The ancient scholars observed human relationships,
> Extended affections to their kin,
> And nine generations were in harmony.
> [...]
> As recorded in the Classics and documents,
> As taught by teachers and scholars,
> The Way of being a man has no other arts:
> Examine principle, and extend knowledge,
> Return to the self, and make your actions real,
> Study diligently, and never depart from the Tao. (*Autobiographical Account* 62)

Hu's mother, on the other hand, was not a Confucian rationalist but a devout Buddhist, and she warned him that misbehaviour could result in his reincarnation as a pig or a dog (88). Combining his parents' teachings, young Hu constructed a cardboard Confucian temple, using a Noontime Tea box as its inner shrine, festooned with classical couplets on silver and gold paper. Delighted, his mother gave him a small incense burner and instructed him on burning incense in reverence to Confucius on the first and fifteenth of every month (84).

Even as Hu Shih had to negotiate between different Chinese traditions, Western culture was becoming a presence in his life. It seems emblematic that he encountered his first work of Chinese fiction, a tattered copy of *Water Margin* partly eaten by rats, among the trash tossed into a Standard Oil Company kerosene crate (67). By his early teens, he was reading Western literature, philosophy, and history in Chinese re-translations from Japanese, and Thomas Huxley's *Evolution and Ethics* inspired his pen name of "fittest." The Confucian exhortation to "study diligently and never depart from the Tao" actually entailed a progressive series of departures for Hu; he left home at age twelve to study in Shanghai—"a small child alone and lonely, protected only by a loving mother's affection, something of a habit of diligence, and a bit of skepticism" (92)—and then crossed the Pacific at age eighteen for his sojourn at Cornell and then at Columbia.

Hu Shih's American education gave him a comparatist's outlook, but this perspective never manifested itself in extended work on different literatures. Instead, his studies abroad gave him a new purchase on his home tradition; as he later wrote, "this revival of interest in English, French, and German literature [...] in a sense revived my early interest in Chinese literature" ("Reminiscences" 214). In his debates with his friends at Cornell, he cited Dante, Chaucer, and Martin Luther as founders of vernacular European literatures, and thanks to those writers "I finally understood clearly the history of Chinese literature, now realized that Chinese literature in the vernacular [...] constituted the orthodox literary tradition of China, [and] represented the natural direction in the development of the Chinese literary revolution" (*Autobiographical Account* 162).

Hu Shih's work undercuts any simplistic opposition between comparative or world literature and the study of a national tradition. For Hu, there was no question of abandoning Chinese traditions in order to adopt Western modes, or of creating a cosmopolitan alternative to nationalism. Instead, the European vernacular revolution provided a comparative perspective from which to serve China by revaluing the Chinese tradition itself, a project he went on to pursue in many books and essays, including seminal studies of *The Story of the Stone*. As he later said of the three centuries of prior commentators on this novel and the other masterpieces of Ming Dynasty fiction, "These classic scholars lacked external materials for comparison and reference. [...] Without comparative material, without reference material from the outside, it was almost impossible for these scholars to understand what they were studying" ("Reminiscences" 245).

Hu was closely associated with the New Culture movement of the 1910s and 1920s, a period in which the premodern Chinese concept of literature as part of a broader framework of *wen* (order, harmony, culture) was being redefined along Western lines as *wenxue*, "literature" as a distinct and autonomous mode of imaginative writing. Yet Hu's conception of his own role was never belletristic, and remained more within the realm of *wen* than of the new *wenxue*. His writing freely crossed the boundaries of literature, philosophy, and history, as well as the divisions between scholarship and journalism. Already during his Cornell years, he became a sought-after speaker for American audiences interested in understanding contemporary China and its turbulent politics, even as he pursued his studies in Western literature and philosophy. Hu saw his activities as complementary, and he remained loyal in many ways to his father's neo-Confucianism, taking a "cultural-intellectualist approach" to addressing social concerns (Chou 116).

Hu Shih's loyalty to his paternal legacy was only increased by a formative tragedy: when he was not quite four years old, his father died while away on government service. In his autobiography, Hu recalls his dying father's final letter home: "His last instructions to me urged me to pursue my studies diligently. These scant few lines have had a great influence on me throughout my life" (60). By that time, Hu's father had already taught him seven hundred Chinese characters, each written out on a sheet of red paper: "These characters, all of which my father had written with his own hand, my mother preserved her entire life, these square red sheets of paper being the most spiritual mementoes of the life of the three of us together" (59-60). For Hu and his mother, writing became a bulwark from the past against an unhappy present.

She had married his father at age seventeen, when he was a forty-seven-year-old widower with grown children who resented the new marriage; Hu Shih was their only child: "My mother became a widow at twenty-three. At the same time, she was a stepmother and head of the household. My clumsy pen cannot describe even one ten-thousandth of the painful bitterness of such a life" (75). Her eldest stepson, the nominal head of the household, was a gambler and opium addict who would steal and pawn anything he could. Creditors would crowd her parlour every New Year's Eve, and she had frequent disputes with her two stepdaughters-in-law. Her loyalty to her husband's memory was redoubled by her difficult situation. Weeping, she would tell her son, "You must follow in your father's footsteps. In my whole life, I have known only this one perfect man, you must learn to be like him, must not bring disgrace on him" (73-74). Writing, public service, and filial duty were already inseparably connected for the four-year-old boy.

Hu Shih's subsequent scholarship and journalism were closely bound up with his public role as a leader in building a modern China. Under Chiang Kai-shek's government in the 1930s and early 1940s, he served for several years as president of Peking University, where he tried unsuccessfully to mediate when the Kuomintang repressed student protests. Later he was China's ambassador to Washington and then to the nascent United Nations, and he served in the National Assembly from 1947-62, first

in Beijing and then in Taiwan after 1949. Staunchly anti-Communist, he had written a series of essays in 1919 under the general title "Study More Problems, Talk Less of Isms," arguing that China's Marxists were dwelling in a world of abstractions rather than dealing with practical issues. Yet he was never a Kuomintang party man. As early as 1929 he sharply criticized the Kuomintang for corruption and for violating human rights, and as Chiang Kai-shek's ambassador to the United States in 1938-42, he traveled around the country seeking to raise support for China's struggles against Japan but rarely even mentioned Chiang or the Kuomintang. Throughout his life, Hu insisted that political action needed to be based on careful thought grounded in deep cultural training.

In an essay on "Chinese Literature since the Literary Revolution (1917)," Lin Yutang emphasized the importance of Hu's Western training, speaking warmly of Hu as the best qualified member of the editorial team that guided *La Jeunesse/New Youth* magazine: "But the other three editors of *La Jeunesse* were like a rickety three-legged table. Three of the four editors did not really understand the west; one of them was clearly a psychopath" (303). Lin argued that most of the reformers lacked sufficient training either in classical Chinese literature or in Western culture: "In the generation which grew up in the 1920s, thinking was curiously lacking in ballast. [...] There was no continuity with the past. [...] Nor was there a deep root in or real understanding of the west" (303). The result was writing "of a certain halfheartedness, of a curious nervous debility, of the failure to reach great depth and power" (304), with too many young writers making awkward attempts to write rambling sentences imitating Thomas Mann, in a Mandarin dotted with Europeanisms (305). "Into this vacuum of ideas," Lin says, "communism rushed like a sucking wind. [...] Communists captured the minds of youth before they captured China militarily" (304)—an assessment that can be compared to Erich Auerbach's claim in the final chapter of *Mimesis* that modernist fragmentation and loss of history paved the way for the triumph of National Socialism.

Lin Yutang's background and career make an interesting comparison to Hu Shih's, showing similar blendings of Chinese and Western literature and culture. Born in 1895, Lin was the son of devout Christians; his father, in fact, was a pastor. Like Hu's father, though, Pastor Lin was also a Confucianist, and taught his children calligraphy and the Confucian classics, even as he cherished an ambition for his sons to study one day in Oxford or Berlin. Lin grew up reading translations of Walter Scott, Victor Hugo, and *The Thousand and One Nights* along with the Confucian *Book of Poetry*. As a teenager, he was sent to study English at a missionary school, St. John's College in Shanghai. "Though it was Episcopalian," he later wrote, "its sacred mission for the majority of the students was to produce successful compradores for the Shanghai tycoons" (*From Pagan to Christian* 29). Lin's love of literature soon outweighed his economic and spiritual interests alike; invited to speak in church when home on vacation, he shocked his father by giving a talk on "The Bible as Literature" (30).

After graduation Lin moved to Beijing in 1916 to teach English at Tsinghua

University. While in Beijing, he began to feel ashamed of his limited knowledge of Chinese literary and cultural traditions. He drifted away from Christianity and became closely involved with the New Culture movement, even as he began to read extensively in classical and vernacular Chinese writing. Then in 1919 he won a fellowship to study Comparative Literature at Harvard. His parents wanted to see him married first, and they arranged a marriage for him; the honeymoon trip for the newly-introduced newlyweds was their sea voyage to America. Their experience in Cambridge proved to be a true idyll. As Lin recalled many years later in his *Memoirs of an Octogenarian*, "It was so sweet, Hong and I the two living together, living our lives alone" (45). They found an apartment just a block from the massive, newly-built Widener Library, where Lin rejoiced in the freedom of the stacks:

> I always maintained a university should be a jungle where monkeys should be let loose to pick and choose from a feast of nuts from any tree he wants and swing and jump to other branches. His monkey sense will tell him what nut is good and eatable. I was having a riot of a banquet. To me the Widener Library was Harvard and Harvard was the Widener Library. (40)

Here Lin both evokes and remakes the traditional Buddhist image of "the monkey of the mind," which is supposed to be quieted by meditation, not indulged in leaping about from thought to thought.

Lin supplemented his library banquet with courses in European literature with Irving Babbitt and literary criticism with Bliss Perry. He was preparing to write his MA thesis and proceed to doctoral studies when an administrator back in Beijing arbitrarily cut off his fellowship. Half a century later, Lin recalled this sudden reversal with unconcealed bitterness: "Dr. Sze was cutting off my neck. Never have I exulted so much on anybody's death, when later I learned Dr. Sze had committed suicide" (41). Lin's Harvard advisers recommended him to a temporary post teaching Shakespeare in Jena, "the town of Goethe" (50), where he became fascinated by Heine's poetry and radical political essays. Lin and his wife then proceeded to Leipzig, where he earned a PhD in Comparative Philology. Somewhat disturbed by the activities of a "nymphomaniac" landlady (53)—thin walls?—Lin delved deeply into classical Chinese as well as Germanic linguistics and textual criticism, then returned to China in 1923 as Professor of English at Peking University.

Lin came back to a country in the midst of wrenching conflicts. He expected to settle permanently in Beijing, but fled the city in 1926 amid a purge of leftist intellectuals by the warlords who then controlled northern China. He ended up in Shanghai, where after a brief period of service in Sun Yat-sen's Nationalist Party, he became disillusioned with party politics and decided to devote himself to writing. He established a series of cultural journals and became a prolific essayist in both Chinese and English, perfecting a humorous, conversational style for discussion of cultural questions and social problems.

In an essay written in Shanghai in the early 1930s, "The English Think in Chinese," he adopts a pseudo-Orientalist puzzlement at the mysterious West and its violence-

ridden civilization: "I am going to speak of my impressions of the white man [...] Everyone knows that Europe is in a mess. [...] We are forced to ask ourselves, 'What are the psychological limitations of the Europeans which make peace so difficult in Europe?'" (94-95). Whereas Hu Shih's Western training gave him a comparative perspective on China, Lin asserts that his Chinese perspective gives privileged access to the English mind: "I think, as a Chinese, I can understand the English character better than Englishmen understand themselves" (98).

In the years that followed, Lin Yutang became the world's foremost exponent of East/West cultural comparison, in a series of essayistic books and several novels, most translated into a dozen or more languages. He moved to New York in 1936 and lived in the United States for three decades before moving to Taiwan late in life, but like Hu Shih, he remained loyal to his prerevolutionary upbringing in the world of *wen* rather than *wenxue*. In such works as *The Importance of Living, The Wisdom of China and India,* and *On the Wisdom of America,* he seamlessly brought together insights from philosophers, novelists, and poets, and he wrote a particularly pointed critique of American foreign and military policy during World War II, *Between Tears and Laughter*, a book he published in 1943 in an attempt to rally American support for China against its Japanese occupiers.

For Hu Shih, as for Lin Yutang, literary and philosophical pursuits were inseparable from political engagement. As early as his Cornell days, Hu developed a knack for public speaking and became involved in public debates, soon after establishing himself as a writer on English literature. In his senior year, he won the Cornell English department's prize for an essay on Robert Browning, becoming the first Chinese student ever to win it; this achievement was mentioned in New York newspapers. Meanwhile, the revolution of 1911 had led to the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912, and Hu began to be invited to give talks in Ithaca and beyond, to literary, civic, and church groups. He also became deeply involved with the "Cornell Cosmopolitan Club" for internationalist discussion and debate, living in its headquarters for his later three years, becoming president of the Cornell chapter and a member of the central committee of the national federation of some thirty such collegiate clubs. The Cosmopolitan Club gave Hu his first taste of national political life; in 1913 he was a delegate to an International Congress in Washington that was received by President Woodrow Wilson and Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, and he then represented Cornell at the national meeting of the association in Columbus, Ohio in December 1914, serving as chair of the resolutions committee (Chou 84-85). Soon after his return, he began his epochal debates with his fellow students on vernacular Chinese language and literature.

Cornell opened Hu's perspectives in new ways, not only literarily and politically. He developed a close relationship with Edith Williams, an art student a year behind him in college. The daughter of a Cornell professor, she moved to New York to study art during Hu's final year at Cornell. In his study of Hu's life and work, Min-chih Chou describes her as "exceptionally intelligent and sensitive [...] well-read, reflec-

tive, and iconoclastic" (64), and she had a significant impact on Hu's ideas. In October 1915, Hu wrote in his diary, "Since my acquaintance with Miss Williams, my lifelong views toward women and male-female relationships have gone through a significant change. [...] Now I realize that the highest goal of women's education is to create women able to live free and independent" (Chou 65).

Though Hu refers to Edith as "Miss Williams" even here in his private diary, it appears that the two were romantically involved, but his mother had already arranged an engagement for him back home. Hu tried to persuade her to allow him to break the engagement, but she refused, replying that once made, a betrothal was permanent. After a good deal of agonizing, Hu accepted this, deciding that "I will follow Easterners in my family affairs, but in my ideas on society, the nation and politics I will follow Westerners" (Chou 71). He told a friend that "we must live by the old conventions, marry the girl chosen for us. [...] Ours is an intermediate generation which must be sacrificed both to our parents and to our children" (80). He returned to China in July 1917; the wedding took place in December, after a nine-year engagement. Edith never married.

Hu had entered Cornell's graduate program in philosophy in 1914; it is probably no coincidence that he transferred the next fall down to Columbia, where Edith was studying. Yet if his destination was influenced by personal considerations, his departure was forced by the fact that the Cornell department had withdrawn his fellowship, as his professors considered that he was spending too much time on public speaking when he should have been studying Kant and Hegel. In his late autobiography, Hu makes no mention of Edith Williams, and touches only obliquely on the philosophy department's dissatisfaction with his growing public persona:

> I had become, through public speaking, rather too popular [...] I knew too many people in a rather small college town. I had too many visitors, too many callers, too many invitations to speak in churches, in local associations, and in organizations, particularly women's groups in Ithaca and nearby communities. So I thought of a line of Chinese poetry [....] "A big city of ten thousand people is like an ocean or sea in which you can hide yourself.'" (218)

The classical Chinese linkage of poetry and guidance in life is well illustrated by the fact that it is a line of Chinese poetry that helps to determine Hu's choice of where to continue his philosophical studies.

Hu always credited John Dewey with having a formative influence on his outlook, yet in his graduate work in philosophy as in his undergraduate literary studies, Hu continued to apply the insights gained to Chinese traditions, and he wrote his doctoral thesis on "The Development of Logical Method in Ancient China." On returning to China, Hu pursued his lifelong goals of literary and political reform, in terms already foreshadowed in a letter he'd written to Edith Williams's father in 1916 during his doctoral studies at Columbia: "I do not condemn revolutions. [...] But I do not favor premature revolutions, because they are usually wasteful and therefore unfruitful. [...] My personal attitude is: 'Come what may, let us educate the people'" (Chou 113).

*

To return to Theo D'haen's theme of the occlusion of many peripheral and semi-peripheral literatures in the Western discourse of world literature, Hu Shih provides an example of a non-Western scholar and activist whose life and work destabilize the very distinction between center and periphery. For Hu Shih as for Lin Yutang and many of China's early comparatists, China was always the center of the world, still fundamentally "the Middle Kingdom" instantiated in the very character used to write its name—a box with a vertical line through its centre—even as China was finding itself in a painful position of unaccustomed peripherality toward the West. Hu's Western studies served a supporting role in refining his primary engagement with his home culture, its history, and its modern needs. It would take a Zhuangzi to disentangle this conundrum—or, better, to accept it and live with it: was China still the ancient periphery long dreamed of in the self-centering West, or had the West become a modern periphery where worldly young Chinese in Ithaca, New York could dream China's future into being?

Works Cited

Chou, Min-chih. *Hu Shih and Intellectual Choice in Modern China*. U of Michigan P, 1984.

D'haen, Theo. *The Routledge Concise History of World Literature*. Routledge, 2011.

Hu Shih. *An Autobiographical Account at Forty. Two Self-Portraits: Liang Chi-ch'ao and Hu Shih*, edited by Li Yu-ning, Outer Sky P, 1992, pp. 32-188.

---. "Reminiscences of Dr. Hu Shih." *Two Self-Portraits* 189-263.

Lin Yutang. "Chinese Literature since the Literary Revolution (1917)." T*he Pleasures of a Nonconformist*. World Publishing Company, 1962, pp. 297-315.

---. "The English Think in Chinese." *Confucius Saw Nancy and Essays about Nothing*. Commercial P, 1936, pp. 93-111.

---. *From Pagan to Christian*. World Publishing Company, 1959.