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The Scholarly Contributions of Professor Victor H. Mair: A Retrospective Survey

INTRODUCTION

In looking back over the immense scholarship of our mentor, Victor H. Mair, we could not help but drift into occasional flights of nostalgia. Many of his articles – and they are many indeed – reminded us of graduate seminars, where Victor sometimes gave his thoughts a trial run. Some of these discussions resulted in friendly arguments, occasionally recurring ones, and it is a tribute to Victor’s pedagogical method that he tolerated such confrontations with his students. More often, however, these discussions elicited awe and respect. Victor has always cast his nets widely, and he could routinely amaze us with observations far afield from the Chinese text we were reading in class. Today people often attempt to simulate this cosmopolitanism under the rubric of interdisciplinary study, but for Victor, it was quite untrendy: he simply had an insatiable appetite for knowledge and pushing boundaries. Indeed, border-crossing has been our mentor’s dominant mode of scholarship, a mode that has constantly interrogated where those very borders are both geographically and categorically. Though never sporting fashionable jargon, Victor has always taken on phenomena and issues that engage aspects of multiculturalism, hybridity, alterity, and the subaltern, while remarkably grounding his work in painstaking philological analysis. Victor demonstrates the success of philology, often dismissed as a nineteenth-century holdover, for investigating twenty-first-century concerns.

Victor’s enthusiasm regularly spilled over into his classes. It was entirely typical for him to arrive at class with a large stack of articles and citations to be distributed to the seminar participants according to our respective research projects. Needless to say, discussions were as wide ranging as they were interesting (even when not related to the seminar topic).

But more than anything else, what stands out from our days at Penn is Victor's incredible and seemingly endless generosity. When not bringing articles to class for students, he was writing long letters of recommendation and helping his students secure funding to finish their studies or engage in field work. And his concern for his students did not stop with the completion of their degrees. In addition to helping us land good jobs, Victor kept tabs on our ongoing work, contributing references and sharing with us his own work in progress. All of us feel incredibly blessed to have had such a selfless mentor and magnanimous friend. This volume collected here is a very small token of our gratitude.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE STUDY OF CHINESE LITERATURE

We would like to begin this volume with a brief overview of some of the principal areas of Victor's scholarly contributions. We can hardly do justice to his immense oeuvre in such a short space, but neither can we ignore the fact that entire subfields of Chinese studies have been altered by his work. We hope to capture some of the major trends and contributions here.

Victor Mair's initial work on Chinese literature centers on a genre of semi-vernacular prosimetric narratives dating from the Tang period known as *bianwen* 變文, or "transformation texts." His close analysis of the manuscripts and texts has redefined the study of these texts and our understanding of the development of popular literature in China. The discovery of this genre among the manuscripts at Dunhuang excited the scholarly community, both East and West. The lack of attention to the specifics of *bianwen* both in terms of form and function has resulted in a bewildering array of uses for the term, which in turn has impeded scholarship not only on the genre itself, but also on the related fields of religion and visual culture. In a series of articles, translations, and monographs, Victor has redefined studies, clarifying its genre characteristics and its pivotal role in the development of Chinese popular literature.

In his first monograph, *Tun-huang Popular Narratives*,¹ Victor translates four *bianwen*, two Buddhist and two secular. *Bianwen* are daunting not only for their language – vernacularisms, scribal errors, and the use of deviant orthography – and but also for their textual vagaries; as stated in his first publication on the subject, "Lay Students and the

¹ Published in 1983 by Cambridge University Press.

Making of Written Vernacular Narrative: An Inventory of Tun-huang Manuscripts,"² the bulk of these texts was written by lay students as writing exercises and not, as was previously accepted, by monks as chapbooks for proselytizing. Victor's skills as a translator laid bare the text itself, revealing the heteroglossia and literary sophistication of these works.

Having brought *bianwen* to the attention of scholars and the general public through his translations, Victor's subsequent monograph on Dunhuang literature, *T'ang Transformation Texts: A Study of the Buddhist Contribution to the Rise of Vernacular Fiction and Drama in China*,³ provides the first in-depth study of the genre, which is groundbreaking for its clarification of the genre's formal features, its performative contexts, and its place in the development of Chinese popular literature. The importation of Buddhist literature and concepts brought with them an expanded range of themes, idioms, and stylistic forms.⁴ Although prosimetric form was an accepted feature of most definitions of *bianwen*, the meaning of the term *bian* itself remained elusive. Victor's innovative interpretation is to focus on the Central Asian origins of the genre, its Buddhist provenance, and its intimate ties to picture storytelling to propose an entirely new understanding of the term *bian* as rooted in *shenbian* 神變 or "miraculous transformation" and the ability to manipulate the fundamentally illusory nature of reality (*māyā*). The term and its conceptual underpinnings are thus tied not only to a complex of Buddhist ideas but also Buddhist practices, namely storytelling and its magic in creating fictive scenes. Furthermore, *T'ang Transformation Texts* demonstrates the necessity of understanding this popular genre as a product of the interplay between different communicative realms, the textual, the visual, and the oral.

This tension between the written/oral and the center/periphery comes to inform much of Victor's subsequent research on Chinese

² In *CHINOPERL Papers* 10 (1981), pp. 5-96.

³ Published in 1989 by the Harvard University Council on East Asian Studies as no. 28 of the Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series.

⁴ In an article entitled, "The Narrative Revolution in Chinese Literature: Ontological Presuppositions," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 5.1-2 (July, 1983), pp. 1-27, Victor describes the process whereby the Buddhist elements furthered the very development of Chinese fiction itself by introducing a greater level of abstraction previously unknown in the culture's literature. Victor further addresses the influence of Buddhist thought on the development of Chinese fiction in an article entitled "Buddhist Ontology and Chinese Fiction," in *Proceedings of the Ninth International Symposium on Asian Studies* (Hong Kong: Asian Research Service, 1987), pp. 85-88, and in "The Contributions of T'ang and Five Dynasties Transformation Texts (*pien-wen*) to Later Chinese Popular Culture," *Sino-Platonic Papers* 12 (1989).

literature. He demonstrates how the seemingly marginal was often instrumental in the formation of the center while foregrounding the manifold ways in which the process has been obscured. These dynamics are clearly visible in the technologies of writing and the hegemonic status of Chinese characters. Buddhism's influence in China allowed the "subtle devaluation of the written word versus the spoken"⁵ which facilitated the growth of vernacular literature. Victor's rigorous philological approach reveals an ongoing reciprocity between the oral and the literary. It is scholars' "graphemic fixation," Victor contends, the obsession with understanding and translating each character rather than attending to words, which obscures a more nuanced understanding of medieval Chinese texts.⁶

In his article "Buddhism and the Rise of the Written Vernacular in East Asia: The Making of National Languages,"⁷ Victor develops in full a theory of how Buddhism helped to legitimate a written vernacular and how that evolution was circumscribed by, among other factors, the dominance of the character as found in literary Sinitic (*wenyanwen* 文言文).⁸ Buddhism's impulse to spread the word of the Buddha in the demotic mode was instrumental in fostering China's written vernacular. Victor argues that the foreign or peripheral was also central, indeed doubly so, to the formation of China's written vernacular as a national language (*guoyu* 國語). Although Buddhism brought with it a concept of the valorized local language (*deśa-bhāṣa*) which legitimated the creation of a written vernacular, the domination of literary Sinitic with its grounding in sinographs impeded this process in China. In the early-twentieth century, Chinese intellectuals turned to the examples of written vernaculars that did develop in East Asia, notably in Japan, for inspiration in the formation of China's own official written language.

The attention Buddhism focused on the spoken language and its use in ritual had a profound impact on literary genres of the elite in China, well beyond the domain of written vernacular. In a pioneering article entitled "The Sanskrit Origins of Recent Style Prosody,"⁹ Mair

⁵ "The Buddhist Tradition of Prosimetric Oral Narrative in Chinese Literature," *Oral Tradition* 3.2 (1988), p. 108.

⁶ See "Script and Word in Medieval Vernacular Sinitic," *JAO* 112.2 (1992), pp. 269–78, a review article of Robert Henricks' *The Poetry of Han-shan* (Albany: State U. of New York P., 1990).

⁷ In *Journal of Asian Studies* 53.3 (August, 1994), pp. 707–51.

⁸ In his chapter, entitled "Language and Script," in the *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2001), pp. 56–57, Victor outlines seven major areas where Buddhism permanently altered China's language and literature.

⁹ *HJAS*, 51.2 (1991), pp. 375–470.

and Tsu-lin Mei detail how “Recent Style Prosody” (*jintishi* 近體詩), which developed in the sixth century and became the most representative form of Chinese poetry, owes its intricate versification to Sanskrit metrics imported with Buddhist psalmody. Before the advent of Buddhism, Chinese poetry had not employed tonal distinctions but rather used line length and rhyme as structuring elements to create syllabic verse. These were insufficient to convey the complexities of Buddhist meter, namely the *śloka*, which, composed in polysyllabic Indic languages, employed quantitative verse. In order to capture the euphony – and ritual efficacy – of the *śloka*, Chinese poets such as Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385–433) and Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513) turned to spoken tones as equivalents of Sanskrit long and short syllables, thereby creating distinct meters. This development was a watershed in Chinese classical poetics, evident from the fundamental rubrics under which non-tonal and tonally informed poetry falls, namely, as “old poems” (*gushi* 古詩) and “recent style” poems. The article is remarkable for its nuanced exploration of how prosodic principles could be transmitted between two languages so highly divergent in their typologies and demonstrates in concrete terms the profound impact of Buddhism and Indic aesthetics on the expansion of Chinese literary forms.

Victor’s greatest contribution to the study of Chinese literature is also his most unacknowledged: redefining our understanding of what constitutes Chinese literature by challenging the authority of an elite canon predicated on a literary tradition (*wenxue* 文學) and a literary mode (*wenyanwen*), exclusive of the vernacular and the geographically peripheral. Beginning with the article “Anthologizing and Anthropologizing: The Place of Non-Elite and Non-Standard Culture in the Chinese Literary Tradition”¹⁰ and continuing through four edited anthologies, Victor has sought to reformulate China’s literary and cultural heritage to include works dismissed or ignored. The first major anthology, *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature*,¹¹ includes items ranging from oracle-bone inscriptions to Buddhist spells (*dhāraṇī*) to travelogues, while including a variety of belle-lettristic works, many of which never before translated. The second anthology, *The Columbia*

¹⁰ In *Working Papers in Asian/Pacific Studies*, published in Durham in 1992 by the Asian/Pacific Institute, Duke University. This article was also published as “Anthologizing and Anthropologizing: The Place of Nonelite and Nonstandard Culture in the Chinese Literary Tradition,” in Eugene Eoyang and Lin Yao-fu, eds., *Translating Chinese Literature* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana U.P., 1995), pp. 231–61.

¹¹ *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1994); see also the *Shorter Columbia Anthology of Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2000).

History of Chinese Literature, complements the first by providing in-depth historical, social, and religious background to a vast array of themes, movements, genres, and texts. The introduction, penned by Victor, is subtitled “The Origins and Impact of Literati Culture,”¹² and sets forth the editor’s view that it is the dialogues between different social groups (Han–non-Han, male–female) and registers (vernacular–literary) which have given Chinese literature its life blood. The ensuing fifty-four chapters present a magisterial overview of the richness and complexities of Chinese literature while foregrounding its heterogeneity, the comprehensiveness of which will assure its status as the definitive guide to Chinese literature for years to come.¹³

Finally, mention must be made of the other tools Victor has fashioned to allow and encourage others to access Chinese literature: dictionaries. With Chinese dictionaries typically arranged according to graphs (*zi* 字) rather than words (*ci* 詞), they reinforce the dominance of writing over speaking and thus fail to reflect accurately the language as a whole. As the motivating force behind, and associate editor of, the *Han-Ying cidian* 漢英辭典 (*ABC Chinese-English Dictionary*),¹⁴ and editor of *ABC Dictionary of Sino-Japanese Readings: A Select List of Japanese Readings of Chinese Characters according to the Pinyin Alphabetical Order*,¹⁵ Victor has greatly furthered his goal of facilitating access to Chinese understood not as a written but as a spoken language. Extending this lexicographical strategy to the *Hanyu da cidian* 漢語大詞典, the *OED* of Chinese-Chinese dictionaries, as editor of *An Alphabetical Index to the Hanyu da cidian*,¹⁶ Victor has effectively reframed this massive work and its entries in terms of the spoken language. Of great utility to all those who study and read medieval Chinese documents, the forthcoming *Dictionary of Medieval Vernacular Sinitic*,¹⁷ coedited with Zhu Qingzhi 朱慶之, will no doubt help reveal a multiplicity of voices long hidden. (NS)

¹² See *Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, pp. 1–15.

¹³ Mention should also be made of the following: Victor H. Mair, Paul R. Goldin, and Nancy Steinhardt, eds., *A Reader of Traditional Chinese Culture* (Honolulu: U. Hawaii P., 2005). This anthology, aimed at a student audience, also reconceptualizes the canonical by including works from the periphery, again challenging long-cherished dominant paradigms of Chinese culture.

¹⁴ Edited by John DeFrancis (Shanghai: Hanyu Da Cidian chubanshe, 1997).

¹⁵ Published by the University of Hawaii Press in 2003.

¹⁶ Published in 2003 by the University of Hawaii Press (Honolulu) and in Shanghai by Hanyu da cidian chubanshe.

¹⁷ Forthcoming from Peking University Press and E. J. Brill.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO BUDDHISM AND CHINESE RELIGION

While Victor Mair is best known for his extensive contributions to the study of Chinese literature, much of his interest there as elsewhere in his scholarship begins with an appreciation of the profound impact of Buddhism on Chinese culture. In his estimation, no other force has done more to reorient and reshape so many facets of Chinese civilization since the Han dynasty.

Victor's work on the impact of Buddhism on Chinese culture begins most famously with the prosimetric tales found at Dunhuang at the turn of the twentieth century. The *bianwen* are important not only for their revelation of the rise of a written vernacular in the medieval period, but also because they afford us a glimpse of Chinese Buddhist popular culture. In these tales we see fully sinified articulations of the concerns of medieval Buddhists who fell outside of the traditional schools, outside of the doctrinal debates that have so long preoccupied scholars, both Western and Asian. Thus the *Transformation Text on Mahāmaudgalyāyana* (*Mulian bianwen*) wrestles with the filial devotion of a monk, who goes to extraordinary lengths to rescue his mother from her unfortunate, albeit fully deserved, fate. We learn, then, through Victor's insightful analysis, not only details about medieval Chinese mortuary rituals and understandings of the operations of karmic law. We also learn the degree to which full-fledged monastics continued to be tied to kin networks, challenging the long held, hermetic division between the laity and the clergy.¹⁸

Victor's work on the *bianwen* quickly led him to address other ways in which Buddhism had a lasting influence on Chinese language. This influence begins with the earliest Chinese translations of Indian Buddhist texts in the Han dynasty and continues throughout the medieval and into the early-modern periods. Here Victor's work has shown that the alpha-syllabic nature of the Indian scripts led in some traditional scholarly circles to a reconceptualization of the very nature of the Chinese written language.¹⁹

Victor's interests in Chinese religion, however, have not been limited to Buddhism. He has also published a number of studies and translations of Daoist texts, beginning with his editing of the influential volume, *Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu*. The *Zhuangzi* has been a long-

¹⁸ *Tun-huang Popular Narratives*, pp. 1-27, 87-121; and "Notes on the Maudgalyāyana Legend in East Asia," *MS* 37 (1986-87), pp. 83-93.

¹⁹ "Cheng Ch'iao's Understanding of Sanskrit: The Concept of Spelling in China," in Cheng Hwei-shing, ed., *A Festschrift in Honour of Professor Jao Tsung-i on the Occasion of His Seventy-fifth Anniversary* (Hong Kong: Chung-Hwa Book Co., 1993), pp. 331-41.

standing love for Victor. Even in his very philological musings, he has never lost sight of Zhuangzi's humor. And no one has done of better job of capturing Zhuangzi's playfulness; his translation of the complete text is truly one of the great masterpieces of Asian translation literature.²⁰ Victor has also carried out one of the most careful translations of the *Daode jing* as well, based largely on the Mawangdui manuscripts discovered in 1973.²¹ This has been one of the most abused texts in all of Chinese literature – indeed, perhaps in all of world literature – and Victor's translation goes a long way toward reclaiming its rightful place in classical Chinese philological studies. (DB)

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE STUDY OF CROSS-CULTURAL INTERACTIONS

Cross-cultural exchanges and influences are major themes in Victor Mair's publications. One of the finest examples is his 1988 publication *Painting and Performance: Chinese Picture Recitation and Its Indian Genesis*, which provides a meticulous account of the picture-storytelling tradition in India and its transmission to China through Central Asia. He also offers compelling arguments about possible links between the Indian performances and those in Southeast Asia and Europe. The Indonesian *wayang bèbèr* ("unfolding/unrolled shadows"), Japanese *etoki* ("explanation of/by a picture"), the Persian *parda-dāri* ("owning or possessing the curtain"), and German *Bänkelsänger* ("bench-singer") are examined with equal expertise. Indeed, the work exemplifies research that crossed cultural borders and disciplines long before world history and interdisciplinary studies became fashionable.

In recent years, Victor's publications on the mummies discovered in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China has made significant contributions to the study of cross-cultural interactions during the prehistoric period. For almost a quarter century, Victor has led excavations, organized conferences, and written scholarly and magazine articles tracing the origins of these Bronze Age blond-haired, blue-eyed, Caucasoid people buried in the western frontiers of China. The search for the origins of these so-called "Tarim mummies" has taken Victor into the fields of archeology, art history, and genetics. In collabora-

²⁰ *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994). See also "Wandering In and Through the Chuang-tzu," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 10 (1982), pp. 106–17; "Introduction and Notes for a Complete Translation of the Chuang Tzu," *Sino-Platonic Papers* 48 (1994); and "The Zhuangzi and Its Impact," Livia Kohn, ed., *Daoism Handbook*, *Handbuch der Orientalistik* 4.14 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 30–52.

²¹ *Tao Te Ching: The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way* (New York: Bantam, 1990).

tion with J. P. Mallory, Victor wrote a comprehensive work entitled *The Tarim Mummies: Ancient China and the Mystery of the Earliest Peoples from the West* that demonstrated cross-cultural exchanges between Europe and eastern Asia during the Bronze Age period.²² It also raised issues regarding the early history of Chinese civilization, especially in regard to China's interactions with foreign peoples. Victor's work on the mummies has drawn a wide audience after it was featured on the Discovery and History channels.

To highlight the importance of cross-cultural exchanges in world history, in May 2001 Victor convened a conference at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology of the University of Pennsylvania titled "Contact and Exchange in the Ancient World." Nine of the fifteen papers were recently published in a book with the same title.²³ In the introduction to the volume, Victor makes clear his support for research that crosses national, cultural, and disciplinary boundaries:

All of the essays in this volume rely extensively on hard data to buttress their claims for early contact and exchange. The aggregate weight of these data makes it very difficult to disregard the fact that ancient peoples were not completely isolated and totally self-sufficient. Yet, during the past half century, scholarship on prehistory and early history has been afflicted by a disease that might be called "extreme indigenism." The symptoms of this pathology are an unwillingness to entertain the possibility that any aspect of culture was the result of borrowing from another culture. In the most virulent instances of this sickness, it is asserted that all societies developed totally in situ and that even the languages and physical types of human beings of a given locality are completely unrelated to those from anywhere else. The driving force behind this sort of academic pathology may be well-intentioned: to respect the integrity of individual cultures and to describe them thoroughly and responsibly on their own terms. Nonetheless, the noble aims of those who have fallen prey to "extreme indigenism" are defeated by their inability to recognize a basic characteristic of human existence: now and forever, we are a single species whose languages and bodies evolved naturally from earlier, related forms and whose technology is both cumulative and constantly shared.²⁴

²² This was published in 2000 by Thames & Hudson.

²³ Victor H. Mair, ed., *Contact and Exchange in the Ancient World* (Honolulu: U. Hawaii P., 2006).

²⁴ Victor H. Mair, "Introduction: Kinesis versus Stasis, Interaction versus Independent Invention," in Mair, ed., *Contact and Exchange*, p. 11.

While Victor's publications on picture storytelling and Bronze Age mummies have demonstrated cross-cultural interactions on a global scale, at the micro level he has pursued research on the exchanges between ancient India and ancient China. In a recent article, Victor challenged the perception that the two regions were "culturally isolated from each other before the first century CE."²⁵ With his usual fervor, Victor presents detailed linguistic and archeological evidence for contacts between India and China prior to the advent of Buddhism. In his other works on Sino-Indian interactions, Victor has focused on the influence of Buddhism on various aspects of Chinese society, including language, literature, philosophy, and art.²⁶ He has drawn parallels between Indian Yoga and Daoist practices,²⁷ between Xie He's "Six Laws" of Chinese painting and the Indian concept of *ṣaḍaṅga* ("Six Limbs"),²⁸ and between Sun Wukong and Hanuman.²⁹

Victor's scholarship on India-China interactions has significantly advanced the field of Sino-Indian studies. Along with the works of P.C. Bagchi, Jan Yun-hua, Ji Xianlin, and Antonino Forte, Victor has underscored the unique connections between these civilizations that were fostered through the transmission of Buddhist doctrines. While others have focused on the historical and philosophical exchanges between India and China through Buddhism, Victor's works have emphasized the ways in which Indic ideas penetrated and influenced Chinese society.

Moreover, Victor's ideas on cross-cultural interactions both at the global scale and between India and China have long been at the core of many of his graduate seminars and have exerted a profound influence on his students. A majority of articles in this volume cross cultural and disciplinary borders. They are a most appropriate dedication to a mentor who has shaped and enriched the field of cross-cultural studies. (TS)

²⁵ Victor H. Mair, "Forward: The Beginnings of Sino-Indian Cultural Contact," *Journal of Asian History* 38. 2 (2004), pp. 81-96.

²⁶ Victor H. Mair, "India and China: Observations on Cultural Borrowing," *Journal of the Asiatic Society* (Calcutta) 30.3-4 (1989), pp. 61-94.

²⁷ See his *Tao Te Ching*, pp. 155-61.

²⁸ Victor H. Mair, "Xie He's 'Six Laws' of Painting and Their Indian Parallels," in Zongqi Cai, ed., *Chinese Aesthetics: The Ordering of Literature, the Arts, and the Universe in the Six Dynasties* (Honolulu: U. Hawaii P., 2004), pp. 81-122; and "New Evidence for Sino-Indian Pictorial Narrative," *Indian Journal of Asian Studies* 2.2 (1990), pp. 24-32.

²⁹ "Suen Wu-kung = Hanumat? The Progress of a Scholarly Debate," *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Sinology*, Section on Literature (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1989), pp. 659-752; rpt. *Indian Journal of Asian Studies* 3.1-2 (1991), pp. 1-104.

