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Rearranging Comparative Clusters: Chinese and Persian Literature During the Mongol Empire

There has been very little scholarly work done to date to compare Chinese and Persian literary traditions. The reason for the lack of comparison between these fields seems to be that they exist in different fields and academic departments; for example, those who study Chinese literature tend to study Japanese and other East Asian work while those who study Persian are likely to compare it to Arabic and other Middle Eastern work. These “comparative clusters,” as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak refers to them, create strict linguistic or regional groups of comparison, rather than cultural or historical.

Spivak also wrote that comparative literature must broaden its horizons in order to stay relevant and reinvigorate itself as a discipline. Comparative literature is starting to break away from this Eurocentrism, yet the very idea that it need do so is still in its infancy. Non-Western literary traditions are either bound by these “comparative clusters” or they are bound to Western traditions. This study examines Chinese and Persian literature during and before the Mongol Empire in order to build the field of their comparison around a significant cultural and historical era that provides motivation to reach across linguistic boundaries in order to find cultural comparison. As such, this field includes elements that inform a study of literature during the Mongol Empire in specific, such as nomadic culture and its influence, Persian literature and writers during the Mongol Empire, Chinese literature and writers during the Mongol Empire, and Silk Road studies. It will also include a case study in which some of these elements will be placed in literary-analytical comparative context in order to begin the work that this study hopes to introduce. All of these components will provide the foundations for the future field of comparative Chinese and Persian literature.