

Haun Saussy

University of Chicago

Chicago, USA

The Differences that Asia Makes

For decades now, comparative literature in the Western countries I know fairly well (the US and France, and to a lesser extent, the UK, Italy, and Germany) have been grappling with the necessity of adjusting their theoretical apparatus to accommodate texts from India, China, Korea, Japan, and other major Asian traditions. Sometimes this accommodation has come in the form of statements of difference: Asian literatures are different from European-derived literatures because they are not X, Y, or Z (X, Y, and Z standing here for properties typically thought to be typical or necessary qualities of literature; it doesn't matter for the present discussion just what they are). But as knowledge of different periods, genres, and styles of Asian literature has grown, these clear-cut distinctions have come to appear partial if not simply misleading. Moreover, attention to the differences within Asia (no longer represented by a few masterpieces from a few major cultures) have made the problem of an adequately descriptive theoretical vocabulary even more resistant, for no single profile of "Asian literature" holds across such diversity. Rather than synchronic typology, the way to broaden and complexify our understanding of the venerable "East and West" literary topic lies through a more exhaustive literary history, a multi-local chronological account of what has been written, translated, commented, and preserved in this area. A return to literary history is not necessarily a step backwards from theory, however: it assigns theory new tasks and new criteria of relative success.