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Multilingualism as Method: Material Culture, Global Networks and Comparative Literature

How do we steer away from direct influence and parallel studies in comparative literature but still privilege intercultural dialogue? The literary world is saturated with traces of cultural encounter, including languages, bodies of knowledge, such as Orientalism, objects, such as silk, jade and porcelain, and food and drink, such as bread, noodles and dumplings, coffee and tea, whose itineraries of travel around the globe resonate with the Silk Road, the most famous global network of circulation and cultural exchange. The Silk Road haunts many literary works inhabited by people, things, ideas, ideologies and even entire cultural institutions that have come from far and wide to partake in the construction of their textual world. Tea, a staple feature of contemporary fictional worlds, is a good example. The history of tea's origins and proliferation, and of its production and consumption as well as attendant technologies, material culture, rituals and spaces, has been mapped fully so that it would be possible, in fact, easy to track the global movement of tea, the rise and development of teahouses, and the intercultural dialogues embedded in the practice of tea consumption and, more importantly, in tea aesthetics. A multilingual reading of tea against the backdrop of the cultures of the Silk Road(s) allows us to reconstruct intercultural dialogues in literary texts across time and space, and to move beyond East – West influence and parallel studies and beyond translation as circulation.