

How (Not) to Write a History of World Literature

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The first comprehensive history of World Literature to be published in English was *Literature: A World History* (4 vols, 2022). As an editor-contributor of this work, I here examine in retrospect the decisions we collectively took about basic structural issues such as periodization, division of the world into six macro-regions, their proportional representation, and the multi-tier process of writing, editing and coordination. In the process, I point out several aspects of our project that in my view did not go as well as they could have, and conclude by acclaiming nonetheless the undoubted success of our pioneering endeavour.

There is a Hindu mythological tale according to which the Monkey-god as a child one day takes the newly risen, orange-coloured sun to be a juicy fruit and attempts to swallow it. To prevent cosmic chaos, the supreme god Indra seated in heaven promptly strikes the Monkey-god with his thunderbolt, which hits him on the jaw, makes him instantly spit out the sun, and leaves him with a distinctive-looking chin, to say the least. This gives him the name Hanu[-]man, the one with a special (or disfigured) chin. But Hanuman does not seem to much mind, just takes it on the chin, and moves on.

Over the 18 years (from 2004 to 2022) that I was involved in collaboratively planning, authoring and also editing a history of world literature, which we decided to call *Literature: A World History* (4 vols., 2022; hereafter LAWH), I often thought of this particular tale concerning Hanuman, which I had grown up with but which can now be found narrated in English with seven variants and full annotation in an erudite volume punningly titled *Hanuman's Tale* (Lutgendorf 2007: 131–133, 187–189). Actually, we at LAWH were aiming not to swallow the sun but just the earth, or, idiomatically speaking, merely asking for the moon. This was to be the first history of its kind in the English language, and we felt that we were heroic explorers,

like Columbus, seeking to discover fresh lands while nurturing superhuman ambitions to conquer, like Napoleon, all that there was to conquer. However, as we proceeded, got stuck, and then plodded on, several of us began to wonder whether the project would come to an end first or we ourselves. Now that it is done and been in print for just over two years, I can still in retrospect recapture the innocent high spirits with which we had set off 20 years ago.

In what follows, I shall offer my own strictly subjective, even memoiristic, and also deeply complicit eye-witness account of what I now think we did right and what, given a second bite of the cherry, we could have done differently. In the end, I will offer some alternative ways of wrapping our puny academic heads around the vast and immeasurable world of literature that we inhabit and constantly read and write about. Many of these are ideas that have struck me only, and necessarily, with hindsight.

Concepts and Models: Scepticism and Optimism

It all began in Stockholm in 2004 at a conference held at Villa Brevik from 4 to 6 November, and ‘The Stockholm Collegium of World Literary History’ – our umbrella institution – continues to be virtually housed at Stockholm University. But why Sweden? At the beginning of my own presentation at that conference, I recall remarking that because Sweden has for over a century been awarding the most coveted literary prize in the world, the Nobel, it has perhaps begun to fancy that it is the navel of World Literature.

I was then hugely humbled to find that scholars of world languages and literatures located within Sweden had, since 1996, been running a project of their own titled ‘Literature and Literary History in Global Contexts’, which had just concluded and was shortly afterwards published as a collection of articles in four volumes under the title *Literary History: Towards A Global Perspective* (2006). All the essays in these volumes were authored exclusively by Swedish scholars. It was only then, with more than ample groundwork already done, that they launched a bigger follow-up project seeking international participation. To my mind, another advantage that gradually emerged out of Sweden being the host and pivot of our project was that Sweden was not as monolithic and dominant a partner itself in this global enterprise as, say, the USA or the UK or even Germany or France could possibly have been, with their own supposedly definitive way of doing things.

Of the 33 participants from 15 different countries who presented papers at the Brevik conference, later published in a volume titled *Studying Transcultural Literary History* (Lindberg-Wada 2006), many took on board the ideological ‘scepticism’ that seemed already to attend on the very idea of the study of ‘World Literature’, on top of the innumerable pragmatic considerations that seemed to doom the project of writing a history of the subject to be necessarily a ‘failure’ (Pettersson A 2006: 9). Incidentally, one of the major reasons we gave our project the somewhat awkward title *Literature: A World History* was precisely because we did not want it to be

hanged by calling it a history of 'World Literature', like the ill-named dog in the proverb. (In retrospect, 'Literatures of the World: A History', which is more or less an anagrammatic rearrangement of our chosen title, might have been more apt.) But some of the Brevik participants were, on the other hand, 'more optimistic' about 'the possibility of counterbalancing the prevailing Anglo-American bias' in the matter and offered specific suggestions about how to negotiate impending perils (Pettersson A 2006: 10).

Some weeks later, a team of five scholars was picked from among the Brevik participants to form an editorial collective to carry the project forward. But how were the five of us initially chosen to become part of the core group out of a formidable field of 33 of the world's best scholars in the field? Almost at first sight, a little sub-group of three friends had formed at Brevik, which comprised Zhang Longxi, David Damrosch and myself; Longxi soon after began calling us the Three Musketeers, and over the years, just the three of us (and sometimes just two) came together on numerous occasions that we manufactured beyond LAWH on our respective home turfs: Hong Kong, New York and India. But that lay in the future. Meanwhile, on finding that both he and I were among the chosen five, Longxi sent me a mutually congratulatory email. Whereupon I told him that he and I had probably been selected not because we were among the best of Brevik but rather because we had a suitable ethnic-academic profile for the job. David Damrosch had been left out, for example, and so had Franco Moretti, to name just two outstanding omissions.

Teaming Up and Traversing the World

So, Longxi was in, supposedly, as he lived in Hong Kong, which was China by another name, had a PhD from Harvard and had taught for a decade in a university in the US. I got in as I lived in India, knew and had written on a few of its major languages including Sanskrit, Hindi and Urdu, had a PhD from the UK, had been a visiting professor at the University of Chicago and the University of London and had lived in the UK or the US for about a decade altogether. As'ad Khairallah taught Arabic and Persian at the American University of Beirut and had a second home in Germany. Eileen Julien taught African Literature at Indiana University in the US and was a founding director of the West Asian Research Centre in Dakar, Senegal. And Djelal Kadir, who grew up in Cyprus, taught the literature of the Americas at Pennsylvania State University and had already published substantially in the area of World Literature. So, we were indeed a motley crew, replete with multicultural and multilingual diversity in our own different ways.

The three Swedish scholars who continued with this new project were in themselves as diverse as any of the rest of us in terms of their academic specialization. Bo Utas was professor of Iranian Studies at Uppsala University, Gunilla Lindberg-Wada was professor of Japanology at Stockholm University and also performed the role of being our collective record-keeper (and also, as and when needed, conscience-

keeper), while Anders Pettersson taught Swedish and Comparative Literature at Umea University, was a literary theorist and would author the section on European literature in our first two volumes.

Down the years, as we prepared to submit a book proposal to Blackwell in December 2010, two other scholars joined our editorial group to perform invaluable service. Theo D'haen, who had taught English and Comparative Literature at Leiden and Leuven, came in to author the sections on European literature after the year 1500 in our last two volumes and also to co-edit Volume 2 with Bo Utas after the latter sought to retire from the project. And David Damrosch had already joined us in 2009 to oversee the whole project and help bring it to publication, bringing with him his vast experience as the reputed begetter of the field of World Literature, and functioning as a general editor together with Gunilla Lindberg-Wada.

Meanwhile, with our post-Brevik team of eight scholars in place, we had made what could be called a flying start to our project. In those carefree halcyon days, we seemed to have funds enough to meet as a group in diverse locations in the world, usually for three-day consultations: in Paris in October 2005, in Uppsala in May 2008, in Hong Kong in May 2009, in Istanbul in June 2010, then again in Hong Kong in December that year, in Brussels in 2011, and then in Vallerosa in November 2013. It seemed as if we had decided to go and check out the world personally before we could begin to write about it. And this was when a couple more trysts did not work out, one at the famous venue of collaborative residencies at Bellagio in Italy, and another at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in the old British summer capital of Shimla, located in the Viceregal Lodge on a picturesque hilltop in the Himalayan foothills.

What We Did and What We Didn't

All this was most enjoyable and helped greatly in promoting easy congeniality and warm collegiality among our small group. But it wasn't all fun and feasting. We also took some clear and hard decisions at these meetings, after a lot of due, and at times undue, deliberation, which were to define the architectonics of our work. A few of these are listed below for the vital archival reason that once a thing is done in a particular way, it is generally taken for granted that it could have been done only in that way, without any awareness, naturally, of the alternatives that were considered and rejected, and some developments that occurred without or against planning. Finally, one or two suggestions are offered on what could be done differently if – perish the thought! – LAWH were to be done all over again.

Periodization

We decided to organize our four volumes not alphabetically by names of the countries or regions but chronologically, so that the literature of the same timespan for each part of the world would be represented in each volume. Surprisingly, the

same timespans seemed to suit all the regions of the world! Volume 1 was to run from the beginnings to 200 CE, Volume 2 from 200 to 1500, Volume 3 from 1500 to 1800 and Volume 4 from 1800 to 2000. Across the world, we seemed only too ready to cut our coats according to our cloth, never sparing a thought for what the comparatists might say, for whom periodization remains a contentious issue even within the literature of a single language. Along the way, when I suggested that for my region a break between Volumes 2 and 3 around the year 1200 would be more appropriate than the year 1500, this was readily accepted so long as I specified this departure from the common pattern at both the end of Volume 2 and the beginning of Volume 3. Such flexibility marked our collective decision-making more often than not.

Carving Up the World

We prioritized contiguity and spatial coherence here over all other factors and divided the world of literature into six ‘macro-regions’, with one member of our editorial team being put in charge of each macro-region. We marked a departure here by beginning each volume not with the colonially dominant West but in the East, where the sun rises. Thus, East Asia was to be coordinated and macro-edited by Zhang Longxi, followed in sequence by South and South-East Asia (Harish Trivedi), West and Central Asia (As’ad Khairallah), Africa (Eileen Julien), Europe (Anders Pettersson) and the Americas (Djelal Kadir). No one questioned whether Africa formed one unit in the same sense that Europe did, or whether north and south Americas were more different from each other than similar in literary terms.

The one bone of anti-contention, so to say, was an outlier group comprising Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific islands or Oceania. They seemed to belong by and large to Europe in terms of history, race and language. But Europe disowned them so resolutely that they ended up being part of the same macro-region that comprised South and South-east Asia, on the basis of (somewhat remote) geographical contiguity. The illogicality of this decision became explicit at the very last stage of our project when this last-named subgroup was summarily detached from the macro-region it had been nurtured and edited under for many years and made to form a tiny floating micro-region by itself. This went to show, among other things, that it is an untidy and internally inconsistent literary world we live in.

Equal Slices of the Pie

It was decided that of the total number of words available for the whole project, which was to be 900,000 words, each macro-region would be allotted an equal share, i.e., 150,000 words each, spread over the four volumes. This was settled not before an argument had been put forward that because the literature of Europe was the best as well as the best-known in the world, it should be allotted double the space. When this was countered by the argument that if it was already the best-known literature in the world, it should be allotted perhaps half the space, we all retreated to democratic (and/or politically correct) parity.

But does notional parity always work out as such in practice? Some macro-regions, or parts of them, kicked in only in Volume 2. It proved difficult in many cases to decide where to place, in terms of chronology, orature recorded and scripted long after composition, and the greater diversity and variety of major languages in some macro-regions compared with others caused other imbalances. The disposition of the macro-regional editors too seemed to cause disparities. In Volume 4, where all six macro-regions could be expected to be at their developed best, one region (Europe) filled over 100 pages while another region (the Americas) stopped at just 30. Europe did finally end up claiming the largest share of the pie but by then no one was counting or asking any questions.

Leisurely Mad Rush

Looking back, we seriously mismanaged our time, which had substantial consequences. According to a detailed 10-page proposal we had drawn up in April 2005, we were to plan the project conceptually and pragmatically and recruit additional contributors where needed over the following two years. We were then to devote three years to ‘Research and Writing’ from 2008 to 2010, rewrite and finalize the drafts in 2011, and thereafter publication was scheduled for 2012. As it turned out, much of the writing was still being submitted, edited and revised at the macro-regional level by 2012, and it began to be submitted to the respective volume editors seriatim only between 2012 and 2015.

There are perhaps, inevitably in most projects, some laggards and outliers, who offer initially plausible and then more and more elaborate and charming excuses for not having finished even two or three years after the revised deadlines. When we still did not have, largely for this reason, a complete and edited manuscript by 2019 for one particular macro-region, we finally decided to part-replace the dilatory contributor. It was as if out of our fleet of six, five ships had already sighted land while just one lay in doldrums far back and out of sight.

Paradoxically, we were far too indulgent in this respect, possibly because we had got to know each other so well personally at our many meetings that we could not take hard professional decisions when the time came. In the end, therefore, our top priority was somehow reaching an ever-receding finishing line, never mind how well or ill we filled the remaining gaps. There is a proverb about marrying in haste and then repenting at leisure; as an editorial team, we had for the first six or seven years gallivanted and dallied at leisure, and then we repented by cutting many corners at the end and somehow scrambling to a closure.

Editing at Different Tiers

While the contributors within a particular macro-region had a period of three or more years for detailed consultations with their editors and for revising and augmenting their drafts, these contributions, when submitted at the next stage to the

volume editors, elicited responses which were so perfunctory as sometimes to be trivial. I recall a pleasant and nicely humorous exchange with the editor of the first volume when I quoted in my text a Sanskrit verse as follows:

Time sucks the marrow

Out of any enterprise

Planned but not done with promptitude

Especially one about to bear fruit (LAWH I, 53)

– and he asked me if I intended an allusion here to our own ever-dilating project! This was in 2012; little did we know then that our project would not be completed and published until 2022.

Another volume editor advised me not to use the word ‘unique’ and I promptly obeyed; he also asked me to eschew anything which may be thought ‘polemical’, a piece of anodyne advice to which I turned a blind eye in my much-colonized macro-region where Western scholars, who claimed to have ‘discovered’ Sanskrit literature, were constantly denigrating it in invidious and partisan comparisons with Western Classical Literature. One editor asked if my list of ‘Works Cited’ could be shortened – without suggesting any cuts in my text! Another advised me not to use the phrase ‘on the other hand’ without having first used ‘on the one hand’. (I suppressed my first response of telling him about the Buddhist concept of one hand clapping, and promptly changed the former phrase to ‘on the contrary’.) And this was just about the sum total of all the editorial inputs I and my macro-regional colleagues received for the contribution of 150,000 words that we had submitted after having between ourselves drafted, mutually edited and substantially revised it for three years. Possibly, no volume editor risked venturing out of the comfort zone of his own home turf to make any substantial suggestions about the other macro-regions. As a result, about 90% of all the interactive editing was done at the macro-regional level and only about 10% at the level of the volume editors, when it should ideally have been half and half. Towards the end, anyhow, we all seemed in a rush that was far from productive or even seemly. It felt not like a triumphal march to victory but rather more like a ragged retreat in the face of an insistently ticking clock.

Coordination: Binding the World Together

In my experience, the contributions from each macro-region were well coordinated, after the exchange of several rounds of drafts. This was especially true, in the case of the macro-region that I edited, between South Asia and South-east Asia, for the reason that the two regions have had a long history in common of transmission of foundational texts, such as the Hindu Ramayana and the Buddhist Jataka tales; the biggest Hindu and Buddhist temple sites are not in India but in Indonesia and

Cambodia. The case would have been broadly similar in the case of the macro-regions of East Asia (comprising China, Japan and Korea) and Europe. But again, there seemed to be little coordination or linkage among the six different macro-regions. This was not only because that stage came later when we were in a precipitate hurry. It was due probably even more to the fact that we had not, at the stage of conceptualizing our history, spent much thought on how to do it. We had not only lost the plot early; we perhaps had no plot to begin with.

Each of the six macro-regions could, to different degrees, be thought to be a coherent literary domain, but how did they even begin to cohere together to form a cogent literary world? As finally printed, the texts of none of the macro-regions seem to have met any other macro-region before; they were held together only by the book-binder's glue (or whatever new substance or technology they now use instead). In fact, even we editors got to see the whole text of the four volumes together only after the publisher had copy-edited it; we ourselves had never planned for such a collation or felt the need for it before each volume editor sent to the two general editors their own part of the total work.

There were other collateral reasons at the end as well for some discontent. The authors within each macro-region were identified as being jointly the authors of the whole macro-region, while the fact was that each contributor had written single-handedly the segment he or she was responsible for. For example, in Volume 4, the whole of the macro-region of East Asia was shown as authored by 'Zhang Longxi, Gunilla Lindberg-Wada and Bruce Fulton', whereas they had solely and exclusively written the sections on China, Japan and Korea, respectively. Despite repeated protests by some of us to the general editors, this kind of misleading byline for all the sections was not altered; all we got was a grudging footnote hidden in such an unlikely spot in the text that anyone who can find it deserves a prize. But protests in another regard did bear fruit. While we had gone to print with only the two general editors and the four volume editors being listed, both opposite the title-page and on the back-cover, it was at the last minute conceded that the left-out macro-regional editors would get a mention as well, although the names were arranged under three different categories or castes. What had begun with full collegial parity and bonhomie had at the end turned into a bit of a petty scramble.

Imagining Other Worlds

It is easy to bemoan the fact, in retrospect, that we at LAWH were not able to nicely tie up the world in a package, but it may not be so easy to say how it could have been done better, or could at least conceivably be done by other scholars clearly aiming at that effect from the start. One can even ask whether any such thing should be done at all, to guard against the possible peril of superimposing a homogenizing pattern. The middle path here may be to fully acknowledge and honour different trajectories of literary production and development across the world, and also to draw criss-

crossing dotted lines between them. The most fruitful differences are those that arise from basic and often unspoken similarities.

Indeed, we at LAWH were aware of this lack of connectivity in our project and had planned for a whole number of what we called ‘cross-cutting essays’ on certain chosen common themes or genres. But these were the first casualties of our mounting delays. There are only two such essays in Volume 1, and none in Volume 4, which is about three times as long. A different way of doing this could possibly have been to have interspersed large chapters on topics such as say the epics, or romantic poetry, or the novels, to which each of the six macro-regional editors might have been asked to provide a perspective from their own respective regions, all within the same common discourse suitably edited and modified mutually among the six authors over several rounds of interaction.

Alternatively, we could have adopted a more explicitly comparative, and therefore integrative, approach. A fine and highly useful example of this lay to hand but we lost it in plain sight. This example was the four volumes of the series titled *Literary History: Towards a Global Perspective*, which the Swedish scholars had authored all by themselves; these were published in 2006, and complimentary copies of the whole set were sent to each member of our editorial board. These volumes are arranged very differently from LAWH, as clearly signalled by their sub-titles: Volume 1: ‘Notions of Literature across Times and Cultures’; Volume 2: ‘Literary Genres: An Intercultural Approach’; Volume 3: ‘Literary Interactions in the Modern World 1’; and Volume 4: ‘Literary Interactions in the Modern World 2’. The mere titles of a couple of essays from just Volume 3 will convey what these volumes attempted in their approach, which we at LAWH steered clear of by design or default: ‘Introduction: encounters between literary cultures: the example of the novel’ (Pettersson M 2006: 1–29); ‘Inventing traditions: a comparative perspective on the writing of literary history’ (Ljung 2006: 30–66); and ‘Euro-African dialogue: some examples of African hypertexts of European hypotexts’ (Larsen 2006: 166–198). But in our pioneering enthusiasm and global bravado, we hardly glanced at these preceding volumes which had laid the foundation for our own project, much less learnt anything from them.

All of us who were involved in editing the LAWH volumes can perhaps think of many more alternative models post facto, by way of learning from experience. To mark a general trend, when we started out on our project, the category of World Literature was a new and rising (sub-)discipline and the one related discipline it seemed to supersede and threaten to displace was Comparative Literature. But two decades on, both World Literature and Comparative Literature are re-aligning themselves in new and composite ways in amiable coexistence, as reflected in the very title of a recent volume that arose from the Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association held in 2019: *Literatures of the World and the Future of Comparative Literature* (Hajdu and Zhang 2023).

A Happy Ending

So far, I may seem to have been largely cribbing and, so to say, counter-historicizing. A life unexamined is not worth living, said Socrates reputedly, and similarly, a project not thoroughly dissected after it is all over may not have been worth doing in the first place. But what was the bottom-line for me, personally, when the project concluded and I received my set of the four handsome volumes? It was a sense of tremendous fulfilment and not inconsiderable pride, at having been a part of this grand, unprecedented and incomparable endeavour. Over the 18 years that the project lasted, 2004–2022, I had sometimes wondered whether I would live to see it through, as I myself progressed palindromically from age 57 to 75.

When our project was nearing conclusion, I wrote an essay, in a section of which I reflected on how my lifelong understanding of my own South Asian/Indian Literature had been enriched and even substantially modified by the experience of writing about it for LAWH (Trivedi 2024: 448–471). I had done it single-handedly through the four volumes, producing a text stretching over about 3200 years, encompassing over 20 languages from Sanskrit to Indian-English, and amounting altogether to about 107,000 words – which is probably the longest contribution by any single editor/contributor in the whole of LAWH. If it were not for LAWH and its macro-regional framework, I would never have even dreamt of attempting anything that seemed practically so inadvisable, in theory undoable, and altogether daredevilish. LAWH is not merely the longest running but in every sense the biggest and the most ambitious collaborative publication I have ever been a part of, and two years after publication, I still feel suitably chuffed about it. ‘England, with all thy faults, I love thee still’, declared Lord Byron, quoting William Cowper, and I too wish in the end to say the same about LAWH, by quoting in turn Lord Byron, with at least some of his romantic-ironic flourish.

But there is also a postscript which looks to the future. As seen above, we had written and edited the six macro-regions of LAWH in splendid isolation from each other. Those macro-regions were like parallel tracks that lay wide apart from each other, and we followed each of them in a straight chronological progression, with no possibility of their ever meeting or even crossing each other here and there. These tracks became in effect separate trenches or silos. But because we wrote up each macro-region all by itself, there may now accrue an unplanned and unexpected benefit. It will prove easy to detach each of the sections and, after some revision and augmentation, issue them as free-standing histories of particular languages or regions.

In fact, this is already proving to be the case. The sole author of the section on China in LAWH, Zhang Longxi, has already published an independent *History of Chinese Literature* (Zhang 2023), and it is understood that plans are afoot similarly to extract and publish *A History of European Literature*, which was written in LAWH jointly by just two authors, Anders Pettersson and Theo D’haen. (Other macro-regions tended to have larger teams of co-authors.) As for myself, nothing would please me more than to revisit and revise the history I solely composed for

LAWH of South Asian/Indian Literature and to publish it separately with an Indian publisher for circulation among South Asian readers.

The set of four volumes of LAWH is priced at \$750, and because the world is far from being a level playing field economically, I wonder if more than half a dozen sets of LAWH have been sold in all in India since it was published two years ago. My own 300-page history of Indian Literature will likely be priced at no more than \$10 for a paperback by a top-ranking local publisher such as Penguin India, and it would finally be able to reach its natural primary readership at that generally affordable price. For me personally, as I await copyright permission to proceed with this plan, that would be a consummation devoutly to be wished for of the whole great endeavour and achievement of LAWH. That would be the homecoming of this Odysseus after all his adventures abroad.

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Harish Trivedi, former Professor of English at the University of Delhi, was visiting professor at the universities of Chicago and London. He is the author of *Colonial Transactions: English Literature and India* (1993, 1995), and has (co-)edited *Indian Literary Historiography: Concepts, Languages, Histories* (2024); *100 Years of A Passage to India: International Assessments* (2024); *Kipling in India: India in Kipling* (2021); *Literature and Nation: Britain and India 1800–1990* (2001); and *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (1999). A festschrift for him was published under the title *India and the World* (2014), edited by Ruth Vanita and with contributions by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Susan Bassnett, David Damrosch, Zhang Longxi and Robert J.C. Young, among others.