Middle Kingdom on the Margins: The Perilous Journey of Chinese into the MLA and Other radical Ruminations

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> I am addressing a subject about which I know nothing whatsoever, except for the fact that it does not exist. The description of a new aesthetic, or the call for it, or its prediction—these things are generally done by practicing artists whose manifestos articulate the originality they hope for in their own work, or by critics who think they already have before their eyes the stirrings and emergences of the radically new. Unfortunately, I can claim neither of those positions, and since I am not even sure how to imagine the kind of art I want to propose here, let alone affirm its possibility, it may well be wondered what kind of an operation this will be, to produce the concept of something we cannot imagine.
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> —Fredric Jameson, "Cognitive Mapping"

Fredric Jameson probably didn't have the Modern Language Association foremost in mind when he wrote those words, but when confronted with the awesome totality of the organization and, by virtue of the language in which I specialize, when I contemplate my marginality in it, or perhaps more precisely my lack of a place within it, I find the analogy suits the situation. Before us we have a colossus of literary, language, and cultural scholars at work on an array of themes and topics that span the intellectual landscape of the humanities today. The MLA is separated into various languages, geographies, disciplines, approaches, methods, genres, and national language literatures that are further divided into epochs, and there are comparative

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approaches as well. Beyond these divisions, we have the humble but stout "discussion groups" that serve as the incubators of future subdivisions of knowledge and pursuits. Altogether, they make up the foremost academic organization of its kind in the world, based in North America yet casting its net widely, attracting scholars from around the world for its annual meeting, and charged with the powerful task of arbitrating what is important in things literary and cultural and what is not.

Nevertheless, at the center of this organization is a hole, an absent center so stark that the fact that it is not everywhere remarked on cannot be due to its lack of importance but more likely to the fact that it is so gaping that its utter obviousness ironically serves as the veil that enshrouds its truth. And that emptiness at or near the center of the organization is Chinese: among all the ways of divvying up turf at the MLA, somebody left out the most spoken language in the world. Indeed, despite the bevy of divisions split along national languages, approaches, and comparative structures, despite the multiple divisions distributed to English, Spanish, French, German, and Italian, not a single division is devoted to Chinese. Admittedly, among the inequities of the MLA, Chinese is not the sole language disenfranchised, and my colleagues will certainly speak eloquently to their own respective languages and geographies. But Chinese is the most spoken in the world. And I hope we can agree that, its millennia of cultural heritage notwithstanding, Chinese is a modern language.

This then leaves us with the question of what is to be done. Would it suffice to simply add a division for Chinese? Would that be enough to satisfy us? Perhaps that small bone would be enough temporarily to keep the sinologists safely at bay. But what then of Japanese? Or Korean? Or, as my colleague Sangeeta Ray insightfully observes, what of Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati, Tamil, Urdu, Kannada, Malayalam? And what of Javanese, Thai, Farsi, Vietnamese, Polish, Tagalog? I think you can see where I am going with this. The list of aggrieved is long, and Chinese is only the most glaring on that list. And to turn the coin back around to look once again at the MLA's present surface, how significant is sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish drama, or French medieval language and literature, or Chaucer? In a finite arena, who will gladly give up their space so that those camped outside the gate may enter and lay claim to some of the space inside? There is no easy answer to how the MLA can address in *practical* terms the sort of redress that it began to enact twenty-five years ago in *theoretical* terms: to put a stop to the marginalization of cultures that were on the receiving end of global imperialism.

What I propose in the next few pages is something that I am by definition unable to conceive of alone. A necessary epistemological

preliminary to my comments, then, is that I—we—cannot allow ourselves to resort to a reification of consciousness, what the Chinese call "ricebowl politics," as a means by which to think ourselves out of our current predicament; we cannot proceed by quelling the most agitated, feeding the largest mouth and pushing the weakest snout out of the trough. We need to do this together as a body of scholars. We need momentarily to shed our linguistic and disciplinary blinders, look up, and collectively contemplate the big picture. This pressing question was raised at a roundtable sponsored by the Division of Comparative Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature in Seattle: "Can the comparison of modern languages worldwide be done within the current structure of the MLA?" I regret that I must resolutely answer "no" to this question. The current MLA structure, in my opinion, is ill suited both for the study of languages and cultures, whether comparative or, let's say, single-language-centered, and to addressing the necessities of our society now and for the foreseeable future. In fact, I wager that the MLA as it is currently structured is woefully anachronistic and in danger of becoming irrelevant in the North American academy if it does not undertake serious reform very soon. And given the economic and political stresses facing the United States, and the whole world for that matter, the larger society beyond us is in need of constant reminder that the study of foreign languages, English, and the humanities has never been more essential to our children than it is right now. The problem is simply that too much of the global terrain of intellectual discourse in the association—whether literary, philosophical, cultural, cinematic, or aesthetic—has, with a few slight exceptions, already been charted.

I was speaking with a prominent academic who recently held a very high position in the MLA—I would prefer not to disclose the name—and this scholar analyzed the situation succinctly and astutely. Given that the most important event is our annual convention, and that there is only so much "real estate," decisions have to be made, space has to be apportioned, priorities have to be put in place. As it is, too much of this real estate is currently given to the languages already established in the academy and not enough to the "other" languages, of which Chinese is one. The publication wing of the MLA also is in dire need of expansion, as a cursory inventory of such book series as the pithy and practical Approaches to the Teaching of World Literatures reveals. Of the many volumes, only one is on Japanese literature (*The Tale of Genji*), and only one on Chinese literature (a recently published volume on *The Story of the Stone*). Others are in various stages of planning. Identifying the problem as one of "real estate" is certainly spot on, but that is not the challenge per se. The true challenge will be how best to accommodate

the rest of the world once "world literatures" have become fertile ground for discussion and the publication of hefty anthologies. Do we merely resort to our tried and true methods of bulking up on the old standards—all very worthy specimens of cultural production—reserving a sliver for the rest, for the "other" languages? Or do we need to rethink the paradigm? Are there models that could help in this effort to rethink?

I believe we do have both within our ranks and from some peer organizations possibilities for fruitful emulation. But most important, in my view, is that we engage in a collective conversation. Therefore, I would like to make the radical proposal that for one annual meeting in the near future the theme be something like reconceptualizing the MLA. Not only should every division, every discussion group, and every session be devoted to reflecting on what it does, and what that means for the whole organization, but the Delegate Assembly should for one year be invited to engage in a broad debate of what we are as a group, whether our present structure fulfills our needs, and whether we are currently ensuring that we are germane to the larger national and global conversations on culture. In other words, instead of making the meager proposal of further accretion, of "mission creep" as it were, I suggest we at least consider throwing out the whole structure and coming up with a new way to cut the pie. All members should have a say in how this happens and in the final determination.

As part of this grand proposal, I would make a few specific suggestions. For one, some of the "lesser-taught" languages, such as South Asian and Eastern European languages, have already come up with ways of addressing their marginality within the MLA by running concurrent or overlapping meetings of their own, outside the MLA. Would it be too much to ask that some of the entities that currently dominate the MLA consider adopting this strategy so that others of us who have little to no oxygen in the association are afforded at least some breathing room? I also suggest we look at organizations such as the American Academy of Religion, the American Historical Association, the American Anthropological Association, among others, to see how they are dealing with the fact that the empire is writing back in increasing numbers. A few years ago, I was invited to present a paper on a panel at the AAR because my current research involves the issue of Confucian values as they are confronted in modern literary and cinematic texts. I attended the conference with some ambivalence: on the one hand, I looked forward to the opportunity to share my work with religious studies scholars and thereby cross an important disciplinary boundary, but, on the other, I feared the lash of marginality and the subsequent welt of indifference I had so often experienced in my home organization. It was a pleasant shock

to see that our panel was extraordinarily well attended and that many of the important names in Asian religious studies were present and active in the AAR. The AAR has vibrant divisions dedicated to Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Hindu, and other non-Western religious traditions as well as other types of groups within its rubric. The AAR is doing something to create the requisite "buzz" that attracts the big names to it. By contrast, we are not.

Admittedly, major scholars whose work focuses primarily on China, such as Rey Chow and Haun Saussy, do frequent the MLA and play prominent roles in its leadership structure. But they are comparatists. I have nothing against comparatists. My only complaint is that not every scholar of Chinese literature and culture, or any other culture, is a comparatist. For English, Spanish, French, German, and Italian, I seriously doubt that only comparatists factor into the intellectual and bureaucratic network of the MLA. Why should it be so for Chinese or any of the other "other" languages? Where are the scholars such as Wendy Larson, Tani Barlow, Edward Gunn, Stephen Owen, Zong-qi Cai, Stephen West, David Knechtges, and others who comprise the brain trust of Chinese literary studies? They are generally nowhere to be found. And this is because the MLA lacks that "buzz" in Asian languages that is taken for granted in European studies. That must change.

I keep returning in my own mind to the comment about finite real estate. In a perfect world, we could simply go on expanding forever. But that is not practical. It is worthwhile to note, however, that the problem with space at and in the MLA is an indication of its *health* as an organization. People actually want to get in. It may seem at first blush that I am contemplating the demise of the MLA. This could not be further from the truth. I have been a member for twenty-two years. I became a member as an advanced graduate student when I was given a chance to present my work at a session. It was the only session on Chinese literature that year, but it was not well attended. I presented a paper on the Taiwanese author Wang Wenxing using Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minor literature and mixing in some Marxist and postcolonial theory. Such a paper would have been unthinkable in the stale confines of an organization such as the Association for Asian Studies, at least at the time. At the MLA, though, despite the small audience, I received some very spirited and trenchant feedback that could not merely be reduced to the xenophobic dismissal of theory that was rampant in area studies at the time (and still occasionally rears its ugly head). I mention this because one might be tempted to respond to my present polemic by recommending that my cohort and I just go create our own organization. To advance that suggestion would be to misunderstand the true import of my entreaty. The point is that the MLA *is* the premier venue for literary and cultural studies.

Chinese scholars and scholars of the other disenfranchised languages and regions should not have to shortchange themselves by opting out of the organization just because they cannot obtain a prominent role within it. The good news for the MLA establishment is that we (or, at least I) are not out to demolish the MLA. The essence of the MLA is that one can attend a session on some of the minutest subjects, texts, or authors and can also attend a session that is sweeping, pathbreaking, and paradigm shifting.

And then there is the brute fact that we live in a capitalistic society. We are professionals, specialists, practitioners whose job is studying culture. We are not a club, certainly not a country club, but also not a social club. Business is done at the MLA. We have a massive book exhibit. And it is not just that books are bought and sold among us, by us, and to us. Meetings are convened. Discussions transpire. Deals are made. Book projects are pitched and contracts are proffered. We engage in these activities because they are a part of the work of our profession, and we should not think of them otherwise. In addition, let us not forget there is an enormous job market that for which the MLA serves as a critical intermediator. People come to the MLA for prospects. People are told if they wish to remain in a job pool, they must attend the MLA for a conference interview. Graduate students soon to be seeking employment need to know the customs. They must learn how to play the game. It is particularly important for younger scholars to present their work publicly so it can gain attention. How can people do that in languages that are essentially closed out of the MLA? And what impression do "other" language scholars have of a colossal conference that offers them so very little? The experience, based on my observations, is punishing and pride swallowing. Between my first presentation at the MLA twenty-two years ago and my second approximately fourteen years passed. The intervening time was nothing but rejection after rejection of special session proposals and abstract submissions to far-flung sessions, because there was no designated Chinese division and there were no guaranteed sessions. Much needs to be done to improve the quality of this experience for the increasing number of East Asianists who are looking for a job and for whom there is real promise of getting one.

Conversely, scholars of the established languages have much to learn from Asianists. A few years ago, at the behest of the MLA, I invited the esteemed Chinese author Mo Yan (b. 1955) to speak. Mo Yan is broadly considered one of the most gifted and influential authors of the post-Mao era. His works display a tremendously active imagination, and he has the uncanny ability to articulate violence, unfairness, and absurdity in unadorned and yet luminous prose. In addition to his address, conducted in

Chinese but simultaneously translated into English, two supporting sessions discussed his work. Attendance at the three sessions was less than was hoped. Viking Penguin, which publishes *Red Sorghum*—arguably the most famous of his novels, because it was adapted into the 1987 film of the same name, which both won that year's Berlin Golden Bear award and served as Zhang Yimou's breakout film—set up a display at its booth, complete with a two-hour period during which Mo Yan signed copies of the book offered to patrons *free of charge*. I accompanied him and served as a translator for the few people brave enough to come up and ask for a copy. Judging by the quizzical faces that floated by, it appeared to me most people were thinking to themselves, "Who the hell is that guy?" More than one actually admitted it, stating, "I don't know who you are, but you must be important." I should say so. Considering Mo Yan's prominence as a contemporary Chinese writer, I hope I'm not being arrogant or disdainful in saying that everyone who is globally literate should know who he is.

What would have been the reaction to a book signing and free give away if the author were Günter Grass, Italo Calvino, or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o? I know I would have stood in line for that. Not everyone can master Chinese, or all of the other subaltern languages that have a right to more space in the MLA. But it would not be difficult for all of us to learn a little more about the cultural exponents of these languages, especially in cases where over a half a dozen of their books are translated into English and are in print and they are highly acclaimed (in the time since I first drafted this article Mo Yan won the 2012 Nobel Prize for Literature). The MLA is a two-way street, because while Mo Yan's participation in the annual conference was certainly a rare opportunity for its members, the prominent place accorded to him by the organization could not have hurt his chances at winning the Nobel Prize. Thus, the lack of space for Chinese in the MLA is a double disservice: once to those of us in Chinese studies and again to nonspecialists who do not have much exposure to what Chinese literary and cultural studies have to offer.

I am a modern scholar, and the MLA is therefore my proper intellectual harbor. Once when I was opining aloud about the lack of any profile for Chinese in the MLA, a colleague quite disingenuously remarked that he was not aware that Chinese *was* a modern language. I found that comment bemusing, but it has provoked me to reflect on our discipline on many occasions. For one thing, there are plenty of divisions and sessions, such as Middle English or Comparative Studies in Renaissance and Baroque Literature, that concern subjects that cannot be considered modern. So, then why couldn't the MLA not only accommodate modern Chinese but also early epochs of its literature? This led me to a deeper realization about the

founding structure of the MLA way back in the late nineteenth century. The MLA was in fact conceived in the image of the European languages. It itself originated as a sort of radical or revolutionary reaction to the more staid dispensation of the study of ancient languages that at that time dominated the intellectual terrain in the way that English, Spanish, French, German, and Italian do now.

On the one hand, this deeply ingrained structure presents serious problems for us, because we are trying to bend an organization originally envisaged as a refuge from the dominant dead languages of the time into something elastic enough to incorporate landscapes well beyond the original parameters of its architects. Conceived with modern European languages in mind, the association provided an alternative to what the serious study of languages was then thought to properly be: primarily an act of ancient inquiry. When we step back and behold the 130-year historical trajectory of the MLA, we see that it has served as one long transitional mechanism moving from ancient philology, through a century-long flirtation with modern European (and Euro-American) languages, finally to the point at which we find ourselves today: a chance to properly incorporate world languages.

On the other hand, there is some hope to be found in the original structure of the MLA, because the MLA contains within its origins the seeds of reform, of reconfiguration, of recentering, of modernity, of moving beyond the intolerance and the intolerability of the status quo at a particular time. Since that is the case, let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater, even as I advocate radical and profound change. We can (re)divide the pie in many different ways. We need a new structure that is more nimble, a big tent or bazaar that allows for all sorts of inquiries, not just geographically but temporally and intellectually as well. That for me Chinese is the precipitating agent of this change is not where the focus should be. Chinese is no more than the proverbial giant straw that is breaking the camel's back. It is the catalyst that has led us to an inevitable realization: we need to have a large conversation in our association about the way it is organized, and we need to have it now.