

Goethe Reading Chinese Novels: The Origins of World Literature

Daniel Purdy

Penn State University

Chinese novels were central to Goethe's developing the idea of world literature. By the last decade of Goethe's career, three such romances had been translated into European languages. All evidence indicates that he had read them intensely in search of material and inspiration for his own poetic creativity. These translations --The Pleasing History (1761), Chinese Courtship In Verse (1824), and Les Deux Cousines (1826)—gave rise to a general search for similarities between Asian and European literature. My paper will explain how Goethe's understanding of world literature was shaped by these first, influential translations. By 1800, reading translated novels was plausibly a more secure form of knowledge about Chinese manners than relying solely on reports from travelers. Afterall, Chinese novels were not written for Europeans; they did not address the Western gaze; they showed no knowledge of their own strangeness. The earliest examples of Goethe's world literary readings in Persian, Chinese, and Serbian literature all shared the fact that they were not written for the European cultural elite. They had come into being autonomously within parallel cultures that were not yet conditioned by the market forces that would later draw them together.