

## CHAPTER V

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### Sorting Out Babel

#### *Literature and Its Changing Languages*

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#### “Literary Tradition” in China and India

What makes a literary tradition? Perhaps it is the continuously renewed experience of earlier texts over long spans of time and across large, somehow coherent territory. In the case of China and India, this sort of experience has been in evidence for several thousand years, throughout what have long been the two most populous countries in the world. The poet Yuan Zhen (779–831) celebrated his predecessor Du Fu (712–770) as follows: “When my reading of poetry reached Du Fu, I understood that all things great and small were gathered in it.” Yuan Zhen goes on to give an account of the whole poetic tradition, each earlier poet adding something that Du Fu combined into a whole. Grade school students in the People’s Republic of China still study texts from 2,500 years ago, including those by Du Fu, if with much vernacular explanation. Similarly, the equally old Indian epics are still very much alive in the subcontinent, though more often in films, comic books, or village pageants than in the Sanskrit of their most ancient versions. A work like the *Mahabharata* seems to have foreseen its own continuous cultural prominence when proclaiming itself a total account of the world: “Whatever is found here may well be found elsewhere; what is not here does not exist.”

Given the enormous time and space they have filled, Chinese and Indian literature may appear to be immediately comparable. But that appearance

is quickly dispelled when we start to look more closely. Consider just the quotes adduced above. Yuan Zhen implies that fullness is the consequence of a cumulative tradition, whereas the *Mahabharata* seems to assume that it was all there at the beginning. And this first modest contrast is complemented by many others far more consequential. For example, unlike Chinese, there was no single language called “Indian” in which literature was communicated across that time and space, but rather several: Sanskrit, the “perfected” language (from around 1500 BCE until around 1500 CE), along with two languages (or dialects or registers) closely related to it: Prakrit, the “natural” language, and Apabhramsha, the “corrupt,” or demotic (both used especially for pastoral themes during the first millennium); and, in the second millennium, Persian, a literary language in India from about the eleventh century onward and the official language of the Mughal Empire (1526–1858). Hindi—called Hindavi, “Indian,” by Arabs, Persians, and others, and chosen as the national language in free India in 1950—emerged only around 1500 out of the broad north Indian vernacular and until the modern era did not gain the subcontinentwide presence of Sanskrit or even Persian.

But India’s linguistic differences from China are even greater than this. Precisely as occurred in Europe around the same time, a number of languages of smaller spaces came to be used for the production of literature: in the south, Tamil from the early centuries CE, Kannada and Telugu from about the tenth century, Malayalam from the thirteenth; in the north, Bangla, Hindi, Marathi, Oriya, and others from around the fourteenth or fifteenth. This process of differentiation included scripts as well as languages, more than a dozen of them (all derived from a single source, an ancient script called Brahmi, but their relatedness had long since been forgotten), something that again distinguishes India from China but also from Europe, where a single script connected the far-flung areas of “Latin” Christendom. The relationship between linguistic and political differentiation also seems pretty clear. The empirelike states using Sanskrit gave way around the end of the first millennium to regional polities using the vernaculars until the coming of the Mughals, who promoted Persian as the language of learning and culture in the consolidation of their empire in the Indian subcontinent. If these many literatures were not written in a language called “Indian” or in a politically unified region called “India” (a term of non-Indian origin), what in fact makes them “Indian”?

China did have its own, less extreme language diversity tied to linguistic change, but two factors had large consequences: the ideal of a unified

state and the writing system of Chinese characters. The unified polity insisted that a number of mutually unintelligible but closely related languages were merely dialects, as early medieval Europe understood the nascent Romance vernaculars as “dialects” of Latin. Chinese characters allowed very different pronunciations across space and time, contributing to the conviction that it was somehow one language. Pronounced in radically different ways in different subregions, the characters contributed to the establishment of Chinese as the most common written language of pre-modern Korea and Vietnam, and the second written language of premodern Japan. Far more than Sanskrit, written Chinese kept growing and changing; but, until the ideological division between “classical Chinese” and “vernacular Chinese” was institutionalized in the 1920s, linguistic variation in written Chinese was understood by Chinese readers and writers as difference of registers, each proper to a certain kind of writing. Regional variation and linguistic change were manifested primarily through new genres of drama, song, and prose narrative.

### Lyric, Like and Unlike

If the time and space across which a literature is produced and continuously reproduced contribute to making a literary tradition, it is thanks to genres that a literature comes to be recognized *as* literature. And if in many respects the genres found in China and India are strikingly incomparable, some, like the short self-contained poem—called “lyric” for ease of reference here, without assuming a category identical across the two traditions—were shared enthusiasms over a very long term. Both traditions show an interest in the emotional force of literature—how emotion is coded in language—and in the closely related phenomenon of implication, how something is conveyed without being said. Both emotion and implication are showcased in the short lyric in China and India; these components do of course exist in the European tradition, but they became a central concern to writers and critics only in more recent times. In addition, literary traditions also require learning, self-reflection, and often theory, and here China and India again show some striking points of convergence.

Let us consider one example each of the sort of lyric poem that these two literary cultures prized, and the kind of learning, on the part of writers and readers, that they both presupposed.

We do not know who wrote this sample Sanskrit poem. It is included in an anthology called the *Amaru-sataka*, or *Hundred Lyrics of Amaru*, but many of the verses in this anthology are elsewhere attributed to other poets—and we have no idea who Amaru was anyway, if he was more than the anthologist and actually a poet to whom some of the poems should be ascribed. We do not know where the *Hundred Lyrics* was written in the vast world that Sanskrit occupied in South Asia (and even Southeast Asia, where the language was also cultivated), since Sanskrit poets typically sought to eliminate any marks of localization. We do not know when it was written. The anthology dates from sometime before the late ninth century, but the sample poem could be from anytime between then and the beginning of the Common Era, when Sanskrit first came to be used for nonscriptural poetry, since marks of temporality were eliminated too. The form of the poem strongly suggests that it is a benediction introducing the collection, but we have no idea what work it may once have introduced. In short, all the tradition has given us is the poem—complete in itself, not a fragment of some larger work—along with a history of interpretations of it. Here is a literal translation:

The fire of Shiva's arrows, like a husband  
whose betrayal is still fresh, was driven off  
as it tried to clutch their hand, mercilessly struck  
when grasping at their hem, shaken off when stroking  
their hair, spurned spitefully falling at their feet,  
and in the act of embracing rebuffed with force  
by the women of the Triple City, eyes brimming with tears.  
May this fire burn away your sins. (trans. Pollock)

If the who, where, when, and why of the poem is information never preserved, this is not because of the tradition's historical stupidity; detailed data for many other aspects of premodern Indian life are available in other cultural forms, such as inscriptions. The information is missing because none was thought to be necessary for understanding the poem. Sanskrit, considered the language of the gods, was prized precisely because it allowed literature to escape human time and space and live forever. All that was necessary was the learning that the tradition privileged. Part of this learning, the simple part, is the mythological background; the harder part is the aesthetic.

According to legend, the enemies of the gods once built three cities, out of gold, silver, and iron, in heaven, in the sky, and on earth. The great god Shiva destroyed them in an act of violence and heroism—but also compassion, since if Shiva destroyed living beings he did so to save the universe from their wrongdoing. This cosmic act prefigures the possibility for the god’s salvation of the individual devotee, however great his own wrongdoing may be. If this little bit of cultural knowledge suffices to make the surface meaning of the poem clear enough, understanding the poem’s emotional registers was a challenge no less for traditional readers than for us.

It was entirely within the scope of Sanskrit criticism to ask why God’s destructive fire should be compared to a husband, and an unfaithful husband at that, who is seeking forgiveness by ever more desperate actions. This was not, however, a question traditional readers posed. Nor would they have cared to remark on the several ironies here, for example, that the figure of a straying husband is used in connection with the deity who famously elevates asceticism over eroticism, or that one and the same fire should burn away sin destructively in the case of evil and beneficently in the case of a devotee. (See also chapter 3 on fire as a burning away of sin in widow self-immolation.) Most of these questions, along with more general ones about the relationship of lyric poetry to legend or, even more important here, to theology, are of interest typically only to those standing outside the tradition and looking in.

The interest of those inside lay, in part, in the mechanisms of signification, especially literary “implication”—meaning without saying—which was subtly analyzed by Indian thinkers and is beautifully exemplified here: the errant husband is mentioned in the simile but coordinated with the fire only by a series of puns (far more compelling in the original). But what preoccupied them above all was the poem’s *rasa* (“taste”), its principal emotional impact: tragic? heroic? erotic? Readers reflected on its rich complexity for centuries. The power of God’s cosmic act could be seen as heroic or violent or awe-inspiring, all three emotions being recognized as possible aesthetic tastes, and all were suggested by thinkers from the ninth to the sixteenth centuries. For others it is the tragic that is primary—after all, the wives are tearfully watching as their husbands and children are burned alive. There is further a clear suggestion, conveyed by a simile, of the erotic: the women are repulsing the fire like an unfaithful husband come home to ask forgiveness. How the tragic and the erotic coexist here (since the

former presupposes permanent separation, the latter eventual reunion) led to further sophisticated analysis.

What fascinated Indian readers, in short, was not only how a poem makes us feel but also how it *makes feeling* by the processes of verbal representation. For them, the feeling evoked by a poem, far from being a critical fallacy as it was for the American “New Critics,” was its very essence, both the horizon of expectation that shaped the creation of literature and the central object of literary criticism. The centuries-long history of reflection on the *rasa*, or emotional impact, of poetry like Amaru’s supplies us with another of the diagnostics—besides time and space and genre—of what makes an *Indian* literary culture: a very learned practice, and self-aware tradition, of slow reading.

No Chinese poem is anything like the Amaru poem. While Indian readers of literature were typically uninterested in the specificities of place, time, and historical context—though this typicality can be overstated, given the precise temporal referencing found outside the lyric genre, in for example royal inscriptions (see chapter 5 on inscriptions as historiography)—Chinese readers read a poem in the context of the author, his life, and the larger historical world in which he lived. Du Fu, one of China’s greatest poets, documented his life in unprecedented detail. He even added his own notes when he thought that later readers might not know the circumstances behind a poem. For a thousand years every Du Fu poem has been read as part of the “Du Fu story”—a poetic biography set in motion by Du Fu himself. His life was set in a historically tumultuous period of the Tang (618–906, also considered China’s golden age of poetry), and that was always the background of his story.

If we cannot date Amaru, much less feel confident that the poem was written by him, there are a remarkable number of Du Fu’s more than 1,400 poems that can be dated to the year and season, often to the month and day. A tenuous link may also be found in the interplay between the world on a cosmic scale and the human world close at hand. The “Amaru” poem makes a human situation the simile by which to try to grasp the otherwise inexplicable actions of an omnipotent god. Likewise, in “Staying Over at White Stands Station,” Du Fu, on the shore of a vast lake, crosses from *this world* to *that world*, from a journey in the empire, where name and reality are matched, into mythic space through reflection. Du Fu wrote his poem in February 770, the first month of spring and the last year of his life.

Having left his comfortable life in Kuizhou on the Yangzi River, Du Fu went downstream to the great city of Jiangling, hoping to find friends and above all, patrons. Finding his friends but no patrons and in a desperate situation, he took the inexplicable next step—as he often did—setting out southward with his family onto the vastness of Lake Dongting, heading for Changsha in modern Hunan. In this context, passage from *this world* to another world has a particular resonance. The phrase that Du Fu used for this journey onto Lake Dongting, planning to go to the “Southern Deeps,” would have evoked for any reader the great parable that opened the ancient philosophical work by Zhuangzi (370–287 BCE) in which the mythic Peng bird, whose wingspan is so large that it covers the sky from horizon to horizon, “plans to go south” to bathe in the “Southern Deeps.” In the parable, the “Southern Deeps” represents the sky–pool of heaven, i.e., *that world*. With this parable Zhuangzi, who more often teaches the relativity of perception and value, is satirizing the inability of those who can conceive only of the world close at hand to imagine a universe beyond that.

To return to this world, in late winter of 770, Du Fu found a mooring at White Sands Station in a section of Lake Dongting called Green Grass Lake. These stations were part of the imperial post system, with lodging for travelers on official business. Du Fu had the credentials of a vice-director in the Board of Works, but it was an honorary appointment and evidently not enough to get the old man lodging in the government post station.

#### STAYING OVER AT WHITE SANDS STATION

I spend night on the water, now still in last sunshine,  
the smoke of men's dwellings, and then this pavilion.  
Beside the station, sands white as before;  
beyond the lake, the grass turns fresh green.  
The million images—all springtime's vapor;  
on a lone raft, I myself am the wandering star.  
Along with the waves, the moonlight boundless,  
and on its sparkling I draw near to the Southern Deeps.

(trans. Owen)

Another old story is also cited by traditional commentators as the source for Du Fu's interesting poetic usage of the “lone raft” and “wandering star”:

Zhang Hua (232–300), a court official and poet, tells of a man who every year in mid-autumn saw an empty raft passing down the Yangzi River. One year he boarded the raft and was carried to sea and up around into the Milky Way, the “River of Stars.” Following the current, he returned to earth and came to Chengdu in Sichuan, where he consulted a local astronomer, who told him that he had seen a “wandering star” in the heavens earlier. On his “lone raft” at night, amid the shattered reflections of moonlight and starlight, Du Fu sees himself as that “wandering star,” ready to launch into Zhang Hua’s “River of Stars.”

As the poem moves from twilight into darkness, it moves from imperial space to mythic space. At first Du Fu comes over the huge lake, recognizing where to stay by the “smoke of men’s dwelling,” leading him to the imperial station. Tying his boat up there, he matches the place names with what he sees. White Sands has white sands; and now in early spring Green Grass Lake has newly green grasses. This is imperial space, *down to earth*, where words match experiential perception. We can locate these places on a historical map. But moving into night and reflection in the lake’s water, representation links ordinary imperial space to something else. Du Fu’s “wandering star” becomes the great Peng, beyond mortal understanding, drawing closer to the “Southern Deeps,” where he will bathe in the celestial ocean.

In the classical poetics of the eight-line regulated verse, the fifth and sixth lines are the *turn*. The poem does indeed turn, moving outside the security of imperial space into another dimension. In the second couplet Du Fu matches “image” and “name.” In the third couplet all the visible images of the world are “springtime’s vapor.” For all its simplicity, this is a strange, grand line. The Chinese word Du Fu uses is *qi*, translated here as “vapor,” as it often is. For example, steam rising from boiling water is *qi*. But is also a basic term in Chinese cosmology for the cosmic substance that is life energy, which is sometimes coalescing into hard things, sometimes attenuating into invisible gases, and always in flux. The spring scene before him is the momentary shape of spring *qi*—for example, in winter the green grasses that give Green Grass Lake its stable name may not be so green.

## Language Dynamics

If the dense learning that marked the two traditions makes them fully comparable with each other, other features set them far apart. The first is the



question of social status, which is highly marked in all the Indian literary languages, beginning with Sanskrit. Although all literary languages are, to an appreciable extent, what Henry David Thoreau (in *Walden*) called “father tongues” (“a reserved and select expression . . . which we must be born again in order to speak”), Indian languages are characterized by a range of internal ranking criteria that differentiate them from one another. Sanskrit, for example, could only be acquired in the course of formal education. From the earliest period of its existence it was restricted to use in solemn religious rites—in what is called the Vedic dialect, from the name of the ancient scriptures, Vedas—and was made available for the creation of nonreligious literature perhaps as much as 1,500 years after the composition of the oldest stratum of those scriptures. While restrictions on who could use the perfect language of the gods have been exaggerated in both traditional accounts and modern scholarship, there is no question that those outside the Vedic fold, such as the new religious communities that arose around 500 BCE, in particular the Jains and Buddhists, originally rejected Sanskrit (or were, so to speak, rejected by it), and composed their own religious texts in other languages newly invented for the purpose. But Jains and Buddhists both eventually adopted Sanskrit, whose prestige and universality made it the premier language of literature across South Asia for more than a millennium. This early history is important as well for the example it offers of language restriction and response, a process that would be reenacted time and again in the literary history of India.

In China language was conceived as situated in a hierarchy as a register of social standing, with the range of possible registers restricted by genre. This sounds complicated, but it is instinctive in English: one does not apply for a job in a bank with the English used in rap lyrics. In terms of variation, a dialect is regional, whereas a language is often the claim of a distinct self-governing country. Galician is a Spanish dialect; Portuguese is a language—despite the fact that Galician and Portuguese are far closer than Galician and Spanish. We can map this phenomenon in India, which had many independent regional polities, whereas China, whatever the political situation of the moment, believed in one polity.

One of the most distinctive features of Indian literary history is the interplay between languages that traveled boundlessly—Sanskrit and Persian above all—and those that did not—the dozen or so regional vernaculars with written traditions. This linguistic situation strongly resembles that of Europe, where Latin and the Romance and Germanic vernaculars parallel

Sanskrit and the north Indian vernaculars (Hindi and so on) and south Indian vernaculars (Tamil and so on). This interplay was impossible before such regional languages were constituted as literary languages in the first place, a process inaugurated in southern India in the late centuries of the first millennium (with Tamil as a precocious pioneer) and visible in north India from about the thirteenth century. The constitution of a literary language is not a natural development; it is the result of an act of cultural will, and in India this will was sharpened by two developments, the first and earlier political—the growth of regional polities—and the second and later (and perhaps even a consequence of the first) religious—the emergence of oppositional faith movements that spoke to often very local concerns.

“Vernacularization,” as this process is now often termed, was in India initially an elite, courtly affair, as regional political orders sought to replicate the transregional political idioms and practices of Sanskrit. Among the most important of these practices, for its high symbolic value and its practical contribution to moral education, was literature. This cosmopolitan vernacular, as it might be called, of the regional polity gave way in many places to a regional vernacular reaction on the part of religious groups, which sought to displace the courtly with more local—and often militantly anti-Sanskritic—registers.

With few exceptions, the vernacularization of India was essentially complete by the time the Mughal Empire was founded. Although the Mughals originated in Central Asia and were speakers of a Turkic language, they adopted Persian as the language of empire—the language of learning and culture used by much of the courtly culture of the Islamic world after its conquest of Persia. The Mughals thereby changed the fortunes of the language dramatically. In the case of the Lodi dynasty that preceded the Mughals, the semiofficial language was called Hindavi, an early form of today’s Hindi. Persian too was in many ways an elite idiom in its Indian embodiment. Despite pervading much of everyday language in north India at the level of vocabulary (by a process still unclear to scholars; the penetration of the bureaucracy has been suggested), its use was essentially literary, as a code of courtiers and religious professionals; Persian was hardly more of an everyday language than Sanskrit. The erosion of Persian beginning in the late eighteenth century, among other factors, led to the creation of a new literary language called Urdu, in which a spoken idiom, largely indistinguishable from Hindi, was refashioned as a literary language embodying Persian genres, tropes, rhetoric, and aesthetic. In all these processes,

especially those of from about the sixth to the sixteenth centuries, languages were practically and cognitively instituted as literary by the creation of texts that reflected the values of a dominant earlier literature (Sanskrit or Persian, and much later but in a very similar way, English). In many cases a whole battery of accessories meant to ensure the individuality, unity, and stability of the language developed: dictionaries, grammars, versification manuals, treatises on rhetoric, and individualized scripts.

The Chinese, by contrast, just kept adding new registers. Chan masters from the eighth to tenth centuries were recorded in a new literary (or “anti-literary”) register invented to mimic the spoken language. Chan masters for the next millennium tended to echo that vernacular register. Northern plays (*zaju*) of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries invented new Chinese characters to represent the sounds of words common in Northern Mandarin. However much Mandarin changed over the next eight centuries, later playwrights of *zaju* never entirely forgot that special language. That vernacular dramatic register of language was quite distinct from the storyteller vernacular register used in fiction, but in many cases both versions of the vernacular register were printed for elite consumers, which led to their durability as the register appropriate to a certain genre.

Although Chinese vernacular registers appeared in roughly the historical period that vernaculars emerged through throughout Eurasia, their emergence cannot be described as a revolution. In China it crept in around the edges of an already heterogeneous literary language, becoming institutionalized as still newer written vernacular registers formed around its edges. Only in the modern period, under the influence of the European model, was the range of written Chinese reconceptualized as a “classical language,” *wenyan*, and a “vernacular language,” *baihua*. Even when Chinese intellectuals allowed a division in written Chinese, it was into two languages rather than many, and those two languages were seen to have been in a struggle for dominance, with one emerging victorious and the other declared “dead.”

The striking contrast with India is that no outside language ever supplanted the use of some version of “Chinese.” The Mongols ruled in Chinese, as did the Manchus later, and Manchu was even more the creation of Chinese loanwords than Ottoman Turkish (used in the Ottoman Empire) or Chagatay Turkish (brought by the Mughals from Central Asia), which were both heavily influenced by Persian and Arabic loans. Admittedly, when the Mughals, the Mongols’ distant cousins, declared Persian the

official language of the empire in the late sixteenth century, it was hardly an outside language that was being introduced, since poets in India had been writing in Persian almost as long as those in Iran proper. But Persian had never been used so assertively as a language of power in India before the Mughals made it so, and for many in Mughal service it was a truly foreign language they had to learn.

### What Is “Epic”?

Whereas a number of literary genres beyond the lyric are comparable in the two traditions, some are stunningly different in themselves and in their historical effects. First on this list of differences is the dominant role in India of the epic imagination, one of the key forces that, through circulation of the originals and later vernacular versions, made Indian literature *Indian* in the absence of any single unifying language or script. While the absence of epic in China, like the absence of historiography in India (discussed further in chapter 5), has been a cliché of Orientalism from the time of the German philosopher Georg Frederich Hegel (1770–1831), here is a divergence in genre in the two traditions that markedly contrasts with what unites their lyric poetry.

In India, the two great epic traditions, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, have shaped its literature in ways with few parallels in world literature. It is not just that Sanskrit drama, like the Greek, is largely crumbs from the epic table, in that both have plays derived from and heavily influenced by epic tales. Later vernacular literatures also referenced epic themes, as European literature referenced the Bible. Instead, rethinking and rewriting the epics were processes that fundamentally shaped literature—and even founded literary traditions—across Indian time and space.

What is significant about the two great epics from a comparative perspective, accordingly, is not so much their literary characteristics as their literary-historical effects. For the period of its likely origins in the last century or two BCE, the *Ramayana* offers an unprecedented combination of narrative coherence and aesthetic concern over an extended tale of love, loss, and recovery, so much so that the author, Valmiki, was called the *adikavi*, or “primal poet,” of the Sanskrit tradition. His narrative will be familiar to readers of the romantic epic tradition in the West from the *Odyssey* onward. And to readers of the martial epic tradition in the West from the

*Iliad* onward the *Mahabharata* will be familiar, both for its style (largely as oral poetry, which makes it older than the *Ramayana* though it is also younger, since it was probably first committed to writing in the early centuries CE) and for its tale of the centrifugal forces of political arrogance and aristocratic pride that ineluctably lead to the chaos of war. The literary-historical consequences of the two works, however, are unfamiliar, if not unique.

Most regional literary traditions in India defined themselves by vernacularizing and localizing one or the other work, their authors often receiving the same sobriquet of “primal poet” in acknowledgment of their inaugurating a new regional tradition of poetry. But the consequences of these epic works were more fundamental than marking the point of vernacular origins. It is no exaggeration to say that the *Ramayana* shaped much of Indian literary history over some two millennia. This holds true for the *Mahabharata* too, though to a lesser degree; dealing as it does with civil war, the most horrific of political failures, it was often viewed as a less normative, even more dangerous text. One exception to this is the *Bhagavad Gita*, an episode in the *Mahabharata* that seeks precisely to invest this failure with positive meaning by offering a new ethics of social action as moral imperative, detached from outcomes. Both epics were held to record actual historical events and exactly as the events occurred, and thereby to make claims to moral significance—for defining dharma, or the right thing to do in one’s relations with parents, siblings, spouses, society, polity—of the sort that actuality far more than fictionality carries with it. Akbar the Great, the Mughal emperor of the late sixteenth century, recognized the centrality of both works to the Indian cultural and political order and commissioned their translation into Persian, along with sumptuous illustrations. Their didactic force remains strong up to the present day. The *Ramayana* continues to enjoy a sanctity among many people as a divine text resistant to any modernist historicization, whereas the *Bhagavad Gita* has in some ways become the Bible of India, a status that is no colonial invention but dates from at least the eighth century.

Generation after generation rethought and rewrote the epic narratives in every imaginable genre of written and performative art. These revisions, especially prominent in the case of the *Ramayana*, sought to address what a given era or section of society came to regard as morally problematic. In one reworking offered in a celebrated Sanskrit drama of the early eighth century, the *Uttara-rama-carita* (*Rama’s Last Act*) of Bhavabhuti, the heroine,

Sita, herself exiled by her husband, Rama, in the face of rumors about her infidelity during her captivity, is vindicated by the goddess Earth and by the ancient poet himself, who returns to rewrite the end of his story. In some South Indian versions especially of the modern period, the demon king antagonist Ravana, like Milton's Satan, has become far more sympathetic, and even heroic, than the protagonist. In yet other versions, Rama and Sita are represented as brother and sister (the Pali retelling), or Sita as the daughter of Ravana (the Tibetan), or Rama's brother Lakshmana as the wily defeater of Ravana (the oral version of the Dungari Bhils, a community of landless cultivators in northern Gujarat), or Hanuman, the monkey ally of Rama's, as the true hero of the story. Indeed, this last rewrite is found in many Southeast Asian versions, and is faintly visible in the sixteenth-century Chinese novel *Journey to the West* (discussed later in this chapter), a text about Chinese travelers to India that marks the point where our China-India comparison, thanks to the vast dispersion of the *Ramayana*, becomes connection.

China's "lack" of an epic was troubling to earlier scholars, both Chinese and non-Chinese. Hegel assured us that every literature was supposed to have at least one, and the Sanskrit epics were used to confirm the thesis that epic stood at the head of every tradition. Genres are, unfortunately, defined inductively; and characteristics of specific texts have been taken as essential to a genre rather than as interesting possibilities within something more broadly conceived. Epics are supposed to focus on one hero in one great undertaking. In practice, however, the "one hero, one action" definition is contingent on a larger knowledge of surrounding history/myth. We cannot read the *Iliad* without knowing the larger story of the Trojan War. The early epics were taken as not only historically true but also centers of historical knowledge. If, instead, we think of epic as foundational history, then we have grounds for comparison.

*Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)*, written by Sima Qian (145–86? BCE), is not the earliest example of extended historical writing in China, but, like the ancient European and Indian epics, it defined the past and provided material for future iterations of antiquity. It treats China from the mythic past down to Sima Qian's present, the turn of the first century BCE. It is in prose, but prose was already the medium of narrative, and it is beautifully crafted. From the beginning it was a written text, drawing on written sources, many of which we would classify as "prose romance" (where historical material is reconfigured and amplified for the sake of the

story)—although to Sima Qian they were “history.” Moreover, *Records of the Grand Historian* has an author very much personally engaged in his text, continuing it as a project bequeathed to him by his father and accepting castration (rather than honorable suicide) in order to see the book to completion. Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that he finds echoes of his own case in many of the stories he tells.

In the famous letter explaining why he accepted castration rather than committing suicide, he explains the purpose of the work:

I have compiled neglected knowledge of former times from all over the world; I have examined these for veracity and have given an account of the principles behind success and defeat, rise and fall. . . . In it I also wanted to fully explore the interaction between Heaven and Man, and to show the continuity of transformations of past and present.

But in the very first of the biographies, which make up more than half the work, he questions the existence of any moral order that would make “the interaction between Heaven and Man” comprehensible.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the *Records* is that it is not overall linear narrative. It first treats the linear history of the rulers and dynasties, then the histories of the great aristocratic families that ruled the feudal domains. Then there is a dull, but necessary set of tables correlating the histories of the feudal domains, by which a single history became possible. The final and largest section treats “biographies,” either in pairs, as did the Greco-Roman essayist Plutarch, or in sets. Ancient China did have prose romances of moderate length treating individuals, but very long poetic or prose narrative is not extant. One earlier, long chronicle history survives, but the commitment to chronicle makes it almost incomprehensible for modern readers because there are many central characters and many continuous “actions,” appearing then disappearing, to reappear the following year or years later. The Sanskrit epic, with its very long digressions, still is framed around a single linear narrative.

Ancient China’s preference for shorter narratives may have had to do with writing. Writing was slow, reading was slow, and the physical texts—primarily bundles of bamboo slips—were cumbersome. To imagine a text like the *Mahabharata* in China, we would first have to imagine a very large warehouse with a meticulous organization. As elsewhere in the ancient

world, memorization was important, but in ancient China it was memorization of shorter texts.

Whatever the reason, ancient China's commitment to shorter narrative led to a different intellectual order. One of the basic forms of narrative is avenging a wrong and setting it right, in which the deferral of action is the space of the narrative. This is the cycle of the Trojan War and of the Sanskrit epics. We can find many parallels in *Records of the Grand Historian*, but it is most explicit in a chapter in the biographies, "The Assassins." In the structure of the chronologically organized short narratives that make up this chapter we see an argument about long duration historical narrative done through short narratives.

The first story is very short, on a general of the domain of Lu in the early seventh century BCE. Cao Mei was known for his physical prowess and was made a general; he repeatedly lost in battle to the neighboring domain of Qi, but the Duke of Lu retained confidence in him. At a treaty ceremony with Duke Huan of Qi, in which Lu was to cede large amounts of its territory to Qi, Cao Mei leaped out of the Lu entourage, took a knife to Duke Huan's throat, and asked him to return the conquered territory to Lu. Duke Huan agreed, and Cao Mei put back his knife and returned to the Lu entourage as if nothing had happened. Duke Huan wanted to go back on his promise, but his advisor Guan Zhong persuaded him that a reputation for honoring his promises was worth more than the territory of Lu he had gained. Duke Huan returned the territory.

If we see no interval between intention and action in the Cao Mei story, in the three stories that follow an increasing deferral of action, accompanied by formalization of a code of honor involving the recognition and trust granted by a superior (hence allowing the assassin to be manipulated by the generosity of a superior). With plotting and the deferral of action, the stories become increasingly complicated.

The last and longest story occurs about four and a half centuries later, when Qin was pressing forward to establish a unified empire. The world of Cao Mei was one of honor and obligation; Qin was a machine of empire. The story of Jing Ke's failed attempt to assassinate the Qin king who would become the First Emperor has been told in movies such as *The Emperor and the Assassin* and *Hero*, but it needs to be understood in its original context.

We have another version of the story in an early prose romance, perhaps not the one Sima Qian was working with, but close. And we can see Sima Qian working with his sources. One of Sima Qian's most telling additions



was that as a youth, Jing Ke “loved reading”—the first time that term appears in the tradition. From his knowledge in the story, he seems to have been reading stories of assassin-heroes. Unlike all the previous assassin-heroes, Jing Ke wanted to become a hero like those he had read about. Eventually he met Prince Dan of the domain of Yan, who chose him to assassinate the king of Qin. They discussed the example of Cao Mei, whose story Jing Ke surely knew—without any misgivings that the age of honor was long past. Prince Dan treated Jing Ke royally, and Jing Ke continually deferred taking action until “the time was right.” Qin’s armies were pressing on Yan, and at last Jing Ke had to go. He concealed his sword in a map as an earlier assassin had concealed his knife in a fish: he was a well-read assassin. He struck, but hesitated, and in the end he died. His last words were that he had failed because he wanted to take the king of Qin hostage and force a promise to turn conquest (and history) back, as Cao Mei had done. This could only have provoked laughter at his naiveté—the king of Qin might make such a promise, but he would never honor it.

We have not one single linear narrative, but five chronologically arranged and historically unrelated stories, echoing one another throughout, with the last story finally coming back to the first. It is a compact way of narrating four and a half centuries of cultural change, in which past narrative itself becomes one agent. This is not extended linear narrative, but a basic way of making significant historical narrative outside of a linear structure, with “one hero, one action.”

## New Literary Cultures

The early modern period of Chinese and Indian literary history (roughly 1500–1800) introduces as many contrasts between the two traditions as anything in the preceding two millennia.

Printing in China became increasingly common during the Tang dynasty, with large projects beginning in the tenth and eleventh centuries, sponsored by the Buddhist church and the state. China’s early modern period should properly be thought of as beginning with the rapid expansion of print culture at the end of the eleventh and through the twelfth century in commercial and private venues. If, for the purposes of comparison, we take 1500 as the date to begin our account, print culture was already fully mature. Manuscripts remained an important venue for circulation

(including manuscript copies of printed texts), but printing was ubiquitous. The categories of literary publication covered a wide range of purposes and markets, both domestic and foreign. At one extreme a family might subsidize the printing of the works of a family member, primarily for local prestige and for inclusion of the name among prominent literary figures in local gazetteers. A local official or private scholar could subsidize an imprint for his personal interests—and sometimes make a handsome profit from the enterprise. At another extreme, fiction and other kinds of literature became a commodity that could be sold throughout the empire as well as in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.

Older plays from the late thirteenth and fourteenth century existed in print, but later aficionados of drama reprinted them as well as more recent plays. The great storytellers' cycles were appearing in printed prose narrative; incidents in those cycles provided plots for drama, much as Indian drama drew on the epics. Later some of those novels spawned fictional spin-offs, followed in the eighteenth century by novels with original plots. Everything from popular songs to joke books to political gossip to travel diaries and manuals for flower cultivation proliferated. Earlier literature was often reprinted, making possible unprecedented access to the literary tradition. Scholars would collect their judgments of earlier and contemporary writing in different genres. Women writers had long been a presence in the tradition, but from the seventeenth century on there began to be circles of women writers. They often circulated their works in manuscript, but increasingly their poetry collections were printed. Numerous anthologies of contemporary and earlier women writers often had prefaces that reflected on traditions of writing by women. If memorization retained primacy of place in India into the nineteenth century, print, supplemented by memorization, dominated China.

Although it is hard to generalize about such textual production on such a scale and in such variety, one consequence bears comparison with India. The distribution system of commercial printing produced a truly national market, which differentiated itself by specialization: it became a culture of aficionados. There were aficionados of particular kinds of writing everywhere: an early seventeenth-century reader might be devoted to travel literature, fourteenth-century plays, and contemporary song lyrics written on the model of song lyrics from five centuries earlier. Certain classical genres were still generally shared by the educated elite. Thus the hypothetical aficionado would have had a basic knowledge of and capacity to

compose classical poetry, but might not have been particularly interested in it.

The old classical genres of prose and poetry were often provided with scholarly commentary in print, identifying sources of phrases, explaining allusions, and glossing difficult words. Both the classical and the newer vernacular genres, however, were often also provided with critical commentaries, which became part of the pleasure of reading. Characters were analyzed, structure explained, and parallel passages identified, often with appreciative judgments on the author's skill. A text could be followed by a short essay offering an overall interpretation, and the beginning of a book might contain a section giving a theoretical overview of what to pay attention to in reading, or else a literary historical interpretation.

The issue of rhetorical complexity, which so deeply engaged Indian literary practice and thought, was never a central concern in the Chinese tradition. Classical poetry and the song lyric tradition that matured in the eleventh and twelfth centuries in different ways sought a transparent perfection in writing about experience and emotion. Heavy figuration did exist but was often understood as concealment, adding a degree of intensity by the presumption of that which should not be spoken but had to be.

Such a poetics of transparent authenticity begged for its negation, in irony, parody, and sometimes disillusioned anger. We first see this prominently in the drama and lyrics in the northern vernacular from the end of the thirteenth century. Indeed, the Chinese passion for genuineness in poetry was the shadow of a social world perceived as false and duplicitous, filled with hidden motives and stratagems. Like Elizabethan drama—and indeed, classical Sanskrit—Chinese drama from its inception had its fools (sometimes with a wisdom undercutting the elite characters and sometimes simply foolish) and its more serious characters held up for ridicule.

The *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is a prose narrative written in a very simple classical style about the struggles for power at the breakup of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) around the turn of the third century. This does have its innocent heroes of pure prowess or honor, who often bungle the purposes of the true central figures, the thinkers for whom stratagem and deception are central. *Shuihu zhuan*, variously translated as *Water Margin* or *Men of the Marsh*, concerns righteous bandits of the early twelfth century: these are mostly heroes of prowess, but they too depend on a leader to curb the propensity to chaos they represent.

In our comparative context *Journey to the West*, the sixteenth-century prose narrative of the seventh-century Chinese traveler Xuanzang's journey to India, comes to the fore. The central figure is not the monk Xuanzang himself, but the attendant, Monkey (Sun Wukong, "Monkey Enlightened to Emptiness"), perhaps originally the Indian Hanuman, the monkey hero of the *Ramayana*, but transformed beyond recognition into a figure of endless resourcefulness and willfulness, bound to Xuanzang's service by an iron band around his head that tightens to cause excruciating pain when Xuanzang recites a spell. Monkey and his main counterpart, Pig, (Zhu Bajie), gluttonous, lecherous, and slothful, are obviously Buddhist allegories of the mind and the sensual self, but they are also lively, engaging characters, the necessary servants of Xuanzang, who possesses neither prowess nor resourcefulness, but who does have purpose.

Although these three prose romances all exist in sixteenth-century editions, they have no clear moment of origin. There are earlier versions of episodes in drama and prose, and their transformation continued in later versions—indeed, to the present day. When we come to *Jin Ping Mei*, a spin-off of *Water Margin* that appeared in print in the seventeenth century but clearly circulated in manuscript in the sixteenth century, we can talk about the "novel." Although it is nominally set in the Song dynasty, it represents the domestic and local politics of the nascent bourgeois culture of the Ming. As in many of the short stories circulating in the early seventeenth century, the culture of officialdom is present but no longer central. The male protagonist of *Jin Ping Mei* is a fabulously wealthy pharmacist, while the short stories focus on merchants and vendors, with women as centrally important as the male characters (in striking contrast to the three early prose romances). After *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, longer fiction was in a version of Mandarin.

Drama circulated primarily within China itself. Classical literature and vernacular fiction circulated throughout East Asia; given the native training in classical Chinese, the classical literature seemed in no way "foreign" in Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Vernacular fiction, however, required "translation," but its appeal was such that it found translators and adaptors.

Even before China's humiliation in the Opium War (1839–42), the old culture was showing signs of strain from forces both external and internal. Once the treaty ports were established, the cultural encounter with the European powers was under way. The primary cultural mediator, however, came to be Japan, which had a head start in the mass translation of

European texts. After China's humiliating defeat (1894–95), Japan was flooded with Chinese students, who translated Japanese translations of European textual culture and borrowed the Japanese characters for translating European concepts. In contrast to India, where English became a lingua franca, Chinese continued to be the unifying language; but, as had happened long before with the importation of Buddhism, it became a new Chinese with the resources to engage more effectively in its cultural encounter with the West.

In some ways the European periodization of early modernity works no better for India than for China. Changes were under way already in the early second millennium that would mark the later era as very dissimilar to what had gone before. We have seen that the vast vernacularization of the subcontinent began around the start of the second millennium and was everywhere more or less complete by around the sixteenth century. Even in the learned traditions of Sanskrit something new was unmistakably happening. There were the first self-conscious editions of the epics, for example, with a *Mahabharata* prepared in the eleventh century in Kashmir (by a scholar named Devabodha) and the *Ramayana* in thirteenth-century south India (by a scholar named Udali Varadaraja). Then too, the first complete edition of the four Vedas and all their subdivisions came to be produced in a massive work of scholarship in the mid-fourteenth century. A new style of philology, or scholarly reading, came into being as well, signaled by the literary commentary, invented, it seems, in the early years of the millennium.

In dramatic contrast to China—and of course Europe, where the invention would help define the early modern era—printing was of no relevance to India, which remained a manuscript culture, and to some degree an oral culture, well into the colonial era (the bardic tradition of western India was vibrant as late as the eighteenth century; see chapter 5). This manuscript culture, especially during the Mughal period, was hugely successful in achieving both astonishing accuracy and widespread dissemination of texts. While admittedly works could be expanded, interpolated, and otherwise changed from the original, practices were in place designed to ensure almost absolute accuracy in handwritten reproduction. Thus the many hundreds of copies of the great Bengali poetic biography of the mystic Caitanya (1486–1534), the *Caitanya-carit-amrta* (*Nectar of the Life of Caitanya*, by Krishnadasa Kaviraj, last quarter of the sixteenth century), were produced with complete uniformity. Equally remarkable, the most important

Hindi work, *Ram-carit-manas* (*The Sacred Lake of Rama's Deeds*, by Tulsi-das, c. 1575), was disseminated largely through oral performance across north India, yet the manuscripts of the work show remarkably little variation. Dissemination likewise astonishes with its breadth and relative speed. A celebrated poem like the *Gita-govinda* (*Song of Govinda*) of Jayadeva, for example, which was produced in Bengal in Eastern India in the twelfth century, could be found in Rajasthan, more than a thousand miles to the west, within a century.

Printing was irrelevant to this world not because it was unknown but because it was deemed unnecessary. North Indians were made aware of block printing by the Tibetans, who learned it from China as early as the ninth century. Pandits from the holy city of Varanasi who visited the Fifth Dalai Lama's court (in 1642 and later) helped to correct texts published in Lhasa, so we can be sure some were familiar with printing. Books were produced by moveable-type printing in Goa in the 1550s by the Portuguese (who were present on India's west coast from the end of the fifteenth century), but significantly, the experiment was short-lived and did not spread. If the Mughals did not know about printing firsthand, they were certainly exposed to printed books brought by European travelers, yet they had no interest in making their own. Perhaps the Mughals' indifference was related to their calligraphic tradition, which was unsuited to mechanical reproduction, but this would not explain the indifference of Hindus or Jains, for whom calligraphy was never a central cultural value.

Of a piece with this indifference to print is the relative unimportance of paper. Although introduced into the Indian subcontinent from Western Asia sometime in the thirteenth century (earlier introductions from Tibet never caught on), paper took centuries to make an impact, unlike its history in the European and Islamic world, where, by providing a cheap alternative to parchment, paper dramatically opened up communication practices. The state the Mughals ruled from the late sixteenth century on came to be called a *kagaj-raj*, or paper empire, and Islamic-style culture in India naturally conformed to the book practices of the Persian and Arab world. With many new textual collectivities entering Indian literary history in the early modern period—a good example are the Sikhs, a monotheistic religious community that originated in India in the late fifteenth century—the sheer amount of paper manuscript material did increase. But this happened very gradually and unevenly across the subcontinent, and whether it was a direct consequence of the availability of paper is open to

debate. In fact, long after the introduction of paper and well into the modern era scribes in many parts of India continued to prefer older writing materials, especially palmyra leaf in the south (which actually seems to have seen an increase of use during this period) and birch bark in the north, in just the same way as writing itself continued to be supplemented by oral reproduction, which literacy typically undermined in other world regions.

The early modern epoch shows a remarkable efflorescence of several new literary cultures, among them Persian. As noted earlier, poets in India had been writing in the language almost as long as poets in Iran itself—though of course India and Iran were far less sharply bounded than they have become in the modern era—and major figures mark those early centuries, including perhaps the greatest, Amir Khusrau (1253–1325). But the language of power in those early centuries of the Delhi Sultanate (c. 1192–1526) and regional Islamic polities were the vernaculars, which had only recently emerged as literary codes. The Mughals, however, actively fashioned Persian into the language of the state and court culture, though poets and singers who used Sanskrit and Hindi were equally welcome and often crowned with distinguished titles, and the sultanate attracted men of learning from across India and even from Iran as poets left the Iranian Safavid state, whether for political or religious reasons remains unclear.

With the rise of Indian Persian poetry, the question raised earlier—what makes Indian literature Indian, if anything other than the fact of being produced in India—is posed once again. The concept of *sabk-i hindi*, or the “Indian style,” which has often been used to characterize this literature, is now understood to be a category of nineteenth-century nationalist Iranian vintage, according to which real Persian literature could only be composed by Persians in Persia, not one developed by the early modern writers or readers themselves. (To some extent, in fact, the “Indian” style can be found among Safavid poets in Iran.) Yet there is something about Indo-Persian poetry that sets it off from the classical works of the poets and literary men of classical Persian, Saadi (c. 1200–1292?), for example, or Hafez (1315–1390), and draws it closer to the formal concerns of a broader Indic tradition. Syntactical innovations such as extended nominal compounding are the formal hallmark of Sanskrit court literature in particular; the studied use of *iham*, or double entendre, is very similar to *shlesha*, or the simultaneous “embrace” of two meanings; *kaifiyat* (the term itself is an invention of eighteenth-century Urdu writers) is something close to the Sanskrit notion

of *rasa*, the emotional impact of a literary work; dense metaphoricity is of the kind theorized in Sanskrit rhetoric and largely unfamiliar from the Iranian style. Consider the complexity of the image Bedil Dehlavi (1642–1720) uses in this poem:

What was it  
that plucked at the strings of your heart  
that you came here  
to divert yourself among such as me, and us?  
You are the springtime  
of another world. How is it  
that you're here, in *this* garden? (trans. Shamsur Rahman Faruqi)

This is unlike almost anything in Persian found outside of India. A similar kind of distinctive and innovative style marks Indo–Persian prose, best exemplified in the work of the greatest intellectual at Akbar's court, the historian Abu'l-Fazl (1551–1602). The following is the opening of his *History of Akbar* (*Akbarnama*) (see also chapters 3 and 5), where he recounts receiving the commission to compose the work:

Day after day this determination took shape, and the threads of success were coming together until, from the court of all excellence, an order was given for the patronage of this favored one, Abu'l-Fazl, son of Mubarak, who had placed the cap of utter devotion on the head of his heart and shaken the eighteen thousand worlds from the sleeve of loyalty. (trans. Wheeler M. Thackston)

If the consolidation of Persian as a dominant language of literature in India in the early modern era was a consequence of its consecration by the Mughals as a dominant language of power, its life was tied inextricably to that power and would end with it. This did not occur with finality until after the full dissolution of the Mughal Empire with the Indian Rebellion of 1857, but signs of Persian's loss of cultural energy were visible earlier. As a consequence of this loss a widespread north Indian vernacular, eventually named Urdu, was gradually upgraded to a literary language through incorporation of major elements of Persian literary culture, including vocabulary, rhetoric, motifs, and of course script. Urdu was used



to produce a literature of astonishing subtlety and sophistication—and self-revelation, as in the poetry of Mohammad Taqi “Mir” (1725–1810):

There was a time when Mir—before tyranny killed him—was  
    young.  
His style of poetry aroused tumult and lamentation.  
The page on which his poetry was inscribed was a packet of magic.  
He recited his *ghazal* and people raptly gazed at his face. A strange  
    and wondrous sight it was.  
In Delhi, on whichever street he would wander, with afflicted  
    heart,  
there walked with him a noise and turmoil like Doomsday.

He wasn't ever downcast, like dust sodden with water:  
he was a storm, a terrible wonderful thing; a clamor that shook the  
    whole world.

...

Was anyone in the world, Mir, ignorant of you?  
And yet when you ceased to be, no name or trace of you was to be  
    found. (trans. Faruqi)

Another register of this same North Indian vernacular would appropriate the vocabulary, rhetoric, motifs, and what had emerged as the dominant script of Sanskrit literary culture. This language would come to be called Hindi, and while literary experiments in Hindi can be found as early as the late fourteenth century (not by Hindus, however, but by Sufis), beginning in the late sixteenth century poets began to produce a literary corpus of such depth that the language would eventually replace Sanskrit as the principal courtly and religious idiom across the north. Key figures of the early history of Hindi include the court poet Keshavdas (1555–1617), and two authors of devotional literature, Surdas (1483?–1573?), poet of lyrics in praise of the god Krishna, and Tulsidas (1532–1623), author of a *Ramayana* epic. The dividing line between the courtly and the devotional cannot always be clearly drawn. Situated right on this line is the following poem by Surdas, which develops a motif of the legend of god come to earth as the cowherd Krishna (also called Mohan, Shyam), who has departed for the city of Mathura, leaving the young women of Braj, his

village, brokenhearted. One of the women speaks here, with a conceit that testifies less to the fervor of the devotee than to the sophistication of the imagist:

Mathura's wells must be clogged with my letters.  
Mohan, for his part, sends not a one,  
    and mine are never returned.  
Messengers traveling there from Braj  
    seem to forget to search him out,  
Or maybe Shyam silences them with some palaver,  
    or maybe they perish halfway there.  
Maybe a cloudburst has soaked all the paper,  
    or all the ink has dried, or a forest fire  
    has burned all the shoots that make all the quills,  
Or the scribes, says Sur, have gone blind  
    from all their writing: cataract-doors  
    have closed and blocked their eyes. (trans. John Stratton  
Hawley)

The differentiation of Urdu and Hindi was a slow process and, in the early modern era, never clearly enunciated. There is much evidence that the two literary cultures were broadly overlapping: Hindi poets could make use of Persian-Urdu vocabulary and sometimes script, and Persian and Urdu poets would adopt motifs and narratives from the Hindi tradition. It was mainly in the twentieth century, perhaps only in mid-century, with the importation of a nationalism that required single peoples with single languages and scripts, that the process was complete, with Hindi becoming the national language of India and Urdu that of Pakistan.

Poetry would continue to dominate the literary cultures of the region. To be sure, prose genres are available, from the massive Persian histories of the Mughals to the mid-sixteenth-century Telugu romances, such as the *Kalapurnodayamu* (*The Sound of the Kiss*) of Pingali Suranna (identified by its recent translators as “in a certain sense, the first Indian novel,” though in fact it is in mixed prose and verse, and many of the elements of the tale are very old). But storytelling was typically oral. Not until the beginning of the nineteenth century and at the behest of British scholars at Fort William College in Calcutta were the vast Urdu linked story collections known as *dastan* committed to writing, the most celebrated being Khalil Ali Khan

Ashk's *Dastan-e Amir Hamza*, starring the paternal uncle of the Prophet (1801). Other older genres either disappeared or ceased to be produced. Especially curious is the fate of Sanskrit drama. The high tradition of theater marked by the works of Kalidasa (fourth–fifth century) declined over the following millennium, so that by the end of the precolonial era (c. 1800) it was only the one-act monologue (*bhana*) that was still being composed. Very few vernacular dramatic traditions are known, one being the *kuravanci*, a dance-drama genre involving lovelorn ladies and bird-catcher fortune-tellers, cultivated in Tanjore (from where the story that was to become the basis for Mozart's most famous opera, *The Magic Flute*, was exported in the mid-eighteenth century). But something must have lived on, though the genealogy has never been fully traced; larger-scale Sanskrit dramas from the courts of seventeenth-century Rajasthan and Tamil Nadu—perhaps the tip of an iceberg—remain largely unstudied or often unpublished. The spectacular, and spectacularly successful, play by Agha Hasan Amanat, *Court of Indra (Indersabha, 1853)*, the first Urdu drama, did not come out of nowhere; and it was to go somewhere indeed, influencing the Parsi theater of Bombay and thereby the future Bollywood film industry.

The kinds of literary processes we have sketched in north India were replicated, to be sure with all the variations produced by particular histories and regional genius, across India during the early modern period. Devotional poetry of great intensity was promoted in temple and village side by side with the courtly productions much sought after for edification, adornment, and pleasure by small kingdoms, whether in Bengal or Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh or Nepal. While works in Sanskrit and Persian continued to be written, they now were complemented, if not overshadowed by vernacular literary composition. The unimpeded reproduction of long-standing convention in idiom, theme, and genre may suggest stasis to those outside the literary cultures, as it did to the British colonialists, who labeled “decadent” anything incompatible with their own Victorian Protestant values. But to those within, such reproduction often conceals the dynamism of small refinements that the “intelligence of tradition” such as the Indian elevates as the hallmark of literary mastery.

Visitors from the West had been coming to India for millennia—Persians, Greeks, Romans . . . Danish, Dutch, English, French—and often left their mark on literary culture; the similarities between Sanskrit and Greek drama, for example, have long intrigued scholars. But the

consolidation of British rule after 1800 and absorption of India into the British Empire after 1857 enabled European language and literary practice to completely transform the Indian literary landscape. For one thing, the deepest structures of literary feeling began to mutate. Realism, historicism, Romantic authenticity, social improvement—all these largely new values came with colonial modernity. For another, the languages of literature themselves were to modernize—those that could not would be pronounced decadent or dead—so much so that, in a way strikingly different from what happened in China, readers without special training would increasingly be cut off from the works of their literary past. Traditions cultivated with such loving care by Indian poets and critics for a thousand years or more would simply be swept away, and left in their wake was an ever-thickening cloud of obliviousness of what had come before, and an ever more anxious uncertainty about the open road ahead.

## Conclusion

Direct comparison of non-Western literary traditions must address both a general and a particular challenge. The former lies in the fact that literary traditions are evolving rather than stable systems, which accordingly cannot be captured, without serious distortion, in the sort of freeze-frame narrative required of the comparative method, with its fixed objects. The particular challenge of comparing outside the West means acknowledging that its categories and norms are actually just historical particulars rather than timeless universals, and that accordingly, other categories and norms are to be expected, and difference is not to be regarded as deficiency.

It is a truism that identity is constructed by comparison; through comparison, diverse communities find some sort of unity. Comparison with India and China was one means, among others of course, by which the fractious polities of the western end of Eurasia became “Europe” and “the West” to begin with. The essentialized commonality given India by Europe and the work of Indian intellectuals themselves created the cultural construct that made a modern “Indian” identity possible. That same process gave China what it had always wanted, an imagined unified “Chinese” identity. To throw “China and India” as a comparison set into the familiar clichés complicates things. India and Europe share the epic in the conventional sense; China and Europe share early modern print culture; China and India

share a fascination with mood and feeling. The stability of binary comparison disintegrates.

The literary cultures of China and India do share a range of phenomena that is broad and deep. The commonalities of their larger environment are indeed striking. Both China and India possessed learned traditions of great historical depth and continuity, which were tasked with similar responsibilities of editing, preserving, commenting on, and critiquing literary works. In both, common social functions—the praise of princes and patrons, for example—worked themselves out in different ways. We find comparable dynamics of literary gatherings and literary societies, richly documented in different places at different times. We find comparable town and village performance traditions, again each working with its own resources. Many genres are familiar to both cultures: for example, what we have discussed under the heading of “lyric” or “drama,” without being too troubled by the use of Western categories.

Other genres confront us with precisely the threat of European conceptual domination that we have to navigate with care. If we follow Hegel on what constitutes an “epic,” for example, there is no epic in China; if we ask instead what kind of historical, imaginative, and political work certain texts perform, then a Chinese epic emerges as readily as an Indian one.

At the same time, the contrasts between these two cultures are undeniable and consequential. They can be found everywhere, from the most material level of literary culture to the most abstract. A salient example of the former is provided by the role of paper and printing. In China, these produced a transformation that many scholars have seen as the start of modernity. In India, printing was known but rejected, and paper continued to be supplemented by—and in many areas ignored in favor of—traditional materials, palm leaf and birch bark. By contrast, new forms of literary practice, including vernacular language use and the growth of commentaries for new reading publics, combined to produce something of an early modernity around the same time.

In China, a single language, or script language, was used for literary culture for more than two millennia, though vernacular registers developed in different locales and venues. In India, after some 1,500 years of Sanskrit’s dominance, new regional languages burst into prominence and were cultivated for literary purposes, as were later new transregional languages, Persian and Hindi. In China, the unity of the language produced an imagined unified literary culture, divided by special interests in different forms.

In India, that unity, to the degree it existed, emerged out of a shared concern with a pool of narratives, motifs, allusions, and expressive techniques. In China, the same script was read everywhere the literary culture extended, but everywhere the language was spoken differently. In India, Sanskrit was spoken everywhere more or less similarly, with wide mutual intelligibility, but it was read everywhere in different scripts. In China, poetry could not be understood without a detailed historical apparatus, identifying the poet and when and where he wrote. In India, poetry could not be understood with a historical apparatus; it was meant precisely to express what was beyond time and place.

Literature is a form of life, and Chinese and Indian literary traditions have long embodied larger trends in Chinese and Indian life. These show commonalities but also profound differences, with regard to the importance and nature of historical imagination, for example; the relationship between culture and state; and the very nature of language itself. Many of these trends continue; indeed, no better exemplar exists for understanding what the past of China and India means to their present than their deep historical literary cultures.

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