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A brief plea for East-West literary bridge-building

Abstract:

Stories are not important: they are vital. Stories are how humans make sense of the world. Their creators are recognised, as they should be. People with high levels of skill in storytelling are top players in the creative industries, and literary novels are often considered to be the pinnacle of intellectual achievement, celebrated by annual awards. Yet the main international prizes exclude most of the world's authors, as they use US and UK publishers as gatekeepers. Furthermore, the literary novel itself is arguably a predominantly Western format of long-form fiction. Some 60% of the world's population lives in Asia and people are accustomed to different stories in other formats. Training courses around the world offer MFAs which teach students Western narrative structures based on ideas from Aristotle, and focus on psychological elements associated with European thinkers such as Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Clearly, the differences between East and West in narrative structure and related factors would repay closer examination. Authors should be able to learn about stories with global rather than local appeal. This paper gives a brief overview of these issues and suggests avenues for further academic exploration.

Biographical Note

Nury Vittachi is a Teaching Fellow specializing in narrative structure at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. He is also a widely published author, with books such as *The Feng Shui Detective* (St Martin's Press, 2002), available in multiple languages around the world. He is the author of more than 40 books, and has more recently specialized in books aimed at younger readers, making science and history accessible to wider audiences. His publishers include Penguin Random House, John Wiley, and Allen & Unwin.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Literary prizes – MFAs – Man Booker – Asian market – East-west

The All-Important Imagination

Humans are dreamers. More than that, humans are successful *because* they are dreamers. The imagination appears to be a key or the key difference between *Homo sapiens sapiens* and varieties of early hominid who died out (Fuentes, 2017). In the 50,000 years or so since we developed the ability to think abstractly, we haven't changed: we're letting ourselves be mentally transported away from physical reality more than ever. The average person today has been measured to spend between 30 and 47 per cent of their waking hours in some form of daydreaming, according to one study (Singer, 1975). In addition to that, we spend many hours a day looking at screens, digesting dramas or reality shows or news stories: a 2016 study indicated that the average American spent ten hours a day consuming electronic media (CNN, 2016). The rest of the world is not just catching up, but in some places has overtaken these statistics. People in Indonesia, Philippines China, Brazil spent more time with screens than Americans in 2014, according to a Morgan Stanley survey (Meeker, 2014). This appetite for removing ourselves from mundane reality may well be good for people in the creative industries, who work as guides to imagined worlds. But narrowing our focus to written fiction, the root of the majority of entertainment items, we need to ask a question: what are the inhabitants of planet earth reading, and what should we be training new authors to write?

What in the World are People Reading?

For decades, books which win the annual Man Booker Prize (known as simply the Booker Prize before 2002) or the annual Pulitzer Prize for Literature have been presented in newspapers and media worldwide as if judges have declared them to be the finest books published in the world that year. There's a significant sales boost as libraries stock up on them and they are added to literary reading lists by educators around the world. In 1997, 40,000 extra copies of the Booker Prize winning volume were published within days of the announcement (Squires, 2007).

Yet can these tomes really claim to be the world's best books? For most of their existences, these prizes have not been chosen from a list of the planet's books, but have been limited to works coming from a small minority of countries. The Pulitzer, to this day, is limited to works written by US nationals and published in that country. The Booker Prize was launched in 1968 but has generally been limited to authors from the Commonwealth, plus Ireland and South Africa: roughly fifty countries out of the approximately 200 on Earth. Today, the prize does allow entries from writers around the world but the books have to have been published in English by a UK publisher.

How much can prizes published for audiences in just two countries tell us about the world's taste in books? Very little, judging by the responses of the planet's book-buyers. Books which win the Man Booker are sometimes, but not always, good sellers in the UK, and the same can be said for Pulitzer Prize winners in the US. But over the rest of the globe? Many of these volumes barely make a ripple in the commercial book business in Asia and Africa. People in those regions are not reading these books. They are reading other things. Although its judges sometimes show a recurring fascination with India, many Man Booker Prize winners share themes and are of a particular style. A 2014 study of Man Booker Prize winners showed that the winning

novels tend to be ‘solemn, serious texts written by British or Irish men, and the stories they tell concern young British or Irish men struggling, often alone, in pain, and under the threat of impending age, through a brutal, violent, and amoral world’ (Powell, 2014).

Does any of this matter? In terms of both logic and economics (the book business is a business after all), the answer is: yes, it does. About 60 percent of humanity lives in Asia, and it is a region where folk have not lost the reading habit, as Internet penetration is much lower than in the West. Add in the figures for Africa, and we have fully 76.2% of humanity living outside the West (Worldometers, 2017). Clearly, the views of the majority, three out of four human beings, should not be disregarded.

Training Writers for the World’s Readers

So much for the world’s most praised books. We can usefully use the same lens to examine related areas, such as courses set up to train would-be authors, often known as ‘creative writing MFAs’, with the initials standing for Master of Fine Arts. There we see a similar imbalance. These types of creative writing course focus strongly on the Western concept of the novel. Books which win prizes in the west – those same Man Booker and Pulitzer winners mentioned above – are presented during courses as the finest models of the art. A 2016 study of creative writing programs indicated that variety does exist (Leahy, 2016). Yet the variety actually appears to refer to books, genres and styles within the broad Western canon or in matching styles—and arguably not to texts popularly read in India, China or Indonesia, with their legions of ghosts, melodrama and romance.

This is not to say that people in Asia don’t enjoy a wide range of good fiction, some quite literary. Books sell well in the region, and stories appear in many formats. Stories can be found in physical books, newspapers, magazines, and in electronic formats. In some countries, fiction appears on computer and telephone screens. China’s 2003 bestselling fictional narrative was distributed by computer, and Japan’s 2006 bestseller on telephones. (Both of these stories found huge success before the Kindle was launched and e-books became a familiar word.) It appears evident that as the world becomes more globalised, ambitious writers and the creative writing trainers who teach them will need to take a broader approach to the whole question of what a good story is, what a popular story is, and how stories should be delivered to the world’s public.

This leads us to a key question: what are the differences between stories in the West and stories in the East? For the purposes of this paper, we will stick to these broad, frustratingly generalised categories. This is clearly a huge topic, and deserves a full-length study. However, this paper may serve to provide a general introduction to the question and an overview of the factors that can be usefully considered. First we need to define our terms. We can agree that a ‘story’ is a work written by an ‘author’. Dictionaries offer us descriptions of the word ‘story’, such as narratives or tales or accounts of events. These may be accurate in as far as they go, but from the point of view of active participants in the creative industries, we might wish to go further, taking a practical view. This paper offers this definition:

A professional author is a person who makes his or her living by producing sustained acts of imagination about invented or taken-from-life characters, generally resulting in saleable,

profitable entertainment products, such as books, serials in periodicals, dramas, films, comic books, games and similar items.

These items may appear in a range of formats, particularly in Asia. In this region, daily newspapers often carry fiction serials that run for weeks or months. In South Korea and other places, episodic TV dramas are much loved. Visual novels appearing on the Internet, or even circulated as games, are also popular, in Japan and elsewhere. Thus we can conclude that a narrow focus on a single format, Western-style novels, may be unhelpful for aspiring writers wanting their work to attract global audiences.

Psychological Stories

If we look at creative writing courses in the West, and the relatively small number of counterparts which have sprung up in the East, we find that students are taught that a story is fundamentally an account of a protagonist who goes through a turning point in his or her life. Students learn the Hero's Journey, an Aristotelian story shape often associated with the mythology expert Joseph Campbell (Campbell, 1949), involving a protagonist who goes through an emotional change (the crisis), coinciding with an action high point (the climax) leading to a 'new normal' (the resolution). Redemption and salvation are the main underlying themes.

As Campbell himself said, the model is not just very psychological, but can be directly associated with the ideas of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, the European developers of analytical psychology who rose to fame in the first half of the 20th century. In this story model, the protagonist typically triumphs over obstacles by going through an inner emotional crisis, and getting over psychological shortcomings such as a lack of confidence that has held him or her back in the past. Morality and good intentions trump money and power, as a cosmic justice mechanism rewards the people who make the right choices. The same psychological factors can be seen in the villain. Typically, the antagonist is revealed to have become evil because of some experience in his or her past. It is no surprise that authors are interested in psychological stress: A 2014 study indicated a close connection between trauma recovery and the creative mind (Richman, 2014).

Interestingly, we find these 'morality-above-all' factors frequently appear in classic Western novels before they were identified by Freud and Jung, suggesting that they lie deep in the Western psyche, possibly from Judeo-Christian roots. For example, in *Pride and Prejudice*, our heroine Elizabeth Bennett feels she lacks the wealth and beauty that successful people have in her society, but she eventually becomes the conquering heroine using solely her inner qualities: her good-heartedness, honesty, morality and wit. Morality wins, mammon loses. At the same time, Mr Darcy reveals that his unpleasant behaviour stems from the way he was parented (Freud would have nodded sagely). 'As a child ... I was not taught to correct my temper,' Darcy reveals. 'I was given good principles but left to follow them in pride and conceit.' He reveals to Elizabeth that he was 'spoilt by my parents... allowed, encouraged, almost taught to be selfish and overbearing; to care for none beyond my family circle ...'

In classic Asian literature, we also find the morality factor, but it is often less subtle and less psychological. The good guy still wins and the bad guy still loses. Yet often we find that it is not their inner strengths that enable them to win in the end, but external factors – they have worked harder to become better swordsmen, or they are

smarter strategists, or are backed by allegiance to superior leaders, gods or immortals. Again, a detailed comparison of morality in Eastern and Western stories would be a major undertaking, so we present only an overview.

Story Shapes

Benefit exists in looking in more detail at another key narrative factor: story shapes. How is a standard narrative structure from the East different from one generated in the West? Let's start with the more familiar Western models, as taught in MFA courses and screenwriting lessons. We are introduced to a hero, who is facing a challenge. An 'inciting incident', to use the phrase of screenwriting guru Robert McKee (McKee, 1997), propels him or her to seek answers. He or she struggles a great deal, but eventually wins the battle and returns home to a 'new normal'. This is sometimes known as the Hero's walk, or the monomyth. Often it is matched with Aristotle's ideas of story development, which see tales consisting of seven or eight elements. A typical Aristotelian pattern would see a division of elements as follows: 1) The Introduction; 2) The Challenge; 3) Rising Action; 4) The Reversals; 5) The Crisis; 6) The Climax; and 7) Falling Action/ the Resolution. In the movie business, they are grouped into three clumps, and we end up with the Three Act Structure. The first act establishes the identity of the main character and his or her problem. The second act deals with his or her journey towards solving that problem. The third act is the final solution and the return to an improved normality (Tierno, 2002).

In ancient Asian writings, we find a similar structure, but the standard pattern is simpler. It is most commonly summed up as four parts: 1) Introduction, 2) Development, 3) Twist (or turn) and 4) Resolution (or Reconciliation). This pattern can be seen in classic Chinese and Japanese stories, and was well known to ancient writers in the East Asian region. This is known as *kishutenketsu* in Japanese, and 起承轉合 (qi3 cheng2 zhuan3 he2) in Chinese. Although the two systems are similar, we can see one marked difference – Aristotle's all-important 5th element, the personal crisis, is missing in the Asian model. The word crisis in this sense refers to a change of heart, an inner transformation, a psychological watershed. As we have seen above, the Western appetite to include this in stories long pre-dates Freud. Other than that, we can see a lot of similarities between the two models. The Asian authors' first two elements, the introduction and the development, are roughly equivalent to the Western model's opening elements: the introduction, the challenge, the rising action, and perhaps the reversals (which was Aristotle's word for the central struggles at the heart of a story). Interestingly, the principle of cosmic justice, which we can call karma, exists in both Eastern and Western stories, although is often minimised to almost nothing in Man Booker Prize winners. There have been some interesting discussions on the nature of the 'twist' or 'turn' in Asian storytelling, with scholars divided as to whether it is close to the Western elements of crisis/climax (Cahill, 2003).

Characters and Worlds

There is another very important difference between Eastern and Western story shapes. To move towards that point, we need to consider the number of main characters. If we look at one of the first great Western novels, *Tristram Shandy* (1759), the number of

main characters is clear: there is the novel's narrator Tristram, his father, his mother, his uncle, and his servant. If we look at *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), we find the main characters are Elizabeth, her parents, and the beaux (Darcy and Mr Bingham) with Elizabeth's sisters making occasional forays into the spotlight. *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) has only one main character, the narrator Lemuel Gulliver. The other characters appear only in one section or another.

Now if we compare them to Chinese or other Asian classics, we find a marked difference. *Water Margin* has 108 individuals seen as main characters. They take turns in the spotlight. *Dream of the Red Chamber* has more than 400 people described as main characters. The Ramayana of India has 500 *sargas*, which we can see as chapters, involving innumerable characters. *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is a saga of some 800,000 words, with shifting main characters. At the start, we think the three unrelated 'brothers' are the main characters of the story – but then the central character's place is taken by the priest Zhuge Liang.

This observation leads us to the main difference between Eastern and Western stories. Even a cursory glance shows that the story shapes of these Asian classics are very different – they are big, sprawling sagas, without a central protagonist, or with multiple people taking turns filling that role. They are collections of stories drawn together and presented as a single tale because of the shared threads that run through them. Common in Asia for millennia, and now found all over the world, we find the lengthy episodic tale—in which a big cast of characters go through a vast series of adventures. Asians went for a world-building model of fiction long before science fiction and fantasy made it popular in the West.

But these are the classics from East and West, hundreds of years old. How do these differences apply to the modern market for stories? The simple answer is that we can continue to see these factors visible. In the West, praised novels (those which win awards, for example) tend to be individual standalone tales, usually with a single protagonist going through a turning point as its main element. But Asian stories are still more likely to be episodic and ongoing, serial-like – we need most of the stories to have no turning point for the central character, because he or she is likely to appear in the next episode and the next and the next.

The traditional Asian story shape can these days also be found in Western literature in at least two areas – TV series and comic book series. And sometimes Asian stories are popular globally. An obvious example of a popular Asian intellectual property with global appeal is the large set of tales associated with *Pokemon*, short for Pocket Monsters, a narrative which started in a game but spread to TV episodes, books and movies. There are no central characters which run through all the stories – but there is a single world in which all the tales takes place.

The Future

Will Asia's creative industries move towards a more Western story structure, in the way that the West has developed an appetite for world-building and episodic structures with multiple main characters? The short answer is yes. Great frustration exists in the creative industries in Asia due to their lack of success in producing material which is successful internationally, compared to Western counterparts. It is extremely rare for a Chinese or Indian film to be a mainstream hit in the West. Yet

popular Western films are very often hits in Asia. As a result, Asian creators of content are actively studying Western narrative structures.

One intriguing observation, heard recently at the science fiction convention in Hong Kong, is that Chinese practitioners, if they can absorb Western narrative structures, will be in a position of great advantage. Western creative industries are often rather self-absorbed, while Asians are familiar with the mythic elements of their own stories, and yet can easily find access to those of Western book writers and screenwriters.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a very brief introduction to a big subject. It has identified a disjunction between key areas of the commercial fiction sector in the West, notably in top prizes and academic training courses, and the majority of the world's readers, who live in the East, and don't read Man Booker Prize winners, and who are less familiar with Western psychological mores. It has suggested one way to bridge this gap is to become more aware of the number of ways people in the East consume stories. It further indicates that an awareness of story shapes in the East would pay dividends for authors in the West wanting their work to reach global markets. Conversely, Asian authors can benefit by learning about Western story shapes. If all goes well on both sides, the ultimate result should be richer, more culturally diverse stories that should benefit readers everywhere – and help people from different sides of the planet understand each other better.

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