

Globalism, Culture, and the New Proximity:

Self, Other, and the Ethics of Collegiality

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I

Before I begin, I would like to thank Romance Languages and Veronica in particular for the kind invitation and the introduction. I am also grateful to you all for coming out to hear what I have to say on my current research in general and, in particular, on the subject of self and other, here and there, inside and outside, culture and community, time and space, especially the time and space of reading, under globalization. Now what interests me these days is how these parameters of life in the expanding “network society” shape what I call the new “cosmopolitan imaginary.” I will theorize this concept a bit at the end, but for the most part I will tackle it by way of two examples. Not only as a courtesy to my hosts, I will talk about two novels by a contemporary Chinese-French writer who is becoming increasingly popular on both sides of the Atlantic: Dai Sijie. I will use the discussion of his works as a springboard for a brief, more theoretical presentation of the work-in-progress this analysis is part of.

Published in French as *Balzac et la petite tailleuse chinoise* in 2000 and translated into English the year after, Dai Sijie’s international bestseller *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* takes us back to the Chinese “Cultural Revolution.” It is an eminently political book not just because it chronicles political events but also because what is at stake here is a whole cosmopolitics of reading where reading the remote, different other’s texts becomes a tool of self-

understanding, dissent, and even survival. To survive means essentially to rescue the individual in you, to hold onto that which Mao's China threatens to take away from you. To resist this expropriation and save itself, the self appropriates the other and its writings. For, to confiscate the individual, authoritarianism symptomatically lays siege to the individual reader, sets out to kill off the individual *as* reader by keeping in check reading as individuating practice.

Totalitarian regimes in particular strive to rein in the free play of reading, to make sure the ensuing interpretations chime in with official ideology. Since ideology revolves around the suppression of the individual and since literature both represents "individual life" and enkindles it through reading in the readers themselves, despotic rulers have characteristically tried to ban either individualizing reading practices or individualizing texts, or both—when they have not outlawed literature altogether.

Of course, for the Chinese regime's censorious mindest some works prove more seditious, more ideologically undependable than others by origin, by being "Western" or simply "foreign," by theme, by style and vocabulary, or by foregrounding individual dramas and thus calling for a reading that acknowledges these dramas and by the same token the reader's particular predicament as an individual. It is this kind of literature that draws the heroes and heroines in Dai's *Balzac*. In reading somebody else, unfamiliar and far away as this somebody else may be, Dai's characters connect with one another and into a new, alternative kind of community. As they do so, they reach a better self-understanding, learn fundamental things about themselves and their world. Undoubtedly, in a different world Dumas *père*, Dostoevsky, and Joyce would have taught Dai's narrator and his friends different things, but in the world where the individual is a political abomination they teach their readers the ways of the self. Reading the other's forbidden writing becomes a compensatory exercise in selfhood, sets up a stage where

the self can go on by performing its vital routines, empathizing and sympathizing, suffering, rejoicing, and ultimately growing an identity in response to the passions, crises, joys, and similar displays of “individual life” in the other’s mesmerizing fiction. After reading to his girlfriend, the Little Seamstress, from Balzac’s *scène de la vie privée Ursule Mirouët*, an awe-struck Luo tells his friend, Dai’s narrating protagonist, that “This fellow Balzac is a wizard. . . . He touched the head of this mountain girl with an invisible finger, and she was transformed, carried away in a dream. It took a while for her to come down to earth. She ended up putting your wretched coat on She said having Balzac’s words next to her skin made her feel good, and also more intelligent.”

The girl literally “wears” Balzac, wraps herself up symbolically in the text of his 1841 novel, *Ursule Mirouët*, or at least in the fragments Luo’s friend was able to reproduce on the inside of a sheepskin coat. “I copied out,” the friend reveals, “the chapter where Ursule somnambulates. I longed to be like her: to be able, while I lay asleep in my bed, to see what my mother was doing in our apartment five hundred kilometers away, to watch my parents having supper, to observe their gestures, the dishes on the table, the color of the crockery, to sniff the aroma of their food, to hear their conversation . . . Better still, like Ursule, I would visit, in my dreams, places I had never set eyes on before.” “Longing” here unfolds as crosscultural mimesis of identity at equal distance from René Girard’s “I desire what others do” confrontational model first sketched out in *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, and Lacan’s “I desire as the Other” substitutive scenario. In the former, the other is a “detour” of the self, but also a competitor. In the latter, the self is a detour by way of “the trajectory of the desire of the Other,” therefore neither model fully applies. In Dai the other and the self do not compete but cooperate on the self’s project—on the self as a project, a work-in-progress of sorts—with the other

providing a necessary alternative, *other* route, the territory, the desire the apprenticeship the self must go through. Dai's narrator does not want *what* the other does; he learns, or relearns to want *as* the other wants, to long, dream, and imagine as she, Ursule, does in Balzac's short story. He does not want to be Ursule but like her. Similar to the Little Seamstress, he does not wish to give up his self. On the contrary, he wants to be himself, his own self, by being *like* Balzac's heroine, through *imitatio alterae*, by going through her selfhood calisthenics, by dreaming, daydreaming, and reinserting himself through Balzac's imagination into the cozy, nurturing nest of his family, from which the "Cultural Revolution" wrenched him to send him off to a remote mountain village to be "reeducated."

Reeducation is key in the book as it was in the China of the '70s, when the author himself was subjected to it for several years. Reflecting Mao's "hatred of intellectuals," the "revolutionary" method of fostering a "new generation" was, Dai notes, distinctively anti-intellectual, and it sought to eradicate the intellectual because the intellectual was viewed as a cosmopolite, vulnerable to outside influences, hence unreliable, potentially subversive. *Balzac*'s author stresses from the outset that "foreignness" was in principle suspicious and so were the intellectuals, more likely than other social categories to catch its disease as they dwelt in cities. And since the cosmopolite was or was presumed to be an urbanite, reeducation was not only an anti-cosmopolitan but also an anti-urban campaign in rural setting, with millions of "young intellectuals," high school graduates like Dai's heroes, sent into rural exile and subjected to a combination of hard labor, interrogation under torture, and deprivation of all sorts.

Fortunately, the flip side of cultural and political indoctrination, cultural deprivation, in particular reading deprivation, does not work in Dai for the narrator and his friend come upon a suitcase full of banned Western classics from Hugo and Stendhal to Balzac, Flaubert, Romain

Rolland, Dickens, Emily Brontë, and Gogol. Not only does the “elegant” valise “g[ive] off a whiff of civilization”; it is civilization itself, or one of its faces, vestige and message from another culture now distant and forbidden but capable of playing the role the carpenter’s case Robinson Crusoe manages to salvage: cut off from others, the self nevertheless possesses their tools, and with them self-reconstruction can begin. With a nicely aimed irony, Dai’s narrator calls this self-reconstruction “Balzacian reeducation.” The former purports to fetter the self, to disable it; the latter enables it, encourages its growth, its morphing into the desired image of itself. This “metamorphosis” is, Luo acknowledges, reading’s “ultimate pay-off,” and reading to his girlfriend from Balzac does pay off because she is thus magically “transformed,” no longer a “simple mountain girl.” *Père Goriot—Old Go*, in Chinese translation—“seduce[s],” “overwhelm[s],” and “spellb[inds]” as it “reveals” its readers the “mystery of the outside world, especially the world of women, love and sex.”

But the outside leads inside. As it reveals itself, the other prompts self-revelation, helps the self rediscover himself and his world. By no means the most realistic piece of *La Comédie humaine*, Ursule Mirouët de-realizes contingent reality and refutes its rhetoric. “Picture, if you will,” the narrating protagonist invites us,

a boy of nineteen, still slumbering in the limbo of adolescence, having heard nothing but revolutionary bladder about patriotism, Communism, ideology and propaganda all his life, falling headlong into a story of awakening desire, passion, impulsive action, love, of all the subjects that had, until then, been hidden from me.

In spite of my complete ignorance of that distant land called France (I had heard Napoleon mentioned by my father a few times, that was all), Ursule’s story rang as true as if it had been about my neighbors. The messy affair over inheritance and money that

befell her made the story all the more convincing, thereby enhancing the power of the words. By the end of the day I was feeling quite at home in Nemours, imagining myself posted by the smoking hearth of her parlour in the company of doctors and curates . . . Even the part about magnetism and somnambulism struck me as credible and riveting.

“Wrapped up,” like the Little Seamstress, in Balzac’s “story of miracles,” the narrator is entranced by this fiction truer than life and cannot help notice that the “credible” fantasy gives the lie to a whole world and whole discourse that claimed to be “scientific.” Balzac manages to “reeducate” where Mao fails because his tale takes one (see Lat. *educere*, “lead forth”) in the right direction, not away from the self, nor does it take away the self from his reader in the process. Quite the contrary: Balzac is a good teacher because he teaches the ways of the self; the other’s “story of awakening” helps the narrator awaken into selfhood. This happens because the narrator’s cosmopolitan perusal of *Ursule Mirouët* “naturalizes” the text. This does remain “distant,” “different” but at the same time opens up a welcoming and familiar space, from “outside” moves “inside” while rendering this “inside” more mobile than ever, so that the story could have been, Dai’s hero realizes, about his “neighborhood” as much as he himself would have felt “at home” in Ursule’s, that is, his own “stories” could have taken place there. Dai gives Ursule a home away from home in his hero’s reading, and in turn Balzac gives his Chinese reader a home away from the one he left behind. Canceling the squalor of the narrator’s living quarters, this imaginary home can make the imagining self at home, accommodate and boost the individual, his imagination, desire, and private projections.

These projections, these “revelations” are “salutary,” the narrator comes to realize, precisely because what they unveil is the dignity of the individual. Romain Rolland’s Jean-Christophe, we learn,

with his *fierce individualism* utterly untainted by malice, was a salutary revelation. Without him I would have never understood the *splendour of taking free and independent action as an individual*. Up until this stolen encounter with Romain Rolland's hero, my poor educated and re-educated brains had been incapable of grasping the notion of one man standing up against the whole world. The flirtation turned into a grand passion. Even the excessively emphatic style occasionally indulged in by the author did not detract from the beauty of this astonishing work of art. I was carried away, swept along by the mighty stream of words pouring from the hundreds of pages. To me it was the ultimate book: once you had read it, neither your own life nor the world you lived in would ever look the same. (italics added)

Dai's protagonist is “naturally drawn” to *Jean-Christophe*. Not only is he a musician like Rolland's hero, but they have the same kind of enemies, face the similar obstacles. Critics have pointed out that Jean-Christophe's life is based on Beethoven's, which Rolland chronicled in a biography published several years before the novel's first volume came out, but also on Wagner's and Mozart's—incidentally, the Mozart violin piece Dai's character performs before the stunned villagers when he arrives at his place of reeducation is introduced as *Mozart is Thinking of Chairman Mao*. But Rolland also put a lot of his own life into his character's, whose trajectory speaks to the author's exiles of body and mind, to his antinationalist pathos. A self-declared “internationalist at heart” and “citizen of the world,” Rolland writes the “ultimate book” because as Dai's hero reads the novel, the novel itself in turn “reads” its reader, its other, as it were, sees through his misfortunes and helps him see himself and his world with new eyes. This very personal, very political exchange between individuals so unlike in so many respects reeducates Dai's reader in the very best sense, teaching him the “notion of standing up against

the whole world” and thus for himself. So does Dumas’s *Count of Monte Cristo* in whose hero he has even more reasons to see himself, with his friend Four-Eyes completing his reeducation but leaving behind his treasure, in this case a treasure of books, with which the narrator and his friend will indeed change their own lives.

More importantly perhaps, both Jean-Christophe and the Count are romantic idealists, characters of a bygone era. Nor is Dai unaware of the marked contrast between such stories and the world in which they read them. At first glance, the disconnect between Dai’s realistically painted China and Dumas’s “pseudohistorical” France, as critics have called it, is absolute, unbridgeable. But the anachronistic insertion of Balzac, Flaubert, Melville, let alone Rolland and Dumas, into the “Cultural Revolution” serves a rhetorical purpose. The more romantic, extraordinary, and “incredible” the heroes of the forbidden books, the more they behave like individuals, assert their freedom, and proclaim a value in short supply in the reader’s world, thus the more credible they become, the more directly they speak to Dai’s world, the more they show what his readers are not allowed to be, what dreams they are prevented from dreaming. Somnambulism, dreams, oneiromancy (like in *Ursule Mirouët*) or psychoanalytically pursued *Traumdeutung* (like in Dai’s second novel), “cloak-and-dagger” fantasies, romanticism—all these are in fact more palpable and make a greater impact than any nitty-gritty realism exactly because of their “excessive,” “extravagant” psychologism, because of a display of individualism that declines to acknowledge a limit, a system of conventions, be those the conventions of verisimilitude. In Gogol and Flaubert no less than in Dumas and Rolland, Dai is looking for a psychological model—for an encoding of the individual—as far away as possible from conventionality, in particular from the psychological conventions ossifying inner life as the infamous “soul engineering” of Stalin, Mao, and their likes.

Two verisimilitude concepts clash here. Purportedly “realistic” as it may be, one is in effect undercut by the very ideology of “psychological” representation, which is twice predictable, and therefore implausible, first as part of a very limited, schematic repertoire of “types,” and second but not independent of this classification, as geared unambiguously toward a specific political action, either “progressive” or “reactionary.” This scheme renders the fictional and cinematic varieties of socialist realism Dai’s heroes have free access to—Chinese, North Korean, and Albanian, with Enver Hoxha’s “complete works” a stand-in for entire “Western Literature”—ham-fisted where psychological intricacies are concerned. The other kind of verisimilitude, while not necessarily nonrealistic—Balzac, Gogol, and a bit later Flaubert found modern European realism—does not rule out romantic, sentimental display of feelings, and derives its credibility from psychological representation unhampered by ideological predetermination. This does not mean that there is no ideology to fictional form in Balzac or Flaubert. It simply means that this ideology does not set out to contain in advance psychological expression, further, that given the political and ideological background against which Dai’s heroes read Balzac, Dumas, and Rolland, the other’s unconventional, extreme, high-flown, “outlandish” reports of inner life convey a sense of freedom, of individuality, putting forth exactly what the “Cultural Revolution” seeks to quash. This accounts for these reports’—these books’—exceptional status of “sacred objects,” salient *exceptions* to the governing rules and thus politically subversive. Again, *Lost Illusions* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* are not so a priori, or are not explicitly so. They become so through a cosmopolitan reading that “politicizes”—without fetishizing—its object within a determined, political and historical context.

II

Set in global-age China, *Le complexe du Di*, published in 2003 and translated into English as *Mr. Muo's Travelling Couch* in 2005, speaks to a different context. The difference is by no means dramatic, though. A Chinese expatriate living, like the author himself, in Paris since the early nineties, Muo returns to his native country only to discover that censorship has not disappeared. Alongside other forms of authority, it has changed, has become both sloppier and more focused. Of great interest is though what the city of Kunming's oddly named "Department of Clandestine Anti-publications" still keeps an eye on. Recycling the Dumasian treasure chest theme one more time, the Department's "treasure house" of "forbidden books" features two main categories of texts. The first includes the memoirs of Mao's personal physician, books on the 1989 Tiananmen Square student uprising, the power struggle within the Chinese Communist Party, the "Cultural Revolution"'s "reeducation camps," and the bizarre "cases of revolutionary cannibalism." These chronicle China's recent past, tell stories the current regime does not want told because they are incriminating chapters in its own biography. In brief, they expose the authoritarian heritage, the political unconscious of "free-market," entrepreneurial China, which explains the Department's interest in a second class of publications featuring "erotic novels," "licentious writings by libertine monks," Sade, ancient pornography, the Chinese Kama Sutra, Freud, and psychoanalysis generally.

The Chinese collective self and unorthodox accounts of its troubled history, on the one hand; the private self and a more theoretical yet no less disturbing understanding thereof, namely, Freudianism, on the other hand: both worry a regime who has misshaped the former by repressing the latter. A cosmopolite psychoanalyst apprentice of Freudian and Lacanian persuasion, Muo sees the "New China" through his masters' lenses, and what he discerns from the vantage point of radical otherness provided by Freud and Lacan is the "revenant" past, the

uncanny survival of the world described in *Balzac*. Muo's return—a psychoanalyst's—bears out, through the analysis he does, in the “observations” he cannot help making, a return of the repressed, of old pains and wrongs, whose public acknowledgment the abovementioned Department is set to preempt. As we may expect, psychoanalysis and authoritarianism are at loggerheads. The former's “truth,” Muo asserts, “no one can escape, . . . not even an official representative of law and order.” Etched in dreams, fantasies, slips of tongue, and the like, this truth invariably unsettles the truths embedded in official discourse, either complicates or render them partial, more or less than what they claim to be.

Tearing down this pseudo-rational discourse, psychoanalysis had been either banished or treated with a great deal of suspicion throughout the communist world. After 1989, this status has changed dramatically everywhere—not so in China. While advertising itself as globalization-friendly, the regime insists on keeping the country outside what Derrida describes as psychoanalysis' “becoming-a-world,” its “ongoing worldification.” Therefore, in “liberalized,” “cosmopolitan” China, Freud remains an “ostracized foreign body.” This body, this *oeuvre* offers up a definition of the self *other* than this discourse's crude determinism and more generally because it simply acknowledges this self, its uniqueness, its needs; what is more, it does not hesitate to apply itself to the system, scan its self-styled rationalism for symbolic, phallogocentric-autocratic drives intent on perpetuating themselves under new codes, languages, and institutions. Not unlike Balzac and Flaubert, Freud and Lacan warrant feelings and emotions, algorithms of private life and ultimately privacy, the rights of the individual. In so doing, their psychoanalysis indeed provides a psychological and political—no less than a cultural—other to the regime, an other whose texts Muo “interpolates” between himself and this regime's rhetoric to institute a “methodological” distance, a *discerning* interval.

This interval is a tool of critique. Banned by Chinese authority long after the cultural prohibition era has passed—at least officially—Freud helps Muo see how much of the “Cultural Revolution” is unofficially still lingering in the public or private unconscious. As in *Balzac*, the texts of the other help us make out our own self-alienation, the asymmetry between self-representation and actual self, between what we think we are or have, on the one hand, and what we actually are and, in being so, or in being forced to be so, what we lack. Dumas and Rolland afford this revelation by inserting themselves between Dai’s readers and what above I call the context of reading, and in so doing they break up a false-consciousness inducing continuity. Self-awareness arises in the resulting, fertile rift, as an effect of a reading that distances the readers from an anti-individualistic environment. But as they secure this protective distance, Luo, his friend, the Little Seamstress, and her father—who starts making clothes resembling those of Dumas’s characters—come to share a passion, learn a secret language, bind together. “Western literature” opens a gap at the same time that it closes those keeping apart the readers engaged in reading the forbidden texts, as well as the vaster gap between these texts’ authors and their Asian audience. The other brings them together as they pull him into their midst, a cosmopolitan dynamic the 2003 novel belabors perceptively. In a letter to his beloved Volcano of the Old Moon, now in a Chinese prison, Muo ponders his reasons for writing to her in French, a language “of which the dearly addressed understands scarcely a word”:

It is a small enigma, resonant with the sweet sound of happiness. . . . From now on, my dear Old Moon, my splendid Volcano, *we can look to this foreign tongue to unite us, reunite us, bind us together in a magical knot* that blossoms into the wings of an exotic butterfly—an alphabetic language from the other side of the world, whose orthography, complete with apostrophes and diacriticals, lends it the heady, impenetrable

air of esotericism. Your fellow prisoners, I can well imagine, will envy you your passing the time poring over love letters, to extract even the slightest triumphant particle of meaning from them. Do you remember those wonderful times we sat together listening to our favorite poets: Eliot, Frost, Pound, Borges? Their voices, each with its own personality and sonorous beauty, enveloped us, uplifted us, and made us dream, even though neither of us understood much English, much less Spanish. Those accents, those incomprehensible phrases, remain for me, even today, the loveliest music in the world. Music for the elect few, filled with the spirit of romance and melancholy. Our music. (italics added)

If he could, Muo insists, he would learn not only English and Spanish, but also Vietnamese, Catalan, Tibetan, Mongolian, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Sanskrit, then the language of Egyptian hieroglyphs, the less “common,” the more “recherché” and unyielding the better. These are highly “complicated” idioms of prayer and scholarly pursuit. They give access to sacred and secular truths as much as they shield those truths, create a sodality of study and worship while protecting it from intruders.

Since they help an “elite few” bond within this esoteric community—since inclusion is premised on exclusion—their cosmopolitanism may at first glance appear questionable. But Muo suspects that these languages’ “inner sanctum” can be “penetrated,” moreover, that he can “pray” for his beloved and himself in those languages on the altars of their grammars. Thus, in Muo’s imagination, the alien, exotic idiom suddenly becomes exoteric, opens up to include the studious lover and linguist and his beloved, to become a language of intimacy available to them yet still impenetrable to this other language’s others. Remarkably, it is the very “esotericism” and foreignness of French or any *other* language for that matter that “unite” and “bind,” which means

that the otherness ensconced in the other's "incomprehensible" tongue, the alterity insiders worship on its linguistic altarity, to recall Mark Taylor, is never irrevocably exclusive. It can be "called," "voiced" into a new inclusiveness. Yet this linguistic and cultural restrictiveness cannot be done away completely either. But Muo draws exactly from the *other* tongue's reserve of secrecy to develop a language of privacy, an idiolect in which he and his former girlfriend can be together as long as the likes of Judge Di cannot "translate" it.

As I show elsewhere in greater detail, translation, bilingualism, fluency in foreign languages generally foster a new, cosmopolitan togetherness, and *Balzac* itself is a case in point. But here, in this emphasis on the untranslatable, we run into a less discussed aspect of all translation and, based on translation, polyglotism, cross-cultural expertise overall, and cosmopolitanism: my tie with the other not native and not like me may require weak ties if not severing the ties to my actual or presumed place and community. Such cosmopolitan bonds may be rooted in individualism understood as disregard for local allegiances and obligations. In Muo's case, though, this individualism plays a positive because resistant role, for what it "excludes," what it keeps out of the linguistic-affective loop is not a community per se but a corrupt autocracy substituting itself for that community and political bondage for community bonds. The language of the other carves out a space where the lovers can "talk" to each other in that *other* language, can "communicate" and understand each other in a language ultimately "incomprehensible" because only this language, this "sanctum," allows for both self-expression and privacy. As Muo relives a Dantesque, Francesca da Rimini-like episode, the music of Eliot's poetry—the *other's* music—was, and its remembrance makes it become again, *their* music. In appropriating this tune they appropriate themselves and in so doing, according to *Balzac*'s narrator, they "take" the ultimate "action" an individual can take. The "mesmerizing, voluptuous

overtones” of the “foreign word” from “the other side of the world” give rise to an intimate “here and now” in which Muo and his girlfriend, separated out by time and space as they are, can nonetheless be “reunited” and bask in each other’s company.

The unknown, the unheard, the unfamiliar bewitch. Little Sister Wang, another female acquaintance, finds Muo’s impenetrable rote recitations from Hugo, Baudelaire, and Verlaine entrancing, mysteriously erotic. Not even the brutal Lolos can resist the magic of the “foreign word.” The tribesmen are so intrigued by Muo’s francophone skills and overall show of “Frenchness” that they feel compelled to show off their own “chivalrous” ways. Muo discovers with surprise that the Lolos are not so uncouth as they seem because they appear capable to sense in his deportment arguably the defining French value, the “spirit of chivalry,” which is also the spirit “guiding” him throughout his Chinese adventures. Ironically enough, the “savages” prove more sophisticated—and more “empathic,” one could say—in recognizing the “essence” of Muo’s Frenchness and accepting it as part of who he is than the local authorities, which take a similar cultural display (peppered with quotes from Freud, Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida) as symptoms of mental illness and commit him to the Chengdu Psychiatric Institute. They diagnose Muo’s French “foreignness” as abnormal, deem it pathological, and isolate him accordingly. To the supposedly uncultured, isolated mountain villages, however, Muo’s otherness is a matter of course. The formula of identity, they suspect, presupposes it, and so does communication between different identities. Muo and the villagers understand each other, come *closer* as soon as he starts performing his otherness, the foreignness setting him *apart* from the Lolos, that is, as soon as he acts out his Frenchness by speaking French, producing his Carte Orange, and lecturing them (in Chinese) on the unlikely topic of the Parisian metro. His linguistic and cultural

otherness bridges a seemingly unbridgeable gap so that the psychoanalyst and the Lolos see each other as culturally structured entities, not “aberrations” or “anomalies.”

In Dai’s cosmopolitan imaginary, then, the strange—the other as strange—does not estrange. On the contrary, it is a go-between, mediates a mutual recognition, a rapprochement between Muo and the Lolos, who acknowledge and accept his French and Chinese identity simultaneously. Or, we saw above, it “reunites” Muo and his former—and current—women acquaintances. The strange other conjures up the Volcano of the Old moon’s presence, brings it magically into being in its own absence and despite—or perhaps precisely due to—it’s own “foreign tongue.” In turn, this presence is best seized as co-presence, intimate aggregate of selves—Muo’s and the Volcano’s—both alike and unlike at same time, brought together by what they know and are no less than by what they do not know and are not yet prove able to imagine about the other. Imagining the other, fantasizing about the meanings of the other’s language and books, the self both leaps into another, markedly different world and links up to other selves inside its own.

Notably, the former is a prerequisite to the latter. We connect to our kin and kind, Dai implies, we relate *authentically* to our relatives and our familiar universe insofar the unfamiliar, the different, the other is already written into the formula of our being and as such shapes our worldview. Our cultural identity no less than perhaps our deepest obligation is predicated on this “impurity,” on this debt that we must honor by recognizing first what we owe. It does not matter that this recognition is imperfect, that we cannot “recognize” French or Tibetan. Nor is the self required to be an expert on otherness, fully conversant with its strange language. The other’s idiom, style, or text need not be completely “comprehensible,” or, more exactly, this comprehension or proficiency does not have to be philological. Dai does not advocate this sort of

competency and the comprehension derived from it, but a more elementary recognition, an intuition of, or “feel” for what the other means in the origination and architecture of the self. To feel this way—to honor its original debt—the self must reach the level of a certain empathy, of a certain propinquity or rapport between itself and other, a relation on which it can then build its own fantasies, play its own individuation games. Stemming from these games, Dai suggests, the individual is always intersubjective, intertextual and intercultural. Ever “derived,” “second-order,” he spins off from a matrix of otherness, is indebted to the other, profoundly unoriginal at his very origin and must recognize that the other has bee a pathway, a bridge to himself and to other selves like himself all along. In becoming himself, in owning himself fully, the individual self—paradoxically or not—“owes one,” ultimately the one she is or has become, to that which or whom makes this becoming, this self-appropriation and closeness to other selves like her possible.

III

This dynamic of self and other is by and large what I pursue in my book. As I explain at length in its introduction, I call this project cosmopolitan for a number reasons. First: it focuses on what I call the turn-of-the-millennium cosmopolitan imaginary obtaining primarily in scenes of cross-cultural reading such as those discussed above. Second: not only do these scenes bespeak this cosmopolitanism. They also make up an intrinsically cosmopolitan discourse in that, although I dwell primarily on narrative, theory, and philosophy written in several American, French, and East European traditions, they recur abundantly and symptomatically across a much larger, virtually global spectrum of discourses and national traditions. Third, and in conjunction with this scope: I purport to do justice to my object methodologically. In other words, my approach is

broadly comparative. Nor can it be otherwise I think, and I find it ironic that most recent contributions on the subject, in the U. S. and elsewhere, are hardly cosmopolitan as they limit themselves to cosmopolitan histories within the respective national languages and scholarly traditions.

Fourth: my enterprise bears witness to the novel cosmopolitanism or neocosmopolitan formations arising against the backdrop of globalization. These formations, the whole “New Cosmopolis” coming on the heels of Manuel Castells’s “network society,” suggest that since 1989—rather than since the late 15th-century travels, as the partisans of the *longue durée* “world-system” model would claim—we have entered an epoch of unprecedented interactions, exchanges, and flows of people and material as well as symbolic goods. If modernity and early postmodernity witnessed the rise and fall of empires—of most of them—this stage of postmodernity is taking us past the colonial and postcolonial into the global era. The colonial and postcolonial paradigms themselves prepared the paradigm shift we are going through right now, although, I hasten to add, there are places where the past tense is not warranted in the sense that neither have all colonies and colonial forms gone through decolonization nor have all empires and imperial propensities gone extinct. (Dai’s China is a prime example here.) But by and large we are fast moving away from a geopolitically and geoculturally *disjunctive* model informed by oppositions such as us/them, in here/out there, metropolis/colony, and so forth, a model characteristic of the colonial and early postcolonial moment, toward a *conjunctive* model shaped by cross-cultural, cross-geographical, indeed, world-scale contacts, juxtapositions, interchanges, and barterings.

If modernity’s defining cultural venue and imaginary site was the nation-state and the national tradition of imperial nations and traditions, then of the nations and traditions empires

could no longer suppress, recent postmodernity registers the rise and then the quasi generalization of diasporical, transnational, postnational, and, as David Hollinger says, “postethnic” venues, structures, institutions, sodalities, alliances, cultures, and subcultures. These are forms and places of shared emotions and passions, ideas and ideals, texts and representations, where people discover themselves in relation to others. The modality of life in the new cosmopolis is relationality and its domain a new proximity, a culturally woven immediacy, with self and other, *hoc* and *nunc*, my culture and your culture growingly in dialogue, intermingling and giving birth to new configurations or remaining distinct yet more and more mutually dependent because less and less separated by physical distance. Initially *gemeinschaftliche*, as Ferdinand Tönnies tells us, a *community* premised on face-to-face, daily dealings, modernity gradually turned into a more impersonal and distant society, *Gesellschaft*. Riding the global wave, taking advantage of networks where they exists and creating them where they are not, the new cosmopolitans—travelers, nomads, migrants, pilgrims, NGO and TNC personnel, crowds and elites alike—work, unsystematically as they may still be, toward a new togetherness, toward a new *Mitsein* where if face-to-face is again possible, where I can see the other’s face more and more clearly, more closely than ever before, and where that is still impossible, another kind of interface may be tried out instead. Thus what the network society fosters as we come closer to one another inside the new proximity is an unforeseen *visibility of the other*, a global *reading matrix* within which we all are legible objects, available to the other’s hungry gaze.

Sixth: it becomes clear that prompted by globalization’s “time-space compression,” the new cosmopolis is equally hindered by it. That is, this novel, worldly visibility of peoples, texts, and cultures, can both help and hurt people, texts, and cultures. For, on the one hand, globalization speeds up and multiplies communication and travel, certainly for some of us more

than others, weakens the state and its borders, and so opens up not just economies but also cultures—it opens them up and out onto other cultures, simultaneously creating new worldwide common themes, concerns, worries, and even interests. On the other hand, the global undermines new cosmopolitanism because all too frequently globalization is “allergic,” that is, phobic to *alloi*, to others. It tends to level out the world’s cultural field by reducing other to the same, hence bringing about planetary “homogenization.”

I respond to this worrisome penchant by forefronting what I identify as an *ethics of collegiality* sanctioning, or at any rate postulated by, the new cosmopolitan formations in general and, in particular, by the readerly encounter between self and other in the reading matrix of network society. That is to say, like the new cosmopolis and directly flowing from the structural obligation I have toward the other, this ethics is sometimes a reality and frequently something still to be achieved. Given the homogenizing pressure of global processes, cosmopolitanism, when driven by this ethics, provides a counter to globalization, a critique and an “other” to it. Very briefly, the new cosmopolitans—and Dai’s characters are perfect examples—work out this alternative, this new paradigm of human interaction by replacing modernity’s rationality with a moral type of *relationality*, thus setting the stage for a new, ethical sort of self-other interface. Post-Hegelian scripts of this cultural and epistemological drama time and again paint a picture that above I call “allergic”: in relating to an other, in attempting to know and deal with her generally, the Western self threatens to co-opt, assimilate, reduce her to the same, rationalize her and thus make her fit the self’s preset epistemological mold, certain theories, patterns, categories, or stereotypes. Drawing from Buber, Levinas, Derrida and other thinkers who have thought through the “allergic” quandary of the knower and the known, I suggest that the cosmopolitan reading scene provides new hope for an ethical dynamic of “us” and “them” in, and often against

the grain of, uniformity-inducing globality. In this light, I find helpful especially Levinas's discussion of the Other's face and, in conjunction to it, his "conversationalist" theory. When applied to cross-cultural encounters, this theory can be particularly illuminating for it helps understand, for instance, why Dai's Muo and Parisian psychoanalysts, but also Muo and the "wild" tribesmen can relate to one another, be in relation, be with each other in the modality of relationality without rationalizing, "colonizing," and assimilating each other. Grounded in this kind of relationality, new cosmopolitanism comes about not despite the other's "differential" identity, mores, and values but precisely through them and as a way of honoring them. Dialogue, con-versation, turning your face to your interlocutor become possible and work *because* he speaks a different language, wears a dress, writes from right to left, and drives on the left side of the road. To put it otherwise: it is this critique of rationality's schemes and predictabilities that prevents this cosmopolitanism from being old universalism's new hat, another unacknowledgedly local and sectarian extrapolation—that is, a global-age version of classical cosmopolitanism.

Why is this an ethics of collegiality? But first, what is a colleague? To answer, I need to remind us that this ethics obtains and becomes a model, perhaps an ideal model, on the cosmopolitan reading scene, within the network society's reading matrix. This ethics is an ethics of reading, only partially indebted, I might add, to J. Hillis Miller's *Ethics of Reading* and in general to deconstruction. Alluding to reading and instruction in Jewish and Christian traditions, in which *reading with the other*, being paired up with another, being assigned a *colleague*, was common practice. In fact, this is what "colleague" means etymologically: a person you "read with," from the Latin *con-legere*. With time, reading, proximity, and intimacy, reading with and reading next to, interacting with, con-versing, close to the other's face and reading it as much as

her face is reading the book—all these become one. In the network society’s reading matrix, this collegiality is about to become a defining ritual, a practice, and an ethos. Or, if it has not become yet, it strikes me as an ideal worth pursuing.

I would like to offer this collegiality as a blueprint for the new cosmopolis, a script for what goes on in the global reading matrix—repeated scenes of reading in which self and other take each other in, represent each other, and hopefully try to accommodate each other, driven by history if not by their hearts into each other, “colleagues” reading each other, their books and world inescapably together. Stemming from this reading-induced togetherness, their collegiality implies a duty, a law of mutual treatment: *legere* refers to “reading,” *lectura*, as well as to “law,” *lex*. This togetherness cannot be preserved and honored other than through a certain way, principle, or law of being together, of *Miteinandersein*, which “reads” (“legislates,” stipulates) that reading and by the same token self and other cannot go on, cannot keep reading if, as they interface, as they read each other’s books, see each other’s movies, eat each other’s food, are not careful not to deface each other, not to dis-figure each other’s faces and figures, rhetorics and idioms. In surveying, then, the cosmopolitan scene of reading, I look into a practice of reading and caring: on the one hand, I cast light on how people read with one another, side by side or from different computer terminals, how they read each other, again, in one another’s proximity or from a distance; on the other hand, I also foreground a cosmopolitan code of worldly conduct, showing how some of us at least, read “with” others morally and epistemologically, not only next to them spatially but also with them in mind even as they read themselves.