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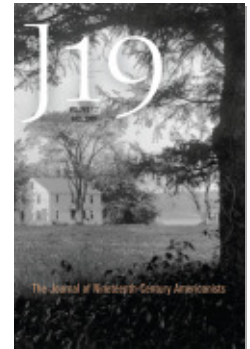
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## Emerson, China, and the Uses of Literature

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### I. “China interests us at this moment in a point of politics”

Thus announced Emerson at the banquet in honor of the Chinese Embassy in August of 1868.<sup>1</sup> The Second Opium War had just ended. Prominent figures in US political reform—Alexander Bullock, Charles Sumner, Caleb Cushing, and Emerson himself—had gathered at the St. James Hotel in Boston with the U.S. commissioners to China and a special envoy consisting of members of the Qing dynasty Tongzhi Restoration—ministers Zhi Keqing (Chih Ta-jin) and Sun Jiasheng (Sun Ta-jin).<sup>2</sup> The event promoted the ratification of the second Sino-American treaty that secured mutuality, commercial favoritism, and extraterritoriality for both nations. Answering to the toast, “The Union of the Farthest East and the Farthest West,” Emerson drew from stock praises—China’s venerable antiquity, China’s inventions, etc.—and re-hashed the popular nineteenth-century slogan of updating “ancient China” to the global timetable. His encomium was but one in a line of performative speech acts crowning a decade-long “Cooperative Policy” between China and America in the middle of the nineteenth century that culminated in the Burlingame-Seward Treaty of 1868.<sup>3</sup> “This auspicious event,” Emerson declared, “marks a new era.”<sup>4</sup>

And yet, for Emerson, China “concerned us at this moment in politics” only partially for what historians now call the “Cooperative Policy,” which assigned to Sino-American relations the task of radically recalibrating the nation and thus wiping away its most pressing social problems. With this announcement, Emerson turned the topic of China toward one of his perpetual interests—the social use of literature—and made

good on another development in the dinner speeches. Behind the rhetoric of “the oldest nation” joining the “newest republic,” in all of the speeches there emerged a new role for literary exchange in foreign policy, an important talking point not to be found in the previous Tientsin Treaty of 1858. In his speech, Anson Burlingame offered the anecdote of the Chinese scholar “Tung Ta-jin,”<sup>5</sup> and his translation of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “Psalm of Life,” as a prelude to imaginative cross-cultural identification. Many of the other speeches also defined international political commensurability in terms of the exchange of texts. Charles Sumner, for example, lamented that Milton had cited “the Chinese” in *Paradise Lost*, but no such textual embedding exists the other way around; the Burlingame-Seward Treaty would redress this by letting the United States trickle into the Chinese literary imaginary. In an extended bibliographic metaphor, Caleb Cushing compared pre-treaty China to a “sealed book before the world” that would now have to open itself up.<sup>6</sup> Analogizing Sino-American exchange to the opening of a book occasioned a shift in the perception of Chinese history, with textual innovations acting as positive indicators of a nation’s unfolding and maturing.

When Emerson opened the “book of China” he turned to China’s own use of books as an example of an ideal form of governance in which the effects of reading can be preserved in a political institution. Emerson pointed to the Chinese practice of basing the selection of officers for governance on their performance in competitive literary examinations, and somewhat tongue-in-cheek, he suggested that America might learn something. On America’s failure to follow the Chinese example, Emerson lamented that the then-senator of Rhode Island had “twice attempted to carry through Congress, requiring that candidates for public offices shall first pass examinations on their literary qualifications for the same.”<sup>7</sup> “China interested us at this moment in a point of politics” only superficially and provisionally for the reasons behind the “Cooperative Policy”; the interest does not apply transnationally but intranationally. In Emerson’s mind, China modeled a sociology of literature that institutionally and programmatically tied matters of reading to matters of governance. As Emerson would write in the preamble tacked on to the speech four years later, China “makes ecstasy into an institution.”<sup>8</sup> The extension of this last desideratum of transcendentalism—the desire that ecstasy be brought into the parameters of formalism—becomes the undeniable proof of China’s preoccupation in the same dilemma that haunted Emerson his whole life: how to preserve a powerful

idea—an ecstasy—long enough to render it an effective, implementable policy but not so long as to ossify thinking and acting, thus neutering the power of that original idea.

Both in its sociopolitical practices and in its status as cipher in America, China, for Emerson, straddled the space between the abstract literary and immediate social problems and offered a shortcut for connecting the two. By historicizing what may, on Emerson's part, look like a passing and superficial interest in Sino-American policymaking and probing it for deeper resonances within his works, I situate Emerson's rhetorical and political endorsement of romantic Sino-American foreign policy within a program of national rejuvenation in the 1850s and 1860s. Although quite short and almost hopelessly pro forma, the Chinese embassy speech offers a rare opportunity for readers to bring several strands of Emerson criticism into the same viewing plane: Emerson's earlier preferences for nonformalized reform versus later commitments to proceduralized change, his problematic transnationalism, and his interest in the sociology of literature. Emerson's China-thinking provides crucial connections between his reform politics and his advocacy of a universal intellectual socialism in literary practices. The final part of this essay examines Emerson's use of literature as an intervention in transnational and hemispheric studies today,

## II. "Inspired we must forget our books"

The Chinese embassy dinner showcased Emerson at a particularly illegible moment in his career—illegible not because he produced work that was difficult to read but because he produced work so clearly belonging in the category of public relations' stock forms. Designed for the passing occasion, the speech marks Emerson as someone who went along with whatever was in the air. Four years later, he reused the "farthest East and the farthest West" phrase at the Japanese embassy and, according to his biographer Ralph L. Rusk, managed to "muste[r] up enthusiasm enough to discover the romantic aspect of the late emergence of Japan from national privacy [by praising] 'the enlightened policy of President Fillmore' that 'sent Commodore Perry to that country.'"<sup>9</sup> Emerson's taking up a triumphalist rhetoric of transpacific designs would, to many critics, redouble whatever offenses he had already made against Asia in his literary practices. The two critics who have analyzed the Chinese embassy speech both study what happens to Emerson's universalism when a literary Asia meets a geopolitical one. In a cogent analysis of the role of historical management in US expansionist

rhetoric, Jeanine Abboushi Dallal finds in Emerson's embassy speech a belittling of China's history that happens through a metaphor of entextualization: "from the beginning . . . [China's 'wars and revolutions'] are textual, 'occur[ing] literally in the 'annals.'"<sup>10</sup> For Dallal, this leveling of other people's historical traumas is characteristic of Emerson's brand of "expansionist discourse," which leans on a Universalist reductionist approach toward other cultures. Defending Emerson from Gallal's critiques of soft imperialism, Tamara C. Emerson argues that Emerson sets up a diachronic model of symmetry between East and West in which cultures do not take from but reconstitute one another. To borrow from the title of her study, Emerson "relates transcendentally," not instrumentally.<sup>11</sup>

This small argument over Emerson's Chinese embassy speech reflects a bigger debate over Emerson's legacy in transpacific studies. Emerson had a long dalliance with oriental literature and the Orient, and often re-presented his findings with cringing reductivism (for example, "the Chinese pagoda is clearly a tartar tent").<sup>12</sup> Entire books in English and Chinese have been dedicated to Emerson's Asia complex,<sup>13</sup> and some critics have, for compelling reasons, called out his orientaling thinking as a homogenizing universalism that corroborates US cultural and economic imperialism.<sup>14</sup> The transnational turn in American studies has by and large come out against Emerson. Myra Jehlen was one of the first to associate Emerson with American expansionism. Giving his audience a philosophy by which identity can be kept intact despite the nation's unchecked development, Emerson "perfected the invention of America."<sup>15</sup> John Eperjesi names him as one of the originators of American Pacific economic orientalism, adjoining the essentialized "religious-philosophical Asia" to an economically exploitable one.<sup>16</sup> A harsh critique of late comes from a panel on repositioning America—in which I gave a paper—at the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) in Toronto. Drawing from Carolyn Porter's work, the panel took as its premise that "what vexes the American subject's ability to position itself in history and geography is an Emersonian literary tradition of ahistorical and reified consciousness."<sup>17</sup>

An alternative to the imperialist Emerson comes from Wai Chee Dimock, who sees him as one actor in a far larger network of cultural translation, appropriation, and ideologization in deep time. Dimock's Emerson is cosmopolitan both in space and time, his global ties strengthened and not mitigated by his deliberately ahistorical translingual praxis: "going back hundreds of years, triangulating at every step,

reading the Koran by way of German, and looking forward to Malcom X and James Baldwin by way of Goethe and Hafiz, Emerson is American only in caricature.<sup>18</sup> By transposing world literature into American literature, Emerson, in Dimock's view, worked under a fundamentally different time scale that "thread[s] the long durations of other countries into the short chronology of the United States."<sup>19</sup> Dimock's extended recovery of the composite world literatures that Emerson stitches and restitches proves that Emerson worked in "deep time," in which the literatures of other countries "are not thousands of miles away but hauntingly here, not ancient but contemporary."<sup>20</sup> Dimock is not the only critic to offer a redemptive reading of Emerson's cosmopolitanism. Many critics have turned to "worldliness" to explain Emerson's idiosyncratic form of political dissent before and after the Civil War.<sup>21</sup> These readings construct Emerson's cosmopolitanism, inhering either in his theory of interpersonal subjectivity or in the "world consciousness" of his textual practices, as a bulwark against indictments of problematic race thinking and/or American exceptionalism. Their cosmopolitan reading frees us to look at an Emerson outside the Mathiessenian narrative of the American Renaissance and the utterly nationalist preoccupations with which he is sometimes associated, allowing us to hear in Emerson's China speech something other than the bad faith rhetoric of US cultural imperialism at the cusp of the Progressive Era. But I argue that what we hear *little resembles* a sustained global, transnational consciousness and conscientiousness that seem to make or break a canonical author's relevance in today's academic climate.

Emerson's provable cosmopolitanism opens but a trick window into his theory on the uses of world literature. Though an archaeological critical method will yield many references to China (and other countries and their literature), Emerson has no "China" corpus from whence we can glean a sustained interest in China or cross-cultural literary exchange. Conventional wisdom would expect to find all mentions of China before the embassy speech slowly warming toward the country, culminating in the celebratory remarks. Instead we find China in Emerson's oeuvre before and after a receptivity to everything that was "out there" on China, positive and negative. We know that Emerson read the latest monographs on China: Father Huc's *Travels to China*, James Legge's and David Collie's translations of Chinese classics, Lawrence Oliphant's *Narrative of Lord Napier's Mission to China and Japan*, and Joshua Marshman's *The Works of Confucius*.<sup>22</sup> In the 1860s and 1870s we find Emerson conversant in transatlantic discourses of China in political

theory, which he transposed on to domestic impasses. In these cases, Chineseness is often deployed as a pejorative adjective: “England is Chinese in her servility to wealth”; “the use of war” is to “break up in a nation Chinese conservatism, death in life”; and English and Americans “look of a Chinese narrowness.”<sup>23</sup> “Chinese narrowness” and “Chinese conservatism/death in life” disclose his newfound identification with a belief running from Tocqueville to Hegel to Mill that China’s exemplary equality dead-ended its democratic social processes, its conservatism contributing to its historical stagnation.<sup>24</sup> What these examples reveal in sinophobia reveals as least as much Emerson’s readiness to consider and/or cite from ambient discourses only to fill a particular philosophical or rhetorical need.

During the period Emerson read and cited most from recently available translations of Chinese literature, he was also thinking hard about how to erase one’s reading traces. In *Notebook EL* (1849–60), Emerson often penned quick quotations from David Collie’s translation, *The Chinese Classical Work Commonly Called the Four Books* and James Legge’s translation, *Chinese Classic*, next to his manuscript poems, sometimes even on the same page.<sup>25</sup> But the Chinese influence cannot be seen in the literary product, though the writer Richard Grossman was so convinced that it existed in the poetry that he published an edition of Emerson’s poems side by side with selections from *Tao Te Ching*.<sup>26</sup> (Unable to point to any one line in the poems that proves influence, however, Grossman had to rely on the logic of juxtaposition.) The eclectic nature of notebooks, compounded by Emerson’s tendency to let the pairing of unrelated texts speak for themselves, will forever prevent us from knowing how these chosen snippets of Chinese poetry and philosophy call across the pages to the poems. The Chinese quotations clearly bore an inspirational logic to the manuscript poems; what they inspired, however, was poetry that thematized the abandonment of influence. The manuscript poems of the 1850s visited time and again the image of undoing one’s reading, with such lines as “Inspired we must forget our books,” “Burn up the libraries!” and “I leave the book, I leave the wine” (i.e., walking away from influence).<sup>27</sup> Even though they rework some of the language from the snippets of *Mea Hung*, *Shang Mung*, and *Chung Yung* that are cited, the poems thematize at once the social force of ideas and the need to remain noncommittal to the sources of those ideas. I will come back to Emerson’s undoing of literary borrowings in the final section, but for now we can say that although Emerson’s China citations leave a record, an examination of this record

reveals cultural crossings whose impermanence and self-erasure cannot be smoothed away with a change in scale. To read Emerson's relationship to China, then, we must adjust our own approach to "reading" transnationalism and be willing to entertain a transnationalism that insists on burning its bridges.

### III. "The co-presence of the revolutionary force in intellect"

In Emerson's energy model of cosmopolitanism the occasional uses of literature model a kind of political idealism. This is the idea that ideas per se can become the condition for a new system of thought, one that pushes the boundaries of existing sociopolitical structures in substantive, measurable ways while remaining un beholden to that original, conditioning idea. Kerry Larson describes it as a form of "intellectual cruising."<sup>28</sup> The whatever-works approach to literature (or anything) has one of its most succinct articulations in one of Emerson's *EL* manuscript poems: "A comrade or a book is good/ that puts me in a working mood."<sup>29</sup> In this equation, the thoughts of others are considered valuable if they are good enough to inspire a will to (political) action, and not beyond that.

But what does the whatever-works approach look like with actual historical events and discourses? As scholars of Emerson well know, the precepts of early Emerson—with its insistence on ecstasy, impersonality, and disinterest—throw his later, more synthetic political maneuvers into irritating relief. Critics have asked how we might reconcile an Emerson who had "reservations about reform movements because participation in them would force him to align himself with a sect or party and thus undermine his ability to speak to the regeneration of society as a whole" with the late Emerson we find in the frontlines of organized reform.<sup>30</sup> In one of the earliest treatments of this discontinuity, Stephen Whicher reads Emerson's open endorsement of programs of change such as the abolition movement as "acquiescence" to institutionalized reform.<sup>31</sup> David M. Robinson suggests that we try to understand this discontinuous Emerson in its historical context, mainly the obdurate-ness of slavery in midcentury America and the politics of desperation that it molded. Emerson's 1840s writings revealed "a dissatisfaction with the 'flash-of-lightning faith' based on moments of ecstatic but unpredictable illumination" that, by the 1850s, "yield[ed] a new orientation toward social relationships, ethical action, and political reform."<sup>32</sup> T. Gregory Garvey's edited volume *The Emerson Dilemma* takes as its central topic Emerson's late concerns with the "discrepancy between



thought and action” and attempts to flesh out the continuity between the earlier and later Emerson by looking at transitional texts/encounters. We read about an Emerson coming around to the doctrines of social progress under the influence of William Ellery Channing (Michael Strysick), an Emerson swayed by John Brown’s fanaticism (Harold K. Bush), and an Emerson whose runs-in with radical abolitionist presses led him to more dogmatic and incendiary stances (Len Gougeon).<sup>33</sup>

Most of the literary critics who study the conversional Emerson prefer to look for traces of transcendentalism in obviously transitional pieces, such as “Experience” and essays from *The Conduct of Life*, and avoid such a clearly marked piece of official-speak as the Chinese embassy speech. But a serious treatment of the awkward genre of the pro forma is exactly the challenge laid out in the 1860 essay “Fate,” the piece that set the tone for the writings composed in the 1860s and 1870s and that cast the longest shadow over the Chinese embassy speech, as I will show. “Fate” was Emerson’s answer to sociopolitical inertia and defeatism fattened by various discourses of social, genetic, and intellectual determinism in the second half of the nineteenth century; instead of denouncing these discourses, however, Emerson totalizes them. “Fate” openly acknowledges that “the hope to reform men” comes up against “immovable limitations” such as the determinisms of upbringing and personality, phrenology and anatomy, predispositions in patterns of thoughts, and the forces of nature and the environment that have dominated public discourse. To minimize the legitimacy of the various discourses of determinisms—scientific racism, social determinism, karma, technologism—Emerson proposes one of his great counterintuitions: accept all of them wholesale; go along with every kind of determinism. A man’s “fate,” echoing the memorable image from “Circles,” resembles a tightly tethered circle: his “power is hooped in by a necessity, which, by many experiments, he touches on every side, until he learns its arc.”<sup>34</sup> His arc (the circumference of limitation) can, nonetheless, at any moment, triggered by anything, open out to larger circles. This geometrical conundrum—you can hop distances longer than your tether—means that models of enlargement can infiltrate circumscribed spaces and radical thinking can be *stumbled upon*. Emerson is not upholding the precious notion that thinking frees us but simply making the observation that one never knows what can happen when we take up for consideration any line of thought, however quietist it might be. Coming across the thought of another, “our own mind is roused

to activity, and we forget very fast what he says, much more interested in the new play of our own thought, than in any thought of his.”<sup>35</sup> And the end of these unplanned thoughts is not simply “thinking a new thought” but something poststructuralists have debated for years: the seemingly impossible ability of the habitus—“those embodied rituals of everydayness by which a given culture produces and sustains belief in its own obviousness”<sup>36</sup>—to jolt itself out of the present conditions of reality that, through the practices of the habitus, has made itself seem inescapable. To prove his point implicitly, Emerson proceeds to give examples of how “fate slides into freedom” using the language and logic of various discourses of determinisms in the process. In this model of sudden inspiration, reformers of all kinds who find themselves with nowhere to turn because everything points to the futility of intervention realize that they can turn toward almost anything, even if it is entrenched, determinist thinking itself. I suggest here that instead of building a narrative that would locate in “Fate” the stirrings of a conversion complete by the mid-1870s, we might instead read “Fate” as a thought-experiment put to the test in many of the speeches and lectures of the 1860s and 1870s, which reflected an allegiance to determinism back to itself. In this genre of Emersonian writing—as well represented by his embassy speech as anything else—we can see the seriousness with which he takes up ambient discourses to provoke, as James Frank described, “a perfectionist transformation and self-overcoming.”<sup>37</sup>

In his recent, provocative critique of New Americanist readings of Emerson, Johannes Voelz argues that their charges of expansionism or quietism must be reexamined in light of Emerson’s “audience-directed philosophy.” Understanding radical politics as an “implicated” process, Emerson “had to partially affirm his listeners’ worldviews.”<sup>38</sup> I hope here to reproduce the experience of listening to Emerson’s Chinese embassy speech and demonstrate how saying what everyone expects can become a sociology of inspiration. I historicize the drive to reform that motivated his China-thinking and I show how his mustering “energy enough” for transpacific policies is paradigmatic of a way of thinking about China that tied in to immediate political and sociological concerns back at home. The Emerson who paid attention to emergent Sino-American realities drew from a specific idealism—the use of foreign policy as a *reform technology* in the antebellum and Reconstruction period (1850–70). This Emerson may seem like a very distant cousin of the cryptic Emerson of “Fate,” but, as I will show, this Emerson

carries out exactly what “Fate” prescribes by internalizing the language of progressive determinism that dominated transpacificism to move toward a vision of a political order that guarantees (because it proceduralizes) the unpredictable social force of literature.

Transpacific policies’ promises of tangible change for the nation attracted Emerson, who had witnessed the emergence of sinology as an important component of US political discourse.<sup>39</sup> Within the genre of China-thinking-as-domestic-reform, the Burlingame-Seward Treaty pitched China as a “technology” that could rejuvenate the nation. In the years leading up to his 1868 speech to the Chinese embassy in Boston, Emerson was introduced to a series of legislators and diplomats who in the 1850s and early 1860s sought extraconstitutional solutions for what seemed to be endless stalling and compromise on the issue of emancipation. Few historians have noted that some of the most vocal proponents of “higher law” were also the most stalwart champions of new Sino-American relations, and even fewer literary historians have noticed Emerson’s movement within these circles. William Seward and Anson Burlingame, who drafted the treaty of 1868, caught Emerson’s attention in the late antebellum period and inspired a frenzy of endorsing speeches and articles.<sup>40</sup> The connection between the rhetoric of Sino-American relations and antislavery is most clearly seen in Burlingame, better known by most for his famous speech against the South Carolina Democrat Preston Brooks (who had physically assaulted Charles Sumner in the Senate) and the triumphant pistol duel challenge afterward that scared Brooks away. In a speech to the House of Representatives in 1856, Burlingame called the use of US territory for slavery as a “perversion of history,” which had to make way for a liberal economic and technological expansionism.<sup>41</sup> During the Civil War, Lincoln appointed Burlingame as the US envoy to China and Burlingame soon outfitted Reconstruction politics with a new goal: to have the US extend “equality” to China—and, by way of doing that, affirm its own sovereignty, as part of its experiment of extending equality to its own citizens.

For William Seward the most efficacious solution to the problem of national reconsolidation after the Civil War presented itself in an unlikely place, in what we might call a technological intervention: if you radically reconfigure the country’s geocommercial coordinates then, as Walter Lafeber said of the Cooperative Policy, “an American community no longer had to be imagined.”<sup>42</sup> Long before the Civil War, Seward

saw that policies tying Pacific expansionism to the development of technological infrastructure could bring about desired social reforms. In his 1855 address “The Dangers of Extending Slavery,” Seward appealed to “higher law” and reasoned that the US Constitution had within it loopholes that permitted not only the justification of slavery but its spread into Texas and Mexico. All the while, he was already working on another front. Urging the US government to turn its eyes toward the Pacific, Seward, in a speech delivered in 1852 to the US Senate, “Commerce in the Pacific Ocean,” put forth arguments for a US commercial hegemony on the seas. Seward advanced here what would subsequently become the most compelling justification of the Burlingame-Seward Treaty: “Whatever nation shall put that [oceanic] commerce into full employment, and shall conduct it steadily with adequate expansion, will become necessarily the greatest of existing States; greater than any that has ever existed.”<sup>43</sup> The technological restructuring entailed by oceanic expansionism would precipitate the “irrepressible conflict” between free and slaveholding states more quickly than “higher law.”<sup>44</sup> After the Civil War, anti-Reconstruction Democrats butted heads with Seward and Burlingame on the issue of the Sino-American relations brought about by Pacific expansionism. As the historian Najia Aarim-Heriot documents, the “Negro problem” in postbellum California had transformed into the “Chinese problem”; many Democrats opposed the immigration clause of the proposed second Sino-American treaty on the grounds of the coolie labor influx.<sup>45</sup> Against opposition to the establishment of what Democrats lampooned as “American and Oriental aristocracies,”<sup>46</sup> Seward and Burlingame proclaimed that “practical sense dictated that the new diplomatic agreement include provisions facilitating the exchange of populations and the interchange of population.”<sup>47</sup> Such a treaty with China was thought to be able to quickly solve many problems at home unrelated to China, and was, therefore, a piece of romantic foreign policy.

At the close of the 1850s, Emerson complained that America had overextended itself, going so far as to “interfere . . . in Canton and Japan.”<sup>48</sup> But the events of the 1860s and figures like Burlingame and Seward changed his view of what transpacific policies could accomplish. Emerson’s writings after this period adopted aspirational responses to developing Sino-American relations that would seem like concessions to programmatic reform policies within his late struggles with the compromise of political “formalism.” As a result of his exposure to this romantic foreign policy, China and national reform become

functionally connected in Emerson's mind: "We have seen slavery disappear like a painted scene in a theatre; we have seen the most healthful revolution in the politics of the nation—the Constitution not only amended, but construed in a new spirit. We have seen China opened to European and American ambassadors and commerce."<sup>49</sup> Like many in his cohort, Emerson entertained a non sequitur by associating China's opening to the United States with domestic, technologically mediated structural changes. In March 1866, just five months before the embassy banquet, he listed under the category of "Revolutions" a series of observations: "When I see . . . the Chinese, instead of stoning an ambassador if he steps out of the walls of Canton, now choosing Mr. Burlingame as their ambassador to Western countries . . . [when I see] my message sent from Boston to London in sixty seconds. The plough displaces the spade; the bridge displaces the ferryman; the press displaces the scrivener; the locomotive the coach; the telegraph the courier."<sup>50</sup> These technologically deterministic associations not only reveal the degree to which romantic Sino-American policy had been advertised as a boon for domestic infrastructure but also Emerson's unabashed willingness to support outright what in Chinese might be called the 形式化 *xing shi hua*—schematic reform and perfunctory assurances that things are getting better. This logic carried over to the signing of the Burlingame Treaty, which he proclaimed as "an irresistible result of the science which has given us the power of steam and the electric telegraph." Improved Sino-American relations fell under and bolstered the logic of progressive determinism, which could be achieved mechanically—happy outcomes in the tides of change—and not intellectually, as an earlier Emerson would demand. His 1867 lecture "The Progress of Culture" offers yet another glimpse of this new orientation. Clearly referencing China, he begins by chronicling the lateral cultural crossovers in the Progressive Era: immigrants "come from crowded, antiquated kingdoms to enjoy" technological advancements, new social freedoms, and the like.<sup>51</sup> The convergence of the "oldest empires . . . of venerable antiquity" with the "newest nations" under the sign of progress ushered in a laundry list of social improvements bolstered by "American institutions": along with friendlier Sino-American relations, "the abolition of slavery, the success of the Sanitary Commission and of the Freedmen's Bureau . . . the abolition of capital punishment and of imprisonment for debt; the improvement of prisons; the efforts for the suppression of intemperance; the search for just rules affecting labor; the cooperative societies; the insurance of life and limb; the free-trade league; the im-

proved almshouses; the enlarged scale of charities . . . [and] the incipient series of international congresses.”<sup>52</sup>

In “Lectures of the Times,” Emerson wrote that the scholar’s role in public politics is to show “hospitality to every new thought of his time.”<sup>53</sup> The “perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power” is not contradicted by a total investment in structured reform.<sup>54</sup> In fact, as “Progress of Culture” shows, the perfunctory listing of improvements makes more vivid the possibility of impulsive action. If we follow that essay to its end we find that the scene of China-meets-America and the rhetoric of cross-cultural betterment that you can really see only serve to precipitate a newfound appreciation of universal equivalences and equidistances. “The Progress of Culture” is an odd, cross-purposed piece that begins with conventional vignettes of cultural progressivism but pivots to talk about literary history. Soon the teleological narrative of cultural progress starts to make very little sense since, as Emerson says, “the world is al-ways equal to itself.”<sup>55</sup> The “progress of culture” brings into view the triumphalism of amalgamating cultures and social improvement only to really bring into view a theory of how inspiration works. Literature—loosely referring to other people’s recorded ideas—makes quickly apparent what positivist indicators will take a long time to show: the fact that models of improvement already exist in the world in any one mind’s encounter with another’s and, therefore, can immediately matter in the world regardless of time and distance. It is not clear how Homer and Shakespeare, whom Emerson cites, anticipate the particularities of Progressive Era improvements; it is not supposed to be clear. What Emerson refers to as the “co-presence of the revolutionary force in intellect”<sup>56</sup> does not involve the application of ideas to political acts; rather, to radicalize intellect means letting activational energies move freely from one arena to another. In this circuit, tangible socioscientific improvements provoke one to “wonder at the world” and superficial appreciation of the progress of culture “confers [to] the processes of an individual mind concordance and agency in the world at large.”<sup>57</sup> Through the technologically deterministic vignettes of social change, one intimates how abstract inspiration can be harnessed to make real change in the world. Literary history, for its part, brings culture’s mediations into view by allowing us to perceive how the sudden inspirations in one person’s mind and those across the ages and continents can line up in equipollence and translate into (without ever needing to directly address) the prevailing social reforms of any particular historical moment.

Sharon Cameron's judgment of Emerson's style, in which "nothing is 'ours' except rhetorically, or positionally," applies as well to his improvised interests in Sino-American relations as his mediations on experience (whence Cameron derives his "impersonality").<sup>58</sup> The lack of apology with which Emerson assumes any voice, indulges any thought-experiment—in sum, his famous inconsistency—reveals, quite consistently, the ways that people get themselves to think in a certain way or take up a certain cause. Ventriloquizing the talk of the times is the preliminary step toward turning the discourse back to the social force of literature. Thus his embassy speech, though it recycles some of the rhetoric of "The Progress of Culture" and takes the proper attitude toward such public events, reveals itself as provisional from the outset. The "immigrants from Asia" who "come in crowds" contribute the stereotyped virtues that were often used in pro-Chinese immigration rhetoric, such as the "power of continuous labor," "versatility in . . . adapting to new conditions," and "stoical economy."<sup>59</sup> Emerson then runs through "the advantages of the new intercourse between the two countries [that] are daily manifest on the Pacific coast." Most curiously, though, the speech proceeds *as though it were the case* that Sino-American relations have produced these positive results. The whole speech begins quite strangely in the hypothetical tense: "I *suppose* we are all of one opinion on this remarkable occasion."<sup>60</sup> The rest of the speech never resolves the ambiguity laid out in the opening remark—is the supposition sarcastic?—and only continues in the hypothetical: "I am quite sure that I have heard . . ."; "it appears that . . ."<sup>61</sup> The wishful thinking of transnational ventures (a form of "wishful speaking," if you will) also parades its own rhetorical detachment.

To Emerson, political activation is by definition cross-cultural (because anything and everything is fair game); yet the moments of activation never accrue to cross-culturalism. It helps to look at an example of what that may be. For Oliver Wendell Holmes, one of the other guests at the Boston embassy dinner, the transformation of China-as-legend into China as one half of a Sino-America utopia created a geographical nearness and a social expediency that obviated the need for words or texts to serve as the transmitters of culture:

BROTHERS, whom we may not reach  
 Through the veil of alien speech,  
 Welcome! welcome! eyes can tell  
 What the lips in vain would spell,—

Words that hearts can understand,  
 Brothers from the Flowery Land!

...

Open wide, ye gates of gold,  
 To the Dragon's banner-fold!  
 Builders of the mighty wall,  
 Bid your mountain barriers fall!  
 So may the girdle of the sun.  
 Bind the East and West in one,

Till Mount Shasta's breezes fan  
 The snowy peaks of Ta Sieue-Shan,—  
 Till Erie blends its waters blue  
 With the waves of Tung-Ting-Hu,—  
 Till deep Missouri lends its flow  
 To swell the rushing Hoang-Ho!<sup>62</sup>

What “alien speech” and “lips” cannot communicate, the conjoined China-America can facilitate. Holmes's literary inspiration is predicated on the impossibly romanticized proximities that the Cooperative Policy and the Burlingame-Seward Treaty would engender. With only a little exaggeration we can say that, in Holmes's utopia, someone can launch a boat in the Missouri River in the morning and find himself coursing in the “Hoang Ho” (Huang He, Yellow River) by afternoon. Literary production—here, the poem itself—fixes the ecology of transculturalism that such Sino-American fantasies have enabled, but the ecology itself does not need any literary or comparably complicated communicative system in order to function: it operates by simple proximity.

In contrast to Holmes, Emerson, who in his journals wrote that he “hated Peking,” “hate[d] China” and “never wanted to drink from the Yellow Sea,” held an interest in China that never generated scenographies of a closer world.<sup>63</sup> For Emerson, propinquity in and of itself means nothing and certainly does not replace literature's mediating role. And if literature mediates, what it mediates is not cross-cultural exchange. Many of the other speeches, for example, promoted the often less than innocent idea that nations trade, little by little, their literature, culture, and peoples in the process of geopolitical collaboration and commensuration. Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, the mayor of Boston, announced that China was poised to “tender to the whole civilized world an interchange of all that can be of any benefit or profit to individuals or collections of



people.”<sup>64</sup> In this view, China’s arts and cultural achievements only concern us in their capacity to represent China’s “claim” to “common respect.” The exact nature of literary exchange is immaterial in these cases because, after all, literary exchange only serves to decorate and lend legitimacy to the geopolitical union. And so while Cushing, Burlingame, Sumner, and others read into China and America’s hypothetical literary exchanges the desired political ones, Emerson intentionally muddied the conversions even as he held on to the shared notion that thinking about China could inspire domestic reform and lead to wanted domestic social outcomes. The newfound proximities between China and America for Emerson ultimately amounted to a shared praxis of practicable intellectualism in which literature holds an at once paradoxical and conventional relationship to the government. When Emerson finally touches on the relationship between Chinese literature and Chinese politics through an anecdote about Confucius, he conscripts it as an example of this kind of political order, rather than advertises it as a sample of Chinese literature that should (or shouldn’t) be folded into the American consciousness. Elsewhere Emerson wrote that Confucius “exhort[ed his audience] to be active in the world as scholars but also to aggressively address the problems of society and government.”<sup>65</sup> Twenty-five years later, in the Chinese embassy speech, he returned to Confucius and the role of scholarly wisdom in governance:

His rare perception . . . put[s] always the blame of our misfortunes on ourselves; as when to the governor who complained of thieves, he said, “If you, sir, were not covetous, though you should reward them for it, they would not steal” . . . At the same time, he abstained from paradox, and met the ingrained prudence of his nation by saying always, “Bend one cubit to straighten eight.”<sup>66</sup>

In this anecdote, Confucius takes a critical position against the government and, simultaneously, provides practical advice that does not contradict the nation’s “ingrained” ways. He can provoke the governor to consider a more just course with a subversive riddle and at the same time advocate a “Bend one cubit to straighten eight” approach, an aphorism that efficiently suggests that a certain amount of compromise and sacrifice of idealism is necessary in any political governance. Emerson presents these two kinds of postures as a non sequitur (connected only

by a temporal coincidence, “At the same time”) and thus harmonizes the contradiction without reconciling it.

It is not that Reconstruction American reform would stand to enlarge its intellectual circuit by importing the Chinese literary model but that Chinese literature as it stands in relation to China—in Emerson’s treatment—represents a model of enlargement that Emerson has championed all along. Emerson’s declaration with which I began this essay—“China interests us at this moment in a point of politics”—provides the pivot from China as geopolitical partner to China’s own sociology of literature. The fact that China might interest the United States politically is not hard to appreciate, then as now, but what really interests Emerson is in what follows that pronouncement, an invocation of China’s literary examination system that engineers a return via intertext to his own thoughts on social democratic reform in America. Taking lines verbatim from his 1867 speech “Fortune of the Republic,” Emerson laments America’s failure to implement a similar use of literature when Congress failed to pass Rhode Island senator Thomas Jenckes’s bill demanding qualification tests for civil servants. Interestingly, Emerson purposely mischaracterizes the nature of Jenckes’s civil service reform (which would peter out by 1875), calling it a “bill . . . requiring that candidates in public offices shall first pass examinations on their literary qualifications for the same.”<sup>67</sup> In reality, Jenckes did not model his bill after the Chinese system at all, nor did he stipulate that the exam contents be “literary” (as Emerson would have known). Jenckes’s push for open competitive examinations in the election of civil servants came from within a Reconstruction movement to “check the ‘centralization of all appointing’” and curtail patronage during Andrew Johnson’s presidency.<sup>68</sup> Emerson’s knowledge of China’s literary examination system most likely came from Thomas Carlyle’s *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History*, which contains this oft-quoted comment on what Carlyle called “Chinese Literary Governors”:<sup>69</sup>

By far the most interesting fact I hear about the Chinese is one on which we cannot arrive at clearness, but which excites endless curiosity even in the dim state: this namely, that they do attempt to make their Men of Letters their Governors!<sup>70</sup>

For Carlyle, the reorganization of politics so that “men of letters” may govern, no matter how unlikely, has to be made practicable because

society has “fallen into decay [and] fallen into incompetence,” producing such dire social malaises as the inability of “millions of men [to] gain food for themselves.”<sup>71</sup> For Emerson, the attractiveness of this model of meritocracy also stems from a pressing need for political reform at home. Rhetorically conjoining the failures of Reconstruction reform and Carlylian Sinophilism, Emerson says that “China has preceded us, as well as England and France, in this essential correction of a reckless usage; and the like high esteem of education appears in China in social life, to whose distinctions it is made an indispensable passport.”<sup>72</sup> In other words, ahead of Western nations, China had devised concrete protocols in the uses of literature (thus “correcting” its “reckless usage”). Yet even explained this way, Emerson’s compliment remains a strange one: China’s exemplarity lies in its regulation of literary scholarship in politics but this it accomplishes by systematizing, or making superficial, the transferences between the two spheres. Literary knowingness functions as a “passport” to “social distinction” in Chinese society—that is, as something doubly superficial: a systematized and an obvious formality. If we idealize literariness in a particular way, then Emerson’s choice of words here could easily be construed as a cynical gesture that only reemphasizes China’s reputation as a vast, irredeemable bureaucracy in which merit takes only the form of empty formalities. But this is precisely the role he wishes literariness to take, its social force falling outside the realm of hermeneutics. Like a passport, it only has to be shown and stamped to serve its function. His call for “the co-presence of the revolutionary force in intellect” requires an alternative conceptualization of literariness and agency, one that gives preference to a model of literature’s social agency as superficial (“superficial” in the literal and not pejorative sense) rather than agonized and agonistic.

In the preamble that he later added to the Chinese embassy speech, Emerson demonstrates through language how a country might move ecstasy (without diluting it) to the stable ground of policy, to locate it in a permanent, official place without giving up any of its demands on ad hoc intuition.

Nature creates in the East the uncontrollable yearning to escape from limitation into the vast and boundless, to use a freedom of fancy which plays with all works of Nature, great or minute, galaxy or grain of dust, as toys and words of the mind; inculcates a beatitude to be found in escape from all organization and all personality, and makes ecstasy an institution.<sup>73</sup>

Recasting “the East” in preexisting terms central to his own philosophy represents a mainstay in Emerson’s theory on the uses of literature, which insists on the extension of a universally applicable paradox. For “the East,” an aversion to the objectification and formalization of ideas and things also comes with a politically necessary drive to objectify, formalize, and institutionalize the ephemeral ecstasies of the mind. Hence, in this preamble, Nature creates a yearning to “escape from limitation” but it does so in part by inculcation, that is, through a repetitive and authoritarian process that returns us to a limiting authority. Even if we accept that Nature “inculcates” the “escape from all organization,” the final word—“institution”—is still the very picture of organization. Thus the preamble joins formalism and ecstasy into a nexus, not by reconciling them (dialectically or functionally), however, but by allowing them to stand in oxymoronic adjacency. This oxymoron offers one of the most concise versions of the political sensibility cultivated in “Fate.” Like “Fate,” the preamble serves up constant reminders of the tethers of limitation, but here these tethers serve to implement ecstasy and thus secure its political utility from whimsy and chance. This logic is preserved in the preamble’s palindromic structure (“Nature creates in the East the . . . yearning to . . . use a freedom of fancy which plays with all works of Nature”), which presents formally a proposition put forth in “Fate” and suggested as early as Emerson’s essay “Nature” (1836). “Ecstasy” grows out of a reflexive act in which Nature creates impulses that can play with Nature. Like the “toy figures in a toy house” clause in “Fate,” Nature here entreats its subjects to regard everything as “toys and words of the mind” to the degree that such a way of thinking becomes standard protocol (encapsulated further in the oxymoron of “restlessness” and “beatitude”). I have used the word “paradox” to underscore the unorthodoxy of this political model, but Emerson himself does not consider such a model paradoxical. We can escape “organization” and dissolve personality into impersonality without shunning inculcation and institutionalization, since what these formalisms enforce is the practice of taking up thought experiments without lingering.

#### **IV. “I want not metaphysics but only the literature of them”**

Emerson’s own uses of world literature, namely, his habit of testing programs of change in the textual laboratories of whatever piece of foreign literature he happened to have on hand, serve as crux and emblem of his theory of the uses of literature and provide for us the final

piece of the puzzle of his China-thinking. I have shown how Emerson freighted China with a nonaggregational, noncommittal approach to literature and ideas; having this elective affinity did not prevent Emerson from submitting the claims to Chinese literature to Chinese “problems.” In his 1875 essay “Resources,” Emerson critiques a crassly material understanding of resources and cites the example of the “Chinaman in California” sending American products back to China and starting a market for American goods there. He has no qualms about using Confucius to deliver this point home (“the old Confucius in China admitted the benefit, but stated the limitation” of a too-literal appreciation of resources).<sup>74</sup> Confucius is invoked with no consideration for contextual coherence—almost as though Legge’s *Chinese Classics* happened to be the book he grabbed from his shelf.<sup>75</sup> Paralogically applied to the immediate situation, Confucius, as with so many others, represents one of the endless resources from which Emerson pulls to make a point.

I am of course not the first to notice Emerson’s arbitrary use of intellectual resources. Most of the critics I have included in this essay—Whicher, Robinson, Garvey, Larson, Cameron—have all written on Emerson’s tendency to take things up only to set them aside. Stanley Cavell has asked that we read Emerson’s essays as a series of philosophies of thinking (and thinking’s contingencies) rather than as a whole philosophy. His intervention led to Cary Wolfe’s systems-theory reading of Emerson, in which he argues that, for Emerson, thinking is “not active apprehension . . . but rather an act of reception.”<sup>76</sup> Against Cavell’s classification of such a way of thinking as acquiescence to unsolvability, however, Wolfe sees it as evidence of Emerson’s prowess in theorizing the condition of modernity. For Wolfe, the “systematicity” of Emersonian thought comes from his recurring observations that the inducements to thinking are contingent, that we can only take from the environment (the complexity of things out there) that which we can use and to which we can only maintain a “temporalized relation.” I agree with Wolfe that Emerson models and theorizes that which happens all the time to everyone (as theorized by someone like Niklas Luhmann)—and his intuition that romantic constructivism has erroneously labeled this phenomenon “negative capability.” However, I reject Wolfe’s implicit claim that Emerson is only describing what is true—only more sensitive to the counterintuitiveness of cognition than others—but remains ultimately, as Luhmann was, uninterested in modernity being anything other than what it is. I would go further to say, risking exactly the kind of idealism that Wolfe’s Luhmannian reading sidesteps, that Emerson

does not only model the contingency of thought but formulates it into an ethics of cultural difference. We arrive at this ethics not by dismissing the usefulness of “literariness” as an analytic, as Wolfe does,<sup>77</sup> but by reconsidering Emerson’s investment in a literariness indifferent to cultural/national/ideological/historical specificity and the “close-reading” model, one that disavows the cultural and intellectual associations naturally formed in the process of using someone else’s literature/literary systems to think a new thought. Emerson suggests that there should be a mode of cross-cultural contact that promises the radical organization of society but does not in the same gesture freight the transaction itself with a representational politics. Only by examining his intransitive transnationalism can we bring one camp of Emerson scholars (who write on his ecstasy, his proto-pragmatism, and his modernity) together with another group who struggle with the way his universalism looks situated in the expansionist politics of the mid-nineteenth century.

Emerson’s ethics of the uses of literature comes to us by way of a touchstone counterintuition in his political transcendentalism: there exists an inverse relationship between the amount of time you linger on the thoughts of someone else and the amount of “difference” that encounter can make. Annoyed with the methodological thoroughness of “Hegel and the Hegelians,” Emerson once penned in his journal: “I want not metaphysics, but only the literature of them.”<sup>78</sup> This complaint does not indicate preference for one genre (literature) over another (metaphysics) but voices Emerson’s theory that the literary manifestation of a thought cuts through a genealogy that weighs the idea down—an appealing mechanism for someone “who only want[s] to know at the shortest of the few steps, the two steps, or the one taken.”<sup>79</sup> Here we are presented with the classic Emersonian paradox introduced in his 1838 “Address to the Divinity School”: those who laboriously sift through the thoughts of others are those who take mental shortcuts, opt out of thinking; conversely, those who keep only a kind of running tab of ideas, as so many titles on a bookshelf, take the shortcuts that are necessary and generative. And as evidenced in this journal entry and in many of his essays, Emerson does not want “the literature of them” for excavation: one just has to tune in and tune out to a universal stock of intellectual resources as it takes “very little time to entertain a hope and an insight which becomes the light of our life.”<sup>80</sup>

Any kind of “literary” entity should only mediate our cognition *but briefly*, as the mind soon hits overload and has to keep moving. The institution of ecstasy only works if we “do not think so much of the point

we have left, or the point we would make, as of the liberty and glory of the way.” “Deep time” represents the opposite temporal scale with which Emerson works: no time at all. The aftereffects of any model of enlargement should quickly disappear. The First and Second Series essays and much of earlier works describe and prescribe the short-livedness of the initial stage of any social, intellectual, or human “thrill” before those “thrills” are nominalized, reified, formalized, and codified into predictable pathways of behavior.<sup>81</sup> Similarly for reading, brief attention spans form the precondition of, and not the obstacle to, powerful experiences of literature. One of “Emerson’s own provocations regarding the uses of literature,” argues T. S. McMillin, “takes the form of a schematic of reading that is and has to be ‘preposterous’: Instead of promoting a practice of reading that masters the subject, consumes the text, and tends toward the end of interpretation, an alternative, ‘natural’ reading would attempt a lively, responsible, continued consideration of the nature of a text in such a manner as to propagate that nature.”<sup>82</sup> In such a reading process a new discourse disrupts an ossified way of thinking in a process that is not driven by ideology but purely stimulated through a regained “immediacy to the (consequently extratextual) Real”<sup>83</sup>—in the way that one might feel moved to act by the words on the page now, but not necessarily a day later. McMillin’s vision of Emerson’s uses of literature as fundamentally antihermeneutical and as serving intellectual purposes where social sensibility fails describes a sociology of literature in which the systematic relay between literature and reality increases in proportion to the contrary and inspired ways in which texts are read.

Everywhere Emerson invokes the literature of other cultures to precipitate the drawing of a new circle that could not be conceived otherwise, and he takes on an ahistorical comparative approach in which the literature of world historical figures enjoys a radical proximity to the problem at hand (e.g., Confucius can shed light on the mannerisms of American youth).<sup>84</sup> For Emerson, the redrawing of a new circle is neither a widening out nor a scaling up, neither a new social network nor a cross-cultural connection. The pedagogical function of citing “world literature” does not inhere in educating native audiences about world literature but, as I have described, in *disrupting stable pathways in the formation of one’s social consciousness*. An intertextual moment in his essay “Woman” offers a good example of how Emerson makes social reform—and, by association, China—a matter of the way you read, as opposed to what you read. In “Woman,” a lecture delivered at

the Women's Rights Convention in Boston in 1855, Emerson urges that "the action of society is progressive. In barbarous society the position of women is always low—in the Eastern nations lower than in the West."<sup>85</sup> To prove this Emerson makes the bizarre, though for him not unusual, move of citing from *Chinese Classics*, and even that in parabolic form: "'When a daughter is born,' says the *Shiking*, the old Sacred Book of China, 'she sleeps on the ground, she is clothed with a wrapper, she plays with a tile; she is incapable of evil or of good.' And something like that position, in all low society, is the position of woman; because, as before remarked, she is herself its civilizer."<sup>86</sup> The way he cites Chinese literature here constitutes a discernible breach in the rules of the use of other people's literature for social purposes. If it does not strike Emerson as ironic to use a Chinese text to offer commentary about a social problem that seems to exist in China—a barbarous "Eastern nation"—it should certainly have occurred to us. In making this meta-move, Emerson makes it impossible to determine if the *Shiking* is being cited as a representative text (of the rhetoric behind the oppression of women) or, because the *Shiking* allegorizes the position of "daughters," as an example of a nation's literary consciousness about its own unequal structures. The introduction of the literary into the social foils any attempt to make the kinds of one-to-one associations that John Guillory has critiqued in *Cultural Capital*—namely, the institutionalized agenda of making noncanonical texts represent their marginalized polities. The economy of the use of literature in "Woman" points to the ineffable logic of a text's own world-making and disabuses us of synecdoche as a way of understanding literary-cultural connections.

One could argue that Emerson falls into the trap described by Edward Said in *Orientalism* where commensurability is extended to the East only to make it the site of thought-experiments, that he considers an Orient that has "no life apart from the ideological constructions foisted on it."<sup>87</sup> Without exonerating Emerson from a certain amount of nineteenth-century orientalizing zeitgeist, we can still say that Said's critique of cultural appropriation—in which others and otherness get co-opted as sources of renewal and self-affirmation—cannot describe Emerson's approach, which moves from generative idea to generative idea without systematically incorporating them or letting any image of a culture fix in his mind. The network of literary texts that represents his "resources" abdicates the politics of representation as well as the sovereign claim to ideological ownership. We can trace this in his much neglected late speeches on the topic of the uses of literature, such as



the work “Books” and other pieces from *Letters and Social Aims* (1876). At the same time he drifted in and out of policymaking as cultural functionary, Emerson revisited with renewed urgency his view of his “Literary Ethics” (to take the title of an earlier essay), giving a series of lectures that both cultivated and promoted a method of politically purposed reading/learning that shunned the kind of ideological commitment that might produce a predictable set of political responses (in the sense that one might read abolitionist tracts and act in accordance to their tenets thereafter). In “The American Scholar” (1837) (originally a lecture called “Literary Ethics” and later republished as “Books” in 1876) he wrote, “Books . . . are for nothing but to inspire. I better never see a book than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system.”<sup>88</sup> His literary ethics called on people to undo the effects of their contact with other people’s thoughts, to disassociate from the sources of their creativity, lest they become “mortgaged to the opinions and usages of Europe, and Asia, and Egypt.”<sup>89</sup> What looks like self-preservation—let’s not follow the philosophies of Asia, Europe, or Egypt too faithfully lest something happen to the way we think—becomes, through the unraveling of the metaphor of “mortgage,” a wholesale abandonment of intellectual property. “All men catch the word,” he writes, “for it is verily theirs as much as his.”<sup>90</sup> Thinking has to be spontaneous, but it does not have to be original.

Shunning what he might call a “compensatory” approach to other-thinking, Emerson’s instrumental use of world literature interrogates our most doxological commitments to cross-culturalism as intellectual property. Under a capitalist model of knowledge aggregation and ownership, the thoughts in the past stay in the past and one roots through them to shore up the legitimacy of a claim in the present. Emerson’s model of intellectual socialism attacks the notion that ideas are intellectual property. In his 1875 essay “Quotations and Originality” he once again critiques the idea that one “quotes” from a person in time, and not from a transcendent, timeless unity. Great men think great thoughts because they pull correctly from the Universal Mind, and therefore their thoughts “quote” one another, retain formal resonances as a result of coming from the same originator. And yet, because great men pull from the Universal Mind, their thoughts no more belong to them, no more belong to any body of thinkers, than to anyone else. Confucian thought belongs as much to Emerson’s immediate need as to Confucius himself, but Emerson does not then “own” or speak for Confucius just because

he cited his works. In this example we can see a repudiation of the conflation of national social problems with the discursive uses of a nation's literature. "Past" and "Present" and vast geographical stretches (such as the fixed distances between Confucius and Montaigne and Zoroaster), and all the thoughts that were ever thought exist in what he calls "equipollence," or perfect geometrical relationship to one another on the same spatial-temporal plane. The universalization of intellectual resources does not imply a sustained world consciousness, as Dimock suggests, but the democratization of accessibility. People from different places in different times are nonetheless equidistant to the "Universal Mind"; a good mind pulls unabashedly from this fund and unabashedly tosses the idea back once it is used. The literary becomes the condition for a new information network that no longer holds cosmopolitanism to an artifactual standard but reveals it to be inherently "reader-centric." Emerson actively demonstrated the folly of marking out signs of literary cosmopolitanism (such as intertextuality, global rhetoric, translation) when cosmopolitanism, like self-reliance, *inheres in method*, with intertextuality, global rhetoric, and translation and other "literary" markers serving as the points of delivery, not what is delivered.

For Emerson, there exists no correct attitude toward, nor correct appropriation of, China or Chinese literature in the long run, no extended stay in the geopolitical folds of deep time, because there isn't for any particular thing or any discourse in the long run. I have argued in this essay that he engages Sino-American relations within the frame of foreign policy in order to make it a matter of reading ecstatically and, consequently, a case-by-case, moment-to-moment phenomenon. While reading ecstatically should translate into tangible reform politics, nothing should dictate how the processes of reading should be transubstantiated into the matter of social conduct. This "institution of ecstasy" also happens to be a universally applicable oxymoron. China, for its part, is a book that can be opened at any page, from which any idea can be taken and the spread of its "literary" never fully syncs with its historical or contemporary reality. Thus Emerson poses the biggest affront to the notion of literary sovereignty (a model under which we currently labor); his intellectual socialism suggests that nothing that we read or write (our "literary" extensions) belong to us. By extension, no literary production by the Chinese "belongs" to the Chinese, no Persian use of literature belongs to the Persians—and, on the upshot, nothing can "belong" to them, either. Novel, if perhaps controversial, Emerson's view of world literature sees it functioning as a communicative medium serving

to facilitate thinking and speaking only. Once used, it and the connections it has occasioned rightly vanish (except, of course, for the pesky problem of the ink still remaining on the page).

## Notes

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Speech at Banquet in Honor of the Chinese Embassy, Boston, 1860." Collected in *Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1875). Hereafter *Complete Works*. This speech was first printed by the Boston City Council as *Reception and Entertainment of the Chinese Embassy by the City of Boston* (Boston: Alfred Mudge and Son, City Printers, 1868). Hereafter *Reception*.

2. *Reception*, 11.

3. Specifically, the Burlingame-Seward Treaty of 1868 amended the Treaty of Tientsin of 1858 and (theoretically) established friendly relations between America and China, recognized China's sovereign power over its domains, encouraged Chinese immigration, allowed privileged Chinese consuls into American ports, and guaranteed "liberty of conscience" to subjects of one nation in the other—thus a kind of global citizenship—and religious freedom.

4. *Reception*, 52.

5. "Ta-jin" is not a name but the romanization of the title of rank that followed the surnames of high-ranking officials in the Qing Ministry of Foreign Affairs (大人 da ren). Tung Ta-jin's name was Dong Xun.

6. *Reception*, 50.

7. *Ibid.*, 54.

8. *Complete Works*, 11: 469.

9. *The Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Hearst's International Library Publishers, 1914), 3:526–27; Ralph L. Rusk, *The Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 454.

10. Jeanine Abboushi Dallal, "Emerson's 'Inquest' and Cultural Regeneration," *American Literature* 73, no. 1 (March 2001): 57.

11. Tamara C. Emerson, "Relating Transcendentally: New England Transcendentalism, U.S. Evangelicalism, and the Antebellum Orientalization of China" (PhD dissertation, Wayne State University, 2008).

12. From his essay "History" (1841), *Complete Works*, 5:24. This deductive claim represents Emerson's basic idea that all forms contain within them their preceding forms.

13. For books on Emerson/China synergies, see K.V. Raghupathi, *Emerson's Orientalism* (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2007); Frederic Ives Carpenter, *Emerson and Asia* (New York: Haskell House, 1930); and Qian Mansu, *Ai Mo Sheng he Zhong Guo: Dui Ge Ren Zhu Yi de Fan Ying (Emerson and China: Reflections on Individualism)* (Beijing: SDX and Harvard-Yenching Academic Library, 1996). Books such as Arthur Christy's *The Orient in American Transcendentalism: A Study of Emerson, Thoreau and Alcott* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932); *The Asian Legacy and American Life* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968); and Arthur Versluis's *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) have argued that the appropriation of orientalism and Asian religions became the condition of possibility for a particular version of American transcendentalism.

14. See Malini Johar Schueller, "'Mine Asia': Emerson's Erotics of Oriental Possession," *U.S. Orientalism: Race, Nation, and Gender in Literature, 1790–1890* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001); and Yunte Huang, *Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature and Counterpoetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

15. Myra Jehlen, *American Incarnation, the Individual, the Nation and the Continent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 100.

16. John R. Eperjesi, *The Imperialist Imaginary: Visions of Asia and the Pacific in American Culture* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2005), 35–36.

17. "Repositioning America as an Atlantic and Pacific Nation," ACLA Conference, accessed March 14, 2013, <http://www.acla.org/acla2013/repositioning-america-as-an-atlantic-and-pacific-nation/>.

18. Wai Chee Dimock, "Deep Time: American Literature and World History," *American Literary History* 13, no. 4 (2001): 770.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Dimock, *Through Other Continents* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 44.

21. See Lawrence Buell's *Emerson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), in which he argues that Emerson "anticipates the globalizing age in which we increasingly live" (3). Ian Finseth's "Evolution, Cosmopolitanism and Emerson's Anti-slavery Politics," *American Literature* 77, no. 4 (2005), identifies a version of sociological cosmopolitanism in Emersonian thought as "quasi-mystical blending of identities" that explains his dabbling in scientific racism and racial pluralism during the 1850s (752). See also Jessica Schiff Berman's location of Emerson's ideational politics within the framework of Kantian world citizenship in *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism and the Politics of Community* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

22. *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 9, ed. Ralph H. Orth and Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 347. (Hereafter *Journals and Miscellaneous*, with indication of volume number and volume editors). Part of this list is taken from the catalog of Emerson's library in Kenneth Walter Cameron's *Ralph Waldo Emerson's Reading* (Hartford, CT: Transcendental Book, 1962), 66, 85, 95. Emerson also mentions that he read "Samuel G. Ward's Chinese book" (see *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, vol. 6, ed. William H. Gilman et al., 378).

23. Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson, eds., *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, (paperback edition) (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 312, 330, 373.

24. Emerson was heavily influenced by Hegelian historiography, which played a key role in the shaping of the representation of China as a city that has fallen out of history. See Robert D. Richardson Jr.'s *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), chaps. 80 and 97, for Emerson's involvement with the St. Louis Hegelians. For contemporary critical studies on the discursive rise of the notion of China as time-stopped, see Jerome Chen's *China and the West: Society and Culture 1815–1937* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1937) and Haun Saussy's chapter "No Time Like the Present" in *Great Walls of Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002).

25. These were either made available to him directly or as periodically published by the *Dial*. See David Weir, *American Orient: Imagining the East from the Colonial Era through the Twentieth Century* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 64–67. In *Notebook EL* (denoting notebooks filled from December 1849 to the end of the 1860s), he transcribed two quotations from Legge's *Chinese Classics (The Poetry Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson)*, ed. Ralph H. Orth et al. [Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986], 325, 331). In *Journals R* and *U* (denoting two different journals filled between 1843 and 1844), he recorded snippets of Collier's translations of *Sì Shū, The Chinese Classical Works*, and specifically the books of Mencius. These appear as numbered entries. In *Journal R*, entries [33] and [123] quote from the books of "Hea Lun," "Shang Mung," "Chung Yung," and "Hea Mung" (*Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 8, ed. William H. Gilman et al., 366–67, 410). In *Journal U*, entries [5], [48] and [49] quote from "Shang Mung" and entries [5] and [7] quote from the "Hea Mung" (*Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 9, ed. Ralph H. Orth and Alfred R. Ferguson, 7, 8).

26. *The Tao of Emerson*, 2007.

27. "I leave the book I leave the wine" and "Burn up the libraries" are lines from untitled manuscript poems in *Notebook EL (The Poetry Notebooks*, 300 and 326). "Inspired we must burn our books" is from entry [153] of *Journal VO* (denoting journals filled between 1857 and 1858) (*Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, vol. 14, ed. Susan Sutton Smith and Harrison Hayford, 161).

28. Kerry Larson, "Illiberal Emerson," *Nineteenth-century Prose* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 37.

29. *The Poetry Notebooks*, 453.

30. T. Gregory Garvey, "Introduction," in *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform*, ed. T. Gregory Garvey (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), xi.

31. Stephen Whicher, *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), 97, 171.

32. David M. Robinson, "Emerson's 'American Civilization': Emancipation and the National Destiny," in *The Emerson Dilemma*, 221.

33. Garvey, ed., *The Emerson Dilemma*, xi.

34. *Complete Works*, 6:24.

35. *Ibid.*, 6:31.

36. Judith Butler, "Performativity's Social Magic," in *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Shusterman (New York: Blackwell, 1998), 13–14.

37. Jason Frank, "Standing for Others: Reform and Representation in Emerson's Political Thought," in *Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2011), 384.

38. Johannes Voelz, *Transcendental Resistance: The New Americanists and Emerson's Challenge* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2010), 244.

39. By the middle of the nineteenth century, and really long before that, China and the prospect of a "Chinese-America" discursively transformed the content, form, and scope of American letters and literature. "China" offered up new ways to think about "what could be thought." For example, the methodological divides in transatlantic sinology shaped, to a certain extent, the ideological divides in transatlantic anthropology (see Miranda Brown, "Neither 'Primitive' nor 'Others,' but Somehow Not Quite Like 'Us': The Fortunes of Psychic Unity and Essentialism in Chinese Studies," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 49, no. 2 (2006): 219–52). As one of the oldest civilizations that always had to be accounted for in any genealogical survey, China presented endless problems for and generated all kinds of innovations in the taxonomic systems of natural history and medicine (see Michael Keevak, *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking*, [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011]). China's place in the history of the world and the notion of Chineseness as a racial category also evolved alongside and impacted the dialectics between unilineal evolutionism, which was adamant on the "psychic unity of mankind," and cognitive relativism, which insisted on essential and not developmental differences between different peoples and races. Chinese literature newly translated into English by midcentury and new literary genres that took advantage of the market for information on China together offered one of the few available "world literatures" at the time. As Cristanne Miller has recently asserted, the flood of "China literature" at midcentury irreversibly changed the American literary market. Emerson, like Whitman, Dickinson, and many other writers for whom the world opened only in the mind, had that opening made available to them by the barrage of print matter on the "far East" that began in the late 1840s. "Such reports," argues Miller, "engaged in Orientalist description but also critically disrupted the popular imagination of a timeless, sensual, and spiritual East by describing events and people in a complex contemporary world" (italics mine). See "Emily Dickinson's 'turbaned seas'" in *Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*, ed. Kerry Larson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 251.

40. See John C. Broderick, "Emerson and Moorfield Storey: A Lost Journal Found," *American Literature* 38, no. 2 (1966): 177–86, for Emerson's correspondences with William Seward after Daniel Webster's infamous "Seventh of March" speech and his critique of politicians who dismissed Seward's appeal to "higher law" for the abolition of slavery.

41. Anson Burlingame, "Massachusetts and Sumner," speech delivered in the US House of Representatives, June 21, 1856. See *Defense of Massachusetts*, Cambridge: printed for private distribution, 9.

42. Walter LaFeber, "Presidential Address: Technology and U.S. Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History* 24, no. 1 (2000): 3.

43. William H. Seward, "Commerce in the Pacific Ocean," speech delivered to the Senate of the United States, July 29, 1852 (Washington: Buell and Blanchard, 1852). For further reading on Seward and US foreign policy, see Ernest N. Paolino, *The Foundations of American Empire: William Henry Seward and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973).

44. After Seward's speech of the same name on the inevitability of war between free and slaveholding states: "Irrepressible Conflict," delivered at Rochester, NY, October 25, 1858 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, Birney Anti-Slavery Collection, 1860).

45. Najia Aarim-Heriot, *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans and Racial Anxiety in the United States, 1848–82* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

46. In Herman Melville's 1876 epic poem *Clarel*, the former confederate Ungar scoffs that Reconstruction's gilded age has devolved into an "Anglo-Saxon China" (*Selected Poems of Herman Melville*, ed. Robert Penn Warren [New York: Random House, 1970], 259).

47. Heriot, *Chinese Immigrants*, 110.

48. *Complete Works*, 7:283.

49. *Ibid.*, 8:142.

50. *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, vol. 16, ed. Ronald A. Bosco and Glen M. Johnson, 99.

51. *Complete Works*, 8:198.

52. *Ibid.*, 8:199.

53. *Ibid.*, 1:291.

54. *Ibid.*, 1:335.

55. From the essay "Works and Days," *Complete Works*, 7:166.

56. Similar phrase also recorded in his journal, October 20, 1864. *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, vol. 15, ed. Gilman et al., 450.
57. Leonard N. Neufeldt, "The Science of Power: Emerson's Views on Science and Technology in America," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38, no. 2 (June 1977): 332.
58. Sharon Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 89.
59. *Complete Works*, 11:474.
60. *Reception*, 52; my emphasis.
61. *Ibid.*, 54–55.
62. *Ibid.*, 41–42. Untitled poem.
63. *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, vol. 2, ed. Gilman et al., 229.
64. *Reception*, 15.
65. Len Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Anti-Slavery and Reform* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 328. A journal entry further shows Emerson's association of Confucius with pragmatic reform: "Reform. Chang Tsoo and Kee Neih retired from the state to the fields on account of misrule, and showed their displeasure at Confucius who remained in the world. Confucius sighed and said, 'I cannot associate with birds and beasts. If I follow not man, whom shall I follow? If the world were in possession of right principles, I should not seek to change it.'" *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, vol. 6, ed. Gilman et al., 403 [May 20, 1843].
66. *Reception*, 54. "Bend one cubit to straighten eight" is a quote from Collie's translation of Mencius in *The Chinese Classical Work* which Emerson wrote down in his journals over a decade prior to the Boston embassy speech. See *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, 13:20.
67. *Reception*, 54.
68. Ari Hoogenboom, "Thomas A. Jenckes and Civil Service Reform," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47, no. 4 (March 1961): 636–58.
69. Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1907), 345. Google Books.
70. *Ibid.*, 234.
71. *Ibid.*, 236.
72. *Complete Works*, 11:473.
73. *Ibid.*, 11:469.
74. *Ibid.*, 8:98.
75. He makes a similar move in "Social Aims," which uses a quote from Confucius for its epigraph. *Complete Works*, 8:78–80.
76. Stanley Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). Cary Wolfe, "'The Eye Is the First Circle': Emerson's 'Romanticism,' Cavell's Skepticism, Luhmann's Modernity," in *The Other Emerson*, ed. Branka Arsić and Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 274.
77. Wolfe, "'The Eye Is the First Circle,'" 282.
78. *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, vol. 16, ed. Bosco and Johnson, 117.
79. *Ibid.*
80. From the essay "Experience," *Complete Works*, 11:243.
81. So, the term "Self-Reliance" means *constantly* stepping out of the long shadow of the institution and getting back to the moment when the sparks flew; "Love" creates a rush that people assiduously try to replicate in form when their love relationships have inevitably cruised back into stasis and impersonality; "History" must be made immediately relevant and not distanced as factual information; "Circles" illustrates the strange and new discursive frameworks we enter to experience the heady source of creativity; "Art" has to recapture "the original soul, a jet of pure light" (*Complete Works*, 5:333). And so on.
82. T. S. McMillin, *Our Preposterous Use of Literature: Emerson and the Nature of Reading* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 87.
83. *Ibid.*, 83.
84. See note 74 for the source.
85. *Complete Works*, 11:414.
86. *Ibid.*, 11:415.
87. Dimock, *Through Other Continents*, 29.
88. *Complete Works*, 1:90.
89. *Ibid.*, 1:159.
90. *Ibid.*, 1:165.