

## The Development and Changes of Comparative Literature in China

### LE DEVELOPPEMENT ET LES CHANGEMENTS DE LITTÉRATURE COMPAREE EN CHINE

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#### Abstract

This thesis explores the origin, development and changes of comparative literature theories. The focus is on the definition of comparative literature in China and the adoption of comparative literature theories in practical usage.

**Key words:** Comparative literature; Development and changes; China

#### Résumé

Cette thèse explore l'origine du développement et de l'évolution des théories de la littérature comparée. L'accent est mis sur la définition de la littérature comparée en Chine et à l'adoption des théories de littérature comparée de l'utilisation pratique.

**Mots clés:** La littérature comparée; Le développement et les changements de la Chine

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Comparative literature is an independent field exploring connections: connections about the literature of two and more different countries, nations and connections across different academic disciplines and ideologies in a global world. Qian Zhongshu points out that: as a specialized discipline, comparative literature specifically refers to

those beyond national borders and language boundaries. Ji Xianlin also explains that: What is comparative literature? As its name suggests, it compares the literature of different countries. This is in the narrow sense, while the comparative literature in the broad sense is to compare the literature with other disciplines, including humanities and social sciences, including even natural science. In one of her book: *Comparative literature and Modern Chinese literature*, Yue Daiyun points out that "we are facing the age of integration, contact and communication. China is now moving towards the world and comparative literature is an important way for Chinese literature to walk towards to the world.....after a long closure and isolation, we need to reevaluate and rerecognize ourselves especially in the context of world literature." Modern Chinese literature develops and enriches in comparison, selection, absorption, transformation from the world literature. It will be of great help for expending its vision and guiding its practices to properly understand and summary the relationship between Chinese literature and foreign literature and find their meeting point." Chinese literature, especially modern Chinese literature, serves as not only a window to promote the understanding between China and the world, but also a mirror reflecting Chinese culture constantly receiving foreign influence, thereby enrich, improve and develop itself. Thus, in order to have a comprehensive study of Chinese literature and have a better appreciation and reevaluation of ourselves, it is necessary to incorporate it into the category of world literature to find its nationality and internationality with a comparative perspective. As a Greek scholar put it: One cannot have a good understanding of Greece without crossing China. Similarly, one cannot understand Chinese literature objectively without comparing with other countries'. In the era of highly informational, political and economical globalization, it is inevitable of the infiltration and convergence among cultures. Although Chinese literature has a profound and long history, in order to introduce Chinese literature and culture successfully,

it has to communicate with the world by comparison through which to find the differences and similarities and to present itself in an acceptable way.

Pichois and Rousseau give the earliest definition of comparative literature: "As a systematic art, comparative literature aims at having a better description, understanding and appreciation of world culture by exploring its similar kinship and in what ways by comparing literatures in such domains about knowledge—representation, or the existing phenomenon and theme among them, as long as they are in various languages and cultures or in the same tradition, no matter it is far away in the time or not. As a relatively independent subject, the comparative literature was founded in the latter half of 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is usually divided into the following schools:

French school, also called the Influence study, has the following claims: 1. It is devoted to the tracing of geographical and historical relationships among literary works which have the same cultural origin. 2. Focusing on the historical consciousness and facts links between two or more kinds of literary rather than on the aesthetics of literature. Paul Van Tieghem, the representative of French School, specifies in his: *Littérature Comparée* "the nature of comparative literature, as other historical science, is to collect facts of different origins as much as possible in order to fully explain the fact of each, which is the base of knowledge expansion." He also gives specific regulations about the scope, content and method: "the aim of comparative literature is to depict the 'transmission line', including the description of borrowing and interaction between different ethnic groups, the discussion of links of origins and evolutionary process and the exploration of means by which they influence each other. The influence study has established a relatively complete theoretical system, but it is blamed by American School for its partial study of origin and influence which causes the limitation of scope.

American School is also known as Parallel Study. In the 1950s, base on the theory and practice of American comparative literature, R. Wellek and Remak didn't follow the influence study of French school, but explore an alternative approach: Taking two or more kinds of literature without direct connections into comparison. Thus, it greatly broadens the view of comparative literature and produces extensive and far-reaching effects around the world. While it should be the New Criticism that lays theoretical foundation of American School. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, New Criticism is popular in the literary criticism. It is against the focus of author's life, society, historical background, literary tradition, which are all the traditional criticism claims. The New Criticism argues that literature is independent and self-contained with its own aesthetic value and the characteristics of the work itself should be focused on. Different from Influence Study, the Parallel Study stands for the following three

viewpoints. 1. Encouraging extensive reading on the literature works through the analysis of symbols, images, metaphor and irony. The introduction of New Criticism into the comparative literature has gradually attached importance to the study of the literature works itself. 2. Figuring out the literariness or the essence and discipline of literature works. The American theorists repeatedly emphasize that literature is not the product based on individual or national psychology but on the language. The root of the literature is its inner forms instead of the human's objective world. Consequently, The American School showed its unwillingness to study the national spirits or features. Rene Wellek, one of the founders of the American School, clearly pointed out: "If the literature is not studied as something different from other human activities or products, any progress won't be made from the perspective of methodology. So we have to deal with the "literariness", namely the essence of literature. 3. Holding that comparative literature is not only necessary for the multi-national literature study but also for the multi-discipline study, because of which general comparative literature concepts are formed. If what Wellek said aimed at breaking the admiring status of The French School's Influence Study in the comparative literature field, another American theorist Remarque would be considered as the designer who built the systematic American methodology. One of his books *Definitions and Functions of the Comparative Study*, written in 1961, argued that the understanding of the American School on the comparative literature is beyond the literature study within one country and generally studies the relations between literatures and the other fields or regions. Remarque stressed: "Comparative literature study refers to the comparison of literature between two countries or more than two countries and also between literature and other fields." What he emphasized is not the relation but the comparison as two kinds of literature with no relations can also be compared. Due to the fact that the American School focuses on studying the literature phenomena between nations which bear no factual relations but have something in common in their aesthetic values, the study is called "Parallel Study".

The Former Soviet Union School appeared in the 1960s, combining the influence study and the parallel study so as to correct the biases of the American and French Schools. The Former Soviet Union School has the following beliefs. 1. Despite the fact that the American and French Schools started earlier with an open mind, they failed in combining the comparative literature with the social and historical conditions, which led to the West-centered Thought from thinking to organizing. 2. Overcoming the Ultra-left Trend of Thought and Russia-centered Thought, The Former Soviet Union School demands to closely connect the comparative literature study with the social and historical backgrounds. 3. It further emphasizes the comparative study of literatures

between socialistic countries, which brings a new field to the comparative literature study.

Comparative literature started relatively early in China, but actually came into being as a subject in 1970s. Just as the modern Chinese literature criticism, Chinese Comparative Study has ever been put in “aphasia” with no declarations and theory systems of its own. However, during its long critical practice, Chinese scholars have not only learned from the merits of the American and French Schools, passing down the traditions of both the influence study and the parallel study as well as the Soviet Union belief of combining the literature with the society and the history, but also have bravely broken the West-centered Thought and come up with an idea that the comparative study between eastern and western literature should be considered as the focus in China, which helps to widen the world’s comparative literature study fields. A professor from Hong Kong Chinese University and the Dean of Hong Kong-America Academic Center, Li Dasan, points out that the neutral stance of Chinese scholars is, under the guidance of the Chinese philosophy, a flexible way to understand the two prevailing schools: the American School and the French School. He further emphasized the principle and aim of the Chinese scholars, as he said: “It should first starts from the self-identity of nationality, gradually goes to the broad cultural awareness, and then combines with the neglected and unfolding literature, forming ‘the third world’ of literature. Therefore it will include all kinds of literatures in the world. At last, it should integrate all the literatures as a whole based on their complex relations, which seems quite difficult to come true, though.” This turned out to be true in the early 1984, when a famous international scholar in the comparative study, Weensy Stein, wrote the paper “Where Are We from? Where Are We Now? And Where Are We Going? -- the Ever-lasting Crisis for Comparative Literature”. In this paper, Stein confessed that the belief that the comparative study can only take place within one civilization system, which was held by many scholars in the past, including himself, actually turned unreliable. Conversely, he suggested that we should carry forward the concept “world literature” brought by Romanists Herder and Goethe to extend the European comparative literature into a new one that includes all kinds of eastern and western civilizations and bears a global significance.

Since 1990s, the theory and practice of comparative literature have been quite shocked. The rapid development of modern high technology and the growing popularity of the Internet make the impact study using traditional data track face severe challenges. When the information used to be possessed by only a few exclusive can be obtained from the Internet by many more people today, the possession of information is no longer an advantage. Therefore, how to summarize, analyze and use these raw data becomes the problem which needs to be carefully treated by those researchers. Wang Ning said, “to solve this problem,

nothing is more than to change the passive impact study into a positive accepting one, that is to say, to emphasize on the study of main part and initiative interpretation the recipients play while they are accepting the source text.” However, American School which is dominated by formalism and emphasizing the parallel comparison study has been doubted for its two-dimensional lateral thinking and the lack of the informative materials and a solid foundation of comparable objects for scientific thinking. Just as the famous British comparative literature expert Susan Bassnett said in her masterpiece *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*, “It can be said that, to the late 20th century, we entered into a disastrous Comparative Literature Period. This study is in a state of crisis in the West, is no doubt that ... a sharp decline in the number of students; works of many comparative litterateurs become less and less; there is no public opinion in what should be studied in comparative literature; people still openly apply the binary method in the study of comparative (i.e. the method of comparing two writers or two texts in two different systems; but how to define two different system is so far a very complex problem need to be solved. ), and other old ideas. All of these are accelerating the decline of comparative literature.” In the article *Current Crisis of Comparative Literature and the Way out*, Xiao Jinlong said that the impact of the traditional theory of comparative literature is major from the post-modern thought and post-colonialism. Postmodernism, with unprecedented power, is subverting the logos centered ideology continued in the Western culture, and inevitably deconstructs the nature and primitive literature explored by French-American comparative literature. Xiao also pointed out that the crisis of comparative literature is in fact caused by seeking the unity or nature of literature through the comparison of various national literatures. Therefore, in order to fundamentally solve the crisis of comparative literature, the only right remedy is to thoroughly change the traditional logos centered ideology, to focus on exploring the differences and particularity of literature, rather than continue to explore the unity, nature or primitive of literature. In *The Background, Research Status and Future Direction of Comparative Literature in China*, Wang Ning pointed out that only by achieving equal-footed and mutual exchanges in the context of cultural pluralism, can comparative literature have a new way out. “From a global perspective, to examine the literature in a cross-traditional, cross-cultural, cross border and national boundaries and cross-linguistic cultural pluralism context, can be able to create a dialogue era of international comparative study and to lay the theoretical foundation for the formation of its new pattern.” Hu Yamin also pointed out in “*Cross-Cultural Literature relationship research: the Thinking on the Subject Position of Comparative Literature*”, “The basic spirit of comparative literature is to link the literature all over the world as a whole, and place literature of

each country to the whole structure to comprehend and compare, from two or more cultural system to observe the literature phenomena, to discover the various relationships between literature and literature, literature and other areas of human activity. By comparison of different national literature, people will find those similarities and differences of human culture, understand the cultural background and patterns of different ethnics, which helps them to enter the era of cultural communication.”

All the discussion above has clearly indicated the location and direction of comparative literature today. It is not simply equal to the comparison of literature. The main feature is to compare across the boundaries of nation, linguistics and nationality. And also the comparison should carry on in larger cultural background, considering the relationship between literature and history, philosophy, linguistics, and other subjects. Comparative literature should be exposure to a broader cultural vision to explore the similarities and differences of different cultures, to accomplish the mission of mutual communication and exchange of different ethnics. Comparison is not only to seek the similarity, but also keep their differences. It is to realize the different characteristics of each nation in the process of comparison. Nowadays, for the increasing demand of equal dialogue in culture, we should see more clearly that any culture is a relatively exist with another culture. Taking the local culture as a perspective, any foreign culture is just an “other”. Through the “other” to see their own culture, it can help to reflect on their own. And the reference and absorbing of foreign culture play an invaluable role in rich and development of local culture.

The same token, today, under the concept of “The spirit product of each nation has become public property”, the research of a great modern writer without studying his relationship with his cultural literary is not a complete one. Taking Lu Xun as an example, if not mentioning his

spiritual nourishment absorbing from Nietzsche, Byron, Gogol, Chekhov, not talking about the abundant papers discussing him from the United States, the former Soviet Union, Japan and Eastern European, the research of Lu Xun is not comprehensive. However, for the study of modern American poetry, if you do not understand how Chinese classic lyrics “creatively distorted” by Pound, the master of American imagery, to become an important part of modern American poetry, you are not able to comprehend the mystery and magic of it.

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