

Universality, Heterogeneity, and Worlding: Meanings of Comparison in Chinese Comparative Literature

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Abstract

Comparison, either in the methodological or ontological sense, is the soul and the operational principle of comparative literature. Its meaning, however, has not always been transparent nor unchanging in the Chinese context. Tracing its signifying trajectory from “universality” to “heterogeneity,” the paper offers a mapping of historicity and culturality that underscores the Chinese theories of literature and the function of comparative literature as a discipline and as an instrument of intercultural communication. The authors further argue that the discourse of comparison, as a way of worlding, reflects a desire of Chinese comparatists to engage the world and yet to retain a distinctive theoretical space and discourse, in which the markings of a Chinese school can be inscribed.

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Introduction

Comparison, a common mental exercise, seeks to relate “one” with “the other” so as to

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identify the similarities and differences among objects, phenomena, and concepts. And it is a mode of critical thinking that prevails in all humanistic studies and scientific investigations, which, for instance, had long existed in literary studies in China. But this does not mean that Chinese literary scholars had an ontological awareness about comparison at all times, particularly its critical implications in the results of their comparative thinking. In fact, their debates on the meanings of comparison throughout history, this paper will make clear, have paralleled the debates of western literary comparatists. Therefore, we will open with an examination of how comparison began in China as an instrument to categorize literary knowledge and to render aesthetic judgements in the service of canon building and humanistic value formation.

Comparison as differing in classical Chinese literary thought

The seed of comparison in literary studies can be traced back to early China in the method widely employed to categorize texts and to distinguish genres and authors, a sort of critical differing necessary to establish a canonical tradition. Two prime examples are Confucius's (551-479 BCE) commentary in *The Book of Poetry* and Gu Ban's (32-92 CE) contextual criticism in *The Book of Han*.

Genre criticism is at the heart of Confucius's editorial work on *The Book of Poetry*, who divides the 305 poems into three sections according to its social functions: namely, *feng* (popular songs), *ya* (courtly songs), and *song* (sacrificial and temple songs). Poems in the *feng* section, totaling 150, are mostly folk songs collected from 15 regions and administrative localities. Assuming differences between these places, Confucius offers editorial comments

packed with value judgments, which paved the way for the school of didactic criticism so prevalent in the history of Chinese literature.¹ For instance, he observes that the folk customs of Zheng and Wei are licentious while those of other places are not based on comparing the differences among the collected poems in the *feng* section (Yang 1958, p.171) since poems are reflections of local customs. Thus, comparative textual readings yield insights that help establish the view of literature as reflective and didactic.

Such practice of textual comparison of poems in helping reflect the local customs continued into later ages. In “Geography Records” in *The Book of Han*, Gu Ban premises the analysis of texts on the differences among localities. According to him, “people in Zheng and Wei with rugged terrain live in mountains and get water from valleys. Men and women frequently get together. Thus, these places have a socially affable custom that encourages lasciviousness” (Ban 1962, p.1652). He further sums up that Qin people are tough and warlike; Qi people have warm and peaceful temperaments while residents in Zheng and Wei are more open-minded, thus representing a crude form of cultural studies whose geography-contingent notion of culture continues through the end of the Han empire and the introduction of Buddhism to China. Literary comparison was not on the agenda of the literati until Southern and Northern Dynasties (420-589) when the great Han empire was politically split into the two imperial courts of South and North. A popular topic is the differences between southern and northern literati cultures, which prompted the following observation by a late Han scholar:

Literary scholars in the south are fond of criticism from others. Mistakes and

¹ The late scholar James Y. Liu (1975, p. 10) calls Confucius’s commentary on *The Book of Poetry* a prime example of the “universe and writer” phase of criticism in his schema of four phases in Chinese theories of literature.

errors thus get corrected upon being pointed out. A case in this regard is Zhi Cao's (192-232) criticism of Yu Ding's (? -219) work. But the common practice in northern China then is not in favor of criticizing others' work. Thus, when I first arrived in Ye [now a region in Hebei Province], I often followed the southern practice and offended others, for which I have not had the least sense of regret. But you, my students, should not follow me in this aspect. (Yan 1995, p.109)

Here comparison is employed not for textual interpretations but to illuminate conventions, customs, and politics of literary culture, which forms the basis of context-centered criticism in the Chinese aesthetic tradition and would become the primary mode of comparative literary studies well into the 20th century.

But this does not mean that classical Chinese literature is devoid of literary comparison for its own sake, either in diachronic or synchronic literary comparisons. Diachronic analysis concerns how literature has evolved over time. For example, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragon*, the first comprehensive work of literary theory composed by Xie Liu (465-532) compares the literary tastes of authors as time progresses: "Yi Jia (200 BCE-168 BCE) a writer in the early western Han Dynasty, came forth grandly; thus his writing was terse and his form lucid. Xiangru Sima (179 BCE-118 BCE) was proud and brash, thus in natural principle he was extravagant and in diction excessive. Xiong Yang (53 BCE-18 CE) was brooding and still, thus his intent was latent and the flavor deep" (Liu 2001, p.243).¹ The idea is that both a writer's temperament and the progression of time have a great role in the style of his literary creation.

¹ Owen (2003, p.221) translates the Chinese citation into English.

As for synchronic analysis, the most salient example is the elaborate work on genre theory by pre-modern Chinese literary scholars. Genre not only refers to the structuring of a creative writing, but also a reading formation that recalls literary tradition and intellectual modes of thinking, a mixture of subjective judgment and objective criteria. The idea of genre is often cast into the web of tangible yet notional and complex traditional concepts such as “qi” (气) and “xing” (性), which empowers it far beyond being the mere topography of the verbal text as demonstrated by the elaboration in *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragon*:

Although there are constants in the forms in which literature is given, there is no limit to the mutations they may undergo. How can we understand why this is so? In the poem, in the poetic exposition, in the letter, and in the memoir, the name and the basic principle depend on one another: these are examples of forms in which they are constants. But phrasing and the force of ‘qi’ endure long only by continuities and mutations: of these there are limitless numbers. (Liu 2001, p.259)¹

Thus, genre does not just simply refer to diction and syntax, but is highly relevant to and influenced by the classical literary theory and thinking mode. Or simply put, it is “a literary work’s structural paradigm of the ‘word-image-meaning’ system” (Chen 1996, p.62). It follows that genre as differing in its function of classification and comparison is a favored topic for almost all classical aestheticians of literature, which can be dated back to times of remote antiquity when the awareness of genre was very weak. For instance, genre is classified into the sub-genres of “dian (basic principles of founding a country), mo

¹ Owen (2003, p.231) translates the Chinese citation into English.

(governance plan), xun (attitudes of ministers), gao (edicts from the King), shi (military initiation proclamation), ming (command from the King)” in *The Book of Documents*, which came into being around the fifth century BCE. Such genre division mainly stemmed from the perspective of literary modes or forms and evolved into more detailed and subtle forms in later ages as displayed by “shiti” (ten genres) in *Wenfu* (Exposition of literature) in Jin Dynasty, “thirty-three kind” in *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragon* in Southern Dynasties, “sixty-one kind” in *Songwenjian* (Complete anthology of literary works in the Northern Song Dynasty), all the way down to the more recent “one hundred and twenty-seven kind” in *Wenti Mingbian* (Differentiation of genres) in the Ming Dynasty.¹ What's more, these later divisions also include elaborations on style of different sub-genres. For instance, “qimi” (sensuously intricate) in “the poem follows from the affections and is sensuously intricate” (Lu 2001, p.171)² in *Wenfu*, a representation of the style of the genre “shi” (poem; one of the ten sub-genres). We should note that the comparison of genres presented in such detailed fashion serves more for the sake of literary creation and appreciation than for a purely unitary disciplinary purpose.

The formation of comparison as a critical concept in the 20th century

The basis of comparative literature as a discipline in China was largely established in the early and middle part of the 20th century. Created as an urgent response to the presence of the West, literary comparison on the whole could roughly be categorized into two approaches

¹ All these numbers (10, 33, 61 and so on) refer to the number of sub-genres in books that came into being in later ages after *The Book of Documents*. The selection of these examples is to demonstrate the genre comparison in classical Chinese literary thought rather than to focus on what these genres are, which exceeds the topic range of this paper.

² Owen (2003, p.133) translates the Chinese citation into English.

with their respective aims. The first approach intends to save and rejuvenate the country, as displayed in relevant works by Qichao Liang (1873-1929), Lu Xun (1881-1936) and many others of that period. Liang's "Preface to the Anthology of Ten Korean Writers", published in 1914, is a typical work on how literature can serve the reality, focusing on comparison between literature of Korea and that of Europe in order to show that European countries have made full use of their own literature in nation building. Liang in this work speaks highly of the role of literature in a nation's development: "

The fate of a country does not lie in the rise and fall of a society and royal family, nor in the change of calendar and clothing designating official rank, but rather in the national character...in what way does the national character pass down...it is literature that carries down the national character and grasps its essentials. If one can have such understandings, he/she would see no exaggeration in the pivotal role assigned to literature in the state governance by the ancients. (Liang 2001, p.225)

It is obvious that in Liang's schemes, literature is assigned a social function with a broad scope, including philosophy and history in addition to the notion of literature as being commonly understood. By comparing the Korean and European literatures, Liang confirms the function of literature in enhancing the national spirit among the European countries, thus showing how literature could lead China out of its impasse. A similar orientation can be found in Lu Xun's practice of comparing Chinese and foreign cultures and poetics in his essay "the power of Romantic poetry", published in 1907, a founding masterpiece of comparative literature in China, where he posits that "the upholding of the valuable national spirit should proceed from recognizing both oneself and others. And blindness can be

overcome by way of systematic comparison, thus giving rise to consciousness” (Lu 1981, p.65). Such a view of literary comparison with its focus on transforming the national spirit is obviously inspired by the influence of western social evolutionism. Lu Xun lists numerous natural and social phenomena, comparing the Chinese and European literature with a view to proving the inevitability of evolution. We can see from his comparison that Chinese poetry tends to focus more on subjects of nostalgia and eulogy while that of Europe concerns more with the theme of revolt. Though in favor of the rationality and logic of western poetics, Lu Xun also upholds the intuitive feature of classical Chinese literary theory in his analysis and elaboration, thus integrating the feature of western poetics into the texture of classical Chinese literary theory, a paragon of real cultural dialogue and communication.

Another kind of comparative literary study from the same period is represented by Guowei Wang’s (1877-1927) endeavors in this regard, whose books include *A Review of the Dream of the Red Mansion* (1904-05), *Commentaries on Lyrical Work* (1908-09), *Investigation on Song and Yuan Dramas* (1912) and so on. Wang analyzes the Chinese oeuvre using western literary and aesthetic theories, focusing on the dimension of “literariness” rather than orientation towards social and political reforms. He also develops his own distinctive literary theory such as “Yijing Shuo” (realm theory). While Wang was credited with being the first to embrace aspects of western literary theories, his enunciation was heavily invested in the language of classical Chinese criticism, since later he turned to utilize the advantages of the western literary theories in constructing Chinese literary theory. Thus, Guowei Wang is the first modern Chinese comparatist in spirit as well as in practice because his exploration of classical Chinese literary theory and comparison of Chinese and western

literatures were purely for the sake of literature itself, unlike his contemporaries such as Qichao Liang and Lu Xun who had an overt social and political agenda.

In sum, literary comparison in China before and during the early 20th century demonstrates a few noticeable characteristics. First, it is an intra-cultural exercise conducted within the domain of Chinese literature, particularly in the case of classical periods. Secondly, literary comparison is increasingly intertwined with political instrumentality as it expands into intercultural dimensions. When cultural renaissance and national rejuvenation energize literary comparison of China with the world, as was the case during late centuries, the legitimacy of comparative literature as an academic field of study is no longer in doubt, and its embryonic disciplinary formation starts to accelerate. At the heart of this formation is the possibility of using foreign literatures to China's benefit, a premise that would inform the institutionalization of comparative literature through the present day. Thirdly, the modus operandi of literary comparison is comparative impressionism, which consists of unsystematic comparison in the form of random thoughts on author, text, and values of literature. There are many reasons as to why comparative impressionism rules in the minds of pre-modern Chinese literati scholars, chief among which are the subjective nature of classical Chinese literary theory and the emphasis of literature on fulfilling needs from disparate areas of life. As C.H. Wang points out, classical Chinese criticism resembles "a private philosophy of literature" without a strong sense of logic and imbued with personal viewpoints. "Personal responses and personal philosophies sometimes remain too private to be deciphered by others," yet the educated Chinese found them "intellectually and aesthetically satisfactory" (Wang 1979, p.529-30). Ngan Yuen-wan makes similar remarks based on an analysis of the

free spirits of classical Chinese literary criticism scattered among “letters, prefaces, biographies, notes and annotations” (Ngan 1981, p.185-97). Evidently, comparative impressionism taps a rich reservoir of classical literary criticism.

Lastly, what drives literary comparison at this stage is the search for patterns of universality within and without Chinese culture. This drive, of course, corresponds to the gradual evolution of China through history as one nation and one people while contending with disparate cultural practices from vastly different regions, such as language, ethnicity, and social customs. The viability of the “Central Kingdom,” in a large sense, depends on the cultural logic of “compare and assimilate.” This is most evident when it comes to influences from places outside the borders of China. The sinicization of Indian Buddhism, although a long and sometimes a contentious process, relies on a rereading of the religion through the lens of Daoism. It is no coincidence that Buddhism exerts the strongest influence on Chinese society when it is reformulated as “Zen Buddhism.” Even the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci realized the Chinese intellectuals’ propensity for universality when he came here in 1601, so he studied Confucianism diligently and generously, and borrowed its terminology such as “tian” (heaven) and “shangdi” (supreme emperor) so as to spread his Christian messages. Ricci and Chinese literati may harbor different motivations, but they share the same impulse for universalism.

In early modern China, the pursuit of universality became a mission for progressive intellectuals because it was made to overlap with the project of national rejuvenation. “Learning from the West” was a slogan that motivated cross-cultural adventures in both personal and textual travels. Literary comparison, a harbinger of a brand of activist

nationalism to come, was characterized by a severe critique of Chinese tradition and the embrace of the western form of modernity. Shih Hu (1891-1962), who was instrumental to the New Culture Movement of the 1920s, advocated radical learning from the West. For him and others of this movement, comparison was not for its own sake, but rather a means to revitalize the Chinese nation. Duxiu Chen (1879-1942) pushed one brand of neo-nationalism to the extreme when he advocated the total replacement of certain Chinese cultural forms with western ones, such as the substitution of written characters with phonetic letters. He spoke highly of western literature as in the following comments: “European culture benefited both from its scientific progress and literary development. In the literary field, Rousseau, Kant, Bacon.....all are my favorite and respected writers. Any literati who would dare to compare themselves with those great writers?” (quotation source first published in 1917; Chen 1987, p.98)

But obviously, such extreme attitude towards Chinese literature and culture would do no good to the national spirit in the long run, but it does reflect the intellectuals’ passion for universality at that time. Such radical progressivism during the New Cultural Movement should not surprise us, considering the sustained national crisis from the first Opium War in 1839 to the tumultuous years after the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. It should be pointed out that classical literati and early modern Chinese intellectuals share the same drive for universalism despite their different pragmatic concerns. For the former, it was a Sino-centric cultural project that seeks unitary forms and values; for the latter, it was the reform of the nation in the image of western modernity.

With the increasing literary exchanges surrounding the May Fourth movement,

comparative literary studies in China began to take on a disciplinary dimension under the direct influence of European comparative literature as displayed in the following initiatives and activities. In the 1920s, universities started offering courses on Sino-foreign literary comparison. In 1924, Mi Wu (1894-1978), whose students included Qian Zhongshu, lectured on European and world literature at Dongnan University, Nanjing. He later taught a popular course “western and eastern poetry comparison” at Tsinghua University, Beijing, which was followed by I. A. Richards’s well publicized visit to China, who offered two courses on comparative literature and Culture at the same university from 1929 to 1931. The next two decades witnessed the publication of some foundational works by Chinese scholars, such as *The Influence of French Literature on European Literature* (1924) by Zhenduo Zheng (1898-1958), *Poetry and Truth* (1935) by Zongdai Liang (1903-1983), to name just a few. The appeal of mutual referentiality and complementarity radiated from those studies, whose often unstated aim was to explore ways for literary innovations at the nexus of Sino-European cultural relationships.

From 1949 to 1977, due to political and historical reasons, comparative literature in China endured major setbacks and was even degraded to the status of a “pseudo-discipline” during the destructive times of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The tradition of comparative practice and research from the previous five decades was largely neglected. Most universities at that time cancelled relevant courses, though individual scholars produced memorable works in the most challenging circumstances. Most significant among these works was the publication of Zhongshu Qian’s (1910-1998) *Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters* in 1979. The book, late translated into English by Ronald Egan, is a tour de force

in literary studies of cross-cultural dimensions and displays all the exclusive disciplinary features of comparative literature: an extensive reference to knowledge from Chinese and foreign sources and its unrivaled interdisciplinarity traversing parallel studies, influence studies, intercultural studies and translation studies. It was a harbinger for the rise of comparative literature in China in the ensuing reform years.

Worlding and heterogeneity in Chinese comparative literature since the 1980s

The 1980s was a period of rapid development for comparative literature in China as witnessed by the diverse relevant activities. Professional associations were established, journals founded, and conferences convened. In 1981, the comparative literature Research Association was established at Peking University, and the next year, the journal *Comparative Literature and Foreign Literature* was initiated by the Shanghai Foreign Languages College. The first national conference on comparative literature was convened in Tianjin in 1983. And China Comparative Literature Association was founded in 1985 at Shenzhen University, where the first international comparative literature conference was convened. The swift institutionalization of comparative literature was also evidenced in the areas of programs and pedagogy as many colleges and universities started to establish a school or a department that fully or partially bore the name of comparative literature. Sichuan University was the first to do so in 2000. Currently, almost every department of Chinese or foreign languages offers required undergraduate courses in comparative literary studies, and over twenty universities have graduate programs leading to master's or Ph.D. degrees in the discipline. The progress made in China in a short span of time drew attention from the West. René Etiemble spoke of

“the revival of comparative literature in China” at the 1985 annual conference of the International Comparative Literature Association in Paris, in which he envisioned the discipline’s bright future in the Asian country. And Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Louise O. Vasvári observe that:

What is remarkable—and this is paid scant attention to in Anglophone comparative literature or world literatures scholarship—is that both the concept of the discipline, as well as its institutional presence are advancing in so-called ‘peripheral’ languages and cultures including Iberian Spanish and Portuguese, Greek, etc., and this is the case also in Latin American languages, Chinese, Indian languages, in Arabic or Farsi.

(Tötösy and Vasvári 4)

Maybe Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Louise O. Vasvári are slightly too optimistic for comparative literature in all “peripheral” places, but China does appear to be ready to make a good effort to rejuvenate the discipline.

The “revival” of comparative literature in China is not only the increasing prestige of the discipline with the secure state funding that comes with the prestige, but also the self-awareness of Chinese comparatists with regards to the importance of their studies in the context of China’s rise in the march of globalization. Witnessing the convergence of China’s social change with imageries of western modernity, the comparatists take as their mission reconsidering the meanings of Chinese culture and literature, in which concepts such as “Chineseness,” “origins,” and “authenticity” have become catchphrases. Well aware of the function of comparative literature to initiate China’s entry into the world and the concurrent state of crisis for the discipline in western academia, they now assert a position of cultural

heterogeneity in comparative literary studies, which implicitly answers the calls of “return to the national” by Fredric Jameson and of uncovering “radical difference” by David Damrosch. This position marks a clear shift of comparison from finding evidence of universality to illustrating signs of heterogeneity, particularly those between China and the West. The first line of inquiry is the wide use of literary theories from the West. From the late 19th century onwards, using western literary theories to interpret Chinese texts and to explain indigenous Chinese poetics has almost become a convention for Chinese scholars, which became a hotly debated topic in the 1990s. While supporters underlined its necessity by the inherent universality of all theories and modern Chinese writers’ proactive adoption of them, critics question the very ideology of universalism, particularly the deleterious effort of its replacement for classical Chinese literary theory. They want the classical Chinese literary theory, or broadly speaking, the voice of China, to be “heard” by the world. Xianlin Ji’s following statement is a good illustration of such orientation:

In the process of changing our research discourse and methodology, we Chinese literary theorists must first completely get rid of the shackles of western literary theory and carefully examine and interpret the traditional terms of classical literary theory we have used for thousands of years in order to build our discourse system on such basis. (1996, p.6).

Shunqing Cao used the term “aphasia” for this regard in 1995, meaning the loss of Chinese scholars’ own critical language in their blind following of western discourse of literary theory, to describe the paucity of Chinese-inspired terms and concepts in contemporary literary scholarship. He ruefully comments: “our country has not produced any influential literary

theory that can stand up to the West. Since the exception of Wang Guowei, we have gradually slipped into blindly following the West the same way we consume the fast food such as KFC” (Cao 2010, p.622). The question is not that KFC is not good or that one should not choose it on occasion, but rather that one eats it so much as to forget the taste of Chinese food. What underlines this anxiety over “westernization” of Chinese culture is an urge to reclaim literary studies and comparative literary studies in Chinese terms, which has gained wide resonance among Chinese scholars such as manifested by Weiliang Huang and Jing Sun, who respectively claims that “China has totally lost its voice in today’s world literary theory and it’s a great tremendous regret that we have not even won one single Nobel Literary Prize” (Huang 1996, p.77-78) and that “China has no literary theory” (Sun 1995, p.60). Thus, such worry has accumulated to the point where transformation or reform is a must so as to well sustain the literary studies and comparative literary studies in China.

If the clarion call for “Chinese elements” in the formation of comparative literature in China has been heard sparingly throughout the long 20th century, it has almost become a collective wish for Chinese comparatists of all strands in recent times. Such a wish coalesces into ideas for a “Chinese school” of comparative literature in distinction to the French, the German and the American schools. As early as in 1971, Liyuan Zhu, William Yip and Yaoheng Hu floated the trial balloons of “Chinese school,” which was picked up and elaborated on by Tianhong Gu and Pengxiang Chen in their book *The pioneering frontier of comparative literature in Taiwan*. They summarize the basis for this school as such: “the lack of a systematic method and theory in the early modern period of comparative practice in China made the scholars with western intellectual backgrounds turn to the method and theory

of their western counterparts, during which time the borrowed western theory underwent certain adjustments so as to better interpret Chinese literature and culture. This kind of applying a western theoretical framework with adjustments for the elaboration of Chinese literature could be termed as the Chinese school of comparative literature” (1976, p.1-2). Furthermore, they lay out in detail the three steps for the Chinese school to flourish, i.e., the “emulation and indiscriminate application of western theory; investigation and readjustment so as to expand the western terms and models; and discovering new literary models so as to identify universal or common poetics for literary creation” (1976, p.154). Yet, the latent Euro-centric universalism in these early proposals for the Chinese School was not well received by other scholars. Specifically, the model of “native text + foreign source” (X+Y), despite its popularity in early practice of comparative literary studies, was questioned by its impulse for obliterating cultural differences. Tianzhen Xie was among the scholars to directly call out the “X+Y” model as a superficial analogy that focuses on seeming similarities without disclosing the underlying ideology. He worries that “such a phenomenon shows the problematic issues in the proposed Chinese school of comparative literature that needs further rectification” (Xie 1994, p.6-7).

Others joined Tianzhen Xie in outlining the characteristics of the Chinese School by tracing significant moments in the works of Chinese comparatists. Shaodang Yan summarized the “three generations” that contained the seeds of the Chinese school:

The first generation includes Guangqian Zhu, Zhongshu Qian and Xianlin Ji who contributed a great deal to the revival of comparative literature after the Cultural Revolution; the second generation is represented by scholars such as Daiyun Yue,

Pengzi Rao and Dun Chen in further accelerating the development of comparative literature; entering the new century calls for a third generation to strive to ‘go global’ and ‘voice’ the theoretical breakthrough in the world arena. (Yan 2011, p.1)

Yan offers a diachronic mapping of the Chinese school of comparative literature by selecting the most representative scholars and their academic achievement among generations of Chinese comparatists. And the idea of advocating a Chinese school is echoed by numerous others.¹ They, in one way or another, have all contributed to the building of the Chinese school of comparative literature, either theoretically or practically, though at most times proceeding from the macro-perspective so as to offer the general direction of the Chinese school. For instance, Pengxiang Chen discusses the rationality and significance of the Chinese school of comparative literature in the context of cultural pluralism and Shuxian Ye analyzes how to build the Chinese school of comparative literature theoretically so as to differentiate itself from the discipline’s development in European countries and the United States. Linked by their opposition to the simplistic “X+Y” research model and their affirmation of the value of heterogeneity, these authors have energized the push by Chinese scholars for theoretical innovations, which have resulted in a number of memorable concepts and theories. “Recent years are a period of rapid development in comparative literature in China when various research directions with sound theoretical basis and diverse academic fruits have come into being, among which the fields of medio-translatology, Sino-foreign literary relations, comparative poetics, Chinese diasporic literature studies and literary

¹ Representative papers in this regard include “The best literary practice in the next century—comparative literature and the Chinese school” by John J. Deeney, “No other reason for the denial of Chinese school” by Pengxiang Chen, and “The root for the Chinese school of comparative literature” by Shuxian Ye, “One more remark on the Chinese school of comparative literature” by Qingshu Meng, “The Chinese school of comparative literature and trans-century development of comparative literature” by Xianbiao Liu and so on.

anthropology, to name just a few, are the most prominent” (Meng 2009, p. 171). And medio-translatology and variation theory are two good examples in the respect of setting its focus on the study of heterogeneity in comparative literature, which have generated considerable traction in the world community of comparative literature.

First proposed by Tianzhen Xie in his book *Medio-translatology* published in 1999, medio-translatology was defined by him as the “study of literary translation and translated literature from the perspective of comparative culture” (1999, p.1).¹ After a detailed analysis of key concepts such as literary translation and translated literature, he differentiates medio-translatology from translation studies in the three aspects of perspective, focus and purpose, all for the reasons of suggesting solutions to the theoretical difficulties confronting both disciplines. He goes on to offer a sustained discussion on the concept of “creative treason,” a term that has caused a great deal of controversy in translation practices and theories. According to Xie, “creative treason can be defined as variability at the lingual and cultural levels in translation and the objective ‘deviation’ from the source text on the basis of maintaining ‘faithfulness’; it is the recreation of the original work either by the translator, reader or the receiving environment in translation” (1999, p.130), inherently reflecting the irreconcilable differences between the guest culture and the host culture; it is a celebration of heterogeneity that motivates translation in the first place. The acceptance of “creative treason” by most translators and readers alike, even if reluctantly at times, reflects our willingness to experience the other culture authentically and critically. If “bad” translations do occur, unlike conventional translation studies that are quick to render a judgment on poor

¹ The quotation is translated by the authors of this article. It applies to other places if the quotation is originally in Chinese except explained otherwise.

skills or misunderstandings, medio-translatology will focus on the causes for these “bad” translations, where traces of cultural difference will inevitably reside. Thus, the lens of medio-translatology is rather useful in analyzing literary translation between two heterogeneous cultures, such as those of China and the West. Xie finds abundant evidence of “creative treason” in the English translation of classical Chinese poems, the Chinese translator Shu Lin’s (1852-1924) renowned remaking of French novels into archaic classical Chinese, and any translation of culturally-loaded terms. One interesting example of “creative treason” is individualized translation, meaning one source text translated by multiple translators. Take Byron’s poem *The Isles of Greece*, which has been rendered into different versions of Chinese, respectively by Junwu Ma (1881-1940), Manshu Su (1884-1918), Liangzheng Zha (1918-1977), and Deyu Yang (1928-2013). Ma and Su inclined more towards the strategy of domestication where “Delos” and “Phoebus” are translated into “和亲” (heqin, marriage for political purpose) and “陵夷” (lingyi, decline or decay), rejecting transliteration. But Zha and Yang adopted free verse, retaining more of the original images and names by rendering the above two words into “狄洛斯” (transliteration of Delos) and “阿波罗” (“Apollo,” a literal translation of Phoebus). Which one is better? The answer is usually simplistic, depending on one’s position on fluency and felicitousness. Such variations in translation, however, are the fecund text for medio-translatology, because they exhibit differences indicative of the changing poetics in times and values, and more specifically, the evolution of classic Chinese to modern vernacular Chinese as in the language of poetry in the above example. Medio-translatology, to put it simply, is the study of errors and distortions (usually purposely made by the translators) in translation, and of how and why they happen

as a meaningful exchange for cultural heterogeneity for the ultimate aim of having a better and deeper understanding of other cultures. Translation is no longer considered as a pursuit of perfection and universality.

Variation theory, or more specifically, literary variation and the inherent heterogeneous elements in comparative literature, has long been noticed and discussed by prominent comparatists in China as manifested by Guowei Wang's elaboration of western and eastern literary interaction, Edward Said's variation study in imagologie, Daiyun Yue's analysis of heterogeneity in comparative literature and Shaodang Yan's study of literary variation of Japanese literature, to name just a few. For instance, Daiyun Yue, one of the representative contemporary Chinese comparatists, attaches great importance to heterogeneity in her advocate for the Chinese school as the third stage of comparative literature, regarding "pluralistic coexistence" and "seeking unity while reserving differences" as the basic rule for intercultural comparative literature. And Shaodang Yan notices the literary innovation in the process of literary variation. "Literary 'variation' means the ability of literature to absorb the foreign culture which is then 'dissolved' in the receiving culture, leading to a new consequent literary form; the displayed ability of literature to 'absorb' and 'dissolve' a foreign culture is not the comprehension of the alien culture in the common sense" (Yan 1987, preface). So variation does not simply mean the thorough change of the native literature, but rather that the native one absorbs the new and alien elements based on its own traits, thus getting enriched. Shunqing Cao systematizes the study of literary variation in comparative literature in his variation theory and defines it as "the study of literary variation of comparative literature, using variability and literariness as its pivotal points" (Cao 2005, p.124). These

pivotal points are places for us “to identify and to explore the rules of literary exchange and communication among different countries. It could be conducted in four aspects: variation in the lingual level, variation in image of a nation, variation in literary text and cultural variation” (2005, p.124). In line with medio-translatology, variation theory foregrounds heterogeneity in its theoretical formation, but instead of focusing on linguistic changes in translated texts, it attends to textual transformation, social image reconstruction, and representational shift at the levels of both comparative cultural studies and inter-civilizational literary comparison. Scholars speak highly of the cultural heterogeneity in the study of comparative literature, deeming it as the “premise for comparison among different literatures and cultures” (Guan 2011, p.120) as supported by the achievement in the study of comparative poetics and literature in China. Cao offers a case study of variation of images in W. Somerset Maugham’s 1922 travelogue *On a Chinese Screen: Sketches of Life in China*. In a seemingly calm and objective tone of narration, Maugham presents an image of the Chinese subject that alternates between romance and mystery. So he brings home to the British readers the lasting memory of the ultimate experience of a westerner looking at his Oriental Other who is simultaneously sympathy-worthy and helplessly inferior. The point is not that Maugham’s narrative is not “true,” but that the variation—the truth embedded in his personal encounters—is what energizes his narrative, which in turn makes his book part of the worlding process by the British public in particular and the western world in general. For its interest in the interspace of intercultural writings and translations, variation theory owes a great deal to Orientalism and postcolonial studies, but instead of treating the misrepresentation in the interspace as the manifestation of the ideology of colonialism, it

views the misrepresentation from the perspective of the misrepresented, through which new meanings under erasure by colonialism could be uncovered by comparative studies; it is the beginning of comparison, not the end, so to speak, that takes heterogeneity as a central building block of the new worlding process. It is just as Cao declares that the rationale for heterogeneity as the basis of comparative literature comes from the simple fact that “heterogeneous attributes” exist and will always exist “among different civilizations in the aspects of cultural mechanism, knowledge systems, academic conventions, and social discourses” (Cao 2015, p.51-52). And it is these attributes where the vitality of future comparative literature is to be explored and found. For instance, scholars on anthropology reveal the mentality position of literary anthropology—constructing a direction towards co-existence of object and man, by analyzing the loss of object in the modern western thought and re-discovering the object by literary anthropology (Ji 2018, p.264), a good example of emphasizing the importance of heterogeneity since “co-existence” indicates the respect for differences even among object and man, let alone among different literatures and cultures.

Conclusion

In the passages above, we have presented a brief history of comparison as a critical concept in pre-modern Chinese aesthetics and of its functions in the formation of comparative literature as a legitimate academic discipline with our analysis and comments thereof. From the pursuit of universality to the illumination of heterogeneity, the meaning of comparison has made a significant turn in the discourse of intercultural literary studies in China. This turnabout has risen from China’s complicated engagement with the West since over the last

two centuries. It is the result of both the celebration of the recent rise of China during the times of globalization that calls for the affirmation of pride and confidence in the discourse of cultural rewriting and the angst from the realization that the imprint of China has been largely absent from the cultural configuration of the globalized world. Domestically, the self-diagnosed symptoms of “aphasia” has propelled a process of self-examination that encourages a refocusing on an indigenous Chinese theory of poetics free from borrowed terms and concepts. Most importantly, such self-examination by the Chinese comparatists echoes one that has been happening within the discipline of comparative literature in the West, calling for a reconfiguration of the discipline away from a Eurocentric basis. Haun Saussy declares forcefully that literary similarity no longer matters much during the rise of cosmopolitanism (2003, p.337), and Gayatri C. Spivak imagines the future of comparative literature to be “crossing borders, collectivities and planetarity” over geographical and conceptual boundaries (2003, p.4). The criticism of a western bias in the tradition of comparative literature is even more direct by contemporary Chinese comparatists. Such criticism advocates for global consideration of theoretical paradigms originated in China such as medio-translatology, variation theory and others, because they seek to re-energize the function of comparison in intercultural studies in general and comparative literature in particular. These paradigms have added to the lasting discourse of comparison that reflects the desire of Chinese comparatists to engage the world and yet to retain a distinctive theoretical space in which the markings of a Chinese school can be inscribed.

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