



Evolution and Schools of Comparative Literature Theories

DI Jiewen^{[a],*}

^[a]Central China Normal University, Wuhan, China.
*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

This paper collects and analyzes the emergence, evolution and schools of comparative literature theories, and focuses on its definition and features in China, thus providing a reference for how to apply this theory to comparative study of domestic and overseas literature.

Key words: Comparative literature; Influence study; Parallel study; Multiculturalism context

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Comparative literature is an independent discipline studying literature of different nations or countries and the relations between literature and other art forms or ideologies. Qian Zhongshu points out that, “Comparative literature, as a special discipline, refers to the comparative study of literatures of different countries and languages.” (Zhang, 1981)

Ji Xianlin also says:

What is comparative literature? Just as its name implies, the narrow definition of comparative literature is to compare literatures of different countries; while the wider meaning is to compare literature with other disciplines, such as humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. (Ji, 1987)

Besides, Yue Daiyun points out that:

We are now in an era of integration, connection and communication, and China is integrating more deeply with the world. Comparative literature is an important channel for Chinese literature to become known... After a long-period of isolation, we need to assess and understand ourselves again by referring to other literatures.

Chinese modern literature is also shaped by comparing, selecting, absorbing and transforming world literatures, thus enriching its own literature history. To understand and summarize the relations between China’s literature and other literatures of the world, and to find out the joint points would greatly help us broaden our literature horizon and guide literary creation. (Yue, 1987, pp34-35)

Chinese literature, especially the modern and contemporary literature, has become the window for the world to learn about China, and a mirror reflecting the fact that Chinese culture is under the constant influence of other cultures, and thus enriches and develops itself. For this reason, to explore Chinese literature thoroughly and comprehensively, we should incorporate it into the world literature, and discover its nationality and openness in the viewpoint of comparative study, thus assessing and recognizing ourselves in a better and more accurate way. As one Greek scholar said, we cannot know about Greece well without going across China. Similarly, we cannot form an objective understanding of China’s literature if we fail to compare it with the world literatures. In today’s world of high-developing information and globalization of economy and politics, cultural infiltration and fusion are inevitable. Though profound and brilliant, it is only with comparative communications can be Chinese literature and culture be embraced by the world. We should explore the similarities and differences between Chinese literature and culture with others, and present ourselves in ways acceptable by the world.

At the very beginning, Claude Pichois and Rousseau define comparative literature as

a systematic art, which compares literatures in the fields of expression and knowledge by means of exploring similar links of kinship and influence relations, or the literary phenomena and themes existing in such comparison. The time distance never matters, and what matters is that they belong to several languages or cultures and are of one tradition. The purpose of comparative study is to better describe, understand and appreciate them. (Li, 1997, p.10)

Comparative study is an independent discipline born in the latter half of the 19th century. It consists of the following schools.

French School, also known as the school of “influence study”, proposes that: (a) In a study of the relations of writers or works between two countries, the objects generally come from the same cultural source. There are historical and geographical evidences. (b) Stress on the historical consciousness and fact relations of two or more kinds of literatures, with less attention to aesthetic research. Paul Van Tieghem, a representative personage of the French school, points out in *Comparative Literature Studies* that,

The actual characteristics of comparative literature, like all characteristics of historical sciences, are to gather different facts from as many sources as possible, so as to fully explain each fact, know more about the facts, and finally find reasons for each result.

He also specifically defines the scope, content and approaches of the study:

The purpose of comparative literature study is to depict related paths, including explaining the interactions among literatures of different nations, discussing about origins and evolution processes of various themes, thoughts and figures, and studying the ways in which literatures of different nations influence one another. (X. P. Wang & Y. P. Wang, 1999, p.687)

The influence study has already formed into a complete theoretical system, but is still criticized by American School for being partial to origins and influences, causes and effects, while limiting its own scale.

American School is also named as the school of “parallel study”. In the 1950s, René Wellek, Henri H. H. Remak and other scholars did not follow the influence study of French School, but opened a new path through American comparative literature theories and practices, and compared the two literatures without direct influences and compared literature with other disciplines. It finally largely broadened the horizon of comparative study, and exerted profound influences globally.

The theoretical foundation of American School is the new criticism theory, which was once popular in literary criticism field in the middle of the 20th century. It objects the traditional method of literary criticism that focuses on connecting works with such external factors as the author’s life, society, history background, literary tradition, etc. but proposes that literature should be an independence acting and fulfilling being, and boasts unique aesthetic values. Therefore, the research should focus on its form characteristics. Different from influence study, parallel study holds that: (a) Study a work seriously, and understand it by analyzing its symbolization, image, metaphor, irony and other techniques of expression. Immersed in comparative literature, the new criticism theory gradually starts to focus on study of the work itself, and the tradition of valuing literariness of works takes its shape. (b)

Understand the literatures of different nations in a comprehensive way, and dig into the literariness, or nature and the law of literature.

American School scholars repeatedly emphasize that literature should not be based on individual or national psychology, but on linguistic forms; the foundation of literature should be its inner form, rather than people’s subjective world. Therefore, American School is not keen on the exploration of national spirits or characters. René Wellek, one of the school founders, points out that,

If literature research doesn’t regard literature as a discipline different from other human activities or productions, it may not make any progress in terms of methodology. Thus we have to face the problem of literariness, which concerns the art nature of literature. (Li, 1997, p.10)

Comparative literature means not only exploring literatures of different countries, but interdisciplinary research, building up a wider definition. If René Wellek, by proposing his opinions, aims to break through the domination of French School, then another theory founder, Henri H. H. Remak, should be the designer who gradually formed the methodological framework of American School. In *Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective* written in 1961, he held that American School’s definition of comparative literature is beyond the scope of one country, which also studies the relations between literatures and other knowledge and religious fields. Remak also points out that, “comparative literature is the comparative study of literature of one country with that of another country or other countries, and the comparison between literature and other expression fields.” (Remak, 1997, p.30) What he stresses on is not “relation”, but “comparison”, which means that two literatures without any relations could also be compared. Since American School focuses on literary phenomena of different nations, which could not have actual links but enjoy common aesthetic values, it is also named “parallel study”.

Russian School, emerged in 1960s, is a combination of influence study and parallel study, and aims to correct bias of French and American schools. It holds that: (a) Though French and American schools started with wide thoughts, their comparative study of literature tends to poorly connect with social and historic conditions, and has a West-Centrism tendency. (b) After overcoming the affect from ultra-left trend of thought and Russia Centrism, Russian school proposes that literary comparison should closely link with social and historic backgrounds. (c) It also calls for comparative study of literatures in socialist countries, opening a new field in comparative literature study.

China school started early, but did not break ice as a discipline until 1970s. Like modern and contemporary Chinese literary criticism, China school of Comparative Literature had been “silent” for a long time without independent declaration or theoretical system. However,

after a long period of criticism and practice, Chinese scholars have learned a lot from advantages of French and American comparative literature theories, the traditions of influence study and parallel study, and Russian school's thinking of linking literature with society and history. Besides, they also break through West Centrism boldly, and propose to regard the comparison between Eastern and Western literatures as research subject of comparative literature in China. With such efforts, the study scope of comparative literature has been greatly enriched.

Li Dashan, professor from Chinese University of Hong Kong and director of The Hong Kong-America Center, points out that, such a compromise is made under the enlightenment of Chinese ancient philosophy, and is a flexible way to combine the two popular schools, namely French school and American school. He added that, the policy and target of Chinese school should

start from the self-identification of nationality, and gradually become culturally self-conscious; then combine with literatures in the ascendant or neglected, and form the Third World of literature; then integrate all world literatures to become a whole; and finally, although hard to accomplish, integrate all literatures despite the complexity. (Li, 1997, p.4)

Correspondingly, in 1984, the comparative literature scholar Ulrich Weisstein admitted in the paper named "The Permanent Crisis of Comparative Literature": Many scholars of comparative literature, including himself, once held that the study of this field could just be limited to one civilization system. However, this statement does not hold water. We should develop the "world literature" proposed by Cordell Hull, Goethe and other German Romanists, expand and transform comparative literature limited to Europe into a system covering Western and Eastern civilization, and finally form comparative literature covering the whole world (Ibid.).

Since 1990s, the theory and practice of comparative literature have been suffering from serious attacks. The rapid development of science and technology and the gradually popularization of the Internet have posed a challenge to influence study that excels in searching information. Possessing information is no longer an advantage for all information is available on the Internet; instead, summarizing, differentiating, analyzing and using such information should become the new concern. Wang Ning holds that, "the way to solve the problem is shifting from the passive research of influence study to positive reception study, which means to explore the interpretation degree of receiver's initiative when they are receiving source texts." (Wang, 2002, p.29)

Meanwhile, American school's comparative method dominated by formalism and stressing on parallel study has also suffered from doubt for its lateral thinking and failing to scientifically consider the detailed materials or sound foundation of objects. As Susan Bassnett put in the work *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*,

"Comparative literature study is entering a devastating time since the late of 20th century... The number of students on this filed is reducing sharply, and the scholar's performance on work or paper is poor. No agreement has been reached on comparative literature study, while people are generally adopting old binary methods (compare two writers or two texts from different systems), but how to define such systems is complex and remains unsolved. All these have accelerated the decay of comparative literature (Xiao, 2002).

In the paper of *Current Crisis and Way of Comparative Literature*, Xiao Jinlong points out: The theoretical trends impacting traditional comparative literature are from post-modernism and post-colonialism. Post-modernism overturned logocentrism that had been popular for many years in Western culture, and it would also deconstruct the literature essence and origin explored by French and American schools. He adds that, the actual crisis of comparative literature is caused by its target to search related uniformity or nature through comparing literature of different nations. The way to solve the crisis should be completely changing the thinking mode of traditional logocentrism and focusing on exploring differences and particularity of literature (Ibid.).

In the paper of "The International Background, Research Status and Future Trend of China's Comparative Literature", Wang Ning concludes that, only by realizing equal dialogue and mutual blending under the multiculturalism context, can comparative literature find a way out. "Only through studying literatures from a global perspective and under the multiculturalism context, crossing culture, tradition, country, nation and language, can we open a new dialogue for international comparative literature and build a theoretical foundation for its new pattern." (Wang, 2000, p.49)

Hu Yamin publishes a paper named "Cross-Culture Literary Relationship Study—Consideration about the Position of Comparative Literature". The author holds that:

The core of comparative literature is to regard all literatures as a whole, put literatures of each country under an integrated structure for studying and comparison, and observe literary phenomena from two or more cultural systems, thus discovering the relations between literatures, or the interaction between literature and other human activities. Through comparing literatures of different nations, people can discover similarities and differences of human culture and know about related culture backgrounds and patterns, entering culture communication time. (Hu, 2003)

The above statement points out the position and trend of comparative literature. Comparative literature, different from pure comparative study of literatures, is primarily characterized by cross-country, language and nation comparison. It should be conducted against other bigger cultural backgrounds. Meanwhile, it should consider the relation between literatures and history,

philosophy, psychology, linguistics and other disciplines (Zhang, 1981). We should study comparative literature on a wider horizon, discover the differences and similarities of different cultures, thus promoting cultural communication and mutual learning. The comparison should not only seek common grounds, but also reserve differences. We should also know about different literature features. As the voice of equal cultural dialogue is increasing, we should come to realize that any cultural existence is relative to another one. From the perspective of native culture, all foreign cultures should be “the other”. Observing native culture on the ground of “the other” cultures would be beneficial for cultural rethinking, while learning from and absorbing foreign cultures could enrich and develop native culture.

Similarly, “the intellectual and artistic values have become public property” (Marx & Engels, 1972), and a research about one famous modern writer would not be complete without studying his/her relations with literatures or arts of other nations. For example, the research of Lu Xun would not be thorough if there was no discussion about his absorbing from Nietzsche, Byron, Nikolai Gogol and Chekhov, or no reference to papers about him in America, the former Soviet Union, Japan or Eastern Europe. Meanwhile, we would never enjoy wonderfulness of American modern poetry if we did not know how Pound, an American imagist, had learned from and creatively transformed ancient Chinese lyrics, and turned it into an important part of American modern poetry.

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