

## DEVELOPMENT AND PROBLEMS OF CHINESE COMPARATIVE LITERATURE <sup>1</sup>

### DESENVOLVIMENTO E PROBLEMAS DA LITERATURA COMPARADA NA CHINA

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**ABSTRACT:** This article proposes an analysis of the development of the Chinese Studies of Comparative Literature. After having delineated a short history of the discipline in China, the author discusses a series of fundamental theoretical nodes in order to characterize appropriately the wide field of action of the comparatist research. According to the author, in the period of transition without precedence that we all have been living, the Comparative Literature is called to play a fundamental role in the construction of an ideal world, in which the various cultures can coexist and become rich by means of mutual exchange. The single national cultures, in fact, are destined unavoidably to open their own borders and to develop, thanks to the encounter and interaction with the other cultures.

**Keywords:** Comparative Literature in China; interaction; development

**RESUMO:** Este artigo propõe uma análise do desenvolvimento dos Estudos Chineses de Literatura Comparada. Após delinear uma breve história da disciplina na china, a autora discute uma série de tópicos teóricos fundamentais para que se possa caracterizar apropriadamente o vasto campo da pesquisa comparatista. De acordo com a autora, no período de transição sem precedentes que temos experimentado, a Literatura Comparada é convocada a ter um papel fundamental na construção de um mundo ideal em que várias culturas podem coexistir e tornar-se ricas por meio de trocas mútuas. As culturas nacionais, na verdade, estão destinadas à abertura de suas fronteiras e ao desenvolvimento, graças ao encontro e à interação com outras culturas.

**Palavras-chave:** Literatura Comparada na China; interação; desenvolvimento

Modern Chinese literature and Comparative Literature were both born in the early 20th century. Lu Xun, the founder of modern Chinese literature, said novel literature generates when “one priority is to examine oneself and meanwhile to know others; consciousness emerges from comprehensive comparison”. It aims at “externally keeping up with the ideological trend of the world and inherently maintaining the intrinsic tradition; acquiring what belongs to today to restore ancient ways and establishing another new

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school”<sup>3</sup>. This marks the end of the closed state of Chinese literature, meaning that China's new literature began to consciously involve into its dialogue with World Literature along the direction of Comparative Literature.

Comparative Literature was established in China as a formal university course between 1929 and 1932. At that time, I. A. Richards, Dean of the English Department in Cambridge University, opened two courses, “Comparative Literature” and “Literary Criticism” at Tsinghua University. These lectures were later compiled into a book, *Comparative Literature*, by his assistant P. D. Jameson.

Other courses opened at that time were “Chinese and Western Poetry Comparison”, “Renaissance Literature”, “Comparative Study on Various Texts of Buddhist Classics”, “Study on Indian Stories in Chinese Literature”, “Bibliography of Oriental Studies by Westerners”, “Buddhist Translated Literature”, etc. In 1985, co-sponsored by 36 universities, the Chinese Comparative Literature Association was founded in Shenzhen. In 1998, the State Board of Education approved “Comparative Literature and World Literature” as a secondary discipline under Chinese Linguistics and Literature. Since then, Comparative Literature has been greatly developed in China and has become a pervasive and regularly taught subject.

Since China's reform and opening up, Chinese Comparative Literature circles have discussed a number of major issues and arrived at generally consistent conclusions. For instance, we discussed the relationship between Comparative and World Literature. It was generally believed that once a point on the coordinate system, formed by the time-axis of ancient-contemporary literature and the space-axis of Chinese-foreign literature, was linked to a certain reader, part of World Literature was composed. No one can master all of World Literature and no one can be referred to as expert of World Literature. Comparative Literature is different, because it is a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary study of literature. In fact, the cultural context of discussants can not be detached from discussions of World Literature, since each moment of history sets out from a certain subject and precipitates the past, responds to the present and creates the future. The core of Comparative Literature lies on the study of intersubjectivity, interliterature, interculturality and interlanguage. Therefore, Comparative

Literature provides theories and a horizon for World Literature studies, while World Literature offers resources and a foundation for Comparative Literature studies.

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<sup>3</sup> Unpublished essay. Wenhua Pianzhi Lun, 1907, (Concerning imbalanced cultural development).

There used to be disputes over whether interdisciplinary literary studies would turn the discipline of Comparative Literature into a boundless hunting ground. However, just as Prof. Yang Zhouhan writes in his preface for *Interdisciplinary Comparative Literature Studies* (1989), “We need an ‘interdisciplinary’ research horizon that oversteps not only the boundaries of nations and languages, but also the boundary of disciplines in order to study literature under a broader cultural background”.

In fact, China already has a strong tradition in this respect, where issues such as the isogenesis of poetry and painting, symbiosis of ritual, music and dance etc., have long served as topics.

Today, when cultures inevitably encounter each other, we believe that this process of cultural encounters is neither persuasion, assimilation and fusion, nor conquest and merger, but rather a process of renewal through “generative dialogues”, mutual recognition, verification and complementation under various circumstances. This process is first founded when a culture realizes how it might benefit from other cultures, both in cognition and aesthetics, and makes choices at liberty. It results not in convergence, but in a joint upgrade, creating new qualities and differences, similar to two circles tangent at a certain point that still run on their own tracks. When the world entered the 21st century, in addition to having significant progress in conventional research of this discipline, such as in the relationship between Chinese and foreign literature, imagestudies, theme studies, genre studies, etc., Chinese Comparative Literature has also made major breakthroughs in the following areas.

## **1. NEW PROGRESS IN COMPARATIVE POETICS**

Comparative Poetics has changed radically in the post-modern world. The original philosophy system has been replaced with interdisciplinary and intercultural theories, which are features of Edward Said’s “traveling theory”. New Comparative Poetics highlights the theoretical and aesthetic features of commonality, universality and cosmopolitanism, presented by original, country and national poetics.

Meanwhile, in the features of commonality, universality and cosmopolitanism, it pursues the differentiation, particularity and national characteristics of diverse poetics, realizes the hermeneutic fusion of horizons, and then creates poetic concepts that explain and circulate. Finally, it fits into the diversified and liquid trend of World Poetics. This is the “third poetics” that is emerging from the confluence and integration of Chinese and foreign poetics. Poetics of this kind have turned into cutting-edge theories and have converged local and international

poetics. Inevitably mixed with elements of interfusion, misreading, confluence, and innovation, it is neither from one original foreign poetics nor from indigenous or traditional poetics, but instead is a type of multiplex new poetics built on the basis of inter-material, inter-aesthetics and interdisciplinary. This type of new poetics is generated from interaction, absorbing foreign poetics widely and maintaining local features as its mainstay.

## **2. NEW HORIZON OF LITERARY ANTHROPOLOGY AND COMPARATIVE STUDY OF DOMESTIC MINORITY LITERATURE**

Literary anthropology and comparative study of domestic minority literature have ripened into core aspects of current Chinese Comparative Literature. Comparatists engaged in this area are aware that Western academic-style literature education, which eclipses and constrains the growth of local knowledge, has brought about three abuses: text-centrism, Han chauvinism and Central Plains-centrism. They believe that more attention should be paid to living literature, interactive multi-ethnic literature and oral literature, whose cultural role of integrating stories, performances, faith, ritual, props, Thangka, images, medical treatment, aphelxia, carnivals, etiquette and customs, etc. deserves to be brought into full play. In this way, evolution from paradigm merely confined to internal research of literariness and literature to reductive study on the cultural context of literature can be accomplished step by step. Our knowledge of how diverse, rich and unique our local heritages are can thus be greatly expanded. The forthcoming book, *Courses in Literary Anthropology* (Wenxue Renleixue Jiaocheng), is based both on Chinese culture's internal diversity and the fact that the shaping of Han nationality on the Central Plains cannot break away from the cultural migration, dissemination and amalgamation of surrounding minority groups. It is produced in the pursuit of breaking the stereotypes of binary opposition, such as majority and minority, mainstream and tributaries, orthodox and subsidiary, as well as dominant and complementary. This puts forward a view of Chinese literature that reconstructs literary anthropology, sparking a search for new approaches and new materials by proceeding from the construction of interaction among ethnic groups, beyond the history outlook of Central Plains Empire narration, to reenter the history of human and literature. They conclude that too little has been done to understand China as "a community of multinational coexistence and how many headstreams and shapes her tradition owns". Thus, special emphasis should be laid on the cross-cultural and interdisciplinary comparative study connected to the historical heritage of China as a multinational country. What's more, the field analysis method, which

anthropology employs, should be introduced into Comparative Literature because ethnic writing in modern Chinese and Western contacts should be emphasized and respecting the weak and marginalized groups deserves special acclaim. Strong national support has been given to this field.

Following the publishing of *History of the Relationship between Southern Minority Literature* (2001) and *Research on Literary Relations of Chinese Ethnic Groups* (2004), large-scale projects, such as “Chinese Minority Literature Database” and *Comparison of Literature in Multinational States*, are now underway.

### **3. RESEARCH ON CHINESE DIASPORA LITERATURE**

Overseas Chinese Literature is the world’s largest writing group among immigrant and expatriate literatures. Since the late 1990s, Chinese comparatists have paid attention to such peculiar poetic discourse of Chinese Diaspora literature such as its search for cultural identity, collision and fusion of Chinese cultural awareness and the local, its marginality and cosmopolitanism, etc. Since the beginning of the new century, hundreds of books and many academic papers have discussed a train of theoretical issues on its further exploration. For instance, research on its localization, Diaspora, modernity, cosmopolitanism, marginality and interculturality, questions on its cultural poetics and aesthetics, and comparative study on its works written in native and non-native languages. At present, in the field of Chinese Comparative Literature, it is studying the process of how Chinese literature, in different corners of the world and under historical contexts, clashes and fuses with the local culture and then derives and grows. In addition, it investigates Chinese culture and Chinese literature in the general background of human culture and world literature.

### **4. Restoration of Ideas of Literary Translation**

China has an almost 2000-year history of translation and has lead in the personnel of translators and amount of translations. Literary translation is not only the conversion of text symbols, but also transmission and remodeling of cultural values. Translated literature cannot exist without translators who commit to innovatively representing the message in the text, even to «create the possibility of communicating where communication is impossible», which means to develop his native language where two languages meet. Therefore, translated literature is not the same as foreign literature, and works translated into Chinese should be

considered as a necessary and important component of Chinese literature. Since 2001, “Volume of Translated Literature”, as well as “Volume of Novels” and “Volume of Essays”, etc., has been formally included in 21 Century Chinese Literature Series and its annual publication has accumulated to 7 volumes so far. Monographs like History of Modern Chinese Translated Literature and 20 Century History of Foreign Literature Translation in China have come off the press. Translation studies is gaining independence from conventional foreign language teaching discipline, with 15 institutions of higher learning having formally established it as a major for Master programs.

## **5. INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES OF LITERATURE AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES**

Interdisciplinary studies of literature and religious studies have also developed. In recent years, international seminars have been held annually in summer to discuss issues of “religious interpretation of literature and culture”, “the problem of publicity in cultural and theological studies”, “theological methods in literary and cultural studies”, “sinology, theology and cultural studies”, as well as “theology and poetics”. *The Journal of Christian Culture* has issued 19 volumes, including special issues like “theology and poetics”, “poetic and spirituality”, and so on. Multivolume academic journal series, such as *Theological Aesthetics and Biblical Literature Studies*, whose authors cover disciplines from religious studies, philosophy, historical research, to anthropology and sociology, have also been published and have become important vanguards of interdisciplinary studies. The Collection of 20 Century Chinese Literature Studies, which came out at the turn of the century, has consisted of monographs of the relationships between Chinese Literature and Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

Overall, since the beginning of the 21st century, dramatic changes have taken place in Chinese Comparative Literature. As Comparative Literature advocates the process of equality-based dialogue, concepts and methods of mutual recognition, verification, complementation and bi-directional interpretation have widely replaced the one-way absorption, reference, critique or imitation in the past. This does not just occur in the scope of World Literature and Comparative Literature, but also permeates different fields of Classical Chinese Literature, Modern Literature, Literary Theory, Foreign National Literature studies and other humanities.

However, in this transformation and development boom, there are many theoretical questions still left unanswered and many new problems emerging.

We first had long discussions about the "relationship between universality and diversity". After the collapse of the last century's colonial system, people in some of the newly independent countries were anxious to build their own identities and highlight the differences between the cultures to resist the dominant culture's attempts to cover cultures of other nations in the name of "universal values"; this is absolutely necessary. However, some nations put undue emphasis on absolute differences and the "incommensurability" between cultures. Since cultures share no common ground and "commensurability", the potential to start a dialogue and have communication is then neglected. So, do the universal values of culture really exist? Or it is really incommensurable for different cultures?

Secondly, we must examine the relationship between holding fast to traditional culture and accepting foreign influence. Will the "purity" of local culture be changed through accepting foreign influence?

There is a popular saying in China, "the more national it is, the more international it becomes". Nevertheless, being "national" is far from being "enclosed", or even being immutable and frozen. A national culture is bound to develop in interaction with other cultures. Moreover, being "national" and being "international" is not something separated and unrelated; what we call "national" means to gain recognition and favor internationally. Cultures highlight their own prominent features, by also considering the horizon of expectations and acceptance screen of recipients. Then, does the fact that cultures inevitably permeate and absorb each other run contrary to the effort to maintain original features and distinctions? Will this kind of interflow lead to the gradual reduction of cultural diversity and even its disappearance?

The next question is the "Self" and the "Other" in dialogue. The "Other" is what I am NOT; hence, its dissimilarity is what should be analysed first. Only when this dissimilarity of "face à face" is fully displayed, can the "Other" be the reference to review the Self. However, if we just focus on dissimilarity, the "Self" and the "Other" tend to fall into "complete irrelevance", which deviates from our goal of understanding and communication. If we do it conversely, it is possible that both sides will lose their characteristics and end up assimilating. Then, how could we deal with such a paradox?

Even more important is the question of discourse in the dialogue of cultures. Equality-based dialogue requires, a set of discourse understood and accepted by both sides to reach successful communication.

At present, developing countries are facing an effective, widely recognized concept system formed over the years by the advanced world with strong political and economic support. This discourse, after hundreds of years of accumulation, brings together millions of reflections on various human problems, and enriches and develops local culture in its exchange with other cultures. Without this discourse life would be difficult to continue; however, if we employed only this set of discourse and the mode it is composed of to interpret and intercept local cultures, then numerous innovative live cultures with local characteristics would be excluded for their failure to comply with this mode.

Should that be the case, the so-called dialogue would turn into a monologue of one culture, with some exotic materials added, and no true interactive dialogue would be formed. What should be done to construct a new, creative set of discourse that will benefit equality-based dialogue?

In addition to these issues that have yet to be well addressed, there are many new problems emerging.

Strong cultures “adopt” new independent cultures and the latter finally completely liberates from the spirit colonization; how to outline the intercultural, time and space transcending writing and reading history; the transversion of print culture and the rise of media culture, which China and other parts of the world are going through, and the interwoven, dynamic relation of these two, and so on.

In the end, we are in an unprecedented transition period. In constructing an ideal world where global cultures coexist, literature-- Comparative Literature in particular-- plays an increasingly important role. Comparatists and literature researchers all over the world will walk side by side, devote themselves to the great cause of reconsidering the meaning of human existence and the way of life for a novel spirit world.

## WORKS CITED

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