

## Linking Ancient and Contemporary

Continuities and Discontinuities in Chinese Literature

edited by Tiziana Lippiello, Chen Yuehong 陈跃红 and Maddalena Barenghi

# Comparative Literature and World Literature in an Age of Trans-cultural Dialogue

Chen Yuehong 陈跃红  
(Peking University, China)

**Abstract** It is commonly acknowledged by the history of any discipline that its border is never unchanging, but always in a constant process of birth, evolution, integration and growth. And there has never been any discipline whatsoever in human history that possesses an everlastingly stable pattern of academic research. This is also true for the discipline of 'Comparative Literature and World Literature' in China, whose development needs to go beyond the disciplinary concept of the so-called Euro-centrism for the purpose of constructing a new ecology of world literature in an age of transcultural dialogue. In this sense, the accumulated experience and the pursuit of academic value conducted during the development of world literature in China may, to some extent, serve as a useful reference to the development of a global world literature.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 On Cultural Differences – 3 Academic Identity, Paradigms and Methodologies – 4 New Perspectives for the Discipline of Comparative Literature and World Literature.

**Keywords** Comparative literature. World literature. 'Literariness'.

## 1 Introduction

I intend, in this short essay, to discuss the relationship between comparative literature and world literature in China today, and my focus will be on their 'relationship'. The motive for this topic is primarily based on my analysis on the status of Chinese world literature studies.

Comparative literature and world literature were two separate disciplines in China until fifteen years ago. Then the governmental Ministry of Education integrated them into one discipline, named 'Comparative Literature and World Literature'. At first, there was much resistance to change among scholars, who raised objections to the legitimacy of such mandatory integration, some of which were published in journals. However, as time went on, scholars in these two fields seem to have found peace, though a fully satisfactory academic consensus is yet to be reached. Moreover, the scholars dealing with comparative literature are more and more willing to cooperate with their world literature colleagues and actively participate in

the latter's academic activities. So we have good reason to be optimistic about the future development of the discipline of Comparative Literature and World Literature in China.

According to data from the *Chinese Education Yearbook* (2009), over one hundred universities out of China's more than two thousands recruit graduate students majoring in 'Comparative Literature and World Literature'. There is no doubt that this is a large number of universities with programs in comparative literature, probably the second biggest in the world, if not the biggest. At present, the number of scholars working in this discipline is over one thousand, while that of graduate students on campus, both Master and Ph.D. candidates included, is no less than two thousand, even by conservative estimates. Perhaps such a scale is not incredible only if it happens in today's China. But that number would not, in any sense, be much considerable any more if we take China's large population into account and use, for example, 1.3 billion as the denominator in our calculation.

In recent years, the debates taking place in the academic circles of comparative literature and world literature in Chinese universities generally center on the following topics: What kind of world literature should we construct from the standpoint of Chinese culture and the need of literary studies? And what is the relationship between world literature and comparative literature?

We once thought that our aim to make world literature transcend the limitations of Euro-centrism could be achieved by increasing the number of non-Western canonical works in the lists of literary classics, by adding some chapters on non-Western literature in our pedagogical practice of the history of world literature, and by supplementing certain contents of non-Western literature in the curriculum. So we naturally believed that a historic change had come when we noticed something new in *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*, which was first published in 1956 and had long listed less than one hundred writers, exclusively from Europe and North America: the change being that, in recent years, the *Anthology* had begun to include several hundred writers from several dozen different countries, including China. It seemed as if this «had not only led to the collapse of literary canons in the same strain, but also made Euro-centrism - the foci that had long been paid attention to by the comparatists - retreat» (Wang 2007, p.3; translation by the Author). But just as what David Damrosch precisely and rigorously pointed out, the consequence of such inclusion is that, on the one hand, some writers like Shakespeare, James Joyce, William Wordsworth, etc., are pushed to an even higher, 'super-canonical' position, while on the other, the honor of inclusion usually put the works of non-Western writers into the dilemma of the minority, which seem very lonely, funny and embarrassing.

The key point to this problem lies very likely in the fact that, without some fresh understanding and construction of the new concept of world literature, while depending only on minor additions of some academic content from literary texts and literary history, the only result we could expect is to let everything keep going on along the same old track. As for non-Western literature, we have no capacity to lift it from its state of impoverishment in the old pattern of world literature. What is worse, when closely examined and studied using Western criteria, and put in a position where unfair comparisons of quantity are made, non-Western literature may end up being shamefully denigrated as «conventional or naïve» because «[t]he third world novel will not offer the satisfactions of Proust or Joyce» (Jameson 2000, pp. 316-317).

## 2 On Cultural Differences

The other side of this problem is that we need to answer an important question: How can we interpret world literature in a country such as China, which has such a long tradition of Eastern culture?

The study of Hardy in China may serve as a good example to illustrate my point here. I have frequently come across essays on this well-known 19th century novelist that unfortunately give me the impression that the authors seemingly tend to ignore the current progress on Hardy studies in both British and international academic circles, and to disregard cultural differences in the process of interpreting classics. Together, studies of this kind present to me a strange scene which is peculiarly and completely outside of Hardy's works. Forty years ago, some people thought that his novels revealed the cruelty of class struggles and the evil of capitalism. Then thirty years ago, some tried to explore from within the description of alienation and the theme of humanism. Then twenty years ago, some others managed to make detailed inquiries about the war between good and evil (which have been everlastingly literary inquiries indeed). And not long ago, we began to switch our attention to the writer's depiction and love of the rural environment and tried to find all sorts of proof concerning environmental protection, as if he already had so clear an ecological and environmental notion in mind over one hundred years ago. I even suspect that some of our researchers would be very likely to dig out some theories of green revolution and evidence of Hardy's stand against genetically modified food from his novels. I would also not be surprised if they make a comparison between Tao Yuanming (365-427), a traditional Chinese poet, and Hardy by means of comparative literature, and clothe these classical writers and poets in a fresh array which is green and eco-friendly. But there arises a problem: conjectures and suspicion of over-interpretation are everywhere in such readings, whose relationship with the classical texts of Hardy is so

discursive that even if one replaces Hardy with Jane Austen or Charlotte Bronte, and Tao Yuanming with Wang Wei, the corresponding explanation also seems to be valid.

Obviously, such studies are far from what we hope for. It seems that we truly need to change the methods of our studies.

One method is, as it is suggested, to return to 'literariness'. But how much confidence do we actually have when exercising our judgment of 'literariness'? Even if we have a firm belief that the theories proposed by Jacobson, de Man, etc., are justifiable, that the differences between literary and non-literary texts can be decided at an accurate level of semantic mode analysis by means of distinguishing literary language from ordinary language, we still, when the context in which a reading occurs is a fundamentally transcultural one and hence in the real sense of comparative literature, have no confidence even to make sure whether we believe in our own analysis of literariness. Just as what Qian Zhongshu (1910-1988), a famous Chinese scholar excelling in many national literatures, tells us: «Compared with Western poetry, those of Chinese poems natively counted as 'romantic' seem to be but 'classical', and those explicit are simply implicit. The words and phrases in Chinese poems, in our opinion, suffice for their brightness and brilliancy and would be appreciated by Westerners, who are accustomed to the luxuriant profusion of luster, for their simplicity and elegance. As for the tone of the poems, what we count as being 'so loud-spoken' are but considered to be quiet voices and gentle whispering. Similarly, in the views of the readers who are bound by the traditions of classical Chinese poetry, what are considered as intangible parts in Western poetry still appear to be palpable and affected, the tranquil and remote parts to be worldly and vulgar, and the concise parts to be verbose and long-winded». (Qian Zhongshu 1985, p. 16). Obviously, up until now, we are still unable to find a common method for our literary readings which perfectly transcend the cultural differences.

### 3 Academic Identity, Paradigms and Methodologies

Perhaps this would encourage us to consider world literature more from the perspective of comparative literature.

As is known to all, comparative literature and world literature were both products of the specialization of knowledge in 19th century Europe. As a discipline, the history of their 'origin' and 'construction' has always been entangled with the history of the global rise of European capitalism and modern Western civilization. The notion of these disciplines is not so much 'global' as 'regional' or 'European'. As a matter of fact, almost two hundred years has passed since Goethe, Marks and Engels first talked about the concept of world literature, but where exactly is that ideal and

integral world literature? To this question, even Rene Wellek sighed with great pity: «Today we are possibly even further removed from such a state of amalgamation» (Wellek, Warren 1977, p. 49).

In that case, our discussion about world literature would have to go beyond the logic of monism and we would have to try to do our job from the position or perspective of comparative literature, which features pluralism and cross-culture. Based on the idea of multi-cultural literary value, world literature ought to be a multi-cultural ecology of literature. So it would not be possible to construct a real world literature in the textual and disciplinary sense without the support of multicultural standards. However, even to this day, in the academic circles of world literature, the dominating criteria are still those confirmed by the Western theories, though there resound different voices from the literary thoughts and theories in China, India, Japan, the Islamic world, and so on. They challenge and resist the domination of Western criteria, but their discourse and questions have not been taken seriously. So world literature in the multi-cultural context is still yet an ideal.

We feel especially frustrated to find that many disciplines in today's non-Western countries, with the discipline of 'Comparative Literature and World Literature' in China as a case in point, are basically constructed by means of integral transplant and direct employment of the frame of the Western disciplinary heritage. In a considerably long period of time and with much haste, we always took the West as our model, tried to imitate it, and wanted earnestly to know whether we were good students and faithful followers. With the passing of time, the model's influence gradually formed and became fixed, so some components of these disciplines, like their institutional structures, research paradigms, criteria of knowledge, methodological systems, and so on, seemed to be accepted naturally as truth in the disciplinary world and standards which were universally applicable. Furthermore, some general academic elements of these disciplines were infinitely magnified, whereas other aspects, like the dislocation of concept, paradox of values, and fundamental defects of structures within these disciplines, were covered up and compressed. As a result, the present disciplinary innovation has invisibly been understood as collocation in and supplementing of classical texts and the limited addition of chapters in literary history, i.e., by nature, to make good on omissions and deficiencies. Moreover, the pattern of academic paradigm is much the same as before, or has been but slightly adjusted, while the old criteria and system as a whole are constantly intact. The paradox is that, as far as the discipline of Comparative Literature and World Literature in today's China is concerned, few people would face up to the contradiction between the truth of its factual and regional existence and the falsehood of its global name. It seems that no one is willing to point out the illusory nature of the emperor's new clothes, and we are hypnotized by various kinds of discussion

of -isms in the Western literary canons, the history of Western literature and Western literary theory texts.

It is because of this awareness of new challenges and concerns in such an age when the academic paradigms and research ethics can change rapidly, that we need not only to break through the spiritual bondage of our own cultural and academic tradition but also to start questioning and reviewing the disciplinary consciousness, theories and ideas which have long been considered self-evident, in order to avoid falling into a self-designed logical snare and confronting the possible embarrassment - similar to what Western culture once confronted - of being questioned when more non-Western cultural others intervene in the future. In this sense, it is not merely an appeal with an ideological hue to move the originally Euro-centered world literature forward, on the basis of multi-cultural theories, to a truly globalized arena of academic research, but a tangible and innovative method to counter the inertia persisting in the history of this discipline and the interpretation of canons. We should manage to prove that, though the concept of Comparative Literature and World Literature as a discipline originated from a context which was particularly European, the studies conducted in such countries and areas like China, India, Japan, the Arab World, and so on are destined to have an epistemological ground which is obviously different from European tradition whose value target is, with a theoretical and logical starting-point that belong only to themselves. So comparatists in these countries and areas have good reason to construct their own academic identity, pattern of paradigms and system of methodology, which will push this discipline towards a reconstruction in culturally different places and to a new depth in research and turn it into a real part of the driving forces of literary studies in the era of globalization. We expect to transform ourselves from the follower to the innovator, from those influenced by others to those who raise questions and even to those who may feed back their achievement and experience to the original inventors of this discipline and help them to renew their consciousness in the study of this field.

#### **4 New Perspectives for the Discipline of Comparative Literature and World Literature**

For scholars of comparative literature and world literature in China, a special responsibility for Chinese literary classics is always ready to be borne on one's back. More specifically, they undertake to help these classics a step closer towards the world by making great efforts on transcultural interpretation. I believe that, if a Chinese scholar who aims to devote himself to the study of Tao Yuanming and is indeed very familiar with each and

every piece of his works, cannot provide the transcultural interpretation in connection with Western theories of, for example, Romanticism or the Utopia, how could he manage to guide the western readers to appreciate the beauty of the poet's works. The canonization of a literary work and its experience of unceasing growth in different historical and cultural context tell us at least one fact: What makes a canon a canon is what it can never do without not only its inner values, but also the external environment in which it exists and is a part of, and the efforts made on it by virtue of comparisons and interpretations. It is in such a process that scholars select a canon, confirm it and construct its meaning. Since the history of a canon and its fate in reality are, after all, originally so closely related to world literature and comparative literature, then the integration of these two as one discipline has justly been moving along with the global trend of academic development, hasn't it?

Destiny is such a good joker that sometimes it shuts the door, no matter how eagerly you want to enter, but allows you inadvertently to step through another door, though originally against your will. According to general value rationality, the right thing we ought to do may be to take our literary canons as transcultural capital and present them as gifts to the cultural other. But the result often tends to be different from, or even runs contrary to, your expectation: this other may not necessarily be interested in accepting the gift, but he may be willing to pay for it, after bargaining, and consider it worthwhile. So who may deny that such a paradox in transcultural communication may not serve as a link between the new comparative literature and world literature?

Then, does it mean that, besides the logic rationality of national literatures and value rationality of classical texts, there still exists an academic path of transcultural communication rationality and cross-disciplinary integration, which is close to that of Habermas? It may be the key point in our consideration of the new Comparative Literature and World Literature as a discipline. Obviously, by focusing on this knowledge, we may reasonably expect to construct, to some extent, the structure of a new methodology belonging to 'Comparative Literature and World Literature'. It is the methodology of comparative literature, and of world literature as well; or in other words, there are no essential differences between these two, which are actually the same by nature.

## Bibliography

- Jameson, Fredric (2000). «Third-world Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism». In: Hardt, Michael; Weeks, Kathi (eds.), *The Jameson Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 316-317.
- Qian Zhongshu 钱锺书 (1985). «Zhongguo shi yu Zhong hua» 中国诗与中国画. In: *Qi zui ji* 《七缀集》. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe.
- Wang Xiaoling 汪小玲 (2007). David Damrosch, «Hou jingdian, chao jingdian shidai de shijie wenxue» 《后经典、超经典时代的世界文学》. In: *Zhongguo bijiao wenxue* 中国比较文学 1. Translation of: «World Literature in a Postcanonical, Hypercanonical Age». In: Haun Saussy (ed.), *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (Baltimore: Hopkins, 2010), pp. 43-53.
- Wellek, René; Warren, Austin (1977). *Theory of Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.