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The Crisis of Comparative Literature and the Rise of World Literature

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The crisis of comparative literature has always been a heatedly debated topic among comparatists, especially in the Western academia. In 1958, René Wellek's challenging speech "The Crisis of Comparative Literature" delivered at the Chapel Hill against the "non-literariness" practiced by the so-called French School caused the rise of the American School in international comparative literature scholarship. After the 1990s, the British comparatist and translation scholar Susan Bassnett, who has been productive both in comparative literature and translation studies, has more and more involved in the critiques of comparative literature as a discipline. In her influential but controversial book *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (1993), she gives a critical introduction to comparative literature as a discipline, which has made considerable influence on the practical studies and teaching of comparative literature at universities. One of its features is her highlighting translation studies while deliberately overlooking the value of comparative literature, that is, she apparently gives priority to the former while belittling the latter. So actually it is by no means surprised for us to read her new essay today in the 21st century. It has some continuity with her previous deconstruction of comparative literature and reconstruction of translation studies. In her above-mentioned book, after talking a lot about the validity of translation studies, Bassnett directly asserts, "Today, comparative literature in one sense is dead. The narrowness of the binary distinction, the unhelpfulness of the ahistorical approach, the complacent shortsightedness of the Literature-as-universal-civilizing-force approach have all contributed to its demise" (47). But, although she declares the "death" of comparative literature, another paradoxical phenomenon should not be

neglected, that is, today's comparatists are very active in the age of globalization, attending at different conferences or symposiums, producing books or essays. Different kinds of academic activities are organized by the department of comparative literature in many universities, all of which obviously affect the entire humanities to some extent. How can we explain such a phenomenon? Apparently, Bassnett herself is also aware of this, for she goes on, "But it lives on under other guises: in the radical reassessment of Western cultural models at present being undertaken in many parts of the world, in the transcendence of disciplinary boundaries through new methodological insights supplied by gender studies or cultural studies, in the examination of the processes of intercultural transfer that are taking place within translation studies" (Ibid.). This is more or less true of the state of comparative literature studies in today's global context.

All the above phenomena show that since the 1990s, comparative literature has actually been in a paradoxical crisis. As a discipline, its domain has been narrower and narrower: many research fields originally belonging to the discipline of comparative literature are now either occupied by cultural studies scholars or cultural critics. But on the other hand, it is easy for those who practice comparative literature to get involved in some border-crossing fields and utter unique voices in the humanities because of their broad and profound knowledge of multi-disciplines, their acute abilities to sense the cutting edge theoretical topics and their well-trained writing ability as well. This is actually the very contrast to the decline of the discipline itself. Thus, the consequence it brings about is that quite a number of scholars in this field are not engaged in the studies of literature, but of other disciplinary subjects from the angle of comparison. However, they have, institutionally, to depend on the discipline of comparative literature, just like late André Lefevere who was engaged in translation studies and the still active comparatist Edwin Gentzler who has been doing translation studies from a cross-cultural and comparative perspective. They both have supervised graduate students who major in comparative literature while doing translation studies from a comparative and literary perspective. Bassnett is also aware of such a phenomenon, so she has been striving to seek for various opportunities to establish the position of the discipline of translation studies. After discussing the relationship between comparative literature and translation studies in a parallel way, Bassnett boldly and frankly points out in the final chapter "From Comparative Literature to Translation Studies", in view of the decline of the former, "In contrast, however, Translation

Studies has been gaining ground and since the end of the 1970s has come to be seen as a discipline in its own right, with professional associations, journals, publishers' catalogues and a proliferation of doctoral theses" (138). So, "We should look upon translation studies as the principal discipline from now on, with comparative literature as a valued but subsidiary subject area." (161) In this sense, Bassnett's book has at least completed the task of deconstructing the discipline of comparative literature and reconstructing that of translation studies.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Comparative Literature has encountered another greater challenge. As the challenge comes from the small book *Death of a Discipline* by the post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak, who has always been active on the forefront of literary and cultural studies in the world since the 1990s, its impacts are much greater. Confronted with this, comparatists may raise such questions: Does Spivak really hope that comparative literature as a discipline should be dead? Or she has already felt that it is dying? Does comparative literature have a future? If the comparative literature in its traditional "Eurocentric" sense has really been dead, then how are comparative literature studies carried out in other places? How is the situation of comparative literature studies, especially in China and other oriental countries? However, after reading this book, my impression is that, Spivak does not really hope that comparative literature as a discipline should die, for she began her own academic career decades ago with this very discipline and has published extensively within or without it. Just as her friend Judith Butler, one of the prominent Queer theorists in the contemporary West, pertinently points out, "Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* does not tell us that Comparative Literature is at an end. On the contrary, it charts a demanding and urgent future for the field, laying out the importance of the encounter with area studies... And she maps a new way of reading not only the future of literary studies but its past as well. This text is disorienting and re-constellating, dynamic, lucid, and brilliant in its scope and vision. Rarely has 'death' offered such inspiration."^[1] It is obviously true that as a Chinese scholar in this field, I, after reading her book, do not have any pessimistic feelings towards the future of comparative literature as a discipline. On the contrary, to my surprise, I have found, to a certain degree, the past decades of comparative literature studies in China has indicated the flourishing of comparative literature studies in the age of globalization. That is, according to Spivak, "Comparative Literature and Area Studies can work together in the fostering not only of national literatures of the global South but also of the writing

of countless indigenous languages in the world that are programmed to vanish when the maps were made.... Then, there is nothing necessarily new about the new Comparative Literature. Nonetheless, I must acknowledge that the times determine how the necessary vision of 'comparativity' will play out. Comparative Literature must always cross borders" (15-16).

If we regard Chinese study as one of area studies, then comparative literature studies in China is certainly beyond doubt part of area studies in the framework of international cultural studies, and also part of world literature. As to its "crossing borders", in my opinion, comparative literature in China actually has had the very feature since its revival in the 1980s. On the one hand, our researches cross the border between the East and the West, and cross the border between world literature and national literatures as well. On the other hand, they also cross the border between literature and other relevant subjects, and the border between Chinese literature and the writings in other languages in other Asian countries or regions.

Let's come back to Bassnett's main views in her essay. We can see that she has already pushed her attitude to another extreme, that is, comparative literature and translation studies are but merely research methods rather than disciplines. It's not difficult for those who are familiar with her recent researches to find, such a view of her is mainly due to the status quo of Western comparative literature, that is, the crisis of comparative literature and the flourish of world literature in the Western academia. But in China, such crisis does not exist, for as early as 1998, comparative literature and world literature were already merged into one discipline in the general catalogue made by China's Ministry of Education. But why has there appeared the flourish of world literature in the age of globalization? Actually the answer is simple. Just as Goethe coined the word *Weltliteratur* in 1827 and later, Marx and Engels reconstructed it in 1848, world literature has been closely related to comparative literature. Or we could say, the early phase of comparative literature is world literature. In fact, it is one of the consequences of globalization in culture and literature. Therefore, after coming into the age of globalization in the 21st century, when the boundaries between nation-states become obscured and national literatures are impacted, a sort of transnationality or cosmopolitanism has been rising. As the very reflection in the literary studies, it is the flourish of world literature that has attracted the attention of comparatists today. So in this sense, we should have no doubt about this that the highest phase of comparative literature will be that of world literature. In 2003, David Damrosch published his book *What Is*

World Literature?, in which he not only emphasizes the intervention of comparative literature but also elaborates the unique role played by translation (1-36). So, we can say, as early as 1998, comparative studies in China had already anticipated the theorization by David Damrosch in 2003. Now that “Weltliteratur” invented by Goethe in 1827 marks the immediate consequence of globalization in culture, which is actually the early phase of comparative literature as a discipline, we can also infer, with the all-round practice of globalization in today’s context, the highest phase of comparative literature today should also be that of world literature. So there is good reason for us Chinese scholars in this field to do research on comparative literature between East and West in a broader context of world literature.

Note:

[1] As for Butler’s comments, cf. the back cover of the book *Death of a Discipline*.

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(translated by Yang Yuying, and revised by the author himself)