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# Variation Theory: A Breakthrough in Research of World Comparative Literature Theory

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**中文摘要:** 本文作者提出了世界比较文学变异学理论, 该理论将打破法国学派影响研究和美国学派平行研究的学界现状。变异学依据杂糅和变异研究方式, 不仅关注不同文明间的差异, 而且提倡不同文明间对话的混杂性和交流性。从同质性到杂糅性, 再到变异性, 比较文学由此开创了新的研究理论和方法, 同时也为研究人类文化开创了新的途径。

So far, the global comparative literature subject theory has experienced three stages of development: the first stage is featured by the influence study, which is proposed by French school and focuses on empirical study; the second stage is dominated by the parallel study and interdisciplinary study, which is proposed by American school. The third one is now taking the shape.

Currently, most researchers in comparative literature think that with the two cornerstones, influence study and parallel study, the foundation of theory building of comparative literature is solid enough. However, it is not the fact. There are a lot of evidence showing that even with the two theory pillars, there are still quite a few defects in comparative literature research and plenty of problems to be resolved.

In the current theory, the most apparent defect is the heterogeneity issue neglected by almost everyone. Usually, those who without comparative literature disciplinary theory background tend to, consciously or unconsciously think that the objectives of comparative literature are to find the difference among the similarity or vice versa, the similarity among the difference. This intuition is definitely right.

However, according to the European and American theories, the ultimate goal of comparative literature is not to find difference but similarity. No matter the influence study or parallel study, their research foundation is to probe the similarity among the different. Specifically, the goal of influence study is to explore the homology, namely, the same identity of origin, while the goal of parallel study is to probe the similarity, that is, the common paradigm among different countries' culture, literature, and other disciplines.

It is impossible for western researchers to fail to notice the issue of difference because it is an issue that only needs to be perceived and realized by common sense and intuition. However, from the perspective of comparative literature, western scholars do not think it make any sense to contrast the differences. In their eyes, there is no comparability. Just as Bladensburg's confirmation: "actually, any coincidence can not result in a subordinating relationship." "Just like an imaginative biologist in eighteenth century, who compared the image and color between a flower and an insect", Weinstein thought there was no comparability between the western and eastern culture. He had ever said: only within a single culture range, can we consciously or unconsciously find common elements which maintain our heritage in thoughts, emotions and imaginations. Only in this way, can different countries' culture be compared and contrasted. But the "similarity exploration" model has insurmountable defect for comparative literature theory because there is much heterogeneity whose importance is much more significant than homogeneity and homology in Influence study and Parallel study.

The foundation of comparability is "homology" and "similarity", on which depend the comparability of comparative literature, but not be refined to "homology" and "similarity", for differences can also be compared, which is a basic theory breakthrough point in variation theory. Variability is the key word of variation theory. Variability is not only an indisputable fact of culture communication but also a basic law for culture fusion and creation. Influence study does not focus on variability, which is a serious defect of French school. Actually, neglecting of "exploration of difference" makes French school and American school fail to think and analyze the variation issue, which is exactly the innovative point in variation theory.

French school advocates to use the empirical way to study the history of international literature relationship. But when one country's literature transmitted from one place to another, it is inevitably transmuted, which supports that the

empirical literature relationship also has variability issue. It can be safe to conclude that influence study should include both empirical and variable literature relationship. However, French school, paying too much attention to empirical study, neglects the possible empirical variability and avoids referring to literature's aesthetic feature and they are the two major defects in its theory. Although, American school solved the loss of literature's aesthetic feature, but the variability issue still remains unresolved.

Although there are varied perspectives among American school, there seems to be a common basis: exploring similarity, a fundamental foothold of parallel study. American school does not realize the variation, while their mutually contradictory views reveal a crisis which they are not aware of, that is, the reason for whether there is comparability among different cultures. Some think comparability does exist, as Wellek's view that all kinds of culture have common human nature; others believe varied cultures can not be compared, as Weistain's suspicion of similarity. Both of their propositions are built up on the "exploring similarity" basis. The divergence among American scholars reflects two problems: the first is that they cannot jump out from the thinking mode of "exploring similarity"; the second is that American scholars ignore the heterogeneity while focus on parallel study, which also proves the need of variation theory in comparative literature studies from another perspective.

Considering the developing course of comparative literature, its present situation and its future development, we must regard and conduct the variation theory as the new disciplinary theory of comparative literature.

Firstly, variation theory is a remedial theory for the defect of comparative literature's disciplinary theory. The so called "defect" in general sense means there is no definite research target and research scope. Not only western comparative literature theories have some obvious flaws, but also some Chinese theory and relevant text books have a great amount of drawbacks. For example, some text books remove media study completely, and only refer to medio-translatology study; some books categorize theme study into influence study, while some list it as parallel study. And this classification confusion intensifies this defect.

Secondly, according to the actual situation of literature history, as in the course of literature development, usually, when there is a heterogeneous culture's collision, there is a period that all kinds of literature blend, experiencing fusion and fission, and at last new elements are generated as a result. This type of literature often

presents a varied and changeable visage. The typical example is literature in ancient Wei Jin southern and northern dynasty. At that time, unrest society, frequent wars and Indian Buddhism's introduction into China accelerated the fusion of southern and northern literature, led to the birth of native religion Zen and brought the literature theory to an unprecedented peak. The reason for this cultural phenomenon is that the communication and collision of heterogeneous cultures can invigorate both sides' internal cultural elements and make them active. No matter whether "expansion culture" or "reservation culture", inside their mechanism, there lies a series of transformations, which acts as a driving force for literature development. Therefore, such a complex progress that alien literature caused the mutation of native literature not only can promote the development of native literature but also can be a model of later literature. So, variation study should be the mainstream perspective of comparative literature research.

Finally, the reason of proposing variation theory lies in the thought that comparative literature has advanced from original "exploring similarity", to the phase of the "exploring variability". Both French school and American school carry out their study within a single culture system, without comparison among different cultures. However, when we shift our eyes to diversified culture systems, apart from some basic literature principles, we will find the variation and transmutation phenomena. So, we should get rid of the "exploring similarity" thought inertia and redefine the study scope of variation theory on the basis of heterogeneity and variability.

For the three reasons mentioned above, the variation theory not only regulates the research scope and target but also coincides with the idea of cross-civilization research. So to speak, the variation theory is based on a solid and sound basis theoretically and practically.

Before the official proposition of variation theory, some scholars of China have noticed some variation phenomena in literature research such as Yan Shaodang's "varied style" in Japanese literature and Xie Tianzhen's "medio-translatology studies", both of whom were aware of the variation phenomena but failed to go on with any in-depth and systematic analysis or conclusion. I propose variation theory from comparative literature disciplinary theory and sort out the variation theory thoroughly. These efforts may have significant impact on the development and construction of comparative literature disciplinary theory worldwide.

After the discussion of the reasons for variation theory, we should know what the

variation study scope is. It can be defined from six aspects.

Firstly, the “domestic appropriation of literature” is the most important part of variation theory. Some scholars argue that “translated literature is not foreign literature”, which is a judgment about this phenomenon. With different literature backgrounds, when two kinds of literature meet each other, the recipient will absorb, select and filter the sending side’s culture and literature, which is a creative progress. At the same time, the sending one will be marked with the recipient’s cultural brand. This phenomenon is variation of literature in other country.

In contemporary China, “Marxism’s Chinesenization”, promoted by the mainstream discourse, actually confirms the correctness of the argument: “domestic appropriation of literature and culture”. Following the idea, domestic appropriation study may have more values than we expected. We can study Chinesenization of western literary theories and westernization of Chinese literature. Of course, to what extent it can be called domestic appropriation still needs further study because not all the influence will lead to domestic appropriation, which means, if we want to make western literary theory truly Chinesenized, we should make them combined with Chinese traditional cultural spirit, Chinese literary theory’s academic regulation and its discourse style, and thus to accordingly promote the construction of Chinese literary theory itself.

The second is transnational variation study, which is typically exemplified by the variation study on image. It appears firstly in Kiea’s *Comparative Literature*, which argues that image study opens a new door for comparative literature and especially elaborates image study in one of the chapters. While Wellek reckons image as a social psychological and cultural research and denies J.M.Carré and Kiea’s attempts. Later, image study gradually becomes a branch of comparative literature. Image study’s target is to research other countries’ images in one country’s literature works. Without doubt, other country’s image is a kind of social imaginary object, which inevitably varies from its original one. The aim of image study is to focus on the image’s variation during its production and analyze its laws from a deeper cultural mode.

The third is cross-lingual variation, conducted at linguistic level. It means the process during which a specific literature phenomenon goes across the language’s barriers through translation and is accepted by recipients, which can be exemplified as medio-translatology studies. Present comparative literature text books categorize medio-translatology studies into media study. However, involving so many lingual



and cultural variations, it is hard to put Medio-translatology studies into the field of media study. We can conclude that medio-translatology originally starts from media study of comparative literature's view to study translation (literature translation, in particular) and translated literature from comparative cultures. Translation study has converted from the pursuit of "faithfulness, smoothness, elegance" to "creative rebellion". At the same time, its research method changes from original empirical study to variation study with a grand cultural perspective. That is, today's translation study has exceeded the scope of media study, so our translation study should shift from original focus on words' translation to words' variation and literature variation.

Fourthly, researchers should focus their attention on literature text. The examples can be found in cultural misreading and literature reception. Literature text is the cornerstone of comparative literature. The variation of literature text means the phenomenon of literature reception takes place during actual communication. Literature reception, currently has become a lively research field, just like what Chevrel said: "reception, this word has become one of the most important terms in the last 15 years." Although some text books have begun to refer to the problem of literature reception, no clear subject location is found so far. How to define the relationship between literature reception and influence study and how to clarify their differences and similarities are remained unresolved. If we want to understand literature reception, we should explore it from the perspective of literature variation. Different from relationship study, which is empirical, the process of literature reception is penetrated with aesthetics and psychology. Additionally, the variation study of literature text includes theme study and genre study belonging to the parallel study. Despite the fact that theme study and genre study have different research scopes, they have a common feature: both of them are marked with the traits of either "exploring similarity" or "compatibility" from French school and American school respectively. Actually, traditional theme study and genre study have inevitably referred to the theme variation and genre variation, especially among different culture systems. There are much more differences than similarities in their themes and genres. Hence, our task is not only "exploring similarity" but also effectively carrying out literature dialogue between varied culture systems through theme study and genre study, from which we can conclude more human literature laws.

Fifthly, it is about culture variation study, demonstrated by culture filter. Going

through different culture systems, literature has to face the varied culture molds, an unavoidable phenomenon in comparative literature study which triggers the variation. The culture filter, the most prominent one in all phenomena, means that in the process during which literature travels from sending side to receiving side, the recipient has done a series of behaviors including selecting, bowdlerizing and innovating. It is easy to confuse culture filter with literature reception. The key point of distinguishing them depends on our realization that culture filter is caused not by simply subjective reception but by different culture molds. At the same time, culture filter brings about a more obvious phenomenon: misreading of literature, which forms in the process when literature goes across heterogeneous culture circles and culture filter. What is the relationship between culture filter and literature misreading? How do they happen? What are the internal laws of the variation? All of these major problems of culture filter and literature misreading will be under discussion.

Lastly, it is for the cross-civilization studies. The typical theory is dialogue among civilizations and discourse variation. We can use Said's "traveling theory" to explain it: When a kind of literary theory "travels" from one country to another country, such a theoretical discourse is bound to mutate. Contemporary theories are mostly those who "travels" from the West to the East, and when they arrived, their theoretical discourse will occur in two variations. One is the lineage of knowledge; China takes in western literary theory completely. In other words, the discourse and ways of contemporary Chinese culture are sheer western-styled, which eventually leads to modern Chinese literary theory "Aphasia" state, that is almost the entire Western literary theory has replaced the Chinese literary theory. The second is its own variation of western literary theory, namely, Chinesized western literary theory. For the issue of "Western Literary Criticism in China", many western scholars believe that Chinese scholars, when introducing Western literary theory, which should be with local Chinese culture, literature, practical and theoretical appeal, in the spirit of tradition on the premise of their own culture, use the spirit of traditional Chinese literary theory to selectively absorb Western literary theory to promote the development of Chinese literary theory. It is a fundamental solution to Chinese literary theory "aphasia." Speaking of discourse variation, the most typical example is illustrative approach proposed by Chinese scholars. In the past, Chinese scholars were accustomed to using Western literary theory to interpret works of Chinese literature, which, to some extent, resulted in variation of western literary



theory and variation of Chinese literary works, which can be understood in two ways. One is that western theories give us a new understanding of Chinese literature. For example, we used to explain poets Li Bai and Qu Yuan from romanticism, or to explain Du Fu and Bai Ju-yi from realism. This “West Learning” in China produced a variation of Chinese literature itself. The other is that the western literary theory mutates when encountering with Chinese literature. For example, when we use West’s romanticism to explain Li Bai and Qu Yuan’s works, the former is also mutated.

Before being introduced into China, the West Lake of the romantic poets represented “Lake Poets”, to promote a natural emotional expression. But when romanticism encountered with the Chinese literature, it highlighted its ideals and exaggeration and so on. Therefore, when the western literary theory meets with the Chinese literature, the two sides will have mutations. Illustrative approach, promoted by Chinese scholars, is produced in the process of western literary theory’s variation and Chinese literary works’ variation, which means that, when using western literary theory to interpret Chinese literature, the latter will be a perspective to observe the former. Therefore, heterogeneity among civilizations, illustrated by different civilizations and noticed by Chinese scholars can be considered as a constructive breakthrough of cross-civilization studies.

The above-mentioned six aspects jointly constitute the literary variation field of comparative literature. As a brand-new disciplinary perspective, many issues of variation studies remain to be resolved; it is definite that the clarification of scope of literary variation is of great importance to the field of comparative literature discipline and the resolution to the crisis of comparative literature discipline.

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