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To cite this article: Li Weifang (2018) The Mission of Research on Globalization and Comparative Literature, *Comparative Literature: East & West*, 2:1, 38-44, DOI: [10.1080/25723618.2018.1482684](https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2018.1482684)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2018.1482684>



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Published online: 15 Aug 2018.



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ARTICLE



The Mission of Research on Globalization and Comparative Literature

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ABSTRACT

We are living in an era of globalization with constant changes. Globalization has profoundly transformed human life, modes of production and ways of thinking. To obtain a win-win situation and harmonious, common prosperity result, we should actively meet the challenge of globalization, champion cultural diversity, enhance the effective communication between different cultures and civilizations, engage in dialogue on an equal footing, and create an inclusive and friendly atmosphere. Comparative literature study, which has a mission to facilitate communication, dialogue and understanding between culture and literature in eastern and western countries, is supposed to perform an irreplaceable function as a unique bridge. In the age of globalization, China's comparative literature studies, focusing on cross-culture heterogeneity and complimentary dialogue, take on heavy responsibilities. In terms of culture and academic research, the studies aim to carry out the principle of on-an-equal-footing dialogue and publicize the positive energy of social value.

中文摘要

正在进行中的全球化时代越来越深刻地改变着人类的生存方式、生产方式和思维方式。积极应对全球化带来的挑战,倡导文化多元化,并加强不同文明或文化间的有效沟通、平等对话与互识互补,营造兼容并包、宽容理性的友好氛围,才能实现合作共赢、和谐共荣的局面。作为以促进东西方不同文化与文学沟通、对话和理解为使命的比较文学研究,理应发挥其不可替代的桥梁作用。在全球化时代,中国比较文学研究同样任重道远,它强调跨文明异质性、互补性对话,就是旨在从文化、学术层面,努力践行不同国家间平等对话原则并且积极传播社会价值正能量。



KEYWORDS

Globalization; cultural diversity; comparative literature studies; expanded classics; dialogue

关键词

全球化; 文化多元化; 文化多元化; 比较文学研究; 扩展经典; 对话

We are living in an era of globalization with constant changes. Globalization has profoundly transformed humanity, modes of production and ways of thinking. One of the prominent features of the globalized world is that, with the rapid development of global economy, the formation of a unified world market, and the continuous upgrading of information technology, such as the Internet, the world has become a small “global village.” The interaction between different countries and ethnicities has become

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unprecedentedly frequent. Politics, economies, trades, cultures, and many aspects of different nations have become more closely connected, interdependent and inclusive, forming a community of shared future. It is unrealistic for nations to go back to the past and be isolated and closed off. Therefore, the world is increasingly regarded as a single community, which results in an increased global consciousness among people. With the expanded influence of globalization on human society, various unavoidable challenges have appeared and subjected mankind to unprecedented tests, including the domino effect of the financial crisis, the spread of terrorism and the threat of climate change, separatism, violence, and cybersecurity. Among all the issues, more attention is paid to the conflicts of different cultures or civilizations, which is a result of globalization. Scholars from different fields and parts of the world have been dedicated to solve the sensitive issues: how can different nations, different races, and different believers get along better and view each other rationally?

How does globalization cause cultural and civilizational conflicts? First, although globalization is an inevitable historical trend that progresses differently in different periods of time, it has never been formed spontaneously; rather, it has always been encouraged by powerful nations in different historical phases. In modern times, especially since WWII, powerful countries mostly pushed the formations of various international organizations and trade treaties forward. Strong nations, while promoting organizations and treaties, have kept exerting economic and political pressures onto other countries. The seemingly unbiased organizations and treaties, in fact, have many hidden elements of inequality. Few strong members have always been in the dominant position. To join international organizations, weaker countries often have to compromise and struggle to protect their own interests. Thus, it could be concluded that globalization is unable to eliminate the boundaries between powerful and weak nations. In other words, globalization has not successfully brought true cosmopolitanism or internationalism; instead, it has cultivated an even more powerful nationalism. During the 19th century, the emergence of cosmopolitanism, in essence, was an expression of nationalism. In fact, globalization has made different national characters more prominent. Countries have prioritized their own national interests when managing international relations. Consequently, military force has become a prerequisite for security and order. Moreover, in the era of globalization, people are interdependent; however, they compete intensively to protect their own interests. Only through competition can people stand out of the crowd and gain rich capital. When competing, powerful nations are still in a dominant position; whereas, weak nations are in an either passive or disadvantageous position. In addition, when pursuing interests, people carry their own national culture and customs. Wealthy and strong nations are usually in the advantageous position in the world. Such a position not only imposes an economic and political impact, but also affects the values and cultures of other nations. In the context of globalization, strong cultural and psychological strength will inevitably lead to conflicts between different values, ideologies, or nations. Therefore, although it is possible to have economic globalization or integration, it is almost impossible to unify the diverse cultures in the world. In the economically unified world, various demands and pursuits of different cultures would inevitably lead to conflicts.

Globalization could not facilitate a single civilization to dominate the world and eradicate other cultures. Both economic globalization and the diversification of national

cultures should be managed in a rational manner. The uniqueness of different national literatures should be protected. In addition, the interaction and appreciation of different literary traditions – regardless of their power and influence – should be encouraged. The world where only a single or handful of countries was in the dominant position has become history. Powerful nations should adjust their mentalities, become humbler, and become more willing to initiate meetings and negotiations. Only through the adherence of dialogue, the pursuit of commonality, and the reservation of uniqueness can nations achieve a harmonious coexistence and development. If strong nations continue to insist on hegemony and the Cold War mentality, they are bound to hinder world peace and stability. In the age of globalization, as an international discipline, what kind of a role can comparative literature play?

In essence, comparative literature, after more than 100 years of continuous updating and development, has not only explored the interaction of various national literatures and cultures, but also highlighted their differences and dialogue. Comparative literature has built a complementary and harmonious coexistence of the world's literatures. From an international perspective, the focus of comparative literature research has shifted from internal interaction to unrelated parallel relationship of literatures within a single culture. The discipline then eventually incorporates the comparative study of heterogeneous civilizations. The study also transformed from imagology to cultural studies. The changes highlight the communication and dialogue between Eastern and Western literatures. However, it should be stressed that the development of comparative literature is gradual and arduous. This is because Eurocentrism has deeply affected the world. Moreover, comparative literature has constantly self-adjusted and self-updated. The subject and the scope of research have been challenged again and again, which, however, is exactly the reason why comparative literature has a huge potential and significance.

As early as 1993, Bernheimer, the then president of the American Comparative Literature Association, published a report on the situation and development of comparative literature entitled "Comparative Literature at the Turn of the Century." The most striking part of the report was the two valuable suggestions on the general direction of comparative literature research in the new century. First, Bernheimer was aware that traditional internationalism in comparative literature was still self-contradictory and focused only on a few European literatures. After the World War, internationalism on the surface still embodied strict Eurocentrism. To Bernheimer's relief, the status quo has been challenged in many aspects. For this reason, Bernheimer argued that comparative literature should abandon Eurocentrism and include both the East and the West. The discipline should strengthen the comparative study of Western cultural traditions (including the elites and the public) and non-Western cultural traditions. At the same time, comparative literature should also actively participate in the comparative study of the formation of literary classics and the re-examination of the classics and encourage people to further expand the classics. The proposal was a subversion of the existing unequal structure of the East and the West. Bernheimer's view also subverted Western power relations with other nations. Second, Bernheimer believed that comparative literature should not focus only on literatures, but also on the cultural contexts in which literatures originated. Researchers, from Bernheimer's point of view, should expand the scope of the cultural activities of comparative literature and adhere to multiculturalism. The scholar believed that expanding comparative literature

is not only a politically correct way to obtain real information about those who we do not want to fully understand, but also a tool that facilitates the deep reflection on cultural relations, translation, dialogue, and controversy. Bernheimer's report has sparked resonance in both the American and international fields of comparative literature and profoundly affected the development of international comparative literature. The report demonstrated that the consensus of the key objectives of comparative literature in the 21st century has been reached.

Many American researchers have, in fact, attempted to break Eurocentrism and emphasized literary diversity. At the beginning to the new century, David Damrosch, Former President of the American Comparative Literature Association and Head of the Department of Comparative Literature at Harvard University, stated that comparative literature is undergoing an important shift of paradigm. Economy, media, and cultural globalization have had profound impacts on many aspects of academic work. The most dramatic impact occurred in the field of comparative literature. Damrosch believed that previous comparative literature focused on a few classics written by literary masters; whereas, contemporary comparative literature accommodates literatures published in any region and at any time. Therefore, in the past decades, the world's literary vision has been greatly expanded. The focus is no longer confined to European literatures or literary classics; it has turned to literary works in other countries. This is the most significant change in contemporary comparative literature. In *What is World Literature?*, Damrosch provided a new explanation for "classics" in world literature. The scholar says that world literature should be an elliptical refraction between national literatures; it does not refer to a set of classics but a kind of reading pattern – entering into a world that is different from our own in terms of time and space with an attached attitude. Damrosch stressed that world literature has diverse characteristics with no fixed pattern. The number of national perspectives in the world determines the number of world literature genres (5). This is because all literary works are born in the context of national literature; even if they enter into the realm of world literature, they still carry the marks of their nations. The marks will then be expanded. The farther the work is spread, the sharper the refraction. Damrosch believed that the research subject of comparative literature is exactly this kind of world literature. Damrosch's insight has broadened the scope of traditional world literature and extended the realm of comparative literature. The notion is a deconstruction of traditional world literature that focuses exclusively on a handful of masterpieces from European countries. Damrosch pointed out that the efforts made by comparative literature scholars were aimed at structurally transforming comparative literature from upholding Eurocentrism to having a global vision.

In the age of globalization, researchers of comparative literature in China also bear a huge responsibility. China's comparative research emphasizes the dialogue of cross-cultural heterogeneity and complementarity, aiming at strengthening the equal communication, understanding, and cooperation between different national literatures. Therefore, China should continue to facilitate the exchange and dialogue between Chinese and Western literatures. Moreover, more attention should be paid to the expansion of the exchange with the United States for mutual understanding, mutual trust, and cooperation. In recent years, Chinese scholars have used various channels and methods to strengthen the exchange with their American counterparts and have received positive responses. The communication of the two parties was described in

Comparative Literature in the 21st Century, which is the preface of *New Directions: A Reader of Comparative and World Literature* edited by David Damrosch, Chen Yongguo, and Yin Xing:

As a result of the cooperation between American and Chinese scholars, a special purpose of this book is to enhance the dialogue between China and the United States in the field of comparative literature, which has risen rapidly in recent years. In the world, China and the United States have both conducted the largest number of comparative literature projects and courses. In recent years, Beijing and Shanghai have held a number of important meetings to attract scholars from China and the rest of the world. In 2009, the congress of the American Comparative Literature Association had more than 2,000 participants from more than 50 countries. The figure is two times more than the highest number of participants in the history. Chinese and American scholars could learn from each other in many aspects. However (apart from some influential works of literary theorists), most of the works done by American scholars have not been translated into Chinese. Similarly, American scholars do not understand the current situation of Chinese comparative literature. This book presents the current situation of American and international comparative literature for Chinese students and scholars. The editors hope that this reading will promote academic dialogue between Chinese and Western cultures and that readers will be able to find materials that could be further explored in their own research. (9-10)

Damrosch clearly pointed out the demands of a stronger exchange between the scholars of the two countries. The scholar also stated in his book that there was an expectation for the two parties to learn from each other in many aspects. The points mentioned by Damrosch are, in fact, the foundation for the communication and cooperation between the two nations. The translation of *New Directions: A Reader of Comparative and World Literature*, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Multiculturalism*, and *Death of a Discipline* have already been published, allowing Chinese scholars to keep abreast of the latest achievement made by their American counterparts. At the same time, Chinese scholars should make their voice and opinion heard, allowing American scholars to learn more about the situation and dynamics of Chinese comparative literature. It is reasonable to believe that as long as the two nations adhere to the exchange, dialogue, and mutual learning, consensus and friendly cooperation can be achieved. Subsequently, international comparative literature would prosper and fulfill its mission to contribute to the world's harmony and prosperity in the era of globalization.

Moreover, the exchange and dialogue within Eastern literatures should continue to be promoted. In this respect, Chinese research on comparative literature has made a great contribution. Many Eastern countries, including China, were once the colonies or semi-colonies of Western powers. The colonized eastern nations have undergone humiliation and were once categorized as a backward, poor, ignorant, brutal, and marginal world. When the Eastern world, which has a long history and brilliant civilizations, started catching up due to discontent, it naturally followed the West. Western democracy, freedom, equality, fraternity, and other concepts have thus become universal values. Western ideology was overwhelmingly promoted in the world as the strongest discourse. Therefore, Eurocentrism and Western advantages are universally accepted, causing the domination of a Western framework and thinking. Huge Western influence has attracted Chinese scholars to pay more attention to Western literature than to that of the East. In the field of comparative literature, Chinese scholars also tend

to focus more on the relationship between Chinese literature and European or American literature, which is hegemonic. To eradicate inequality, Chinese scholars should get rid of the “affected role,” overcome the mentality of inferiority, strengthen cultural identity and self-confidence, highlight Chinese characteristics, and review the characteristics, values and significance of Eastern literature in detail.

It should be noted that Western literatures all share a common cultural foundation: Greek and Hebrew cultures. Western cultures also share similar aesthetics and values due to the unity of the Roman Empire. Therefore, in the West, people have yet to experience a heterogeneous cultural circle; whereas, diverse Eastern literature consists of several distinctive cultural circles, such as Han, Indian, and Arab-Islamic, and black African cultures. The difference of the literary patterns and aesthetics in Eastern culture is more prominent than that of the West. Therefore, to better study Eastern literature, its inherent heterogeneity should be carefully examined. In the past, the heterogeneity of Chinese and Western literatures was often highlighted. However, the significant differences within Eastern literature have not received enough attention. Heterogeneity, a mark for the distinctive features of different nations and ethnicities, is a major issue faced by scholars. Heterogeneity is also the focus and the most interesting topic in comparative literature. By studying heterogeneity, scholars demonstrate their tolerance of dissimilarity and recognition of the rich and diverse world. The study of heterogeneity should be engrained in the realm of literature. Eastern literature is not a single-styled but rather a pluralistic literature, consisting of works depicting distinctive cultural traditions and aesthetics. Scholars should carefully observe the rich national characteristics and heterogeneous details to truly understand heterogeneity and its values. The parallel research on the heterogeneous literary features within Eastern literature should be deemed as the new research field of international comparative literature in the age of globalization. This marginalized yet valuable research field is able to demonstrate the richness and uniqueness of Eastern culture, presenting the tolerance and equal dialogue between diversified cultures and value systems.

In 2015, in his keynote speech at the annual meeting of the Boao Forum for Asia, Chinese President Xi Jinping put forward and comprehensively and systematically expounded the concept of “community of shared future,” which includes the adherence to mutual respect, cooperation, common, comprehensive, and sustainable security, as well as the inclusiveness and exchanges between different cultures. President Xi also called on all nations to work together to build a human community of shared destiny. Xi stressed that “Civilizations are only unique, and no one is superior to the other. There needs to be more exchange and dialogue among civilizations and development models, so that each could draw on the strength of the other and all could thrive and prosper by way of mutual learning and common development. Let us promote inter-civilization exchanges to build bridges of friendship for our people, drive human development and safeguard peace of the world.” In 2016, President Xi said again at the opening ceremony of the G20 Hangzhou summit that “As global citizens, we should have the consciousness of the human community of shared destiny.” Xi’s speeches have received positive responses and compliments worldwide. The president’s view also coincides with comparative literature’s global vision and equal dialogue, which ought to become a common academic principle.

In conclusion, during the formation of the community of a shared future, different cultures will inevitably face conflicts and challenges, which require effective dialogue. Equality and tolerance is the key to assimilation, assisting in reducing or avoiding conflicts instead of responding negatively. Deliberate exaggeration or provocation should be avoided. Only under such conditions can the peaceful and prosperous environment be maintained and sustained. Comparative literature is one of the effective ways to conduct equal dialogue between different countries and spread positivity from the cultural and academic levels.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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