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Chinese and American Scholars on the “Path of Comparative Literature”

—Preface to *1979-2009: Retrospect of the Development of Comparative Literature Studies of China*

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中文摘要：本文是台湾黄维梁教授为刘介民的新编译著《1979—2009 见证中国比较文学 30 年：John. J. Deeney（李达三）刘介民往来书札》写的序。序言简介了 20 世纪 80 年代香港、台湾和内地学者的学术交流、合作和他们的师生情谊。李达三和刘介民这两位学者筚路蓝缕，亦师亦友，合作 30 年，留下了很多学坛佳话。在中国比较文学起步阶段，他们作出了特殊的贡献。

In the last century, my beloved partner Cao Shunqing and I co-edited a book *The Chinese Theory of Comparative Literature Billiton—Taiwan scholars Papers* (University Press, 1998). In the preface, I wrote:

The Chinese University of Hong Kong is an important base for comparative literature study of Hong Kong, as are the base of Taiwan and Mainland. Its significance is so great, as Heidelberg to Germany and Tokyo to Japan, and both of them are noted as the “home of philosophy”. In my personal view, the Village Path, Central Avenue, and Shilin Path in Chinese University of Hong Kong can be named “Path of Comparative Literature”, because we can trace a lot of footprints of scholars of comparative literature in these sites. In particular, John J. Deeney, Yuan HehHsiang, Zhou Yingxiong, Zhu Limin, Chung Ling, Yue Daiyun, Liu Jiemin, Cao Shunqing, Zhang Longxi, Harry Levin, and A. Owen Aldridge have left their insightful ideas and thinking on the comparative literature studies here.

Of those scholars that I have just mentioned, two of them, Liu Jiemin and John J. Deeney, built the most precious friendship. Their academic cooperation and communication in the field of comparative literature has lasted more than a quarter of a century. Through compiling and editing all the correspondences between them, Liu Jiemin completed the book *1979-2009: Retrospect of the Development of Comparative Literature Studies of China the "1979-2009"*.

Liu Jiemin was born in 1945. He graduated from Shenyang University and later furthered his study in Chinese Academy of Social Sciences as a graduate student. After a long-term work in Liaoning Academy of Social Sciences, he transferred to Chinese College, Guangzhou University in 1995 and was appointed as the director of Institute of Comparative Culture there. During this period, he compiled and edited some books of great influences in the academic circle such as *Methodology of Comparative Literature*, and *China's Comparative Poetics*. Liu's friendship with John J. Deeney began in 1985 when he engaged in a continuously three-year research in Hong Kong. In Chinese University of Hong Kong, Liu had some cooperation with his partner, more precisely, his tutor John J. Deeney who now is noted as an excellent scholar in the field of comparative literature study with a famous Chinese name Li Dasan. John J. Deeney was born in 1931 in U.S.A.. Having obtained Ph.D. from Fordham University, he learned Chinese in Taiwan and since 1965 worked as a teacher in Taiwan Normal University and other schools. In 1977, he moved to Hong Kong and taught the course Comparative Literature in English College, Chinese University of Hong Kong. At the same time, he established Hong Kong Committee of Comparative Literature with his colleague Yuan HehHsiang. As the vice-president of the committee, John J. Deeney was devoted to the promotion of Comparative Literature with immense enthusiasm. Comparative Literature was a relatively new discipline before the 1950s as it was until 20th century introduced from the west into east Asia. Due to the great endeavor of the scholars both in Hong Kong and Taiwan, Comparative Literature studies progressed remarkably in decades between the 1950s and 1970s in this area, which then brought the boom of mainland China in this field during the 1980s. So it is no exaggeration to say that John J. Deeney has contributed greatly to promoting comparative literature studies in the Mainland.

During the early 1980s, the scarcity of academic materials and reference books were big problems to the scholars in mainland when undertaking research in

Comparative Literature. A research group of English department, Chinese University of Hong Kong thus cooperated with Comparative Literature and Translation Studies Center to raise funds, assisting the Mainland scholars to visit Chinese University of Hong Kong and helping them carry on relevant studies. Most of the visiting scholars from mainland were young. After they returned to mainland, they shared the academic experience and communicated with their peers and played key roles in the subsequent boom of Comparative Literature in mainland. Their individual efforts plus generous assistance of Chinese University of Hong Kong made most of them become experts in this engaging field nowadays.

Those young scholars of mainland, who have suffered the “bareness” of the Cultural Revolution of 1970s, came to Hong Kong, a blessed land, and hoped to obtain the opportunities to their further study. Most of them ever got the selfless assistance of John J. Deeney. Just as his Chinese name implied (“Dasan” signifying generosity), John J. Deeney, with his magic force of personality, did his best to accelerate the development of Comparative Literature studies in mainland. To raise the research funds for the visiting scholars from mainland, Dr. Li had to put up with the “unusual decade of hardship”. In Liu Jiemin’s new book *1979-2009*, many letters mentioned the difficulties and embarrassments John J. Deeney encountered when raising the funds. During that period, I was a counselor of New Asia College, Chinese University of Hong Kong. My job was accompanying the dean of the College to raise funds then. Therefore, I can quite understand the “painstaking” what John J. Deeney has mentioned in his letters to Liu Jiemin. And what I felt in the process of fund-raising was like the words of my university song — “Though dangerous, I forge ahead. Exhausted as I am, I never give up.”

Raising funds was for the better development of Comparative Literature in the Mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Based on the achievements some scholars have made in this field, John J. Deeney and Liu Jiemin did some creative jobs and co-edited two important books *Research on Foreign and Chinese Comparative Literature* and *Chinese and Western Comparative Literature Theory*. All these books, apply an idiom, “Benefiting scholars, it’s perpetual and immortal”. According to the book *1979-2009*, John J. Deeney painstakingly revised the book *Chinese and Western Comparative Literature Theory* through closely textual research, supplementing, and deleting in the editing process. And the amount of the revision was up to around 30,000 words. And Liu Jiemin also made great contribution to the accomplishment of the books by collecting data and modifying

the manuscripts.

John J. Deeney is noted for his diligence in his university. I ever worked in the same building with him, and sometimes I went to his office, noticing piles and piles of books, papers and periodicals there. His office was full of colorful notes which are used for reminding him of all schedules. All in his office impressed me and told me that he must be a workaholic.

John J. Deeney is a typical American, rather easy-going in personality. The colleagues liked to call him Jack, namely John, in daily life. He can speak fluent Mandarin and have rich experience in teaching the course Comparative Literature. Although he admits the fact that the discipline Comparative Literature is originated from the west, and it is characterized by western approach and theories, he hopes Chinese scholars can let the west hear the voice from China in this field. Conventionally there are two schools in the field: French School and American School; the former is notable for its empiricist and positivist approach, while the latter concentrates on "Parallel Research". However, John J. Deeney calls on Chinese scholars to establish "Chinese School". In an article titled *Chinese School of Comparative Literature*, published in *Chung-Wai Literary Monthly* in October 1977, John J. Deeney pointed out that Chinese scholars should "establish their own theory of Comparative Literature based on eastern culture and thus resist the western monopoly in this field". He also noted that Chinese scholars should "create their own terms in the present academic circumstances of China, digging out the 'treasures' belonging to the traditional legacy of the east".

Since the 1970s, John J. Deeney started to cooperate with scholars of the Mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong to make an attempt on establishing "Chinese School". For such a school, the establishment of a new theory was necessary. And a theory should have its own terminologies. Therefore, from early 1990s, John J. Deeney and several scholars of Taiwan and Hong Kong dedicated to edit a book which was about the translation and interpretation of some important terminologies in terms of ancient Chinese literary theories. But it was a pity that the participants in this program later became fewer and fewer out of some reasons. Until the spring of 1993, there was a meeting for the scholars of Taiwan and Hong Kong to communicate the periodical progress with the Mainland peers in Peking University. But only five people were available, including John J. Deeney. I was one of them and then responsible for the interpretation of the Chinese literary term "vigor of style", a basic concept of ancient Chinese literary theory. I remember that I

accepted the task with a little reluctance, because at that time I was too busy with my teaching, administrative work and different social activities in Chinese University of Hong Kong. But I admired his zeal in promoting comparative literature studies and agreed with the methodologies he applied in the research of this field. During that period, both he and I became workaholics, overloaded with academic studies and all kinds of social work such as raising funds and accommodating the Mainland scholars and the like. I deeply knew the significance of his job and the importance of interpreting the terminologies to promote its own Comparative Literature of China. From the book *1979-2009* and some works by Dr. Li, we can see that it has been his cherished dream to translate and interpret the terminologies of ancient Chinese literary theories. But it was finally proved a failure as the book of the terminologies did not come out. Only one article dealing with the interpretation of several terms including “vigor of style” was later published in *Tamkang Review*. The unexpected outcome of this project is the publication of *Dictionary of World Poetics* in 1993, which was proposed in Peking University by professor Yue Daiyun. And the great scholar Qian Zhongshu inscribed the title of the book cover.

Since the scholars John J. Deeney, Chen Huihua and Gu Tianhong first advanced “Chinese School” in Taiwan during the 1970s, there has been a great deal of discussion and debate about it. In the 1990s, the Mainland scholar Cao Shunqing further enriched this concept with more theoretical support. In short, the aim of “Chinese School” is to highlight Comparative Literature with Chinese theories, which means forming a research center parallel with the western center. In recent years, with the revival of the economy of China, Chinese culture also gains its popularity in the globe. More than two hundreds of Confucius Institutes have been established in different countries. Even Obama, President of the United States would quote Mencius’s sayings to add power to his address. So the time of promoting Comparative Literature of China to other countries has come. It is a pity that the great scholar Qian zhongshu has passed away. If he was alive, if he could address in the international forums or academic session on this issue with his proficiency in seven languages and broad vision, it would be definitely a success of introducing “Chinese School” to the world. But Liu Jiemin opposed the concept “Chinese School”, which was showed in his letters to John J. Deeney. In one letter written in March 25, 1987, Liu Jiemin quoted some dissenting opinion of other scholars. Also in another letter of October 10, 1987, he frankly expressed his

objection.

The time to advance Chinese School, I admit, has not been ripe. But we can set it as a goal and encourage Chinese scholars to meet it. Although John J. Deeney is an American, he can regard it as his cause for life. I think it is his deep love for Comparative Literature of China that brings him so much enthusiasm in this field.

After John J. Deeney proposed the concept "Chinese School", there has been a great deal of debate about it. And he is always concerned with the development of it. In 1998, when he had retired from Chinese University of Hong Kong for five years, he wrote to Liu Jiemin, hoping to know something about the recent development about it. During that period, there were some seminars related to Comparative Literature such as Modern Transformation of Ancient China Seminar held in Xi'an. The topics of them were indirectly involved in Chinese School. For the past decade, most Chinese scholars have been accustomed to studying ancient and modern Chinese literature with Western literary theory. It poses a question to all of us: If the theories of ancient Chinese literature, directly or indirectly, could be applied to the present research of literature? If it could be, it means the theory that John J. Deeney has advanced, namely the theory with Chinese nationality, should be workable.

"The sense of justice and rationality is the same with everybody," I personally agree with the way Qian Zhongshu put. Too few people will gainsay that there are some common things shared by Western literary theory and Chinese ancient literary theory. We can take *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, an important ancient Chinese literary treatise, as the basis, and combine the western theories to establish a system of contemporary literary theory. And then we can rely on this system to carry out some concrete analysis and evaluation. Based on this concept, I have published a series of articles in relation to it in recent years. In late June of this year, I delivered a lecture on *The source of Eastern literature theory: The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons and literature study* in Research Centre of Eastern Literature, Peking University. When I was a college student, I have realized the distinguishing characteristic of *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, and often quoted its standpoints in my writing. Even in my later academic paper, I from time to time cited the viewpoints of it, combining with western theory, to support my idea. Therefore, when in 1977 I asked Mr. Xia Zhiqing to write a preface for my book *Approach to Chinese Poetics*, he wrote a sentence: "Weiliang praises *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* so highly, and I really hope he can write a treatise on it." Maybe at the bottom of my heart, I have long thought

myself as a member of Chinese School of Comparative Literature.

Since he retired from Chinese University of Hong Kong and back to the United States, and later taught at Soochow University in Taiwan, I have not contacted with John J. Deeney for years. When we both worked in Chinese University of Hong Kong, we had some cooperation in academic research, but we were not intimate friends. He probably knew Comparative Literature was not my keen interest, so he always regarded me as the “marginal man” of Comparative Literature. When I read the book *1979-2009*, I learned that he led a leisure life in U.S.A. after his retirement and every Christmas he would greet Liu Jiemin and other friends by letters. According to the book, I also know that he and his wife have spent much happy hours in Pittsburgh, walking on the falling leave, reading the eternal lines of English poets; he missed the love his dead mother hold to him; he listened to eastern and western music; he went around all libraries of the city; he occasionally made some public speeches; he wrote some lovely essays and then mailed to his friends and relatives in Christmas days. The follow is a short poet he ever quoted in his letter:

Yesterday is history.
Tomorrow is mystery.
Today is a gift.
That's why it is called the “Present”.

I think this poem is good and deserves recommendation to readers. And I have tried my best to translate it. The following is my Chinese version:

昨天已成老皇历，
明天的事很神秘，
上苍赐我的大礼，
今天要珍惜。

Some rules of thumb become outstandingly unique because of their witted rhetoric, which reminds us to cherish “today” and friendship.

Early in 1997, Liu Jiemin told John J. Deeney in one of his letters that he would compile all the correspondence of them into a book. But Dr. Li showed his lack of confidence in marked contrast to the enthusiasm of Liu Jiemin. By 2008, Liu Jiemin has translated all the letters into Chinese and completed the edition of them and now is seeking a publishing house. The book *1979-2009* detailed the hardship of

publishing the five volumes of the book *Chinese and Western Comparative Literature Studies*. I hope the publication of 1979-2009 will be smoothly. Liu Jiemin has been an expert of Comparative Literature studies in Mainland for a long time. He ever wrote to John J. Deeney in his letter dated on 10 Feb. 1990, "I will always be your follower." And John J. Deeney told Liu Jiemin in his letter on 24 Sept. 1998 that he missed him and has met him in dream. From these letters, we see their valuable friendship. I have not seen John J. Deeney more than ten years, and left Chinese University of Hong Kong almost nine years. It is said that Comparative Literature studies at the University has been ignored. Reading the book 1979-2009, we know about the development of Comparative Literature in Mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong, including exchanges among scholars, research situation, related curriculum design of University, and the changes in the international seminars on the topic and so on. Now it seems that I see both John J. Deeney and Liu Jiemin; they are walking under the shadow of "Path of Comparative Literature" tree, talking about American School and Chinese School. The book 1979-2009 is not only the demonstration of the development of Comparative Literature of China in the past three decades, but also the record of both scholars' friendship.