



Comparative Literature: East & West

Series 1

ISSN: (Print) 2572-3618 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcle19>

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To cite this article: Shunqing CAO & Ying LIU (Translator) (2012) The Legitimacy of Comparative Literature and the Variation Studies of Comparative Literature, *Comparative Literature: East & West*, 16:1, 1-8, DOI: [10.1080/25723618.2012.12015545](https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2012.12015545)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2012.12015545>



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Published online: 09 Aug 2018.



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The Legitimacy of Comparative Literature and the Variation Studies of Comparative Literature

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中文摘要：在西方原有的比较文学学科理论框架中，东西方不同文明之间文学比较的合法性是受到怀疑的。例如，美国著名比较文学学者韦斯坦因就认为不同文明之间的文学比较是不可行的，因为东西方不同文明之间的文学没有相同性。事实上，在西方原有的比较文学学科理论中，东西方不同文明之间的文学是没有可比性的；东西方文学的比较失去了合法性。这种不正常现状显然应当改变。西方比较文学学科理论的这个重大缺憾，现在需要弥补。中国比较文学学者提出的变异学理论，成为比较文学学科理论的重要突破。变异学重新为东西方文学奠定其合法性，这个合法性就是异质性和变异性，变异学肯定了差异的可比性的，从正面回答了韦斯坦因的困惑，奠定了东西方不同文明文学比较的合法性。变异学理论，必将开创比较文学学科理论的新阶段，推动全世界比较文学研究的发展。

In the framework of the comparative literature theories in the West, the legitimacy of literary comparison between Eastern and Western civilizations has always been questioned. For example, Ulrich Weisstein, the famous American scholar, believes that literary comparison between different civilizations is infeasible since no comparability exists between Western literature and Eastern literature. In his *Comparative Literature and Literary Theory: Survey and Introduction*, he shows his hesitation in the expansion of parallel studies between

literary phenomena to that between different civilizations, although he does believe some cases are feasible. For him, only in the context of a single civilization, can be found in thoughts, feelings, or imagination some common factors that help to maintain tradition either consciously or unconsciously, so it is hard to say that some similar models can be found between the Western poetry and that of the Middle East or far East.^[1] The reason of Ulrich Weisstein's doubt lies in the opinion that no similarity exists between literatures of different civilizations. For a long time, many scholars in the West hold that the comparability of Comparative Literature is to seek similarity, i.e., the similarity between literatures of different countries. For example, in the studies of influences the same origin is what can be compared, while in the parallel studies, the homogeneity between different literatures is what can be compared, so obviously there is nothing that can be compared without the "origin" or "homogeneity". In the traditional disciplinary framework in the West, comparison between the Eastern literature and Western literature is hard to begin. As Weisstein mentioned, the attempt to seek for similar patterns between the Western poetry and mid-Eastern or far-Eastern poetry is difficult. Therefore, it seems that no legitimacy exists in the comparison between Western literature and Eastern literature according to the traditional disciplinary theory.

In fact, in the context of globalization, scholars all over the world have to face many exchanges, collisions, comparisons between different civilizations. Presently, endeavors have been made in the comparison between the Western literatures and Eastern literatures. At the same time, Chinese comparatists focused mainly on the literary comparison in different civilizations. For all these years, we have already made some achievements in the comparison between Chinese literature and literatures from other nations, but the studies have not even got any legitimacy in the field of Comparative Literature. This is not only surprising, but also abnormal and unreasonable. Thus, this situation needs to be changed and this is the moment of changes now. Certainly, comparatists have responsibility to clarify the theoretical legitimacy of comparison between the Western literature and Eastern literatures theoretically.

So, is it possible to compare Western literature and Eastern literature? Is the comparison legitimate? Some scholars do believe in the comparability, though mainly similarity. In the name list we can firstly find Rene Wellek, who maintains that the legitimacy of Western and Eastern comparative literatures lies in their similarity. For him, literatures of different civilizations can be compared because of

their common features. He advocates that we should regard the world literatures as an integrity and seek for the emergence and development of literature in spite of the distinction of languages. At the same time, he also suppose that one day the study of the common tendency of different literatures, the study of Western literary tradition (including Slavic tradition) and the comparative study of any literature including far-Eastern literature will influence each other.^[2] One of Wellek's key points is to call for efforts in seeking for the common secrets and rules of literature through comparative studies on world literature. As long as we make efforts in this way, we can grasp the nature of arts and poetry that beyond life and destiny shapes a new world of imagination, then our extreme national pride will disappear and various individual human beings will appear anywhere and anytime.^[3] Another name that should not be skipped is Qian Zhongshu, a Chinese comparatist who was learned in both Chinese and Western literature and is regarded a milestone in the development of Comparative Literature and Comparative Poetics in China. His works *Guan Zhui Bian* (*Limited View*) and *Tan Yi Lu* (*On Arts*) are worldly acknowledged. Qian held the same opinion that the Western literature and Eastern literature have something in common that is comparable. He tried to find the common *Wenxin* ("literary mind"), common rules in arts and humanity by comparison. He was confident in communication of humanity, emotion, affection in different cultural contexts. He frequently mentioned that. In the preface of *Tan Yi Lu*, he clearly said: "Minds cross the oceans can be communicated; studies beyond fields are integrated."^[4] For Qian, since humanity and human affections have much in common, so literary minds can communicated with each other, no matter how space and time changes. He himself made his academic research for the purpose of building a bridge between different cultures.

Apparently, either Wellek or Qian thinks the similarity between different civilizations and literatures as the basis of comparability. Their opinions really encourage those who don't quite agree with Ulrich Weisstein. The fact that they held similar idea is an evidence to show that the Western literature and Eastern literature, or the Western civilizations and Eastern civilizations can be compared.

However, stressing on similarity is far from enough. Explanation on comparability between different literatures in the perspective of similarity is insufficient. Actually, Weisstein's question on looking for similar patterns of Western poetry and Eastern poetry is worth noticing. Neither Wellek nor Qian Zhongshu has really given a real answer. Seeking for similarity doesn't give legitimacy to the comparison between Western and Eastern literatures. Great

diversities do exist in different cultures. Therefore, cross-civilization study of comparative literature is not the simple equivalence of looking for similarity. Instead, it is an equal dialogue on the premise of mutual respecting and cultural individuality and idiosyncrasy maintaining. During cross-civilization comparative studies, people are inclined to ignore the peculiarity of an individual culture as if similarity is the only aim while difference is not analyzed. This will further lead to the ignorance of the complexity and diversity of cultures, which may result in superficiality in research.

Realizing this problem, French scholar François Julien criticized that Qian Zhongshu neglected difference when looking for similarity. While much admiration is paid to Qian and little criticism has been made to him at home, a scholar from other country gave insightful comments on him. Julien, in an interview in 1996, pointed out the Achilles' heel of Qian's comparative study. i.e., he confused comparison with analogy. Julien said that he respected Qian very much for his erudition, knowledge in Chinese tradition and noble personality but disagree on his analogous study. Julien found that Qian's research finally led to the analogy between different quotations and was not very effective.^[5] Julien also discussed with James J. Y. Liu on the issue and believed that Liu was wrong from the starting point by analyzing Chinese poetics with typical Western theoretical model.

Julien's remarks on Qian Zhongshu make us think: what kind of comparison is really valuable? How can "comparison" hold its position in the present context when Comparative Literature continues to burgeon? What is the basis on which Julien made such comments on Qian Zhongshu? Is the basis reliable? Therefore, we realize that what Julien's comments lead to is not only of sinology, but also, or even more crucial to the development of Comparative Literature in China and all over the world. The vital question is comparability and legitimacy between Eastern civilization and Western civilization. Only after seeking for the answer to this question could the world Comparative Literature shake off the fetters of "crisis" and "death" and get rebirth.

From Chinese practice in the field of Comparative Literature, the disciplinary theory based on analogy bothers us a lot. For a very long time, Chinese scholars have failed to recognize the heterogeneity between the Western and Eastern civilizations. Most research were bond to the original disciplinary theories, emphasizing much on the homologous and parallel studies. Whenever a study is made, the saying "Minds cross the oceans can be communicated" remains to be a

maxim. Thereafter, papers on so-called comparison between X and Y have been published. Some meaningless comparison between totally irrelevant objects appear everywhere. The main reason lies in the lack of proper theories in the discipline. The existence of such superficial studies proves the lack of the study of variation.

This era is asking for new ideas in the discipline of Comparative Literature, and the theories on the study of *variation* may be the key to solving the problems. Study of Variation gives new foundation to the legitimacy for the comparison between the Eastern and Western literature. This legitimacy lies on heterogeneity and variability, which answers the question of Weisttein and makes the comparison between the East and West possible.

How can heterogeneity become the basis for comparability? In the past years, comparative studies focused much on analogy. Can we begin to compare “variation”? Today, literatures in various civilizations are included in the perspectives of comparative literature. The idea of sticking to parallel studies can only be put in the same cultural circle, even refusing to seeking for the difference of various civilizations, held by many Western scholars including Weisstein, is really out of date. In their opinion, great difference between different civilizations makes comparison impossible. However, in practice, this kind of comparison has always been in existence. The pity is that our discipline of Comparative Literature hasn’t presented clearly the comparability of heterogeneous literatures in the theoretical system. Therefore, no sufficient consideration is made on this question.

It has been a long time that scholars in the field of Comparative Literature believe the theoretical edifice of Comparative Literature is perfectly built on the basis of influence studies and parallel studies. With the respect to the Western theories of Comparative Literature (mainly the theories of French School and American School), we cannot deny the fact that Variation Studies is one actual part of Comparative Literature and the related theories an essential part. Variation is not only an important concept in cultural and literary communication, but a most valuable part of Comparative Literature and an essential approach to cultural innovation as well. It shows that the study of Comparative Literature turn to heterogeneity and variation from analogy and homology. Both the former and the latter are brought into Comparative Literature. Only the integration of the four characteristics can we complete the edifice of Comparative Literature.

The first layer of heterogeneity lies in the variation of communication and influence between literatures. The past influence studies were based on “analogous”

comparability which was originated from the French School. As they believe, the international relationship and mutual influences among literatures are certain empirical relations, causal relations and homologous relations; while collecting materials, classifying and clarifying, seeking for facts, looking for cause and effect, and tracing the roots are the main approaches used. There are three important parts in influence studies: Doxology, from the sender, via the transmitter, to the receiver; Crenology, from the destination back to the starting point; Mesology, on the process of circulation. In all the three approaches remains a consistency, which is the homology in the communication and influences of international literatures. The actual complicated variation has been neglected.

In fact, during the process of inter-national, inter-lingual, inter-disciplinary and inter-cultural/civilizational relations of different literatures, variation is indispensable. The influence relations of literatures should be explicated in both tracing the origin and seeking for variation. The variability in the studies of international literatures or influence studies refers to the variation in languages, images, themes and other elements during translation, circulation and reception, caused by factors such as various cultural, psychological, ideological and historical reasons. When literature and culture is transmitted from one country to another, it is very possible to encounter variation of translation, reception, etc. then cultural filtering, misreading, creative betrayal of translation and even certain “domestic appropriation”(such as the domestication of Buddhism in China) may happen. All these are unavoidable phenomena of variation of the circulation, influence and reception of literature. The consistency and variation in literary relations are two sides of a coin. Neither side can be neglected. The past research put too much emphasis on the consistency while ignored the variation, which made a discount to the Western theories of Comparative Literature.

On the other hand, in parallel studies, Julien’s questioning on Chinese saying of “East or West, both lead to the same direction” is a real challenge. In his questioning, the second layer of heterogeneity is presented: the commensurability and incommensurability between the Eastern literature and Western literature. From the perspective of the former, the minds cross the ocean, East and West really can be communicated. From the latter, difference can exist in harmony, without being confused to each other.

Chinese Scholar Yu Hong’s work, *Chinese Literary Theories and Western Poetics*, is valuable, because it takes a clear attitude to the incommensurability between the

Eastern and Western literatures. However, too much emphasis on the incommensurability is another kind of mistake. An opposite instance is *Chinese Theories of Literature* by James. J.Y. Liu. This is a work that tries to introduce Chinese literary theory in the pattern of Western literary theory. This work makes an analogy of Chinese and Western literary theories in a compact way, relating to a wide range which is rather influential. However, paying too much attention to similarity is its defect. For example, he tries to explain Chinese literary theory by rearranging the Abrams' four elements into a two-way cycle, breaking the integrated system of Chinese literary theories. As criticized by Francois Julien, Liu's adaptation of Abrams' frame of four literary elements is not suitable for Chinese context.^[6] The research based on homologous approach will result in "the lost of heterogeneity", which will finally influence the academic significance of parallel studies. Julien says: "this is a key point that we are now in an era when everything is standardized in Western patterns. The result is that Chinese people cannot read Chinese culture and Japanese people cannot read Japanese culture because everything is reconstructed. Ancient Chinese thoughts are gradually changing into all kinds of Western notions. Actually, Chinese thoughts have their own logic. In classical Chinese texts, what lead to consideration are the dependency, symmetry and networking between words, which are the ways of their mutual reaction. Without taking these into consideration, the essence of Chinese thoughts will be lost."^[7] It is on the foundation of knowing the heterogeneity between different civilizations that parallel studies can be developed in the perspective of "dialogue", so as to realize the mutual reflection, interpretation and complementation, which is advantageous to the mergence and communication of different cultures. Analogous approach is really practical in the parallel studies of literatures in similar civilization, however in comparison between heterogeneous civilizations, the characteristics of heterogeneity is even more important and crucial. "Without seeking for the origin of different civilizations and noticing the different academic rules and discourse in different civilizations, the Comparative Literature is inclined to become superficial 'analogous' literature." It is heterogeneity that decides the value and significance of parallel studies.

Some Chinese scholars are accustomed to adapting Western theories as universal maxim. They don't understand that it is quite problematic if we apply those theories blindly without connecting them with the Chinese local soil. When we import Western theories, we should notice their heterogeneity, instead of regarding them as

absolute truth. Crossing the heterogeneous civilization is beneficial to the complementation and reference of different civilizations. The emphasis on heterogeneity is advantageous to the communication and integration of different civilizations. It is also favorable to the construction of a harmonious world with difference in coexistence. That is the final aim of the variation studies of Comparative Literature.

Chinese scholars have proposed the theory of variation studies, which not only answers the puzzle of Weisstein, but also lays a foundation for the comparability and legitimacy of comparison between different civilizations and cultures. It is possible for us to create a new stage in the development of disciplinary theories of Comparative Literature and promote the development of the World Comparative Literature.

Notes:

[1] Ulrich Weisstein. *Comparative Literature and Literary Theory: Survey and Introduction*. Indiana University Press, 1973. Liu Xiangyu, trans. Liaoning People's Publishing House, 1987. pp. 5-6.

[2] Rene Wellek "Comparative Literature Today", Huan Yuanshen, trans. in Yu Yongchang et al, eds. *Study of Comparative Literature: A Collection of Translation*. Shanghai:Shanghai Translation Publishing House 1985. p.165.

[3] Rene Wellek "The Crisis of Comparative Literature", *ibid.* p. 134.

[4] Qian Zhongshu. *The Tube and Awl Chapters*. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 1984. p.1.

[5] Qin Haiying, "On the Dialogue Between Chinese and Western Poetics—Interview with Julien", in *Chinese comparative literature* 1996(2).

[6] Qin Haiying, "On the Dialogue Between Chinese and Western Poetics—Interview with Julien", *ibid.*

[7] Qin Haiying, "On the Dialogue Between Chinese and Western Poetics—interview with Julien", *ibid.*

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