



# Comparative Literature: East & West

## Series 1

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

## The Development of Plural Cultures and the Future of Comparative Literature

Daiyun Yue

**To cite this article:** Daiyun Yue (2000) The Development of Plural Cultures and the Future of Comparative Literature, *Comparative Literature: East & West*, 2:1, 136-141, DOI: [10.1080/25723618.2000.12015278](https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2000.12015278)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2000.12015278>



© 2000 Sichuan University. Published by China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House.



Published online: 06 Aug 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 43



View related articles [↗](#)

## **The Development of Plural Cultures and the Future of Comparative Literature**

**Peking Univ.    Yue Daiyun**

In today's world where national economies are becoming more and more integrated into a larger whole, we are faced with the question of what is going to happen to the cultural aspects of our life such as philosophy, religion, ethics, literature and art. Are they also going to be gradually homogenized in an age of globalization, or is there a need and possibility to maintain the plurality of these cultural forms? This is what the present essay will deal with.

It is quite obvious that differences among cultures have played a great role in the development of human life. Different cultures in the world provide a cultural repertoire from which people draw inspirations to enrich their own national cultures. If we did not have different cultures in various forms, human civilization would not be so colorful. In this sense, the historical significance of cultural plurality will manifest itself more and more clearly, especially in today's context of globalization in which various national cultures are confronted with severe challenges.

Economic globalization, however, has not necessarily made cultures homogenized, but on the contrary, it has pointed to the need of cultural plurality. Firstly, globalization hastened the disintegration of Eurocentrism and the old system of colonialism and brought in a global postcolonial era. When the old colonies gained their political indepen-

dence, the immediate task they face is to locate their national identities, hence the importance of adhering to their unique cultures.

Secondly, globalization and postcolonialism have actually brought Western society into a new phase of development, that of post-industrialism culturally manifested as postmodernism. Postmodernism has brought about the deconstruction of various "centers". Being one part of a larger whole, every corner of the world legitimizes its existence in its own way. The all-binding "universal laws", the so called "grand narratives" are being challenged, and people are no longer interested in intangible, timeless "pure" and "ideal" forms, but are concerned about the tangible "body" which breathes, acts, and experiences pain and pleasure. The world around "the body" has lost its certainty and changes with the different moods and positions of the body. This constitutes a great liberating force for the pluralization of cultures. With this profound change in epistemology, such issues as the search for "the other" have been brought up. Many people have come to realize that we not only should learn from other cultures in order to develop our own, but also need to study other cultures so that we could know ourselves better from another point of view of. In order to achieve this, we should broaden our horizon and become familiar and tolerant with other ways of thinking and behavioral patterns.

However, there are still two dangers in the development of multi-cultures. One is cultural tribalism or cultural isolationism. Having being suppressed for quite a long time, some nations desperately strive to defend themselves by over-emphasizing the importance of preserving their national cultures. They only stress the "purity" of their own culture and are opposed to communicate with other cultures, so they adopt a policy of cultural segregation or isolation. By emphasizing the "unity" or —homogeneity—of their own culture and resisting any form of new development, they may try to silence the voices for

positive changes and innovations from within. If we suppress differences to seek superficial uniformity, we could only bring our cultures to self – suffocation and death. The other danger is the so – called cultural hegemony, by means of which one nation's ideology is imposed upon another by dint of greater economic and political power. Cultural hegemony not only exists in the West but also in the East, where the old Japanese dream of “the East Asian Belt of Common Prosperity” is still alive. Even the old notion of “China – centrism” also occasionally plays to the foreground these days. An undeniable fact is that the conception and practice of cultural hegemony once brought about terrible catastrophes to mankind.

In today's world, the repeated regional wars seem to be telling us that cultural conflict (that of races, religions and powers) has turned to be the primary element triggering off wars (there are quite a number of such cases in East Asia, Africa, Central Europe, Russia and the Indian Peninsula). History tells us that any attempt aiming at “cultural annexation”, any forced “cultural homogenization” or “cultural integration” will certainly bring about catastrophic tragedies. This will lead to a great crisis challenging all human races in the 21st century.

Threatened by the two dangers mentioned above, the future of the development of multiculturalism is by no means promising. Nevertheless, as scholars of the humanities, we cannot help feeling that we are committed to contribute our bit to the promise of a better world. According to the above analyses we can naturally draw a conclusion that, tolerance, communication and understanding between ordinary people might be the most essential things to reduce and finally do away with cultural isolationism and cultural hegemony.

It is right here that literature can play a special role. Literature touches the chord of human feelings and emotions and is therefore less utilitarian. Despite so many racial differences, different cultures share

quite a number of literary themes more or less related to the common concern with the concept of "man". Human beings have roughly the same life forms: male and female, the old and the young, man and nature, man and fate, etc., thus they likewise have the same forms of experiencing: joy and sadness, happiness and sorrow, departure and reunion, expectation and desperation, love and hatred, life and death, etc. Literature that aims at probing into the mystery of human life and experience may share a lot of common aspects, such as the "concern of death", "ecological environment", "the final judgement day", "utopian phenomenon", "escapism", etc. To those questions, people from different cultures may make different responses conditioned by their respective modes of living and thinking. Those responses on the one hand are echoes of historical tradition, and on the other hand, are also being selected and re - interpreted by contemporary people in the contemporary context. More satisfactory answers are evoked in the course of repeated dialogues across different cultures. And in the mean time, those questions are brought into broader horizons and prospects. In such a process, people can thus gain communication and understanding of their thoughts and feelings. The purpose of literary theory is to construct new theories in this process in order to summarize profound experiences of literary writings in different cultures. To answer questions concerning literature, literary theory should not confine itself to a single culture but to do it in a cross - cultural way; in such cross - cultural activities of literary interpretation, every culture will make its particular contributions. That is the future of comparative literature. The following are several examples to illustrate how comparative literature can be developed in a cross - cultural context.

1. From time to time, mankind has been dreaming of going out of the small areas in which he is confined: a Greek hero travels far away to alien lands looking for Golden Fleece; likewise, a legendary monkey

in a mythical Chinese romance is not satisfied being a monkey – king on his paradise – like mountain either. Such impulses as to explore newer lands and to gain more knowledge about others are perhaps motivated by human instincts. Earl Miner points out that, the need for understanding is the mother of comparative poetics. The birth of comparative literature is exactly initiated by a longing for knowing other literatures. Such a longing has to a great extent broadened our horizon and brought to us more aesthetic pleasures.

2. The encounter of two literatures also include re – interpretations of each other from new perspectives, i. e. , to interpret (or mis-read) the texts in one culture with the hermeneutic paradigm born in the other culture, thus resulting into the discovery of totally new significance. Like the grafting of plants, which yields neither of the parental two but a quite different new species, literary encounter, too, will lead to the birth of new cultural variety.

3. The contact between two literatures is not only a process of conversion, but in essence a process of interaction in which two parties involved may make up each other's deficiencies and achieve new development. Such a development is two – faceted. On the one hand, it injects new blood into the other culture. For instance, Walt Whitman' influenced the Romantic poetic movement in modern Chinese literature in the 30s and Ezra Pound's misreading of Li Bai inspired him to create his imaginary poems on the other hand. When a literary text of one culture enters into another culture, it may undergo new expansions and developments. Literary trends like Romanticism, Realism and Naturalism all have their respective development in India, China and Japan, If there is no research about these new developments, the description and understanding of these literary trends will not really be completed. Clearly, comparative literature in the future will make unprecedented contributions on issues discussed above in a cross – cultural perspective.

To sum up, with the advent of a new century, comparative literature will be most probably constructed in the process of mutual recognizing, confirming and supplementing which occur among literatures from various cultural traditions. Such a comparative study of literature will undoubtedly play an important role in the communication of different human cultures.

There is no doubt that we are entering an unprecedented new era, the prospect of which is hardly predictable. In this era, like all the other disciplines of human science, comparative literature will surely undergo unimaginable subversion and reconstruction. Nowadays, quite a number of young scholars are suggesting that comparative literature will become more and more useless and oblivious, and Chinese – Western comparative literature studies are even less worth mentioning. However, I am by no means that pessimistic because in my view, comparative literature will still be based upon a totally new cross – cultural and interdisciplinary foundation, and comparative literature will definitely play a vital role. It will expand people's communication and understanding, and in the clamor of cultural isolationism and cultural hegemony, promote the development of various cultures in a pluralistic way, which may well be the only way of saving human civilization.

#### **About the Author:**

**Yue Daiyun:** professor of Peking Univ. President of China Comparative Literature Association and vice – president of International Comparative Literature Association. Recent publications include *Comparative Literature: A New Course*.