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Goethe and Comparative Literature

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Since its first appearance as a discipline, comparative literature has ever been closely linked with the name of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749—1832), the great German writer and thinker. A comparatively systematic and deep-going research titled “Goethe and Comparative Literature” may well be a lengthy Ph. D. dissertation. However, this author intends to provide an outlined introduction to this subject.

1. Goethe as a Subject and a “Paradigm” for Comparative Literature

In his *Comparative Literature*, M. F. Guyard, the renowned French literary theorist, used a quotation “All literatures should often learn from foreign countries” from Goethe to initiate the whole work and explained the “origin and history” of comparative literature with this quotation. In addition, Guyard equaled Goethe with Shakespeare as a twin “paradigms” for comparative literature studies in general, and its influence studies in particular. With a detailed description of the related studies and achievements, the author summed up the tremendous significance:

The twin paradigms of Goethe and Shakespeare have miraculously demonstrated the function and importance of comparative literature at the decisive stage for national ideology and literary history. The studies on the destiny of Goethe and Shakespeare could promote us to better understand our own literature, enabled us to better figure out own literary characteristics and have a clear distinction on the significance and development of these two unprecedented great literary works in Europe. (1.

M. F. Guyard, *Comparative Literature*, Chinese version, tr. Yan Bao, Peking University Press, 1993, p. 71)

Guyard went to say: "As L. Cazamian called for our note, a study on Goethe in Britain" is well equivalent to "a chapter of British literature". (2. *ibid.*, p. 74)

Because of its great significance, it has become a permanent and productive theme in the world's comparative literature to study Goethe and his relation with foreign literatures, the spreading and reception of Goethe's works and thought beyond Germany, his ideal of "world literature", and to comparatively study Goethe's works and other writers' works, etc. .

The comprehensive and systematic works on how Goethe's works were spread and received in a particular country or region, i. e. *Goethe in France* (1904) by F. Baldensperger and *Goethe in Britain* (1920) by J. - M. Carre', etc. , have already become classics in this field. Since then, some similar works like *Goethe in this or other country / region* have appeared in world's main countries and regions. (3. Yang Wuneng, *Goethe and China*, Beijing, Union Press, 1991, Its German version would be published by Peter Lang Verlag, Germany) Under this general theme, some subordinate works of the reception of Goethe's representative works in various countries and regions have also appeared, i. e. *Werther in China and Faust in East Asia*, etc. . (4 After the International Symposium on "Goethe and China "(1982), Prof. G. Debon, renowned sinologist of Heidelberg University, Germany initiated and presided over another international symposium on "Faust in East Asia")

There are also fruitful records in the field of Goethe's relation with the literature of a particular country or region. As an outstanding example, *Goethe and the Arabian Night* by a noted contemporary American scholar K. Mommsen, focuses on how Goethe was influenced by Arabian literature. Similar achievements were made in China, i. e. some essays like Fan Cunzhong's "Goethe and British Literature" and Xu Zhongnian's "Goethe and French Literature", etc. . Chen Quan's "Studies on Chinese

and German Culture”, exploring how Goethe was influenced by Chinese culture in general and by Chinese fiction of Ming Dynasty in particular, has been regarded as an important achievement in this field. (5 Chen Quan, *Studies on Chinese and German Culture*, Chinese edition, Commercial Press, 1936, originally the author's Ph.D. dissertation, Kiel University, Germany)

Similarly, there are also achievements of Goethe's relation with a certain writer or a group of writers in other countries. Take China as the example. We have produced many works and essays like *Dante and Goethe* by Hu Yuzhi, (6 Hu Yuzhi, *Dante and Goethe*, Shanghai, Commercial Press, 1925, this is the first academic work of comparative studies on Goethe, produced in China) *Confucius and Goethe* by Tang Junyi, *Li Bai and Goethe* by Liang Zongdai, *Du Fu and Goethe* by Feng Zhi and *Go Moro and Goethe* by Yang Wuneng, etc. .

Apart from these, there are comparative studies on Goethe's works and the literary works from other countries. In his well-known *Comments on Dream in Red Mansions* (1904), Wang Guowei compared Goethe's Faust with this classical Chinese fiction. In *Three Leaves* (1920), Go Moro, Tian Han and Zong Baihua explored Goethe's poems and classified them as “powerful and free”, similar to those poems by Qu Yuan, Li Bai and Du Fu. In addition, there are comparative studies on the characters in Goethe's works with the literary archetypes from other countries, etc. .

In summary, for the discipline of comparative literature, the concept of “world literature” initiated by Goethe is included in the sphere of general literature. (7 Francois Jost, Chapter 2, “Significance of World Literature”, *An Introduction to Comparative Literature*, Chinese edition, tr. Liao Hongjun, Hunan Literature & Art Publishing House, 1988, Ulrich Weisstein, *Comparative Literature and Literary Theories*, Chinese edition, tr. Liu Xiangyu, Liaoning People's Publishing House, 1987, pp.15 – 17) For instance, his dramatic poem Faust is in the sphere of thematics, his educational fiction *The Apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meis-*

ter in that of typology(8 Chen Dun & Liu Xiangyu, An Introcuotion to Comparative literature, Beijing Normal University Press, 1988, pp.129 - 138), while his *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Elective Affinities*, *West - Eastern Divan* and *Chinesisch - Deutsche Jahres - und Tageszeiten*, etc., could be included into the sphere of influence and reception study. Undoubtedly, these subjects have long been much concerned by scholars of successive generations. In short, Goethe's studies on comparative literature could safely be regarded as comprehensive and applicable in many fields, i. e. in influence study and parallel study, in general literature and particular regional literature, in literary history and literary theories and approaches, etc., His assumption of "world literature" has particularly been emphasized ever since.

2. As a Predecessor of Comparative Literature, Goethe First Employed Comparative Approaches to Explore Literature in World's Literary History

Goethe has never written a comprehensive and systematic work on literary theories. However, his original and profound thought on literature and art could be seen from his correspondence, talks, poetry and fiction, etc.. For instance, in his *Gesprache mit Goethe* compiled by Eckermann, there are many extraordinary passages of much significance for establishing a discipline of comparative literature.

On April, 14, 1824, Goethe made a general comparison between the literary styles of Germany, Britain and France:

Generally speaking, philosophical thinking is harmful to German people, for it makes their style obscure and difficult to understand, so as to arouse weariness...English people have been able to write quite well. They are born orators and practitioners, focusing reality. French style has demonstrated the general personalities of French people. As they like social communications, they have always keep audience in their mind. They have endeavored to be clear and understandable, in order to persuade readers, and to be interesting in order to please readers.

What's more important is that Goethe had drawn a convincing conclusion of general significance after this concise comparison of styles: "A writer's style is an accurate demonstration of his life in his inner mind." (9, Eckermann: *Gesprache mit Goethe*, Chinese edition, tr. Zhu Guangqian, Beijing, People's Literature Press, 1978, p. 39) It has proved that Goethe's thought is not a phenomenon juxtaposition, nor a comparison for comparison's sake, it has set up a model of parallel study for the scholars of later generations.

On May 12, 1825, Goethe explored the mutual relation between writers through comparison between his contemporary German writer and himself. He made a modest self-examination: "If I could figure out how much I should be indebted to my great predecessors as well as my great contemporaries, what is left is but almost nothing."

Then he went on to mention the writers like Moliere whom he frequently reconsidered and draw influence from, and thus summed up a guiding principle for our influence study: "We learn generally from those we like" (10 *ibid.* P. 89) It shows that a same aesthetic preference is the prerequisite for influence production and reception.

Goethe liked particularly to make parallel comparison with an immensely broad perspective and a variety of flexible approaches. His views in this field, nothing pedantic, are of real knowledge and deep insight. For instance, when talking about Moliere, he pointed out the difference between and other playwrights: "His (Mopliere's) comedy seems to cross the border with tragedy." (May 12, 1825) Goethe used a vivid metaphor to compare Shakespeare with his imitators in Germany: "What Shakespeare gave us is a gold orange in a silver plate. We have taken over the silver plate through learning. However, what we could provide it is but a potato." (December 25, 1825) When comparing the dramatic works by Schiller, Lessing, Shakespeare, Moliere, Calderon and himself, Goethe made a clear differentiation between "for performance" and "for reading", and classified his own plays *Goetz von Berlichingen mit eiserner Hand* and *Faust* into the latter. All these remarks are very

concise and thought – provoking.

In *Gesprache mit Goethe* there are many passages concerned with comparative literature. The best – known among them is his conception of “An era of world literature is approaching” (January 31, 1827). Along with his concept of “world literature”, Goethe pointed out, with a Chinese fiction of Ming Dynasty *Hou Kiou Chooan* as an example, that Chinese people are almost the same of us in their ideology, behavior and emotion, etc. . We could easily identify them as our kinsmen. Goethe also showed affinities between this Chinese legend with his *Hermann and Dorothea* and with English fiction by S. Richardson. Goethe expressed his confidence in this talk that “Poetry is a common treasure for mankind”. (11 *ibid.* p.112)

As for the birth of comparative literature as a discipline, Goethe's talk is of epoch – making significance. His conception of “world literature” and his assumption of “poetry is a common treasure for mankind” might be far beyond “a rudimentary form of comparative literature” (12 Heh – hsiang Yuan, *Definitions of East – west Comparative Literature*, Ying – hsiung Chou, William Tay & Heh – hsiang Yuan , ed. *Selected Essays on East – west Comparative Literature*, Taipei, Shibao & Culure Publishing Co, . Ltd. 1980, p.7). Goethe's thought has actually revealed social and philosophical bases for the birth of comparative literature. “It is by no means a coincidence in time that A. F. Villmain, father of French comparative literature, first used the term ‘comparative literature’ in the same year, in his lectures in Sorbonne.” (13 see 8, p.3)

Apart from *Gesprache mit Goethe*, Goethe also used comparative approaches in his literary essays. For instance, the second part of his well – known essay on Shakespeare *Shakespeare und kein Ende* is titled “Comparison between Shakespeare and the Ancient – Present Writers”. In this part, Goethe compared and analyzed the differences in dramatic contradictions between classical and modern tragedy in Europe, and pointed out that Shakespeare had well combined the two in his drama. In his short

essay "Indian Literature and Chinese Literature", Goethe showed why the ancient Chinese people felt so grieved since they had no male offspring, through a comparison between a Chinese play *Lao sheng er* of Yuan Dynasty and a German play *The Old Widower* by Iffland, his contemporary playwright.

In addition, Goethe paid a special attention to mediology, i. e. studies on literary translation. He explored extensively the functions, approaches, criteria, extent and translatability of literary translation in his essays, letters and talks. Many of his viewpoints could still provide us with inspiration nowadays. (14 Yang Wuneng: Goethe and Literary Translation, Chinese Translators' Journal, 1999, No.5)

3. As His Conception of "World Literature" is Highly Original and Profound, Goethe Has Naturally Been Recorded in the History of Comparative Literature.

In *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels pointed out, that "the bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country... In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world-literature." (15 *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Foreign languages press, Peking 1965, pp.35-36)

As early as 20 years prior to the publication of *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, a German compound word "Weltliteratur" (world literature) was initiated by Goethe in his writings and talks. We have been quite familiar with the above much-praised quote from Eckermann's

Gesprache mit Goethe, which has demonstrated Goethe's incompatible foresight and insight.

However, this is not the only time, nor the first time, for Goethe to talk about "world literature". Before that, Goethe wrote in his journal *Art and Antiquity*, No. 1, Vol. 6:

"I have quoted these reports from some French newspapers and journals, not in order to remind people of myself and my work. I have a superior purpose worth mentioning here. That is, we have been able to learn from any sources about the human development and a brighter future for the world as well as for mankind. It is unnecessary for me to study and expound on its general situation. I intend to call for our friends' awareness. I have been confident that a world literature of general significance is being formed and a glorious position would be reserved for us German people in the future world literature..." (16 from Erich Trunz (hrsg.) *Goethe. Werke*, Hamburger Ausgabe, Bd. 12, S. 362)

Then Goethe wrote in a letter to his friend Streckfuss:

I have been tremendously confident that a world literature is being formed and all the nations are looking forward to it and making their efforts. We German people have been able and obliged to make our greater contributions. We would play an outstanding role in the process of this magnificent convergence. (17 see 3)

For the reference of Goethe's "world literature", these two phrases "general significance" and "magnificent convergence" are particularly worth our attention.

After the well-known talk with Eckermann, Goethe made further explanation on his conception of "world literature".

In his essay "German Fiction" (1927), Goethe wrote: "Let different individuals and nations maintain their own characteristics, and be confident that only the literature belonging to the whole mankind is a literature of real value. Thus a general tolerance could be realized and guaranteed." (18 from Erich Trunz (hrsg.) *Goethe. Werke*, Hamburger Ausgabe, Bd. 12, S. 353)

In the next year, Goethe wrote in *Art and Antiquity*, No. 2, Vol. 6: "While having increasing readership, these journals would most powerfully promote the birth of comparative literature of general significance as we have expected. We should reiterate here that a world literature does not mean being identical of all nations' ideology, it hopes that they would be concerned with one another, and understand one other. They should at least learn how to tolerate, if not love, one other." (19 see 18, S. 362)

Goethe was at his advanced age of 80 in 1830. However, the conception of "world literature" still lingered in his mind. He wrote in the preface to *The Life of Schiller* by Carlyle: "It is quite reasonable that we have been talking about world literature for a long time. After getting shocked during the fearful wars, all the nations have returned to their original isolation and segregation. However, they should realize that they have learned and absorbed something new and unknown before, and realize some spiritual demand they have never known. An feeling of good-neighborliness is thus produced. It has enabled them to break through the isolation and segregation, which is replaced by an emerging spiritual demand, i. e. their wish to be accepted into a free spiritual communication to certain extent." (20 see 18, S. 354)

Goethe's explanation on the conception of "world literature" is far beyond the above-mentioned remarks. Anyhow, we have already seen three aspects of its significance from these remarks.

Firstly, Goethe holds that the basic prerequisite as well as the most important result of the birth of world literature is the realization of a general tolerance of all nations. For this purpose, all the nations should learn, through a spiritual communication including literary exchange, how to understand, be concerned, and respect one other. Goethe's conception of "world literature" based on tolerance is a reflection in literary concepts, of his sincere emotion of loving people and loving peace. It has developed the ideal of Goethe and Schiller that human nature be reformed by aesthetic education, and has broadened the tolerance between different religions and religious schools, advocated by the thinkers in enlighten-

ment period, to a tolerance of all nations. Goethe has experienced many vicissitudes of life in a separated and backward Germany and in warring Europe. With a deeper understanding on world affairs at his advanced age, should Goethe be able to raise such a conception. This conception of his is not, and would never be outdated.

Secondly, Goethe believes that only the literature belonging to the whole mankind is a literature of real value, i. e. literature of real value should serve mankind, and be understood and accepted by mankind. The history of literature has proved it as a truth. Thanks to the divergent contributions made by all nations, his conception of "world literature" has already come true. Owing to his distinctive intention to write for the whole mankind, Goethe has been able to accomplish the monumental work *Faust*, and to become a prominent writer and thinker, generally respected by world's people. Therefore, the conception of "world literature" should also mean that it "embodies a general significance", it should belong to the whole mankind and the whole world, rather than to a particular region or a particular nation. He believed that "Poetry is common treasure of mankind".

However, on the other hand, Goethe has also held that "Let different individuals and nations maintain their own characteristics", world literature "does not mean being identical of all nations' ideology". As a German writer, Goethe has emphasized time and again: "A glorious position would be reserved for us German people in the future world literature..." In the process to form and develop world literature, "German people have been able and obliged to make our greater contributions" and "play an outstanding role". Therefore, Goethe has never abandoned his German tradition, though he has immensely respected the literature of other nations and endeavored to absorb their strong points for his own creation. Take his *West - Eastern Divan and Chinesisch - Deutsche Jahres - und Tageszeiten* for example, the keynote is still western, German and Goethe's personal. His *Faust*, a distinguished representative of mankind, is still a German. Goethe has praised Chinese literature as frankly admit-

ted "Even when our remote ancestors lived in forests", China produced literary works in the real sense. However, he does not advocate the confinement to a certain foreign literature, including Chinese literature, and take it as a model. If there should be a model, it must be "a frequent returning to the ancient Greeks", i. e. returning to his own tradition.

It should be also mentioned that 1827 is the year during which Goethe was most related to Chinese literature, the year he began, and most often, to talk about "world literature". It is an inevitable consequence, rather than a coincidence. Through knowing Chinese literature, though superficially, Goethe had actually accomplished his knowledge of main literatures at that time. Consequently, his reading of Chinese literature like *Hou Kiou Chooan*, provided him with a final inspiration for producing his conception of "world literature". We Chinese people could naturally feel proud of it. However, the assumption of Goethe's extraordinary and exclusive emphasis on Chinese literature is but a misunderstanding. And we Chinese people are liable to have such misunderstanding. It should be stressed that what Goethe emphasized is "a world literature of general significance."

In sum, Goethe's conception and practice of "world literature" intend by no means to deny national characteristics and historical tradition. On the contrary, Goethe has been more concerned about such literatures as Chinese literature, Indian literature and Arabian literature, etc., which has more national characteristics and historical tradition. *Faust* has convinced us that Goethe is a philosopher and thinker who knows dialectics quite well. The study on his conception of "world literature" has enhanced this belief of ours.

In a summary, since Goethe has never written an essay to expound "world literature" never given an accurate definition to this conception. To Goethe, "world literature" is but an ideal, a prospect. When at his advanced age, Goethe turned to be a spiritual hermit. He escaped from the mean, narrow Germany to the vast open world, from the dirty,

dreadful reality to literature of truth and beauty. He has reposed his ideal for the future of mankind in "world literature", his spiritual homeland. Only the making and raising of his ideal of "world literature" could sufficiently demonstrate how great Goethe is, as a progressive humanitarian thinker. His "awareness of mankind" embodied in this conception comes down in a continuous line of the humanitarian spirit in western tradition, and is closely linked with the ancient Chinese philosophers' ideal of "Great Harmony". From this, the derived concepts like "the world is poets" enlarged motherland, and "poetry is common treasure of mankind" reflected an international perspective on human culture and the world as well. They have served not only as a spiritual pillow for Goethe's conception of "world literature", but also as the philosophical foundation of the discipline of comparative literature.