



# 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 & Fu Wang (Translator) (2005) Cross-civilization Study of Comparative Literature—The Turn and Construction of the Discipline Theory of Comparative Literature, *Comparative Literature: East & West*, 6:1, 1-14, DOI: [10.1080/25723618.2005.12015331](https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2005.12015331)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2005.12015331>



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Published online: 09 Aug 2018.



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# Cross-civilization Study of Comparative Literature—The Turn and Construction of the Discipline Theory of Comparative Literature

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**中文摘要:**21 世纪, 比较文学学科原有的理论已不能完全适应于当前对元文化语境中的比较文学学术研究。本文探讨了跨文明冲突与交汇诸问题, 提出了跨文明比较文学学科理论建设的重大理论问题和可行性思路。

Comparative literature is currently undergoing an important development. We have been facing a much needed adjustment and turn of the discipline theory since Chapelhill International Comparative Literature Conference in 1958. This turn represents by across-civilization between the east and the west based on the academic practice of world comparative literature, symbolized by a breakthrough advance of the discipline theory. Corresponding to the “influence study” of the French school and the “parallel study” of the American school, I think this discipline theoretical turn and development can be called “cross-civilization study of comparative literature” (simplified by “cross-civilization study”).

## **I. “Cross civilizations” and “Cross cultures”**

Why is called “Cross-civilization Study”? Because only “cross-civilization” can really bring out the basic characteristics of this important turn and avoid being confused with “cross cultures” which is excessively and randomly used nowadays. I realized it deeply from experience and got les-

sons. I have used “cross cultures” many times before.

In 1995, I published a long paper “The Chinese School of Comparative Literature: The Essential Features of Its Theory and A Tentative Study of Its Methodology” in *Comparative Literature in China* (1st issue, 1995). And I defined the basic characteristics of Chinese school of comparative literature—“cross cultures” or accurately “cross heterogeneous cultures” as follows:

The cross-heterogeneous-cultural comparative literature has a different focus from the studies within the same occidental cultural circles, that is to say, the cultural differences become the focus and play an important part. Fundamentally, the vital principle of comparative literature lies in “cross” and “link”; if the French school is cross-national, and links up the influence relationship of their literatures, the American school which furthers more is interdisciplinary, bridged over literatures of different countries with no influence on each other, the burgeoning Chinese school is bound to cross the huge wall of heterogeneous cultures between the East and the West to break through the thick barrier cemented by cultures over thousands of years link up the global literatures to reconstruct the world literary concept. Thus we may say that “cross-cultural study” (cross heterogeneous cultures of the East and the West) is the life source and foothold foundation of the field and the advantage of Chinese school. It is his most fundamental theoretical and academic characteristic which makes the Chinese school different from the French and American schools. All the methodologies of the Chinese school are closely related to this basic characteristic, or extension of it.

But now I would rather change “cross cultures” into “cross civilizations”. For what reason? Firstly, because “cross cultures” tends to be excessively used. The implication of “culture” is too extensive, with hundreds of definitions; nowadays it has come to a vogue, too much is entitled “culture”. Secondly, “cross-culture” tends to create misunderstandings since there may be various national and regional cultures within one country such as cultures of Sichuan, Shangdong, Zhejiang, etc. in China.

This may confuse the studies of nations and comparative literatures. Thirdly, there are different cultures in a single civilization such as French, British and American cultures. This may lump together “cross cultures” and “cross-national”. Actually, I have already discovered much confusion and misleading terms still exist in spite of my constant advocating “cross heterogeneous cultures”. Many seem to favor and advocate “cross-culture study of comparative literature”, but their implications are not the same as mine. Thus, here, I specially change “cross heterogeneous cultures” into “cross civilizations”, so that the academia can really understand my intention.

## **II. The academic practice and theoretical basis of cross-civilization study of comparative literature.**

As far Chinese scholars the cross-civilization study of comparative literature is based on the conflict and combination of oriental and occidental civilizations and mainly of Chinese and Western cultures and literatures. The academic practice in China in the past hundred years has been fundamentally carried out in the cross-civilization context.

However, for a long time, the field has not examined deeply enough the nature of “cross civilizations” or profoundly studied the theoretical mechanism, the law and the countermeasure, thus leading to many significant academic errors. This serious “aphasia” in academic circles is just a good proof. Similarly, it causes many errors in comparative literature. For example, many Chinese scholars deny that they have something to do with or take up comparative literature although they are more or less engaged in it. This is a strange phenomenon in contemporary China. A case in point is that Qian Niansun, the research fellow from Anhui Social Science Academy, who wrote an article “On the Dying out of Comparative Literature” and used as a proof. The fact that the great learned men like Zhu Guangqian never considered themselves to be comparative literature scholars. The reasons are worth examining up. I think the causes are various, one of which is that maybe comparative literature has a bad reputation in China. Some

scholars once rumored in private that comparative literature, which is extremely difficult in the west, becomes something opportunistic. Those engaged in comparative literature don't know much about western literature and literary theories as well as Chinese counterparts or don't study the Chinese or the western people. They just resort to trickery to serve themselves, skim through Chinese and western literatures to make a random comparison by "something" plus "something else" and reach a conclusion by finding out "surprising similarities". This effortless superficial style becomes common practice and various "academic achievements" of superficial comparisons are rolling out with full force. Some scholars even claim that a crisis has emerged in China's comparative literature. The crisis is just the superficial comparison or "X + Y" or "something" plus "something else", like the comparison of Wordsworth and Tao Yuanming, Dante and Qu Yuan, Du Shiniang and Camellias etc.. Some people call it the comparison of "cats" and "dogs". Thus, instantly comparative literature seems to become "far-fetched comparative literature", the academic shelter of opportunists. This is indeed a sore point of the academia in China. Some scholars deeply realized it and determined to redress energetically the study style. Some publications decide not to publish the articles of this kind. In the following years, such articles decreased, but the problems remained unsolved. At Chengdu International Comparative Literature Conference in August 1998, some scholars from the grass-root units, especially from the teacher's colleges have different opinions and questioned the use the "X + Y" pattern or compare Wordsworth with Tao Yuanming? You scholars have to give us clear reasons and tell us what is genuine and profound comparative literature instead of superficial or far-fetched comparisons. Scholars have to make it clear, otherwise people won't know what to do. If things continue like this, the popularization and development of comparative literature in China will be severely undermined. The seemingly simple and common words implies a deep and rigorous problem—the theoretical inadequacy in China.

Our present textbooks or discipline theories can't meet the needs of

practice or the divorced from practical studies. They can't solve the practical problems and difficulties. Actually we've borrowed numerous theories from the West such as from Wellek, Remak, Guyard, Van Tieghem, Chevreton and Fokkema. However, we don't have our own feasible practical and original theories or methodologies. We admit that Western theories are virtually valuable and gave an impetus to world comparative literature. But we forget that their theories are rooted in the Western culture and literature. After the uncritical import of the Western theories into China the first difficulty is sino-western heterogeneous civilizations. China and the West belong to totally heterogeneous civilizations. The cross-heterogeneous civilization study is never carefully treated in the West but it is what we have to deal with earnestly to start with. So the commonplace analogy study in the Western civilizational circle becomes far-fetched comparative studies. The big cultural difference and civilization heterogeneity between Wordsworth and Tao Yuanming make harder the comparative study between them. If people neglected the origin exploration, the academic rules and the discourse differences of heterogeneous civilizations, such studies would be bound to become superficial and far-fetched. That is the key to the problems.

Nowadays, how can we deepen comparative literature and promote its discipline theories? I advocate cross-civilization studies, especially cross-civilization studies between the East and the West, which will be a significant breakthrough, making comparative literature step into a favorable turn and will be a significant far-reaching strategic shift of the discipline theories.

What is the characteristic of this strategic shift? Obviously, the most notable and prominent is the interaction and combination of the East and the West, and the shift from the monopolist Western civilization into the renewed mutual cognition demonstration and complementation of Eastern and Western civilizations and the creation of a new multi-cultural era in which different civilizations can be truly blended and reach a new peak. The sagacious westerners have come to know it while the easterners including Chi-

nese scholars have a more sober and penetrating knowledge of it. The scholars from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Mainland China have realized the significance and value of the comparison between Eastern and Western literatures and literary theories. It shows that the rise of cross-civilizational comparative literature (cross heterogeneous civilizations of the East and the West) is the necessity of history but not the one-sided wishful thinking of some scholars from some countries!

Evidently, the cross eastern-western heterogeneous cultural civilization study is a new development stage in comparative literature, Phase III after Phase I "influence study" by French school and Phase II "parallel study" by American school.

### **III. The definition and essence of cross-civilizational comparative literature.**

At the turn of the 21st century, comparative literature as an "eminent discipline" gets reconsolidated out of all the crises. In China, it has taken on a prosperous look. This is indeed contradictory. Virtually, the incessant controversy about its definition since its birth is an extremely important cause. Just as René Wellek, representative of American school pointed out when criticizing French school. At present, the major problem is still to clarify its definition and essence in Phase III. This is also one of the important objects of this paper. Nowadays, our discipline theory is still ambiguous. The theory of "cross-civilization study" needs particular construction. This is a basic problem concerning its further development. So, if people really want to promote comparative literature, they have to study its definition and essence.

Reviewing its development in over one hundred years, we find out that the research on its definition and essence has never stopped. It can be asserted that just due to the controversy of its definition and essence, comparative literature stepped out of imminent danger and into prosperity one time after another. Interestingly, each controversy caused one crisis but each crisis aroused one turn for it.

It is believed that, so far, thanks to the controversy, the discipline theory has been formed on three stages, the first in Europe, the second in America, and the third in Asia. As stated above, on the one hand, this developing discipline has an original motive of openness, development and globalism, but on the other hand, its birth was also influenced by its literary and cultural tradition and the given social ideological trends. Therefore, since its birth, its definition has varied with the development of different phases. If the controversy accompanied its development like a shadow and brought crises to it repeatedly, the crisis of its definition gave an impetus to its development.

Actually every discipline often develops with the controversy of its definition.

Let's take the well-known definition of "literature", for example. The final conclusion should have been reached long ago. But the controversy has never ceased. "What is literature", puzzled the academia for thousands of years, with various definitions proposed. For instance, literature is imitation, imagination, fiction and feelings, etc. As far as the west is concerned, Russian Belinski, Chernyshevski, Dobrolyubov have carefully studied it and should have given a definition. However, the contemporary Western literary theory still started with it. The preface of "Literary Theory, an Introduction" by Terry Eagleton begins with "what is literature" to introduce and study contemporary western literary theory. It is with his question that Russian formalism set up its clear-cut stand and unfluenced contemporary western literary theories. As Eagleton pointed out: "Perhaps literature is definable not according to whether it is fictional or 'imaginative', but because it uses language in peculiar ways. On this theory, literature is a kind of writing which, in the words of the Russian critic Roman Jakobson, represents an 'organized violence committed on ordinary speech'. Literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language, deviates systematically from everyday speech... This, in effect, was the definition of the Russian formalists." Russian formalism boldly challenged the preceding definitions, promoted the literary theories and furthered the debate on the contro-



versy of definition in some sense. The seemingly endless research is just one form, one boring way in which the scholars promoted the literary theory accidentally but honestly. This may be the academic value and significance of its definition research.

In China there are a good many textbooks, papers and monographs giving definitions to comparative literature, the majority of which copy the ideas of the Western especially American school. The following ones are some of them:

“Comparative Literature, An Introduction” by Lu Kanghua and Sun Jingyao (1984, Heilongjiang Press) the first surveying works in Chinese Mainland, points out: “What is comparative literature? Now we can reply with Chinese scholar Mr. Ji Xianlin’s explanation. As the term suggests comparative literature in the narrow sense is the comparison of literatures from different countries. Broadly speaking, it’s the comparison between literature and other disciplines including humane and social studies” (p. 14). This is basically a copy of Remak’s definition. However, the book adds: “We think that the most concise and memorable is Chinese scholar Mr. Qian Zhongshu’s saying, ‘Comparative literature as a discipline refers to the literary comparison of different countries and languages. More specifically it compares the literary phenomena of different countries and languages and studies their mutual influence in the literary and artistic theories, literary ideological trends, specific writers and works’” (p. 15). This definition resembles that of French school, not emphasizing parallel and interdisciplinary studies.

The following textbook “Comparative Literature, a Brief Introduction” by Chen Ting (1986 East China Normal University Press) still defines comparative literature in broad and narrow senses. “We think comparative literature usually referred to in narrow sense is the literary study of transcountries, transnations and translanguage, it studies the interrelationship of two or more national literatures the mutual influence of literatures from two or more countries and finds out the similarities and differences between them by studying the relationship influence and similarity and differ-

ent characteristics of various national literatures and explores the literary common law. In a broad sense it also studies the interrelationship between literature and other ideologies (history, philosophy, politics and religion ). ”

“Chinese and Western Comparative Literature, a Course” chiefly edited by Yue Daiyun (1988, Higher Education Press) has a more deepened knowledge. Carefully studying the definitions at home and abroad we find out that: “Comparative literature is an open discipline free from the restriction of languages, nations, countries and disciplines”. From the angle of internationalism and history, it studies the relationship between two or more literatures and between literature and other disciplines. Taking the world literature as the background it seeks the characteristics of different national literatures and their common law.

With time going by the circle has more and more deep-going knowledge of it. Two distinctive outlines of comparative literature were published in 1997. One is “Comparative Literature” chiefly edited by Chen Xun, Sun Jingyao and Xie Tianzhen (1997, Higher Education Press) which did not copy the Euro-American definitions but raised its own: “We think, it will tally better with its nature and better reflect people’s current understanding of it if we regard comparative literature as a literary study of cross nations, languages, cultures and disciplines” (p.9). Here four “crosses” are mentioned with “cross cultures” supplemented to previous definitions. It’s a mighty advance. But as a definition it’s not definite and distinct enough. Meanwhile, “A Newly Compiled Comparative Literature Course” (1997 Hunan People’s Press) put forward a quite distinctive and novel idea and held that comparative literature has the following features “namely, openness, comprehensiveness, internationalism and interdisciplinarity” (p. 145). “An Outline of Comparative Literature” by Chen Xun and Liu Xiangyu (revised edition Sep. 2000 Beijing Normal University Press) produced a definite and the newest definition. “What is comparative literature? It is an open literary study from a macroscopic visional and international angle. It takes various cross-national, cross-lingual, cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary literary relations as its object with the consciousness of

comparison and features of all-inclusiveness theoretically and methodologically" (p. 21). This is the most distinctive and comprehensive definition we have seen at home.

The mindful readers can notice that this definition cuts down "cross countries" compared with that of American school. Why? Because Chen and Liu think "cross countries" highlighted by French and American schools is not accurate. Their masterpiece "An Outline of Comparative Literature" says, "The proposition 'cross countries' repeatedly emphasized by American scholars is not accurate. Comparative literature was initiated to break the boundaries of national literatures and its focus of attention was to compare different national literatures. " Country "is mainly a political and geographical concept, which may be a nation-state or multi-nationation. In the multi-national countries, there exist unity and differences between various national literatures. The differences and their significance are no less than that of literature between different countries. So the literature of various countries and that of different nationalities are not the same. The academic objective of comparative literature specifically should cross nations but not countries". This new idea is different from American school and also from China's first works of this kind, "Comparative Literature, an Introduction", and the works by Yue Daiyun and Chen Ting etc. . Regardless of "cross countries", are there any problems or ambiguity for "cross nations"? Actually "cross nations" is even more inaccurate and misleading because problems on ethnic minorities exist in all countries, most of which are multi-national countries such as China with 56 nationalities , Russia with over 100 nationalities. If the comparison of literatures among the 100 domestic nationalities belongs to comparative literature, it tends to confuse the academia and go against the basic principle of "world vision" or "international light". Currently the academia still regards the comparison of domestic national literatures as domestic or ethnic literary studies. This is a correct practice.

Additionally Chinese scholars also put forward "cross languages". For example, "Comparative Literature" (1997, Higher Education Press) says

“it'll tally better with its nature... if we regard comparative literature as a cross-national, cross-lingual, cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary literary study”. Actually “cross languages” is a great problem. Neither the master of French school Carrie nor that of American school Remak has ever mentioned it in their respective definitions.

Since both French and American schools do not emphasize “cross languages”, why do Chinese scholars talk about it with so much relish? In fact “cross languages” as the definition was definitely raised by Chinese scholars. In “Comparative Literature, An Introduction”, Lu Kanghua and Sun Jingyao quote a sentence by Mr. Qian Zhongshu, “Comparative literature as a discipline specifically refers to the literary comparison between countries and languages”. Of course the key is not who put forward it but whether it is correct. Obviously “cross languages” is also quite problematical. For instance, both America and Britain are English-speaking countries, but can we expel the comparison between the two literatures from comparative literature just because it doesn't cross languages? Broadly speaking English is also spoken in Australia, New Zealand as well as in many Asian countries, isn't the comparison between these English literatures regarded comparative literature? Canada being a multi-lingual country, what about the comparison between its French and English literatures? Furthermore, as for a bilingual writer, can we conduct comparative literature studies between his works of different languages just because he crosses languages? Clearly “cross languages” can't serve as the content of the definition. Otherwise, it will cause extreme confusions.

Denying “cross nations” and “cross languages”, I think the definition should have but three crosses: countries, disciplines and civilizations. The reasons are as follows.

“Cross countries” and “cross disciplines” were established by French and American schools and tested by years of practice while “cross civilizations” is officially raised for the first time in this paper. Therefore, it's necessary to expound finition concerning “cross civilizations”. I think comparative literature is a cross-country, cross-civilization and cross-disciplinary

comparative literary study with international vision and light. It mainly studies the common origin analogy heterogeneity and complementarity of the literatures and takes influence parallel interdisciplinary and cross-civilization studies as its basic methodology. And its purpose is to summarize the literary laws and specific properties with international light to strengthen the mutual understanding and integration of world literature and to push on world literature.

My definition differs from those of French and American schools as follows: I augment and highlight “cross-civilization study” and “heterogeneity and mutual complementarity studies” which are the most fundamental characteristics of the third stage of comparative literature.

Because “cross-civilization studies” is the most fundamental characteristics of the third stage when the literary study of heterogeneous cultures becomes the most important field of vision that the cultural heterogeneity and mutual complementarity should be studied with focus. Only in this way can we avoid the far-fetched comparison like “X + Y” and conduct the deep cross-going studies to regain vitality for comparative literature full of crises since its birth.

The literary comparison of different civilizations has never been carefully confronted and profoundly probed because French and American schools belong to the same European cultural circle originated from Ancient Greco-Roman culture. Thus unlike Chinese, Westerners never faced the tremendous clashes between Chinese (Eastern) and Western cultures and the corresponding violent cultural crises. Therefore in some sense their discipline theories are virtually produced in the same cultural background. However, with the development of comparative literature, the Western scholars recently came to know the importance and necessity of Eastern-Western literary comparison and that of cultural heterogeneous study in cross-civilization comparative literary study. It is encouraging and inevitable.

Comprehensively surveying the history of world comparative literature, we can see a clear chain of the definition and theory, which bears influence

parallel and cross-civilization studies in a progressive order whose characteristics is not only "cross" (countries, disciplines and cultures etc.) but the enlargement of study field and light. I define this development mode as "ripple style" structure, that is, the development of the discipline theory is just like ripples surging outside ring from small to big when a stone is tossed into water. No matter how many rings it raises, literature the core remains unchanged. Despite the various divergences from literature (for instance, French school excessively stressed literary "export" and neglected literariness; the contemporary "pan-culture" diverges from literature), literature the core is never fundamentally abandoned.

The ripple rings correspond to the development stages. All the rings constitute the basic framework of the discipline theory, which develops in an overlapping and progressive but not linear substitute or father-murdering way. The newly arriving theory doesn't substitute itself to the preceding ones. For example, the parallel and interdisciplinary studies don't replace influence studies; "cross-civilization studies" (cross Eastern-Western heterogeneous cultures) don't replace parallel or influence studies either. So far the most internal ring of the ripple structure—"influence study" continues to be in effect and vitally plays a very important role in the current studies. Different stages build their own specific theoretical system and formed the specific ripple ring while all the theories together build the whole magnificent framework. It proves that the controversy of the definition indeed gives an impetus to the discipline theory.

#### **IV. The basic contents of cross-civilization study of comparative literature**

The cross-civilization study of comparative literature has very abundant contents. Owing to the limit of this paper, the outline is listed as follows:

I. Chinese (Eastern) and Western literary theoretical discourse studies

1. Discourses of heterogeneous civilizations

① Ancient Chinese and Western discourse studies

- ② Contemporary Chinese literary theoretical aphasia etc.
- 2. Dialogues between Chinese and Western literary theories
  - ① The principle and mode of the dialogue
  - ② The means of the dialogue etc.
- II. The exploration of origin of heterogeneous civilizations
- III. The comparative study of heterogeneity between heterogeneous civilizations
- IV. The misreading and communication of literatures between heterogeneous civilizations
  - 1. The misreading study of heterogeneous civilizations and the study of foreign imagery etc.
  - 2. Translation, mistranslation and creation etc.
- V. The mutual illumination of literatures and literary theories between heterogeneous civilizations
- VI. The integration of literary thoughts between heterogeneous civilizations, etc..

Trans. by Wang Fu

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