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Cross-Culture: A New Change and Breakthrough of Comparative Literature

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At the end of this century, it seems that comparative literature is facing a new "crisis" again, which stands for, at the same time, a new change and breakthrough.

We are already on the turning point for such a new option and important strategy. The history is challenging us and the opportunity is at hand. But how to meet this challenge and grasp the chance is necessarily an important task for the scholars in the field of comparative literature, of both China and the whole world.

In the early 50's, the study of comparative literature was in a serious "crisis". It was, however, such a crisis that caused the field to make a remarkable breakthrough, in which the Parallel Approach, the American School, was born. Since then this field has been on a new phase.

In 1958, Rene Wellek pointed out at the conference of the International Comparative Literature Association held at Cathedral Hill that the discipline was in crisis with the sign that both the object and the methodology had not been defined. . . . Comparative literature thus had almost become dead in terms of its methodology. And right now this field in China is in a similar situation. Meanwhile, the discipline theory of the field outside China seems more and more

indefinite because of the outgrowth of the field. Some even think it is unnecessary to define its theory. For example, a scholar once said that "comparative literature in one sense is dead." (Susan Bassnett; *Comparative Literature—A Critical Introduction*) Such a situation and attitude have caused the new crisis. If we say the crisis as Wellek pointed out in 1958 was "a dead water", the crisis today could be "a fog" in which direction has been lost.

Is comparative literature really dead? Is this discipline really out of date? In fact, the conference of the association held in every other four years is still flourishing. With more standardized speciality, the discipline springs up like mushrooms. Such a fact shows that this discipline has been far away from being dead. On the contrary it has its growing vitality.

But why is it, theoretically, facing a crisis since it is with growing vitality? This is the question we must answer.

Pan-culture; the Wrong Track for Comparative Literature

In recent years, the basic tendency of the field worldwide has been toward the Pan-culture direction. Obviously, during the 14th Conference at Edmonton in 1994, scholars noticed that the literary study would possibly be overwhelmed by the cultural study. As Ye Shuxian pointed out the general impression of that conference was that the literary study had been drowned by the cultural study. "The crisis of comparative literature" caused by the concept definition appeared again in a new form (Ye; 1995). It is with such background that certain scholars hold an identical view that comparative literature should go toward comparative culture. Prof. Charles Bernheimer, President of American Comparative Literature Association, put

forward two proposals during the symposium on comparative literature at the turn of the century: firstly, the Euro-centralism should be given up and the whole world be put into consideration; secondly, the study should be turned from literature into culture. These proposals have evoked a great controversy. Jonathan Culler, Professor of Department of Comparative Literature, Cornell University, said that comparative literature would face another identity crisis should it be expanded into the global cultural study. If it was developed like this, it would evolve everything (Charles Bernheimer, ed.: 1995). When a discipline could evolve everything it would be drowned dead in such an evolvment. Since every study could be a comparative literature, it could be nothing. In a sense, Susan Bassnett's remark that comparative literature had been dead and the field as a discipline had been out of date is not an empty word. The Pan-cultural tendency of the comparative literature would cause the decline of the field. Therefore, I think the Pan-culturalization is the wrong track.

When I assume this, however, I don't mean to negate the cultural study. Comparative literature will be connected with the cultural study. But such a connection should deepen the comparative literature on the basis of cultural study, which should not replace the comparative literature. The way to deepen the study, in my opinion, could be the cross-cultural study, particularly East-West intercultural study, which would serve as a breakthrough turning the crisis into a new phase. It is possibly the significant strategical turning for international comparative literature.

Cross-Culture: the Strategic Turning for Comparative Literature

As I mention above, Culler was against the expansion as to change comparative literature into cultural study. But what he suggested was to make the field retreat to literature itself. He remarked that comparative literature, if negating the cultural study, would discover a new identity with literature, as its central task (see Charles Bernheimer ed.: 1995). It should be noticed, nevertheless that what Culler suggested was somewhat rational. Some Chinese scholars in this field hold the similar opinion. But I do not think such an attitude is appropriate enough. When the great trend of cultural study is approaching, it is neither possible to avoid it nor worthwhile to adopt. As a result, the field of comparative literature both inside and outside China has been in a dilemma whether to expand it into cultural study should or retreat to literature itself.

Are there only two opinions for us at the critical time? Of course not. "Cross-cultural study" could be a broad road for us to push comparative literature worldwide onto an entirely new stage. Comparative literature on the basis of cross-culture would not cause the comparative culture to replace comparative literature, nor would comparative literature make itself retreat to literature-centered self-enclosure. We should combine comparative literature and comparative culture studies. Such a combination should be in harmony with the purpose for literature study while cultural study be taken as its important media. In this way could comparative literature be deepened with the cultural study. If such a purpose and media could be dealt with appropriately, cultural study could hardly overwhelm comparative literature. On the contrary it would push the latter into a

new stage, a stage to cross different cultures and the third "wall" between the East and West. This kind of cross-culture study evolves at least two advantages, the first of which would be that comparative literature could be much more deep going, and the second of which would become much more characterized with internationalization. This new stage is not only the one for comparative study in China but also the one beyond the French School and American School. It would be the one to blend both eastern and western cultures and literatures.

Let us see why cross-cultural approach could deepen the study of comparative literature rather than overwhelm it? In the development of comparative literature, there have been a phenomenon of making a far-fetched comparison. In the beginning, this phenomenon was obvious in China. The reason lies in the fact that scholars at that time paid their attention only to literature itself rather than the culture background behind the literature. Mr Yuan Hehsiang, an overseas scholar, once criticized someone who blindly borrowed the Western term "baroque" to apply it to the Chinese poetics, which brought about certain shallow or even wrong conclusion. Similarly, in the mainland of China there appeared quite a lot of papers as "X and Y" pattern. The comparison based on the culture roots could to a certain extent avoid such misunderstandings. For example, when the Western tragedy is discussed to view the Chinese drama, people began to doubt whether tragedy existed in China or not. If such a controversy were only on tragedy itself without regarding the cultures, it would be more and more confusing. The fact shows that only by comparing the different cultural implications, values as well as tragedy consciousness could deepen the study of Chinese-Western concept of tragedy. In this way could we avoid such embarrassing problems as whether Li Bai, a poet in Tang Dynasty, belongs to "romantic" and Bai Juyi to "realistic" or not. Therefore, cross-cultural

approach would bring about the result that the comparative literature could be deepened. We should, however, be alert that cultural study is but a method with a purpose for literature and should not replace the literature study itself.

The second advantage of cross-culture approach could serve the scholars in this field to have a real international perspective and to follow the different cultures with great interest. The confrontation, misreading of different cultures and the way for mutual understanding, exchanging co-existence would be much stressed.

It has been known that the early stage of this field was Euro-centered and then Western-centered. The so-called comparative study was in fact a comparison carried out within the circle of Western culture. As Ulrich Weisstein, a renowned American scholar in this field, pointed out in one of his books that it would hardly sound reasonable to discover the similar patterns between Western and Eastern poetry (Weisstein; 1973). This is the typical Western-centered point of view. Such a narrow view limited the globalization of the field. As Wai-lim Yip pointed out in his *Comparative Poetics* that within the Euro-American systems, as Weisstein says, was a mono-cultural system.

But now at the turn of the century, and with the rising of the East, the Western circle of comparative literature could no longer be blind. Another celebrated American scholar Earl Miner's *Comparative Poetics* has explained what Weisstein felt confused by comparison of Eastern and Western poetics. Armando Gnisci, Italian scholar, advocated a comparative literature as a non-colonial discipline that the West should introspect and co-operate with other cultures in order to push the field forward. Bernheimer in his discipline report argued that the Euro-centered concept should be given up and the whole world be put into considerations. It can be concluded that the cross-cultural

approach is not just the will of certain scholars but rather the requirement of the time. The major difference of this method lies in the fact that the cultural difference has been put on the forefront, which plays an important role in the field of comparative literature. The fundamental task right now for comparative literature is to cross or link up. If the first stage with French School advocating the influence study as the road has crossed the wall between countries, connecting the influenced relationships; the second stage with American school as the head advocating the parallel study has crossed the wall between West-East disciplines connecting the non-influenced literary relationships, the third stage with the forming Chinese school would cross the wall between different cultures and Civilizations with its cross-cultural approach. It is identical with other international scholars like Bernheimer who advocate the global perspectives. It is in an agreement with the tendency of the development of comparative study that serves to push the field theory going on. People could be cleared out of "the fog".

It can be expected that during the third stage, comparative literature instead of being dead will march into a broader field. The crisis is disappearing and the turning point is drawing near. Such a new direction has been described by many scholars in this field both in and outside China as non-colonial discipline advocated by Armando Gnisci and the effort to establish the New school by constructing the methodology system for discipline theory. The comparative literature study is once more facing an important turning worldwide. Let us get ready to meet such a brilliant era!

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