

# Problems in Cultural Studies Since the New Period

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## ABSTRACT

**This article discusses some issues of cultural research since the new era from the perspective of literature, and sorts out the background issues, definition issues, development issues of literary theory, and relationship issues with literary research in academic circles. Cultural research is an exotic product, and scholars' different understandings can be seen from the academic debate on its definition. From the perspective of focusing on cultural research to construct literary theory, to distinguishing the difference between cultural research and literary research, and the emphasis on the locality of cultural research, it can be seen that the research on cultural issues is in continuous development. Therefore, for the future development of cultural studies in China, it is necessary combine China's specific conditions in the research and pay attention to deeper connotations.**

*Keywords: cultural studies, definition, literary theory, literary studies*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The development of contemporary society and culture affects all aspects of people's lives. Culture has become a new development and new trend. The rapid rise of electronic technology media breaks through the limitation that traditional literature can only be transmitted through traditional print media, and has an increasingly obvious impact on people's daily life. People have fully experienced the convenience and new changes and trends brought by new technologies. In literature, people are no longer limited to the constraints of traditional books, newspapers and journals. People are also pursuing more diversified and all-round development, such as online reading and e-reading. This is the influence brought about by media culture. As a result, mass culture gradually emerged. Mass culture has broken through limitations and sprung up, followed by which a series of related cultures impacts people's lives. For example, video culture begins to gain people's attention, fashion culture is sought after by people, and network culture involves in thousands of households. It is precisely because of people's needs and development that a broader platform will appear. In addition to meeting their own material and cultural needs, people also have more demanding spiritual and cultural requirements, and everything is developing toward aesthetics and culturalization.

Because of the impact of Western culture, especially the concept of consumer culture, many literary works have become the goods of buyers. They buy such goods only for the purpose of satisfying their inner vanity and prove their cultural taste, rather than be really attracted by the connotation. Literary works no longer have its

true value, but be used by many companies to achieve the purpose of obtaining economic benefits. This makes literature full of money transactions and becomes a subsidiary of business; its intrinsic value has been ignored by people, and becomes more utilitarian and vulgar. For example, in real life, the packaging of some commodities carries a literary and artistic flavor. However, it only increases the effect of propagation, not for reading, as it obscures the attributes and values of literature itself. As a result, the value of the literary work itself is constantly fading. Especially, the main ideas, literary and artistic atmosphere conveyed are no longer strong, the impact on people is no longer profound, and its unique charm gradually disappears. Some literary writers also become eager for quick success; their works no longer have ideological souls, but be just reading materials for people's pastime. Based on this phenomenon, some scholars believe that there is such a research method that links literature with social, political, economic, cultural and other theories to serve as important examples of sociology and culturology, so as to make researches in aspect of social ideology or social value criticism. Among them, the most important research is cultural studies.

## II. THE BACKGROUND AND DEFINITION OF CULTURAL STUDIES

As an academic "imported product", China's cultural study started from the mid-1980s, and the first question discussed by the academic circle was the background of introducing cultural study into China. In the book "Cultural Studies: The West and China" written by Mr. Tao Dongfeng, he mentioned that cultural studies are formed in the context of local

culture and the general environment facing the challenges of various western theories and thought that in the change in overall trends of the two aspects, the challenges of local reality account for a large proportion. In the book, it is not difficult to find that people's attention to cultural studies is more concentrated in the early 1990s. During that period, China's marketization, secularization, and popularization influenced the final cultural formation and also makes people addicted to the theory of cultural studies.<sup>1</sup> As can be seen from Wang Yuechuan's research, the reason why the current cultural studies exist is should be explained from four contexts including tradition and localization, ideologicalization, Westernization of modernity, and post-modernization of digital replication. The four contexts have different value orientations, and all reflect the different aspects brought about by the earliest institutes of cultural studies.<sup>2</sup> In the mid-to-late 1980s, in literary studies, the study direction was suddenly turned to its own studies, and the purpose was also to explore more of its own internal world, which also prompted different criticism methods to spring up like mushrooms, such as aesthetic criticism and other critical methods. These internal criticism methods focus on language, narrative, structure and other aspects. For example, people began to pay attention to the subjectivity of literature and also began to highlight the aesthetic nature of literature. However, although such a development method has a certain breakthrough in theory, it also limits the future development of literature and art. In the early 1990s, along with the strong development of market economy, cultural studies were also brought to a broader development environment. Together with the corresponding institutionalization of disciplines, literature and arts were seen more as a system development. Therefore, the development of pan-popular culture eventually made literary theory unable to cope with it. At the same time, cultural studies are intrinsically interdisciplinary and critical. This characteristic gives it more rich and broad direction choices on the road of future development. Therefore, cultural studies also gradually entered Chinese academic circle in this potential method and drove the academic development at that time.

Regarding "cultural studies", one of the first problems to be solved is how to define cultural studies. Judging from the available materials, there is still disagreement on the true meaning of cultural studies. Most scholars agree that cultural studies originated from the Western countries of the last century and was a trend of thought that can reveal facts and criticize the society. In the 1950s and 1960s, a landmark event of

the birth of cultural studies as a "discipline" was the establishment of contemporary cultural research center by University of Birmingham in 1960. This research center became a support for the development of later cultural studies and was gradually prevailed and continued to develop in the 1980s. "Cultural studies are all-encompassing, covering classic science, also involved in emerging political movements, and also participating in the evolution of ideas, such as Marxism, post-colonialism, feminism, and post-structuralism. According to the change of focus and motivation, it can leap from one discipline to another, from one methodology to another methodology."<sup>3</sup> This is enough to show how difficult it is to define the boundary of cultural studies. Hence, some scholars reckon that "cultural studies" is anti-definition, "it is just a strategic naming, a description of an academic trend and interest, and an expedient measure to describe the academic turn."<sup>4</sup> It is a rebellious phenomenon existing in Western academic circles and is very different from ordinary studies. Although it is prevalent, it cannot express its connotation. However, in the course of practice, it can discover problems that are not valued and left over by history. It always reminds people not to make it unique and develop into a new discipline.<sup>5</sup> At present, many people in the academic circle have conducted research and analysis on the concept and connotative characteristics of cultural studies. Many scholars have made corresponding speeches on cultural studies related issues at relevant research conferences. Although many people do not agree with the idea of treating cultural studies as a discipline, or even oppose the emergence of such a discipline, they can not prevent the development of cultural studies in the direction of discipline development. In western countries, to a certain extent, cultural study is treated as a discipline, including cultural poetics, cultural criticism, etc. Therefore, some scholars have suggested that the meaning of "cultural studies" is not a simple meaning, but have a very wide interpretation. For example, "Cultural studies is a positive endeavor of the contemporary 'disciplinary alliance';"<sup>6</sup> "cultural studies" can no longer be simply regarded as a form of discussion on higher level of culture, but refer to the cultural theoretical trend of anti-elite consciousness in developed countries; "cultural studies" has an obvious trend of anti-establishment and anti-theory, and has strong characteristics of interdisciplinary exploration. So far the scope of its definition is still erratic, but it is

<sup>1</sup> Wang Yuechuan. *Chinese Mirror: Studies on Culture in the 1990s* [M]. Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation Press, 2001. p12.

<sup>2</sup> Ziauddin Sardar. *Cultural Studies* [M]. Beijing: Contemporary China Press, 2014. p6.

<sup>3</sup> Wang Min'an. *Cultural Research and Academic Machines* [N]. *China Reading Weekly*, April 4, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Luo Gang, Meng Dengying. *Cultural Studies and Anti-disciplinary Knowledge Practice* [J]. *Literature Art Studies*, 2002 (04).

<sup>5</sup> Jin Yuanpu. *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* [M]. Kaifeng: Henan University Press, 2003. p4.

<sup>6</sup> Tao Dongfeng. *An overview of the seminar on "Literary Theory and Cultural Studies"* [J]. *Literature and Art Forum*, 2000 (04).

basically determined as a quasi-disciplinary discourse;<sup>7</sup> cultural studies should not stop in the same field but expand to all-round multiple levels to make constant in-depth exploration in many methods. In cultural studies, culture should be more regarded as a manifestation of various power relations, rather than treating culture as an established fact.<sup>8</sup>

### III. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURAL STUDIES AND LITERARY THEORY

The discussion on cultural studies is inseparable from the development of literary theory. There are many views on this category. For example, in Su Hongbin's "The Rise of Cultural Studies and the Future of Literary Theory", it is reckoned that the development of theory should be linked to the practice of criticism, especially cultural criticism. Only in this way can Chinese literary theory be better developed.<sup>9</sup> Zhang Fa's "The dispute between literary theory and cultural research: Chinese symptomatic research on an academic phenomenon in 2004" made its own argument about the arguing between literary theory and cultural studies appeared in 2014.<sup>10</sup> Wang Zhenglong's "Gain and Loss of Cultural Studies and the Reconstruction of Literary Theory" provides insights from cultural studies on the reconstruction of literary theory knowledge including social politics, "writing" and "reading ability".<sup>11</sup> Tao Dongfeng's "Challenge on the Literary Studies from Trans-subject Cultural Studies", Duan Jifang's "Reflection Criticism and Value Reconstruction: Contemporary Chinese Literary Theory and Its Paradigm Composition in the Context of Cultural Studies", Li Qingben's "Towards a Literary Theory of Cross Culture Studies", and Li Chunqing's "Literary Theory Construction in the Context of Cultural Studies"<sup>12</sup>, etc. all discussed about cultural studies. As a

<sup>7</sup> Luo Gang, Meng Dengying. Cultural Studies and Anti-disciplinary Knowledge Practice [J]. *Literature Art Studies*, 2002 (04).

<sup>8</sup> Su Hongbin. The Rise of Cultural Studies and the Future of Literary Theory [J]. *Literature Art Studies*, 2005 (09).

<sup>9</sup> Zhang Fa. The dispute between literary theory and cultural research: Chinese symptomatic research on an academic phenomenon in 2004 [J]. *Tianjin Social Sciences*, 2005 (03).

<sup>10</sup> Wang Zhenglong. Gain and Loss of Cultural Studies and the Reconstruction of Literary Theory [J]. *Journal of Nanjing University (Philosophy. Humanities. Social Sciences Edition)*, 2004, (06).

<sup>11</sup> Tao Dongfeng. Challenge on the Literary Studies from Trans-subject Cultural Studies [J]. *Social Science Front*, 2002 (03); Duan Jifang. Reflection Criticism and Value Reconstruction: Contemporary Chinese Literary Theory and Its Paradigm Composition in the Context of Cultural Studies [J]. *Journal of South China Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, 2012 (03); Li Qingben. Towards a Literary Theory of Cross Culture Studies [J]. *Chinese Culture Research*, 2007 (03); Li Chunqing. Literary Theory Construction in the Context of Cultural Studies [J]. *Seeking Truth*, 2004 (06).

<sup>12</sup> Wang Fengzhen. The relationship between cultural studies and literary studies [J]. *Tianjin Social Sciences*, 2000 (04); Hao

phenomenon enjoying great concern, cultural studies have specific influence on the development of Chinese literary theory.

### IV. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURAL STUDIES AND LITERARY STUDIES

Looking at the relationship between cultural studies and literary studies, we can see that cultural studies and literary studies belong to different directions of development in different disciplines. For example, cultural studies and literary studies have different emphases: cultural study is not a research work that must be done in literary study and humanities, but be relatively close to anthropology and sociology; reading a lot of valuable literary research works is very necessary to explore the different characteristics of its existence; but for cultural studies, the main direction of its research is more ubiquitous, and is common to all things; literary study is perceptual, and has a thorough research on detailed things, while cultural study is rational, involving in social political aspect. Cultural study pays more attention to "mass culture" that has a great impact on people's daily lives and thinking; for example, the currently popular TV, movies, and magazines and the like "mass culture" become the focus of cultural studies, so it should be distinguished from literary studies. As another example, it is also necessary to understand the connection between cultural studies and literary studies: cultural studies originated from literary studies the earliest. Cultural studies cannot be separated from literary studies, and literary studies cannot be separated from cultural studies and may introduce the concepts and methods of cultural studies. Some scholars believe that literary study is included in cultural study. Literary study only takes literature, a special culture, as the research object. Therefore, literary study is a part of cultural study. From this we can see that cultural study is to analyze other literary subjects in literary study method, while literary study is a cultural practice linked to other discourse methods.<sup>13</sup>

### V. OTHER PROBLEMS

There is a view that cultural study was introduced from the West, and the introduction of this method posed a significant impact on China's traditional cultural research pattern. Cultural study has obvious

Minggong. An Analysis of Relationship between Cultural Studies and Literary Studies [J]. *Journal of Chongqing Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 2013 (01); Huang Weixing. The relationship between cultural studies and literary studies [J]. *Social Sciences in Yunnan*, 2007 (04); Cao Shunqing, Jiang Rongchang. From "Literary Study" to "Culture Study": A Worldwide Change of the Aesthetic Feature of Literature [J]. *Hebei Academic Journal*, 2003 (05); Wang Ning. Cultural Studies and Literary Studies in the Context of Globalization [J]. *Literary Review*, 2000 (03).

<sup>13</sup> Zhou Xian. Cultural studies: why and how to do it? [J]. *Literature Art Studies*, 2007 (06).

characteristics of western post-industrial knowledge society, but China should adhere to the local nature of cultural research and do not give up the local characteristics and tradition of cultural study. For example, Zhou Xian believes that the emergence of a populist knowledge concept is actually an inevitable result of cultural studies. It is a very meaningful change. While abandoning traditional classic analysis, it focuses on the daily form of real cultural practice. It is precisely in this transformation that literary studies were gradually replaced by cultural studies, losing their original advantages, because cultural studies are not limited to certain things compared with literary studies, but anything can be the object of research. He also believes that when we abandon part of the content, it will inevitably cause some scholars' dissatisfaction; but it is undeniable that while abandoning part of the culture, some things that were not included in the field of literary studies were discovered, making the field of cultural studies more extensive than before, including various genres and forms of mass culture from the Internet to virtual culture and from film and television to advertising.

## VI CONCLUSION

As a foreign ideological trend, cultural study has its own limitations in the local development in China. In addition, Chinese scholars are actively welcoming foreign cultural studies. There is no deep thinking about whether cultural study is suitable or not for localization development in China and whether the development trend is estimated too optimistically. Of course, no matter from which aspect, the Chinese academic circle's focusing on cultural study is a correct research direction and deserves our attention.

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