

# Variation Theory: A New Approach of Cross-civilization Study

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**Abstract**—The Western comparative literature theory is mainly to conduct practical research under the homogeneous Western civilization. On the contrary, the lack of effective theory applicable to cross-civilization studies has obstructed global scholars for a long time. The Variation Theory proposed by Chinese scholars provides an effective solution to this problem. This theory emphasizes heterology in the comparison of different literatures and discovers the genesis mechanism of heterologic literary phenomena in cross-civilization study. The Variation Theory meets the needs of studying heterologic civilization literature in the era of deep globalization as well as provides a new approach for the development of comparative literature in the world today.

**Keywords**—*Variation Theory; Comparative literature; Cross-civilization; Heterology*

## I. COMPLEMENTATION OF VARIATION THEORY AND MAJOR WESTERN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE THEORIES

The discipline of comparative literature in China came into world at the beginning of 20th century, it was the moment when the East and West civilizations collided drastically. During this process, Chinese scholars endured hardships in pioneer works from generation to generation. At first they imitated western methodologies, tried to explain Chinese literature by Western theories. As more and more problems had come up during their practices, they gradually realized the limitation in seeking homology. Inspired by Eastern philosophy, some Chinese scholars discovered the significance of heterology in cross-civilization study towards the discipline of comparative literature. Therefore they started to focus on the aspects of literary variation. Finally Prof. Cao Shunqing and his team from Sichuan University has proposed Variation Theory of comparative literature. This theory opens a brand-new point of view in the discipline.

Concretely speaking, the Variation Theory takes the literariness and transversality of comparative literature as the two supporting points in the study. On this basis, it explores the regularities from variable phenomenon in literature by means of studying international literary exchanges facts as well as heterology and variability contained in similar but no interrelated phenomena within the same category [2]. Hence, the Variation Theory does not mean to make an arbitrary comparison, instead, it based on the existing influence study and parallel study of the discipline so as to research rigorously

the heterology and variability in a certain literary phenomenon based on cross-civilization context.

We may firstly discuss the Variation Theory based on influence study. The idea of “influence study” proclaimed by French Scholars lays emphasis on empirical or homologous elements, meanwhile they ignored the non-empirical and variable ones. We are quite familiar with the empirical influence in their cases. For example, a French missionary Joseph de Prénare had translated *The Orphan of Zhao*, a Chinese play in 14th century into French, later Voltaire had adapted it as a famous French play, named *The Orphan of China*. As exchange facts are so solid, this case is really fit for the influence study. On the other hand, the non-empirical and variable elements reflect in certain ambiguous influence which can not be demonstrated by facts and history within the international literary relationship, such as writing style or esthetic taste. In fact Carré in French School had mentioned at the preface of *Littérature comparée*, in 1951,

People perhaps take an excessive attention in the influence study. However this kind of study is hard to achieve, because it is constantly unreliable. During which the people often attempt to measure some immeasurable elements [3].

This sentence clearly shows some scholars from French School itself had realized the border of empirical research.

Besides, as the influence study based on homology, this kind of characteristic especially embodied in aspects such as Thematology and Genology etc. Although exists the homologous source, we may still find the variable element in the influence study. The reason is under the different cultures, ideologies and historical contexts, the linguistic, imagic and thematic variations come up from each literary text during the process of interpretation, diffusion and reception. Afterwards the misunderstanding, cultural filtration or “creative treason” come into being. In the views of theories in Reception Aesthetics and Hermeneutics, the receivers hold a specific ethnic cultural rule which no doubt influences the reception of a literary text. In brief, the homology and variability coexist in the international literary relationships, but the latter has been always neglected.

Then regarding the Variation Theory in parallel study, as we know it proposed by the Americans School which emphasizes similarity in the comparative study, this methodology adjusted the research key points towards the internal principals of literature, such as literariness and esthetic. At that time, the Americans considered it as a universal

methodology for world literature. But it must be pointed out that the parallel study theory was constructed inside the Western civilization. So it should be questioned whether the theory is applicable to the cross-civilization cases. A point of view from Ulrich Weisstein was representative. He said in *Comparative Literature and Literary Theory*:

In my opinion, only in the context of a single civilization can we find the common factors which consciously or unconsciously maintain the tradition in terms of thoughts, feelings and imagination and the attempt to find a similar pattern between the West and the Middle East or the Far East is more difficult to be justified [4].

In China, we may find some clumsy application of parallel study. For example, there exists a famous example which compared Shakespeare with Tang Xianzu, a Chinese dramatist in 16th century. The conclusion by this kind of parallel study was that firstly they were lived in almost same time, secondly they were both talented dramatists and good at tragedy-writing [5]. This case did verify Weisstein's query was reasonable. But if we adopt the idea from Variation Theory, the question will come up in other ways, just like: What makes the two dramatists use different means to present the theme of LOVE? Or what kind of peculiarity had each dramatist inherited from theatrical tradition in their own country? We believe the research in this way should give more valuable conclusions.

As the large differences exist between Chinese and Western languages, there are more variations occur in text translation between East and West than the ones among Western languages. At this point, the Variation Theory should be well-applied on analyzing translated texts so as to understand how misreading and misinterpretation exerts an influence onto the target culture, besides it also analyzes the misreading mechanism under historical and cultural context [6].

For instance, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, a classic Chinese novel, has two English versions, one translated by Couple Yang Xianyi et Gladys B.Tayler, the other by David Hawkes, both versions are excellent. However, the fact shows that Hawkes' one enjoys more popularity than Couple Yang's. The reason is Hawkes had made sophisticating creative treasons in his work, which made Western readers can understand the text better. On the contrary, Couple Yang did a word for word translation, which closed to the original edition but ignored Western readers' culture context. Here is a case to show their different works: A sentence in Chapter 15 which is meant to admire the hero. Couple Yang's translation is "your son is truly a dragon's colt or young phoenix", which almost closes to Chinese version in each word. But we know in Western culture, Dragon is a symbol of evil, it could not be possibly used in admiration. So Hawkes left the word out and translated the sentence as "the young phoenix was worthy of his sire". In this case, we may know how the cultural value works in translation variations [7].

Besides the domain of influence study and parallel one, the Variation Theory can be integrated with other contemporary comparative literature theories, a typical case is from Reception Study. In comparative literature this kind of theory originates from the Reception Esthetics on 1970s. Yve Chevrel had pointed that the term "RECEPTION" had become a key word

in literature study. But as one of the initiator of the Reception Study, his work still remains lots of the empirical views. Like his predecessors, he took more consideration on how influence and reception affects literary system and history, also he emphasized the positivity of the facts. However, the major characteristic of Reception Esthetics is against text-centered standpoint by placing reader to the core position. The point in this kind determines the empirical facts should play a secondary role. However, in the cross-culture text, Reception Study can also be attributed to the aspects of Variation Theory instead of influence study. In the field of Reception Study, the reader's background should be under cross-language or cross-culture. Thus the elements like native language and culture context will cause plenty of the variations in reading. If we research the mechanism on how variation produces, more rules of literary reception will be presented. After an extensive survey, we may find that sinologists in the West tend to study *A Dream of Red Mansions* under the context of Western literary theory such as tragic theory or feminism. However Chinese scholars prefer to analyze this novel by thoughts of Confucianism, Taoism or Buddhism. This case shows heterogeneous culture contexts indicates different horizon of expectations, which finally determine each research patterns.

Therefore, the influence study and parallel study seek homology while the Variation Theory seeks heterology, then the three theories could form finally a complementary theoretical system. As Kawamoto Koji, the former president of ICLA had said in 2001:

"In resent 20 years, the interest point in literature and culture study has transfered its pursue from universality to diversity and difference."

From the elaboration above, we can summarize the Variation Theory is a sort of methodology with universal sense in cross-civilization literary study, it meets new tendency of comparative literature in the new millennium.

## II. CHALLENGES TOWARDS COMPARATIVE LITERATURE IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

At the beginning of this new Century, globalization wave has grown more and more strength, cross-civilization literary study has become a hot spots within humanities and social sciences domain. As for comparative literature, it has met developing opportunities during this tendency, meanwhile encountered some severe crisis, which challenged its humanism ideal. On account of a broad containment with contemporary western literary theory, Variation Theory could provide a sort of oriental wisdom in the globalization era.

One major challenging view came from "Clash of Civilization", proposed by American politics scholar, Samuel Huntington. He considered after the Cold War, the conflicts between Western civilization and non-Western ones would be put in a major position. His point of view has been partly verified by 911 incident and several partial wars at the first decade in 21th century. The other is "the death of a discipline", a view from American comparatist Gayatri Spivak, also her British colleague, Susan Bassnett thought "comparative literature as an independent discipline was invalid". How did comparatists all over the world meet these challenges?

At first, the view of Clash of Civilizations alerts us in a negative way that in this globalization era, dialogues between different civilizations will become a significant issue. Huntington divided several civilizations as West, China, Islam, Africa etc. Certainly his division could contribute to analyze the heterologic factors for our discipline. On the other hand comparatists could make use of this argument in a positive way in order to promote the understanding among all the civilizations. In any case, promote a better understanding among the civilizations or countries is an essential duty for all the comparatists, as the initiator of the discipline had proposed.

Secondly, as for the prospect of the comparative literature, by analyzing two scholars' opinions above, we may know that Spivak's view aimed to oppose the research pattern in Western Centrism and a tendency of elitism, and for Bassnett's view, she thought comparative literature was rather a literary idea in a broad sense which can be used to research all kinds of cultural phenomenons. Actually since the publication of Bernheimer Report of ACLA in 1993, which proposed "The Cultural Turn", it proved to be a major tendency that the present discipline advocates pluralism as well as integrate culture study. During the transition in this time, Western scholars made effects as following:

Firstly they applied contemporary philosophic and sociological theories to literary and culture studies. Since 1990s, all kinds of post-modernism trends of thoughts came out initially in the West, then spread all over the world. As one of the results, a profound study of literary theory had become an independent branch in literature, which can meet the requirement of cultural pluralism. The other result is to break through the restriction on classic literary texts. Popular or non-classic texts could also be the object of academic study. One typical case is Alain-Michel Boyer's study of Paraliteratures.

Secondly Western comparatists have expanded their views towards a world-wide range, their studies were no longer restricted in Europe. According to them, different poetics in each literature logically became the objects of study. In 1963, René Etiemble had made his prediction in *Comparaison Is Not the Reason*:

A combination of historical textual criticism and esthetic reflection will transform fatefully comparative literature into a sort of comparative poetic.

Nowadays, as Etiemble predicted, comparative poetic had enlarged gradually and become a key branch in the discipline.

Like their Western colleagues, Chinese scholars also actively discover the prospect of comparative literature. They tend to seeking the solution by the idea of "Harmony but not uniformity" from Confucius. This motto had guided Chinese for over thousands of years, which has caused a harmonious coexistence among the different ideologies as Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism in the country. Inspired by this idea, Chinese comparatists provide their views as follows,

Firstly, Chinese scholars insist that the literariness should possess a core position in the discipline. As a Chinese scholar indicated that Western comparatists started to deconstruct their literary classic texts, which can be thought as a great progress. However it is not the first issue for Eastern scholars, instead,

their duty is to make the world recognize the classic texts from their own countries or nations, and further more to make these texts rank among the world classics [12]. As a result, a study towards the literariness in Chinese texts and their diffusion in cross-civilization context remains Chinese comparatists' major duty.

Secondly, Chinese scholars advocate cross-civilization dialogues by a profound research in disciplinary theories. In this point of view, the base of dialogue is to comprehend heterology in each civilization. In their study, the Variation Theory enlarges the legality of comparison as well as effectiveness in dialogues. Besides, this theory confirms each cultural subject's identity by seeking their difference and analyzing their literature development.

### III. REJUVENATING CHINESE TRADITIONAL LITERARY THEORY BY VARIATION THEORY

With enough respect on the heterology of each civilization, the collision of the East and the West is no more a zero-sum game, but a new developing opportunity to the both part.

Thus Variation Theory has inspired Chinese scholars to delineate an approach to revive traditional theories. The solution to the aphasia of Chinese traditional literary theory is a good case of such kind of application. As we know, the traditional literary theory in Chinese depended literary practice and discourse in the mainland. However, at the beginning of 20th century, the mainstream of scholars' view considered that traditional theory was no longer effective, for it was illogical as western ones. By the influence of Western literary theories, traditional discourse had changed step by step, its grammar had been replaced from Chinese classic style of writing to modern Mandarin; the way of thinking was replaced from a perceptual pattern to critical thinking; a poetic expression had been replaced by a logic exposition. As a result, Chinese literary theory today has lost its capability to interpret modern texts, that so called "aphasia" in Chinese academic circle. We can consider it is a kind of negative variation. Even Western Scholars realized the serious situation. Such as Julien had indicated:

We are now at a time which Western modes normalize everything. It makes Chinese people become estranged to their traditional culture. That is because everything has been reconstructed. Traditional thought in China have gradually turned to Western conception. But in fact Chinese thought possesses its own logic [13].

Consideration the situation as above, Chinese scholars at first may analyze the variation route of Chinese literary theory, then reserve its positive element of the variation. Next step is to cultivate the theory in soils of local literary discourse. Specifically speaking, we could search its realistic application, keep on assimilating foreign literary theories. On the other hand, sticking to convention or replacing by the Western theories are both unwise. In brief, the core idea should be to accept the reality and guide the variation in the future. Under a cross-civilization context, the crisis in traditional Chinese literary theory is not an individual case in non-Western countries. Chinese scholars want to share their effort and thought to other comparatists on how to face the challenge

from the strong Western theoretical discourse throughout the world.

In conclusion, the Variation Study academically initiates the heterology among all kinds of literary phenomenons. As a sort of methodology with universal sense in the present discipline, this theory has made up the defect of the existing theories and enlarges the horizon of comparative literature study. Under the circumstance of deep globalization today, the Variation Study fully respects the heterology of each civilization, which provide an effective approach in cross-civilization literary study.

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