

On World Literatures, Comparative Literature, and (Comparative) Cultural Studies

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Ning Wang,

"On World Literatures, Comparative Literature, and (Comparative) Cultural Studies"
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Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 15.5 (2013)***
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Abstract: In his article "On World Literatures, Comparative Literature, and (Comparative) Cultural Studies" Ning Wang argues that cultural studies is characterized by being opposed to (elite) literary studies not only because it points to popular or non-elite literature, but also because it challenges the discipline of comparative literature. On the other hand, (comparative) cultural studies complements literary studies in that it contributes a great deal to the reconstruction of a sort of new comparative literature. Wang illustrates how some of the representative Anglo-American comparatists are now doing cultural criticism while still engaging in comparative literature and they paved the way for dialogue between literary and cultural studies. Therefore, deconstructing and subverting the Eurocentric discipline of comparative literature, (comparative) cultural studies has made a positive impact on the reconstruction of a new discipline of comparative literature and the field of world literatures. It has also enabled a remapping of world literatures by enlarging the canon with non-canonical Oriental literary works.

Ning WANG

On World Literatures, Comparative Literature, and (Comparative) Cultural Studies

In the current era of globalization, more and more scholars of literature are worried about what has happened to comparative literature studies. It is true that we cannot but be confronted with these phenomena: on the one hand, the boundary of literary studies is increasingly expanding with more and more scholars not doing literary studies proper and on the other hand, the domain of traditional (elite) literary studies is narrowing with many university courses on the verge of death. How did this happen? We often hear that cultural studies is responsible. But is cultural studies really destined to be opposed to comparative literature? And if this is indeed the case, will cultural studies put an end to the discipline of comparative literature? In the article at hand, I address these questions looking at Chinese comparative literature studies and put forward a positive strategy for keeping the discipline of comparative literature alive and energetic with the help of cultural studies.

Since cultural studies is a non-elitist interdisciplinary field devoted to the study of contemporary popular culture and non-canonical cultural products, it is regarded as being opposed to literary studies, especially comparative literature studies in its Eurocentric version. As we know, decades ago comparatists had to master several languages and possess wide literary knowledge, but nowadays, with the digitization and globalization of cultural products, more and more students and young scholars would rather read e-texts than visit the library. However, we should not forget that such pioneers of British cultural studies as Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams were also prominent literary scholars. Dissatisfied by the ever-narrowing domain of elite-oriented literary studies, they, as well as many others, called for expanding the boundary of literature by pointing to those cultural phenomena ignored by literary scholars before including such matters as ethnicity, gender, mass media, identity politics, or community life. Not many comparatists have since adopted these perspectives and used them to interpret literary works in innovative ways, although some scholars, for example Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, proposed since the late 1990s a "merger" of comparative literature and cultural studies as "comparative cultural studies" (see, e.g., "From Comparative" <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1041>>, "The New"; see also Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári). Their efforts have undoubtedly bridged the gap between literary and cultural studies, paving the way for constructing a sort of literary culture. So it is not surprising that at some US-American universities comparatists are doing cultural studies in the name of comparative literature regarding the latter simply as the institution with which they are affiliated. In world literature courses, literary works are taught largely in translation, not in the original. Hence, a return to philology has been called for in the name of comparative literature (see, e.g., Holquist; Villanueva).

Jonathan Culler, a scholar of studies on structuralism and poststructuralism, devoted an entire chapter of his *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* to the relation between literary and cultural studies. This is how he describes the challenge of cultural studies to traditional (elite) literary studies: "What's happening here is 'cultural studies,' a major activity in the humanities in the 1990s. Some professors may have turned away from Milton to Madonna, from Shakespeare to soap opera, abandoning the study of literature altogether" (42). Trying nonetheless to find a positive side of the rise of cultural studies, Culler goes on to ask:

But what is the relation between literary studies and cultural studies? In its broadest conception, the project of cultural studies is to understand the functioning of culture, particularly in the modern world: how cultural productions work and how cultural identities are constructed and organized, for individuals and groups, in a world of diverse and intermingled communities, state power, media industries, and multinational corporations. In principle, then, cultural studies includes and encompasses literary studies, examining literature as a particular cultural practice. But what kind of inclusion is this? There's a good deal of argument here. Is cultural studies a capacious project within which literary studies gains new power and insight? Or will cultural studies swallow up literary studies and destroy literature? To grasp the problem we need a bit of background about the development of cultural studies. (43)

Culler has of course long been engaged with comparative literature and he is aware of the challenge comparative literature is confronted with at present. In the above two quotations, there is a clear shift of focus from the canonical to the popular. However, Culler rejects the attempts to put literary studies

in opposition to cultural studies, although their attitudes toward the literary canon are radically different: the former wants to preserve the authority of canon, while the latter tries to undermine the established canon by reconstructing it. Culler argues that it is possible for comparatists to do literary studies in a broader cultural context in order to construct a sort of literary culture or an expanded canon. Obviously, his endeavor has renewed the discipline of comparative literature, which has long been in "crisis" and has in recent years often been declared "dead." Further, Haun Saussy posits that "comparative literature has, in a sense, won its battle. It has never been better received in the American university" (4). Indeed, comparative literature has more than survived the threat of being devoured by various "theories" and cultural studies: "The controversy is over. Comparative literature is not only legitimate: now, as often as not, ours is the first violin that sets the tone for the rest of the orchestra. Our conclusions have become other people's assumptions" (4). This is certainly true of the present function of comparative literature in the humanities. However, Saussy also expresses worry about certain developments in the discipline: "But this victory brings little in the way of tangible rewards to the discipline. What comparatists elaborated, argued, and propagated in the laboratories of their small, self-selecting profession has gone out into the world and won over people who have no particular loyalty to institutional bodies of comparative literature. That is grounds both for satisfaction and for a restless kind of disappointment. We may all be comparatists now—and for good reason—but only with a low common denominator. Few think of themselves as primarily comparatists; the accidental or momentary comparatist is not about to give up her day job" (4).

Saussy's argumentation is on the mark: many comparatists are doing cultural studies now instead of traditional comparative literature, be it film studies, postcolonial studies, or popular cultural studies. This is also true of Chinese comparative literature. Furthermore, an increasing number of comparatists use their position within the institution teaching literary courses while writing about topics of their own interest. Thus comparative literature is losing its identity and disciplinary meaning. The traditional literary canon composed of high cultural products has been "hybridized" by postcolonial and other non-Western literary works. More or less the same goes also for today's Chinese literary scholarship. In my view, this has both an upside and a downside: while it may threaten the existence of the discipline, it cannot be denied that the elitist Eurocentric comparative literature should indeed expire and make way for the new comparative literature that has come into being both in the West and the East, working together with area studies and characterized by "crossing the border" as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggests (15-16). As I have argued elsewhere (Wang, "Death"), the resurrection and prosperity of comparative literature as a discipline in China is certainly a case in point.

As for the interactive and dialogic relations between cultural studies and comparative literature, I have addressed previously (e.g., Wang, "Confronting"). But since tremendous changes have taken place during the past ten years both in China and the world, comparative literature today has more or less taken on a new look. To many literary scholars, the future of comparative literature is not so bright as it is challenged by cultural studies because cultural globalization is a direct consequence of economic globalization. It is characterized by spreading Western, especially US-American cultural values over the world and thus in the age of globalization even European cultures are impacted by ubiquitous US-American culture. As a result, world culture is more and more homogenizing with small cultures' national identity becoming more and more obscure (see, e.g., D'haen <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/9>>). So it is not surprising that such an attempt is resisted by the other force: cultural localization. As a matter of fact, globalization in culture cannot be realized unless it is localized in a particular national culture. The cultural changes in China during the past ten years have certainly proved this: as an "imported" and "translated" discipline from the West, comparative literature in China has immediately had its own characteristics and developed in its own unique orientations.

It is true that as long as the project of cultural globalization is in progress, it should be resisted by the attempt of cultural localization. World culture will develop in the context of the two forces being juxtaposed: now conflicting and now communicating, but finally coming to have negotiation and dialogue with these two forces in co-existence. In this way, we might well expect that in the context of globalization, the new framework of world culture in the twenty-first century will be characterized by different cultures coming to have dialogue and merge in some degrees rather than "cultural conflict" predicted by Samuel Huntington in 1993. To this remapping, I posit that Chinese comparatists will

contribute a great deal. In such a cultural context, we could easily find the unique role which has been and will continue to be played by comparative literature: since world culture is developing in a pluralistic direction, comparatists have much to contribute to the future of world culture and literature. In the first half of the twentieth century, along with the rise of the United States, Eurocentrism was broken through, but it was soon replaced by a sort of West-centrism. Comparatists in the East are aware that doing East-West comparative studies of literature and culture is a long-term endeavor, but no easy work and they should not only challenge long-established Eurocentrism and West-centrism, but also fight for their own literary canon. Thus one could say that there is still hope for the future of comparative literature even in the age of globalization in which the world has become a small "global village" and people easily communicate with each other in such a "village."

As a cultural construction and aesthetic representation, literature has enabled and will continue to enable us to construct various forms of artistic production both in the East and West. Contemporary people cannot be only satisfied with plentiful material life, they should enjoy their cultural life in a pluralistic way in order to have more choices in a postmodern society. The reason why Goethe put forward his utopian conjecture of world literature in 1827 is largely because of his getting access to non-Western literary works, including some of the Chinese literary works of minor importance. But even so, he still found something in common with the great tradition of European literature. In the contemporary era, literature is no longer so attractive to people as there are numerous choices or temptations in consumer cultural products. However, literature could offer them entertainment and aesthetic pleasure which they cannot obtain from other means of cultural representation. Since economy could be "globalized" from the West to the East, why not culture "globalized" from the East to the West as Oriental culture was once of a splendid heritage? Speaking historically, a strong economy will not necessarily bring about rich and colorful cultural products although postmodernism does provide people with more choices. In doing cultural studies for us literary scholars, we should adopt a critical attitude toward the impact of various cultural phenomena and always use literary materials as our objects of analysis. So my argument simply lies in the fact that cultural studies, in its narrow sense, comes more or less from literary studies, especially when we speak of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies rising in the 1960s which aims at analyzing people's community life and pointing to the study of popular culture and literature in a critical way.

In "Northrop Frye and Cultural Studies" I discuss how Frye viewed literary study and suggested that although Frye's work predates Hall and Williams, he was one of few far-sighted scholars who took the initiative in putting literary studies in a broader context. By broadening the scope of comparative literature studies, Frye's practice of combining literary studies with a broader perspective has actually paved the way for the possible confluence of comparative literature with cultural studies even prior to the Birmingham School. Another case I should mention is F.R. Leavis, who is generally recognized as a pioneering figure in contemporary cultural studies, despite his elite sense of literary and cultural theory. For Leavis, culture was always in the hands of a few elite intellectuals and it is understandable that Leavis spoke for (canonical) "English" literature and the great tradition of English literature. It is also understandable that Leavis wanted to heighten the general level of ordinary people's culture by offering them a list of canonical literary works. To Leavis, ordinary people can raise their cultural level only through reading a body of canonical literary works for literature could make better persons and educate and even enlighten them with aesthetic pleasure. Obviously this sort of enlightenment project in the present era will not work as literary study itself is in danger. Although later scholars of cultural studies have long surpassed the level of Leavis's elite cultural theory, they cannot forget the pioneering role played by him in putting literary studies in a broader context of cultural studies (Wang, "Northrop Frye"). And the reason why cultural studies could develop after Leavis is largely because they have stepped out of the elitist Leavisian mode of cultural study, pointing to the broad masses of people who "consume" culture and enjoy cultural products, including literary works.

As for various definitions of cultural studies, I refer to the one by Simon During since his definition is frequently quoted in the Chinese context. For During, "cultural studies is not an academic discipline quite like others. It possesses neither a well-defined methodology nor clearly demarcated fields for investigation. Cultural studies is, of course, the study of culture, or, more particularly, the study of contemporary culture" (1). According to this basic definition, cultural studies covers a wide range of areas: ethnic studies dealing especially with postcolonial and diasporic study, gender studies

concerning women study and queer studies, area studies concerning Asian and Pacific literatures and cultures, and media studies dealing with contemporary mass media and internet writing. On the other hand, cultural studies could be done on three levels: exploring theoretical problems of culture itself so as to reconstruct various forms of culture, pointing to contemporary popular and consumer culture so as to enable more people to appreciate and enjoy cultural products, and last but not least, dealing with literary study from cultural and ideological perspectives rather than just from formalist and/or aesthetic perspectives. No doubt, through the impact of cultural studies, the discipline of comparative literature has largely been expanded with cultural elements inserting in literary studies. And in this sense, literature in its traditional sense has no longer been so "pure" with more and more people engaged in analyzing literary works from their own perspective. Since many of the theoretical issues discussed in current cultural studies come from literary studies, why should we maintain that comparative literature studies be opposed to cultural studies?

Obviously, comparatists have already noticed the fact that doing comparative literature studies cannot just confine ourselves to the narrow domain of literature proper for the scope of literature is largely expanded and the traditional literary theory is being replaced by more inclusive critical theory or cultural theory with the latter being closer and closer to cultural studies. The same is true of the discipline of comparative literature. In my view, comparative literature studies in its best sense should be done in a cross-linguistic, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary way and it should not just stick to the "text" in the formalistic sense, but it should deal with the larger "text" of social and ideological sense or "context" (see Tötösy de Zepetnek, "From Comparative" <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1041>>). When comparatists are doing literary studies, they ought to be aware that scholarship cannot be done well without touching cultural and ideological issues, but that it must start with literary phenomena and come, after some theoretical and interdisciplinary analyses, back to literature, thus contributing to the reconstruction of literary theory itself. The practical achievements made by Frye, Leavis, Culler, and Tötösy de Zepetnek have certainly proved this. The same is true of the themes discussed in the past few congresses of both the Chinese Comparative Literature Association and the International Comparative Literature Association / Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée at which cultural issues are attached more and more importance to and deal with more than mere literary phenomena. Indeed, we find that comparatists are on the same ground with cultural studies scholars at least in challenging the old paradigm. Then, one might well be puzzled: what is the future orientation for comparative literature as it is confronted with the challenge of cultural studies? In current US-American scholarship discussing world literature(s) has become an important issue and even one of the most cutting edge theoretical topics, especially along with the acceleration of globalization in literature and culture. In the Chinese context, this issue has also attracted a wide attention in both literary and cultural studies. Two of the phenomenal events that took place in China I should mention here are the two high-level conferences on world literature(s): the Fifth Sino-American Symposium on Comparative Literature was held 12-14 August 2010 in Shanghai with the general theme of "Comparative Literature: Toward a (Re)construction of World Literature" (followed by the publication of selected papers in *Neohelicon: acta comparationis litterarum universarum* [see Wang, *Comparative Literature*]) and the International Conference on the "Rise of World Literature" was held 27-29 July 2011 in Beijing. The coming of world literature(s) into the Chinese context has largely renewed literary studies in China encouraging Chinese writers and scholars to move toward the world in an attempt to promote Chinese literature and its study worldwide.

But as for what world literature(s) mean(s) in the contemporary era still invites various debates and discussions. While the notion of *Weltliteratur* was conceptualized by Goethe in his conversations with Eckermann in 1827, the "worldly" communication between writers and literatures, as well as scholars existed of course prior to Goethe and the adoption of his notion in the first half of the nineteenth century in Europe (see, e.g., Fokkema). Even with regard to the notion of *Weltliteratur* August Ludwig Schlözer used the term already in 1773 (see Schamoni) and Christoph Martin Wieland in 1790 (see Weitz), although it was Goethe who has endowed it with new significance. By 1848, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels used the term in the *Communist Manifesto* to describe the "cosmopolitan character" of bourgeois literary production as a consequence of global economic capitalization. From a disciplinary point of view, world literature is actually the early stage of comparative literature coming out of the process of economic and financial globalization. However, for a long period of time,

according to Franco Moretti, "comparative literature has not lived up to these beginnings. It's been a much more modest intellectual enterprise, fundamentally limited to Western Europe, and mostly revolving around the river Rhine (German philologists working on French literature). Not much more" (54). Dominated by a Eurocentric and then West-centric mode of thinking, world literature was another name of Western literature and the entire East, including such ancient cultures as China and India were excluded from the mapping of world literatures. Thus comparative literature came to a crisis and whose domain became narrower and narrower.

In order to highlight the function of literary and cultural studies in the era of globalization, the issue of world literature has once again been put forward. But this time "world literature cannot be literature, bigger... It has to be different ... world literature is not an object, it's a problem, and a problem that asks for a new critical method: and no one has ever found a method by just reading more texts. That's not how theories come into being; they need a leap, a wager — a hypothesis, to get started" (Moretti 55). In the remapping of world literatures, we should certainly have a comparative perspective and international view on which we could achieve some new advances in literary studies. In today's context of globalization along with the remapping of global culture and world Englishes, re-emphasizing the construction or reconstruction of world literature is particularly significant (on English and global culture, see, e.g., Patil <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1217>>). As we all know, the traditional boundaries of national literatures are being more and more obscured and writers are becoming "hybrids" owing to their mobility physically and intellectually and this shows in fiction increasingly and in the publishing industry everywhere (see, e.g., Sturm-Trigonakis). No literary scholar can claim that he/she studies just one individual national literature without referring to other literatures or social and cultural contexts, for cultural and literary trends have been marked with regional or even global characteristics. In this sense, the field of world literatures also means those literary works with "transnational" or "translational" or global significance, common aesthetic quality and far-reaching social influence. In the process of their traveling and circulation, translation plays an important role and without which many of the canonical literary works might well remain "dead" in the contexts of other cultures and literary traditions or marginalized (see Apter; Wang, "World").

When we talk about world literature(s), we usually adopt two attitudes: cultural relativism and cultural universalism. The former emphasizes the equal value of different national literatures, while the latter lays more emphasis on the universal and common aesthetic and criterion of value judgment, which finds particular embodiment in anthologizing literary works in translation. Although various anthologies of "world literature," especially the popular *Norton Anthology of World Literature* (Puchner, Akbari, Denecke, Dharwadker, Fuchs, Levine, Lawall, Lewis, Wilson) or the *Longman Anthology of World Literature* (Damrosch, Alliston, Brown, du Bois, Hafez, Heise, Pike, Pollock, Robbins, Shirane, Tylus, Yu) in the English speaking world the term is used to market a largely Western canon despite the fact that the past three decades have given rise to a more expansive conception of literary interests and values. Arguably, this is closer to the original sense of the term as used by Goethe and Marx. Similarly, in viewing the acceleration of globalization in culture, one tends to see its homogenizing tendency while overlooking its diversifying aspect which is actually more and more conspicuous in the process of cultural globalization.

Comparatists, even if they master as many as a dozen languages like Goethe and Wellek, still cannot read all the world masterpieces in the original and cannot but depend on translation now and then. Translation will therefore help literary works to be circulated in other cultural contexts so that they will possibly be among world literature. Just as Walter Benjamin pointed out that "for a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life" (72). It is also true and necessary for a writer who is strict with himself/herself to know as much as possible what his/her domestic and international peers have achieved and are doing now. Although as an excellent translator himself (Benjamin co-translated Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* to German), he never expected that the German version on which he spent much time and effort has long been surpassed by several new versions. But his short preface to another translation done by himself entitled "The Task of the Translator" was appreciated by such deconstructionist theorists as Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man. Benjamin is thereby viewed as one of the most influential

deconstructive translation theorists inviting discussions and debates both in the West and China.

Some of the Western Sinologists do think that the reason why contemporary Chinese literature has not produced excellent masterpieces of world renown is largely due to the fact that most of contemporary Chinese writers do not know foreign languages and Sinologist Wolfgang Kubin's — while radical and controversial — underscores this. This has some validity because most Chinese writers active now grew up during the Cultural Revolution in which almost no university education was offered and thus it is not surprising that they cannot be compared with luminaries who worked and published in the 1920s. Further, it is unrealistic for a Chinese writer to write in a foreign language. However, if a writer intends to write not only for his/her own contemporary readers, but for all readers of the world, he/she will at least think about whether the subject matter he/she deals with would be of certain universal significance. Some Chinese writers might well raise another question: Goethe himself did not understand Chinese, but he read Chinese literary works because of which he could put forward his conjecture of world literature). And Goethe read other Oriental literary works he could get access to through either English or French translations. What is more important is that he paid particular attention to the development of non-European literatures. This is why he could have a wide international horizon based on which he put forward his concept of *Weltliteratur*. Given that most of literary works of world significance are available in English translation, today's Chinese writers who can read in English can get aesthetic nourishment and creative inspiration this way rather than wait for Chinese translations. In this sense, I think that writers should at least master English, the *lingua franca* in the present era. And more excellent Chinese literary works should be translated into the major world languages, especially English. Through joint efforts in collaboration with Western Sinologists and publishers, I suggest that the objective of publishing Chinese texts to English and vice versa ought to be a prime undertaking. Since the Chinese economy has been developing by leaps and bounds in the past decades, China has taken on a new look of the world's people and it has made great contributions to world economy. Daniel Vukovich writes that "So, too, let us recall that 'our' relationship to China is overwhelmingly an economic (and political) one" (142). However, China's rise, its status as the "next" superpower and the manufacturer of the world, the buyer of the last resort for U.S. dollars, the second largest economy, and so on, could and should be harnessed to produce translations both ways, Chinese to English and English to Chinese.

Although great achievements have been made in China's comparative literature studies, the presence of China's comparatists is still weak on the global landscape of the discipline. In this aspect, Chinese comparatists in promoting Chinese language and literature world wide should also involve themselves in reconstructing world literature by publishing internationally. Since it is more difficult for Western scholars to master the Chinese language, Chinese scholars ought to publish in English, so that their colleagues would be able to hear their voice and read their scholarship in order to become interested in Chinese literature and culture. This a similar argumentation to what Tötösy de Zepetnek posits in his principles of comparative cultural studies:

The fifth principle of comparative cultural studies is its built-in special focus on English, based on its impact emanating from North American cultural studies which is, in turn, rooted in British cultural studies along with influences from French and German thought. This is a composite principle of approach and methodology. The focus on English as a means of communication and access to information should not be taken as Euro-American-centricity. In the Western hemisphere and in Europe but also in many other cultural (hemi)spheres, English has become the *lingua franca* of communication, scholarship, technology, business, industry, etc. This new global situation prescribes and inscribes that English gain increasing importance in scholarship and pedagogy, including the study of literature. ("From Comparative" <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1041>>)

In conclusion, by joint efforts to translate Chinese literary works to English and other languages, the real age of world literatures would arrive and Goethe, the forefather of *Weltliteratur* and comparative literature, would be at ease. I close with a quotation from my *Translated Modernities: Literary Perspectives on Globalization and China*: "A cultural strategy for Chinese intellectuals to deal with globalization is to realize first of all that we are now caught up in an age that has an incalculable impact on us. Yet, we cannot be dragged along indiscriminately or uncritically by these strong waves. This being so, the proper attitude might be to make full use of globalization to develop Chinese culture, while preventing its cultural tradition from being colonized when attempting to popularize Chinese culture worldwide" (72).

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