

## Variation Theory and Comparative Literature: A Book Review Article about Cao's Work

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**Ning WANG**

**Variation Theory and Comparative Literature:  
A Book Review Article about Cao's Work**

Although comparative literature as a discipline is flourishing in China to the extent that it occupies a prominent position both institutionally and intellectually, this is little known in the West. In the book review article at hand I discuss Shunqing Cao's (曹顺庆) books published in Chinese as representative work with regard to the prominent position comparative literature holds in Chinese scholarship today with focus on his 2014 *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*.

In comparative literature and literary theory in Chinese, Cao — the first to obtain a doctorate in comparative literature in 1987 at Sichuan University and his dissertation published a year later as *中西比较诗学* (Chinese and Western Comparative Poetics) is even from today's point of view not out of date (the book was republished in 2010; see also Cao, *比较文学概念* [Introduction to Comparative Literature]). Cao is known for the conceptualization of 失语症 (aphasia) that invited long-standing debates and controversies. Cao theorized "variation studies" although he is not necessarily the first to adopt this research methodology in practical research (see, e.g., Xie). Of particular importance is his 2013 *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* because it is published in English and thus accessible to a wide range of comparatists. The book is the result of his studies of comparative literature and theoretical construction including books such as his 2006 *比较文学教程* (Course in Comparative Literature), his 2010 *比较文学学科史* (History of Comparative Literature), his 2011 *迈向比较文学第三阶段* (Towards the Third Stage of Comparative Literature) and the collected volumes *中西比较诗学史* (with Xingming Wu, 2008) (History of Chinese and Western Comparative Poetics) and the 2012 four-volume *中外文论史* (A History of Chinese and Foreign Literary Theory).

I believe that Cao's *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* is an important contribution to the discipline and I am suggesting this based on my understanding of the discipline's theoretical status quo in English-language scholarship. Let us first look at how some of our Western colleagues think about this book. As indicated by Cao, he was advised by Douwe Fokkema who visited China many times including Sichuan University and encouraged him to rewrite in English what he has published in Chinese so that his ideas would be known in global scholarship. Indeed, the significance of Cao's book should be recognized as Fokkema points out in the foreword that "Cao's book aims to open a dialogue with scholars abroad, in Europe, North and South America, India, Russia, South Africa, and the Arab world" (*The Variation* v). For although there were and are a number of Chinese comparatists who put forward interesting ideas in constructing various theoretical frameworks, their ideas cannot be read by those who do not have a good command of Chinese and, unfortunately, this has been and remains the case in the West at large. Thus the language barrier results in a limited interchange of ideas between Chinese scholars and their Western counterparts. As Fokkema says, it would be a "gross mistake not to take up the challenge of Cao's erudite exposition" for his "argument contains many pertinent observations, and where we have reason to disagree, we must express our own views so as to continue the discussion" (v).

I assume that Cao does not expect his Western colleagues to agree with him or apply some of his theoretical notions. Instead, what I gather from my conversations with him is that he intends to attract scholarly debate with Western comparatists in the context that Chinese scholars have been doing something different from Western comparative literature scholarship. I think if this goal could be realized, Chinese scholarship in comparative literature would achieve something that eluded it until now and, more importantly, perhaps the usual situation whereby Chinese scholars simply import Western thought would at least be modified. In the past, Chinese comparatists always tried to seek homogeneity, but now they will try to seek heterogeneity and in this sense the publication of Cao's book makes a significant breakthrough in comparative literature studies not only in China, but in general.

Before I elaborate on Cao's variation theory, I present a brief retrospect on the course of comparative literature in China (see also Chen and Sheng <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss6/14>>; Moore <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss6/6>>; Shang

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss6/19>>; Wang, Miaomiao

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss6/17>>; Wang, Ning; Wang and Liu

<<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1882>>; Zhang

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss6/20>>; Zhang and Yue

<<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1881>>; Zhou and Tong <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1092>>). China's comparative literature started with the publication of Lu Xun's (鲁迅) *摩罗诗力说* (Forces of Romantic Poetry). However, others have a different opinion and they think that Guowei Wang (王国维) — who published *红楼梦评论* (*Review of The Dream of the Red Chamber*) and who applied Schopenhauer's philosophical and aesthetic theory to interpret the classical Chinese novel — should be regarded as the first comparatist in Chinese scholarship. Further, comparative literature was taught at some leading Chinese universities in the 1930s as there were Chinese scholars in the field of literary studies who obtained degrees at Western universities and then started to teach in China such as 范存忠 (Cunzhong Fan) who provided courses on Sino-British literary relations at Southeast University (later Central University), 吴宓 (Mi Wu) who taught English literature in comparison with classical Chinese literature at Tsinghua University, and 朱光潜 (Guangqian Zhu) who offered courses on Western aesthetics and the psychology of literature and art at Peking University and Tsinghua University. Their pioneering works paved the way for the recovery and development of comparative literature in China in the 1980s although they did not necessarily publish precisely on comparative literature.

Following the Cultural Revolution, China's opening up to the outside world, and economic reform comparative literature has been resumed owing to the efforts of scholars such as 钱锺书 (Zhongshu Qian), 季羨林 (Xianlin Ji), 杨周翰 (Zhouhan Yang), and 乐黛云 (Daiyun Yue), to name a few. At the time when few scholars of classical Chinese literature studies realized the importance of comparative literature, Cao took the initiative to apply a comparative approach to study Chinese classics. While Cao was inspired by the work of such as James Liu and Earl Miner, in his later work he transcended what he presented in his 1988 *Chinese and Western Comparative Poetics* where he interpreted Western critical concepts from a Chinese perspective. Cao's objective to develop a home-grown Chinese comparative literature culminated in his 2012 four-volume edited collection *中外文论史* (*A History of Chinese and Foreign Literary Theory*). I posit that this work is similar and comparable to the International Comparative Literature Association / Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée's series of *Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages* (for a discussion of the series see Gimber <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss7/20>>).

Cao's edited volumes cover a wide range of geographical locations including China, Greece, India, ancient Rome, Egypt, Persia, Britain, France, Germany, Korea, the United States, etc., thus crossing the boundaries of many languages and cultures. The strength of the work — although historiographical — lies in that it for the first time put Chinese literary theory in a broad context of world literary theory highlighting its different characteristics and unique position. It also demonstrates that to write a comprehensive history of world literary theory should not overlook the literary theory and criticism in those non-Western countries, especially China, where there is its own autonomous body of literary theory with *文心雕龙* (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*) by 刘勰 (Xie Liu) as its landmark. It is not surprising that *The Literary Mind* occupies about 180 pages in *A History of Chinese and Foreign Literary Theory* because Cao's specialty is classical Chinese literature and critical thought (although some of the equally important Western theoretical works do not occupy the similar length of discussion; however, this is important because there is enough scholarship in Chinese with regard to Western thought, but little about Chinese thought). Since the collection is available in Chinese only, it has not made an impact outside the Chinese context.

Cao is not satisfied with merely analyzing some literary and critical texts in a parallel way or summarize what other people have already done in history. *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* is a result of his theoretical reflection and what I emphasize here is that after some comparative studies of Chinese and Western literary theories, Cao wants to make his own theoretical construction. As he mentions in the book, some Chinese scholars, such as 谢天振 (Tianzhen Xie) and 严绍盪 (Shaodong Yan), have already compared Chinese literature with other national literatures in an attempt to find something different rather than similar, but it was Cao

who tried first to theorize these phenomena and presented theoretical constructions in Chinese. Fokkema points to this writing that "The variation theory is an answer to the one-sided emphasis on influence studies by the former 'French school' as well as to the American focus on aesthetic interpretation, inspired by New Criticism, which regrettably ignored literature in non-European languages" (v), thus pushing current international comparative literature to a new stage, namely that of cross-cultural comparative studies of different literatures. Further, while there were also "excellent cross-cultural studies, such as by the American Japanologist Earl Miner or by the Chinese James J.Y. Liu teaching in the United States, by the Japanese Yoshikawa Kojiro on Song poetry, or by the American Sinologist Stephen Owen on Tang poetry. They all discuss the phenomena of both homogeneity and heterogeneity and of sameness and difference, and they had a keen eye for the variation which Cao Shunqing provides with a theoretical framework" (Fokkema vi; on Owen's work see also Eoyang <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/16>>; Li and Guo <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2175>>).

Cao sums up the various phenomena of variations which appear in Chinese and Western literatures: 1) the variation of literary phenomena across different nations, 2) the variation of literary phenomena across different languages, 3) the variation on the level of literary texts, 4) the variation on the level of culture, and 5) the variation on the level of civilization. People might well find more aspects of such variation, but these five aspects are enough to indicate that to do comparative literature crossing linguistic and cultural boundaries one should not only seek homogeneity, but also heterogeneity and the latter is more and more tempting in the current era of globalization when global cultures are developing in a pluralistic orientation. So as comparatists, we should not only compare different literatures within a similar cultural tradition or civilization, but also pay more attention to comparing those belonging to different cultural traditions and civilizations. In this way, Cao raises a challenge to current comparative literature scholarship. Cao argues that "the study of literary variation offers a new angle, new method and new theory to comparative literature and also is a great breakthrough in worldwide comparative literature study" (*The Variation* 93). Further, Cao postulates that variation study can be applied with regard to influence study, analogy/parallel study, the variation in linguistic translation, the variation in exotic imagery, and variation in cultural filtration and misunderstanding" (*The Variation* 87), that "current studies of comparative literature should start from the logic of Chinese literary theories and adhere to its own discourse norms and value positions" (232), and that "comparison between Chinese and Western civilizations is not to find out the specific 'sameness' or otherness, nor is it to establish comparability based on 'sameness' like the French school did, nor is it to excessively pursue heterogeneity and even head off for 'irrelevance'" (236). Inspired by the recent rise of the notion of world literature(s), Cao highlights the function of translation in reconstructing the notion and practice of world literatures, but unfortunately he does not elaborate much. In sum, I think that from among Cao's criteria especially translation studies and imagology studies deserve special attention.

As to what characterizes the proposed Chinese school of comparative literature, Cao does not elaborate much as he has done elsewhere in his Chinese-language publications, but the reason why he proposed variation studies is to characterize the proposed Chinese school with this new approach: "the ultimate goal of variation is to achieve harmony and even the effect of 'harmonious yet different' through 'seeking for otherness' and mutual elucidation and variation among literatures from heterogeneous civilization. It should be commonly accepted that facts should speak for themselves and comparison is an implicit inspiration. Therefore, the essential relation between civilization heterogeneity and the variation of comparative literature is to first acknowledge commensurability and otherness and then to establish comparability" (*The Variation* 236). As we know, the Chinese school was first proposed by scholars such as John J. Deeney and Peng-hsiang Chen, but their work did not resonate in Western scholarship. But today things are different: along with the rapid development of the Chinese economy as the second largest economy and one of the world's powers perhaps more attention will be paid in the study of literature and culture to Chinese thought. While the long-standing bias of Orientalism still dominates, the value of Chinese culture and literature must be acknowledged and incorporated in comparative literature studies and it is here where Cao's work is timely and relevant.

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