


Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies: A Book Review Article about Wang's Work

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Tian ZHANG

Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies: A Book Review Article about Wang's Work

While Ning Wang's (王宁) work is known in the West because of his numerous English-language publications, his Chinese-language work is less known for obvious reasons. Thus in the book review article at hand I focus on his publications in Chinese. Wang's research covers a wide range of theoretical issues including Chinese and Western literary theory, cultural studies, globalization studies, and translation studies. In China, comparative literature was not considered as a discipline until the early 1980s. Its rise is marked by three events: 1) it was the 1983 Triennial Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association / Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée when Chinese scholarship emerged in the West. Since then, Chinese scholars have been playing an increasingly important role in the discipline, 2) the establishment of the institutional presence of comparative literature: the Chinese Comparative Literature Association was founded in 1985 and it has so far a membership of over 800, publishes the journal *中国比较文学* (Comparative Literature in China) and a series books in the discipline, and 3) the establishment of comparative literature as a discipline by the education of young scholars in comparative literature in China proper, as well as abroad. With its rapid development overwhelming China, universities established departments and programs in the discipline on the undergraduate and graduate levels (on comparative literature in Chinese see also 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 and Liu <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1882>>; Wang, Miaomiao <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss6/17>>; Zhou and Tong <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1092>>).

I begin with Wang's 2000 book *比较文学与当代文化批评* (Comparative Literature and Contemporary Cultural Criticism), a collection of his articles published previously. The story that emerges is that of dramatically changing responses to the issue of comparative literature both in China and in the world. With the policy of reform and opening-up, there is more ground for the research of comparative literature in China because of the enthusiasm of exchange and communication with the outside world. It is in this context that Wang linked comparative literature in the West with that of comparative culture in Chinese by highlighting the importance of the discipline within the context of China as a developing industrial power. In terms of humanities research in China, he also argued for interdisciplinary research. Further, when discussing cultural relativism and multiculturalism, Wang urged for dialogue between the East and West. Wang revisited traditional centers of comparative literature with the distinction of referring to the Continental School, the US-American School, and the Oriental School (Comparative Literature and Contemporary 51) instead of the traditional view of the French, German, and US-American schools. According to Wang, the French-centered Continental School was characterized by the empiricist approach of influence and reception studies, the US-American as concerned with parallel comparison and theoretical analysis based on traditional hermeneutics, and the Oriental School with China, India, and Japan at the center as interested in parallel studies and poetic dialogue and including influence studies. This highlight on the role of the Oriental School injected new energy into comparative literature especially by bringing prospects of research in Asian countries. However, what is missing in Wang's discussion in my opinion is detail about the new ways of research in the Oriental School. At the same time, what is relevant in Wang's view on the three different schools of the discipline is that he transcended then available views of a specific Chinese comparative literature as for example in Peng-hsiang Chen's 1992 *From Thematics to the "Chinese School" of Comparative Literature*. In *Comparative Literature and Contemporary Cultural Criticism* Wang also chronicled the then evolving status of comparative literature in China. Wang argued that the marginal status of comparative literature in China was changing and in 2000 this view was most needed to facilitate the further development of the discipline.

Wang attaches particular importance to theoretical issues and this runs through all of his books. For example, as one of the most popular Western literary theories, psychoanalysis reaches a vast group of readers in China as well. In his 2002 *文学与精神分析学* (Literature and Psychoanalysis) Wang presented a critical introduction to psychoanalysis and its relationship with literature. Relevant is that Wang presented his views including Chinese points of reference such as the work of playwright Yu Cao (曹禺), whose dramas contained much material with regard to psychology. In the first part of the book Wang discusses Western writers whose work are prone to be read with Freud's psychoanalytical approach. Further, Wang summarized Western literary criticism in which the psychoanalytical approach is traceable: Marxist criticism by the like of Erich Fromm and Terry Eagleton; psychoanalytical criticism proper by the like of Otto Rank, Jacques Lacan, and Norman Holland; structural and post-structural criticism like that of Jacques Derrida, cultural and literary criticism like those of Lionel Trilling and Alfred Kazin, and aesthetic criticism like that of Ernst Gombrich. Many of Wang's critical views drawing on Western scholarship were for the first time introduced in Chinese scholarship and in this and in his other books Wang excels in communicating and transferring Western thought to Chinese scholarship.

Translation has, in a traditional sense, been regarded as a language-oriented practice by which we transfer texts from one language into another. But to study it from a cultural perspective is what comparatists are engaged in. The traditional concept of translation has been challenged with the advent of translation studies in that it expanded to accommodate various processes not constrained within the linguistic realm, but instead within a wider cultural context. The "cultural turn" is a theoretical and methodological shift in translation studies which gained broad recognition with the works of such as by Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere who posited that "Now the questions have changed, the object of study has been redefined, what is studied is the text, embedded within its network of both source and target cultural signs and in this way Translation Studies has been able to utilize the linguistic approach and move out beyond it" (*Translation* 12). Wang imported to Chinese scholarship Bassnett's and Lefevere's notion of "translation turn" (*Constructing* 1) in his 2006 *文化翻译与经典阐释* (Cultural Translation and the Interpretation of Canonical Works) and introduced a theoretical framework and methodology that in his opinion represented one of the most advanced possibilities for the study of literature and comparative literature. In *Cultural Translation and the Interpretation of Canonical Works* Wang presented detailed analyses and interpretations such as the translated works of Whitman and Ibsen. Wang posited that the study of literature should be rooted in a national culture so as to be fully appreciated and to spur a change in the interaction between the canonical works and local literary traditions. Further, Wang argued that because the focus in translation shifted from language to culture, it is necessary to draw on current theoretical developments in translation studies.

In his 2009 *后理论时代的文学与文化研究* (Literary and Cultural Studies in the "Post-theory" Era) Wang proposed strategies for China's humanities and social science research from the aspect of East/West exchange of ideas. He argued that Chinese scholars in the discipline of comparative literature and the fields of translation and cultural studies are responsible for taking pains to translate foreign literature into Chinese and vice versa and should pay special attention to the influence of translation in history of Chinese culture, scholarship, and the practices of translation. However, what I miss in *Literary and Cultural Studies* is that Wang does not elaborate in more detail about aspects of the "translation turn" from theoretical and epistemological aspects. Further, Wang centers on the key word "post-theory" with a discussion on the aftermath of the "after-theory" proposed by Terry Eagleton in 2003 and Wang discusses this topic ranging from comparative literature to cultural studies and from literary theory to critical practices.

With elaborations on a variety of theories within the context of globalization and glocalization — such as consumer society, ecocriticism, literary ecological ethics construction, postcolonialism, Neo-confucianism, contemporary cultural studies and comparative literature in China, world literatures and translation — Wang envisions a bright future for literary and cultural research. In the first section of *Literary and Cultural Studies* Wang highlights different theories in the post-theoretical era including new perspectives in post-colonial theory, gender studies, and diasporic writing. In Wang's opinion cultural studies opened new ground in cross-cultural research and thus raises

challenges to comparative literature in the traditional sense. Wang also takes issue with opinions such as by Bassnett and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who posited that comparative literature is "dead" and argues that the discipline would revive itself if performed in interdisciplinarity. Wang claims that traditional nation-centered comparative literature and its Eurocentrism is sure to come to an end with a new comparative literature focusing on world literatures.

In the third and fourth parts of *Literary and Cultural Studies* Wang takes us to the present day when comparative literature and cultural studies are being reconfigured in order to reflect the post-theoretical era particularly in interdisciplinary studies. Here, I should mention that it is curious that Wang makes no reference to Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek's notion of interdisciplinarity elaborated on in his 1998 *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application* (see, e.g., the chapter "Comparative Literature as/and Interdisciplinarity," see also "The New") or his 1999 notion of "comparative cultural studies" in which Tötösy de Zepetnek proposed a "merger" of comparative literature and cultural studies ("From Comparative" <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1041>>), a similar approach as to what Wang proposes. Specifically with regard to cultural studies in China, Wang describes three periods, namely 1) origin and introduction through translation, 2) moving toward an international dialogue and intercultural exchange, and 3) the institutionalization and "globalization" of Chinese cultural studies.

At the beginning of the 1990s cultural studies was introduced to China from the West right after the introduction and translation of a variety of Western postmodern theories and trends. Wang also postulates an "iconological turn" in literary and cultural studies and the study of visual culture. People's visual perception has undergone much change in the era of information and technology and in Wang's opinion this provides a new perspective for cultural studies. In the last part of *Literary and Cultural Studies* Wang discusses the notion of world literature(s), an approach that has acquired much interest since the 1990s and particularly since the 2000s (see, e.g., (see, e.g., Damrosch; D'haen; D'haen, Damrosch, Kadir; D'haen, Domínguez, Thomsen; Lawall; Moretti; Pizer; Sturm-Trigonakis; Thomsen; see also Tötösy de Zepetnek and Mukherjee). Revisiting David Damrosch's criteria of world literature in *What Is World Literature?* (2003), Wang takes Damrosch's notion into the Chinese context suggesting that world literature is best defined as 1) the established canon of literature regardless of culture or language, 2) a global and cross-cultural perspective and a comparative horizon in the study, evaluation, and criticism of literature in general, and 3) aspects of the processes of production, circulation, selection, and translation of literary texts. Although in principle Wang's revised criteria of world literature is similar to that of Damrosch, the difference is that Wang elaborates on the importance of Chinese literature as world literature, a position that has gained traction only recently in Western scholarship (on this, see also Eoyang <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/17>>). Hence Wang's approach is relevant to the evolution of the notion of world literature(s) from all traces of Eurocentrism towards dialogue between literatures and cultures on equal footing.

In his 2011 *比较文学：理论思考与文学阐释* (*Comparative Literature: Theoretical Thinking and Literary Interpretation*) Wang broadens the field of comparative literature and locates it within the larger context of globalization. Wang departs from the conventional approach of defining comparative literature solely in terms of their origins and constructs and contextualizes the discipline within the historical, cross-cultural, and multi- and interdisciplinary background. Further, Wang reaffirms the necessity of interdisciplinary comparative literature through illustrating the relationship of literature and the other arts with other disciplines and fields in the humanities and social sciences. In the first part of the book Wang focuses on the theoretical reflection and construction in comparative literature. Part two involves in the comparison and dialogue between East and the West. Wang offers his own theoretical reconstruction of globalization by referring to its characteristics in the Chinese practice: 1) globalization as a way of global economic operation and development, 2) globalization as a historical process that started long before the twentieth century, 3) globalization as a gradual process of financial marketization and political democratization, 4) globalization as a critical concept, 5) globalization as a narrative category, 6) globalization as a cultural construction, and 7) globalization as a theoretical discourse.

In a conventional sense, in Chinese scholarship and public discourse "globalization" means Westernization, but so in the context of US-Americanization. Instead, Wang proposes that since globalization is a theoretical discourse, it shall not be taken as a one-way dimension or solely within the Western context. Thus Wang posits that instead of "a journey from the West to China" it should be "a journey from China to the world" (*Comparative Literature: Theoretical* 150; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). He also advocates the importance of the reconstruction of Neo-Confucian discourse in the context of postcolonial globalization. Wang also summarizes four areas covered in the Chinese context with regard to the range and content of cultural studies: ethnic studies including studies of postcolonial, minority, and diasporic writing; area studies including Asian and Pacific studies; gender studies including studies of gay and lesbian theory and literature; and media studies of cinema, television, and the internet.

In part three of *Comparative Literature: Theoretical Thinking and Literary Interpretation* Wang discusses translation studies in the context of comparative literature and in part four Wang elaborates on the reception of comparative literature with specific case studies. In his view, the globalization of material, cultural, and intellectual production accompanied by the negation of Eurocentrism resulted in the rise of Eastern cultures and literatures and this suggests the reemergence of the notion of world literature(s). As to how to bring Chinese literature to the world, Wang suggests that "We may as well think of translating Chinese literature not only on the interlingual level, but on the intercultural level for the latter plane will highlight Chinese literature and culture before the world, while the former with its attentiveness to linguistic rendering will enable Chinese literature to become better known to the non-Chinese-speaking world (216).

In conclusion, Wang's work about comparative literature in Chinese represents not only the importation of Western theoretical thinking to Chinese scholarship per se, but because of his adjustments and rethinking of Western thought for and in the Chinese context goes beyond adaptation and importation. While with regard to his earlier books Wang's is known for "translating" and introducing Western theories to Chinese scholarship, in his later books there are many aspects and perspectives which result in equal dialogues with his Western counterparts. Further, one of his recurrent themes is with regard to the importance of the translation of Chinese literature to Western languages thus to achieve a "journey from China to the world" (*Comparative Literature: Theoretical* 150) and this includes not only the translation of literary texts, but also of Chinese theoretical thought.

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