

# Positivism and Variation: Literary Communication and Propagation at Heterogeneous Cultural Context

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The study of the international literary relations in comparative literature includes not only the positivistic relations of different nations and different literary systems, but also the relations of variation among different literatures when it comes to the cross-civilization heterogeneity. Therefore, the positivistic approach and that of variation in the study of international literary relations constitute the two indispensable pillars in this field.

*Keywords:* international literary relation, positivism, cross cultural communication, heterogeneous cultural context

## Introduction

The study of the international literary relations is the focus of the comparative literature from the very beginning. While the traditional literary research is confined to the literary study of only one particular country, comparative literature breaks through the boundaries of time and space from an international angle, working on the literary communication and mutual influences among literatures of different countries, languages and cultures. From the positivism study founded by the French school to the cross-civilization heterogeneity study of the Chinese school, it can be told that both the perspective of positivism and variation are the indispensable parts in the study of the international literary relations in comparative literature. That is to say, the study of the international literary relations in comparative literature includes not only the positivistic relations of different nations and different literary systems, but also the relations of variation among different literatures when it comes to the cross-civilization heterogeneity. Thus the positivistic approach and that of variation in the study of international literary relations constitute the two indispensable pillars in this field.

## “International Literary Relation” From the Positivistic Perspective

The influence study based on factual evidence originates from the French school in the early 20th century and is one of the means of the traditional study of the history of international literary relations, which focuses on the relations and mutual influences among different literatures. Represented by scholars such as Paul Van Tieghem, Jearl-Marie Carré, M. F. Guyard and under influence of the ideology of “world literature” proposed by Goethe, the French schools advocate a study of literature beyond the boundary of countries. Also, it preaches the approach positivism to the influence study and has established a set of strict theoretical system of positivistic study in comparative literature, which provides the literary study with a brand new perspective.

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Since the main features of positivism of the French school have been discussed in details in the previous sections, it will not be repeated here.

Positivistic study is continuously challenged, questioned and criticized since the birth of its application in the study of comparative literature by French school in the process of its formation. But it has obtained great achievements in the early stage in that it has enabled literary study to trespass the confinement of the national literature and to focus on the “factual evidence” between literatures of two countries. However, this method at the same time has limited the scope of the related study to a very narrow one.

After breaking through the confinement of national literature, the comparative literature has trapped in the confinement of the study of the international relations instead of striding into a broader field. In order to confront the challenges uttered by some scholars like Benedetto Croce and guard the “scientism” and “accuracy” of its academic foundation, the French scholars draw the “border” of comparative literature, restricting it in terms of subject, methods and purpose of its research so that it can be limited in a relatively narrow “domain”. (CAO, 2001, p. 158)

Henry Remak, a noted American comparatist, also criticized the excessive preference to the positivism, and questioned the methodology of “science” and “positivism” of the French school from the aesthetic and artistic angle. Remak indicated that,

...comparative literature advocated by French school is a historical discipline about literary history instead of an aesthetic discipline about literary criticism. It equates comparative literature with factual connection in the matter of objects of study, and it excludes aesthetic analysis, only making empirical criticism in terms of methods. Therefore, comparative literature is only the study of origins and influences, causes and effects, which radically excludes the literary values and aesthetic analysis of the literary works, thus disables us from studying a single artistic work on the whole. (Remak, 1986, p. 66)

Rene Wellek, another renowned literary critic of the American school, also criticized the French school in matter of the nature of the national literary relations and its methodology. He points out that,

...comparison should not be only confined to the historically factual connection, as the recent practice of linguists to the researchers of literature, since the values of comparison lie not only in the study of influence based on factual evidence, they also exist in typological equivalent comparison of the linguistic phenomena without historical connection. (Wellek, 1985, p. 133)

Aiming at the French school’s methodology of dismissing aesthetic analysis, Wellek remarks in his article *The Crisis of Comparative Literature* that “the authentic literary study concerns standards and quality of aesthetics, rather than lifeless facts” (Wellek, 1986, p. 28). He says that “we must take a serious look at literariness, for it is the core issue of aesthetics as well as literature and arts” (Wellek, 1986, p. 28).

Apart from that, the positivism with its tendency of Euro-centrism and France-centrism adopted by the French school is also under criticism of other school.

For a long time, the French school has restricted the scope of comparative literature merely in Europe, excluding Slavic literature, Chinese literature and Oriental literature as a whole. It is argued that the real impact and factual connection only exist within the same cultural system. Outside the same circle, what one can study is only the occasional coincidence which can not lead to scientific conclusion. (CAO, 2001, p. 167)

Remak, also pointed out that “the starting point of the French school is French Literature, whose main concern is French literature’s oversea influences and the foreign literature’s contribution to French literature” (Remak, 1986, p. 74). Wellek also puts forward sharp criticism to the motivation of nationalism of French school. He criticizes that,

...the frequently showed primary patriotism in comparative literature study in many countries, such as France, Italy and Germany, causes an abnormal phenomenon of treating comparative literature as a cultural credit book. It intrigues strong desires to get credits for one's motherland by means of demonstrating the extensive influences that one's motherland has on other countries, or in a more subtle way, by means of proving that one's motherland tops others in attraction to the masters and can better understand them. (Wellek, 1985, p. 129)

Besides the national psychological effect, the reason on a deeper level for the tendency of French school's Euro-centrism and French-centrism roots in that: only the literary relations within Europe have sufficient positive "facts" to be collected and organized, and only with that can one draw out the "route" that Van Tieghem said of literature influence. The literature outside Europe lacks concrete "dissemination study" facts, so it is more difficult when the positivism study is applied.

Although the study of international literary relations advocated by the French school breaks through the boundaries of country and nation on the basis of early theories, and has expanded the study of the national literature into the field of international literary relations, contributing indelibly to the development of comparative literature, it is confined to study of factual influences and to the positivistic methodology with the "facts" as basis, as well as to the narrow stand of Euro-centralism and French-centralism. These limitations impede them from studying the international literary relations in a deeper level in the context of globalization, and stop people from looking into the variation relations which are generated by the literature dissemination in the context of cross-civilization heterogeneity. As a result, the common laws of the world literature can not be revealed with broader views and scientific theories. Despite the fact that the criticism of American school on French school's positivism study has expanded the space of comparative literature and has initiated comparative literature to pay attention to the aesthetic nature of literature and arts, the American school, like the French school, still only study the literary comparison within the same circle of civilization, failing to put heterogeneity of cross-civilization into consideration. Thus it greatly limits the further development of comparative literature. While it holds the so-called "cosmopolitanism" and opposes the "Euro-centralism" and "nationalism" of the French school, the American school, as a matter of fact, also consciously or unconsciously shows the signs of "west-centralism" or "neo-colonialism". Therefore, it is impossible for the American school to meet its promises of achieving cosmopolitanism by literary comparison.

Undoubtedly, after the French school, the American school has founded a new "institutionalization trend" in the theories of this discipline. After breaking the narrow study space of the French school, however, it forms a new encirclement which excludes the cultural exploration of origin of literature and cross study of Western and Eastern culture, etc. In other words, the American school, after solving "the second crisis" of comparative literature, brews "the third crisis" the disciplinary theories. It is an inexorable trend to break through the new encirclement in comparative literature theories built by the American school in the cross-cultural period of comparative literature. (CAO, 2001, p. 192)

Besides, in terms of methods, the American school has excessively misled the comparative study. Professor Gu Zhengkun of Beijing University comments that,

...the American school's inappropriate exaggeration of the role the hybrid comparative literature plays infinitely extends the boundaries of comparative literature. It equals the objects of comparative literature with almost all human's cultural domains, which would ultimately dissolve the discipline itself. If the comparative literature is everything, then it is nothing. (GU, 2001, p. 6)

The greatest drawback of positivistic study, of course, is its overlooking of variation study, which is the topic of the next section.

### **The Other Pillar of “International Literary Relations”: Relations of Variation**

The variation theory is the latest trend and direction of the international comparative literature study. It is a new theoretical breakthrough for cross-civilization study as well as a major theoretical innovation for the development of comparative literature. First proposed in 2005, the variation theory is established on positivism of French school's study and Parallel Approach of the American school. It comes into being in the context of the disputation between the French and the American school, of the challenges that resulted from the impact of the reception aesthetics on the traditional comparative literature study and of the new crisis that the comparative literature encounters in the globalization context. The theoretical proposition of the variation study transcends the disputation between the French school and the American school about the “external positivistic study” and the “internal aesthetics study”. Also, it crosses the barriers of the French school's Euro-centralism and nationalism as well as the West-centralism exemplified by the following American school, makes an expanding stride in the further development of comparative literature, and opens up a broad prospect for the study of the international literary relations in the heterogeneous civilization context.

After the American school challenges French school's positivism, the reception aesthetics theories proposed by Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser in the second half of the 20th century exert enormous impacts on the positive influence study of comparative literature. Casting away the traditional models that are author-oriented and text-oriented, the reception aesthetics focuses on the end of reception of literature—the readers as its study objects, studying on the readers' value orientation, aesthetic taste, cultural background, knowledge structure as well as the perception and reception of the text.

While the influence study of the French school emphasizes the literary influence and the input from the country of influence source to other countries in the transnational literary communication, the influence study of reception aesthetics focuses on the literary selection, filtration, reformation and transformation of one country to the foreign literature, including an overall inspection of its cultural particularities, ideology, historical context and so on. (CAO, 2006a, p. 118)

However, what is the relation between reception aesthetics and positivistic influence study? Which model should it belong to in the study?

Actually, the reception study has countless subtle connections with influence study, but it can't be simply put into the category of influence study. While the influence study focuses on the positivistic literary relations study, the reception study emphasizes on the variation of the literary relations. (CAO, 2006a, p. 118)

The literary variation is everywhere. Besides the certain positivistic influence, there are many other uncertain elements that would affect the transnational literary communication besides the influences of cultural filtration, translation and reception. Gustave Lanson, a noted French literary historian says that “the real influence is the literary state in one country when its literary mutation can not be explained by its usual literary tradition or the author's own original creation.” Talking about the variation in literature dissemination, Professor Hu Yamin from the Humanities School of Central China Normal University comments in *The Course Comparative Literature* that

...the dissemination of literature is not a linear or equivalent process. It is nearly impossible to be identical with the spirit of the original works no matter it is the dissemination of foreign literature in homeland or the dissemination of homeland literature in foreign countries. Variation happens. The recipient would inevitably choose, receive, and reject the sender's works selectively. Theoretically, the more the intermediaries exist in the reception process, the greater the variations would be. In some perspective, variation is an absolute. (HU, 2004, p. 67)

In *The Course Comparative Literature* of which Professor Cao Shunqing is the chief editor, he defines the variation of comparative literature, together with literariness as “the pivots of the discipline, the variation of comparative literature explores the internal laws of literature by means of studying the variation in literary communication between different countries and cultures” (CAO, 2006b, p. 97). In the book, Professor Cao Shunqing classifies five aspects, namely, variation of culture, language, transnational and cross-civilization image, literary text and literary foreignization, as the main domains of variation study and elaborates on them one by one. Firstly, variation of culture means the filtration and misreading of another culture. More elaborately, it refers to the influences that the recipient’s different cultural background and cultural traditions have on the selection, transformation, replacement and penetration of the received information during the literature communication process, and it also means the counter-action that is formed by the creative reception of the recipient when one culture influences another one. It is the key factor for the variation, loss and misreading when the literature of one country disseminated into another country by intermediaries (CAO, 2006b, pp. 99-100). Secondly, language variation means the variation produced by the transformation of the literature from one country into another, which is also the reception process of the translated literature. The misreading, mistranslation and “creative treason” caused by the translator’s cultural awareness and value orientation can be categorized into the Translation Studies or Medio-Translatology. Thirdly, transnational and cross-civilization variation means the images of other countries reflected in one country’s literary works and the imagination from the authors and groups on other countries and nations. Daniel-Henri Pageaux, the French imagologist calls it “Les imaginaires sociaux”. According to his understanding, image is a cultural fact for it is the image of others, and it is also the cultural group image. It is of some significance in the symbolism world in which it plays a very important role. The symbolism world which Pageaux calls “Les imaginaires” is inseparable with all the social and cultural organizations, because it is what the society uses to make self-inspection, self-writing and imagination (Pageaux, 1999, p. 124). The imaginary image it is, thus variation is inevitable. Fourthly, literary text variation means the variation produced by the reciprocal influences between different literary texts or literary traditions. The variation is based on the reception theories but also differs from it. Built on the reception theories, it places emphasis on the readers’ participation and their understanding and appreciation of the texts. Meanwhile, it pays attention to the readers’ transnational, interdisciplinary and cross-civilization attributes. Fifthly, the literary domestic appropriation means the deeper variation after the literature of one country being filtered, translated and received by other country’s culture. That is to say the receiving country localizes the received literature by its own literary traditions, literary theories and cultural rules. Only when the disseminated literature is domestically appropriated on the basis of the receiving country’s cultural rules can it be really received by the receiving country and participates in the renewing and recreation of the receiving country’s literature.

The literary variation is everywhere. It is more common and inevitable in the context of transnational heterogeneity civilization and in the dissemination process of different literatures. Its influence on the Chinese contemporary literature is all the more eminent when the Japanese aestheticism literary trend was introduced into China in the 1920’s. However, its influence didn’t flourish in the garden of Chinese literature as it did with the Japanese aestheticism literature. Many writers, such as Yu Dafu, Guo Moruo and Tian Han from the Creation Society and Yu Pingbo, Zhu Ziqing and Zhou Zuoren from the Literature Research Association, all gave up the aestheticism literature which they previously praised highly, choosing other ways instead. The main reason roots in the variation of the Japanese aestheticism literature in the Chinese contemporary literature.

In other words, the Chinese contemporary writers have filtered and selected when they received the Japanese aestheticism literature. The aestheticism in Chinese contemporary literature has been “Sinillized”. The “art for art’s sake” proposed by the Chinese aestheticism differs from that of the Japanese contemporary aestheticism. It is not only a simple literary and artistic attitude for the Japanese aestheticism. To some extent, it is an idea of value. In the opinions of the Japanese aestheticisms, literature should dissociate from actual life and turn down any ideology, refusing any service to practical purpose. In addition, the writers should pursue the pure beauty with a surreal state of mind. However, because the traditional Chinese culture holds that “writings are for conveying truth”, plus the national crisis stirred the writers’ spontaneous national responsibility and concerns, their writings were mostly for the waking of people’s awareness for the survival of the nation. Therefore, the contemporary writers who are inclined to the aestheticism endowed new connotation to Japanese aestheticism’s “art for art’s sake” trend (ZHANG, 2006, p. 2).

Likewise, after the birth of the New Chinese Literature, the Marxist literary theory was successfully sinified and worked as the scale of the art and literature criticism at that time, because during the process of receiving, the emphasis was put on the literature’s reflection on the reality. The variation examples are everywhere in the literary works. For example, *The Orphan of the Zhao Family*, created by Chinese dramatist in Yuan Dynasty named Ji Junxiang, was introduced to Europe and was translated into French entitled *A Chinese Tragedy of the Orphan of the Zhao Family* in 1732. The great French writer Voltaire adapted and rewrote it into a five-act play named *The Chinese Orphan*. The play was put onto stage in 1755 and became a sensation in Paris. Voltaire adapted the story of “dissension and fights between civil and military feudatories” in Chinese Spring and Autumn Period into a story of “fights between civilization and barbarism”, represented by the fights between the Hans and the Tartar ethnic group in the early Yuan Dynasty, in order to demonstrate the theme that “the barbarism” would certainly be assimilated and conquered by the civilization, so that to change the spiritual emptiness and moral falling of the upper-class in French society at that time (CAO, 2006b, p. 75). In the translation of Hugo’s *The Miserable World*, Su Manshu, the modern Chinese translator, changed the seventh chapter according to his own will. For the purpose of criticizing Confucianism, he even made up a story and a character named Nan De to speak for his mind: “only the slavish Chinese treat the enslaving preach of Confucianism from China as the golden rules. We noble civilians of France don’t listen to the bullshit!” (XIE, 1999, pp. 159, 160). In his book *Medio-Translatology*, Professor Xie Tianzhen from the Shanghai International Studies University lists and analyzes many examples of literary variation produced during the process of dissemination by means of translation.

### Conclusion

To sum up, the variation due to the differences of culture, ideology, reader/translator’s personal factors, etc. is inevitable in the process of communication and dissemination of the literature among different civilizations. The development of comparative literature theory can not and should not avoid the emphasis on the variation. In the same civilization circle, the theories of French school and American school of comparative literature can not notice the differences in heterogeneous civilization, and it is more unlikely for them to propose the variation theory of comparative literature from the height of comparative literature theory. The Chinese school, however, proposes a comparative literature study under the light of the variation study, trying to inspect the variation factors in the international literary intercourse on the basis of the heterogeneity culture/civilization’s interactivity with a brand-new model of disciplinary theory and angle. Surpassing the

disputation between the French school and the American school about the positivism and aestheticism, it forms a criticism pattern that centers on the literary aestheticism and traces the cultural origins, which successfully find a connecting way between literature and civilization. From this point of view, the variation study of comparative literature undoubtedly pioneers a new perspective for the comparative literature study, at the same time, it also enormously enriches and develops the comparative literature theory, which is a valuable attempt to the solution to the crisis of comparative literature.

Taking a chronological look at the formation and development of the comparative literature theory, we may say that the international literary relations are the integration and complementarity of the positivism and variation. Although the positivism international relations study started by the French school has its historical limits, it reached a significant milestone in the first development period of comparative literature. The positivism comparative study founded by the French school who values the organic connection in the international literature development will still exert great values in the international literary relations study, constituting one of the indispensable methods. In recent years, Professor Cao Shunqing, the Chinese scholar of our country, has developed and innovated the comparative literature theory with the variation study which he proposed and founded. The proposition of the variation theory makes up for the deficiency of the positivism study in international literary relations study, furthermore, it broadens the horizon of international literary relations study, leading it into a wider space.

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