

SHUNQING CAO – PEINA ZHUANG: A New Introduction to Comparative Literature: From a Sinitic Perspective

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There are many introductions, handbooks and companions to comparative literature available in English, and each publication presents a unique take on the field, but they are almost always conceived from a European or North-American perspective. *A New Introduction to Comparative Literature* by Shunqing Cao and Peina Zhuang is therefore particularly interesting, because it brings a survey of the theories of comparative literature in the so-called Global North, and also offers a glimpse on the discipline as developed by Chinese scholars. This English translation of the Chinese original published in 2021 is a valuable contribution to the state and prospects of the discipline globally.

Cao and Zhuang's book consists of an introduction and four chapters. The introduction defines comparative literature and outlines its history in Europe, North America and China. The first chapter concentrates on international literary relations and influence studies. The focus of the second chapter is on parallel studies. In the third chapter, the authors present the variation theory of comparative literature, while the fourth chapter offers an outlook on the future of general literature studies.

One of the principal starting points for the authors is the distinction between the French and American schools of comparative literature, which has always been controversial, although it was used quite widely till the 1990s. The French school is characterized by a focus on international relations and the concept of influence, while the American school aims to expand the focus of compara-

tive literature through interdisciplinarity and cross-national research. It is worth mentioning that M.-F. Guyard and René Étiemble distanced themselves from this *idée reçue* already in the 1970s.

Shunqing Cao and Peina Zhuang are aware of the problematic character of a sharp distinction between the two schools and admit that by the 1970s the differences between them were basically eliminated. Interestingly, they see a historical progression from the French school to the American and to the Chinese school. The period of the French school was approximately from the 1870s to the 1950s. The postwar period until the 1970s was dominated by the American school, followed by the period of the Chinese school that focuses on cross-cultural study. Again, the relativity of the distinctions becomes obvious if one admits that many of the driving ideas of the Chinese school were anticipated by René Étiemble, who was himself a scholar of Chinese literature, and have been picked up by other scholars in the Global North.

However, the period from the 1970s onwards clearly represents a new phase in the development of Chinese comparative literary studies, in which it has achieved intellectual independence. For Shunqing Cao and Peina Zhuang, the Chinese school has not replaced the French and American schools, but rather integrates them and builds on them, while adding elements of the Chinese tradition. With the increasing presence of Chinese literary scholars in the interconnected academic world, it is necessary to be aware of the ac-

complishments of Chinese literary comparatists and enter into a dialogue about the general questions of comparative literature with them. The present book is therefore a much-needed publication introducing the key concepts of Chinese comparative studies and the understanding of the development of the discipline by Chinese scholars. Unfortunately, despite giving attention to the French and American schools, the authors of the book do not directly react to other major developments in literary studies, such as post-colonial studies and world literature studies.

Nowadays the necessity of overcoming Eurocentrism is widely acknowledged by scholars in the Global North, but despite this fact, the international discourse in literary studies remains mostly Eurocentric. It is not possible to overcome Eurocentrism without the knowledge of non-European literatures and literary theories, and a dialogue in which both sides lack a good knowledge of the other's positions is prone to misunderstandings. Thus, in the book, concepts familiar to European and North American scholars are reinterpreted from a Chinese perspective, such as the way that the authors promote interdisciplinarity: "*Wen* [literature] and *yi* [art] constitute two major systems. Only after we figure out their positions and relations in China's framework of knowledge, and their links with Chinese cultural traditions and spirit, can we hold a reliable interdisciplinary dialogue" (87).

Cao and Zhuang make several generalizations that may raise the eyebrows of Western scholars, if they are not understood in the proper context, such as their claim that "poetry (especially lyrics) have not received due attention in the Western literary tradi-

tion" (76). Since the authors build on the groundbreaking work of Earl Miner, his argument that Western literary theory is based on drama, whereas the Chinese, Indian and Arabic poetry is based on lyrics, is especially significant.

One of the most remarkable Chinese achievements in the theory of comparative literature is Shunqing Cao's variation theory. It is also duly expounded in the present book. The variation theory helps the authors integrate the main areas of comparative literary studies such as translation studies, reception studies, imagology, cultural studies, and civilizational studies. In my opinion, two concepts related to the variation theory, cultural filtration and literature misreading, deserve special attention. The authors see cultural filtration as a fundamental process of cultural exchange. They even acknowledge that "effects of cultural filtration and misreading are most prevalent in dialogues between civilizations" (145). However, they still encourage dialogue and are generous enough to account for misunderstanding, an approach which makes the exchange more relaxed and inviting. Their volume thus offers several conceptual tools for a cross-civilizational study of literature. In opening important questions and offering a vision for a truly general literature studies, it definitely makes worthwhile reading for anyone interested in the theory of comparative literature.

RÓBERT GÁFRIK

Institute of World Literature

Slovak Academy of Sciences

Bratislava

Slovak Republic

robert.gafrik@savba.sk

ORCID: 0000-0001-6448-9026