

# BOOK REVIEW

---

## Introducing Comparative Literature: New Trends and Applications.

César Domínguez, Haun Saussy and Darío Villanueva (eds):  
169 pp. London and New York: Routledge, 2015. ISBN  
978-0-415-70268-3

---

Cao Shunqing

As one of the latest books on Comparative literature, *Introducing Comparative Literature: New Trends and Applications* offers readers a comprehensive view of this discipline both synchronically and diachronically. It addresses the most recently discussed topics of comparative literature, while not neglecting the historical side, that is, the crisis that has confronted this discipline over the years. Covering no more than two hundred pages, the book discusses the most relevant aspects of comparative literature by dividing itself into nine chapters. Additionally, List of Figures and Tables, Preface, Acknowledgement at the beginning of the book and Glossary, Further Reading, Bibliography and Index at the end of the book are also included. The main body of the book is the preface and the nine chapters, presenting to the readers the exciting opportunities and the demanding challenges that comparative literature is facing in current times and also in years to come.

The Preface of the book first reviews the historical changes in definition of the term comparative literature by Van Tieghem, Rene Wellek and H.H. Remak, etc. and also the incapability of the definitions in solving the crisis of the discipline, either in its object or research method. For instance, Susan Bassnett asserted the death of the discipline in the early 1990s from the perspective of the method and suggested the inclusion of comparative literature into translation studies. The authors of the book deny such a death by proposing three factors underlying the excitement and promising future of this discipline, namely, “the common reader’s experience, enthusiasm about human diversity, and the allure of risk and crisis” (Domínguez xiv), giving us new insight into the basis of existence for this discipline. A brief introduction of the main content of the book is also included at the end of the Preface.

The following nine chapters could be grouped into three parts in accordance with their content. The first part is Chapter One. In this chapter, the author gives an overall introduction of the historical development of the discipline from the very origin to the current times, surveying issues including the importance of comparative literature in the study of literature, the changes in the definition of the term, the incapability in fulfilling the utopian demands of this discipline, etc. A key point discussed here is the crisis that the discipline has encountered, either historical crisis during the two world wars, the theoretical one referring to the positivism of the discipline by Wellek, or the postmodern crisis as proposed by Bassnett, Spivak, and Claudio Guillen. In response, the “new paradigm” in research in the face of such a crisis from Fokkema to Stephen Tötösy de Zepetnek at the turn of the new century is discussed at the end of this chapter.

Chapter Two to Chapter Nine constitute the second part of the whole book. It surveys the seven aspects in research of comparative literature in the current times. Chapter Two, “Comparative Literature as Interliterary Theory” investigates the relevance of interliterary theory to comparative literature. It addresses the application of this theory in comparative literature, first as a critique of common-sense notions such as the misleading concept of the history of comparative literature being chronologically steeped in the French and American school and the conception of the influence in influence studies. Also the paths of the interliterary theory offer a new mode of literary relation “consisting of genetic contact or typological affinities” (Dominguez 26). Lastly, the explanation of world literature and the adoption of world literature as the ultimate research object are highly relevant to the research in comparative literature.

Chapter Three discusses the relations between decolonial studies and comparative literature and the inspiration drawn from the former to the latter while differentiating the terms post/colonialism and de/coloniality. Proceeding from the similarities between comparative philosophy and comparative literature, it argues for the requirement of “diatopical hermeneutics” in research of comparative literature in colonial conditions and also briefly mentions the contributions by Lu Xing and Cao Shunqing to an imperative comparative literature.

Chapter Four, “World Literature As A Comparative Practice” traces the historical origin of the term by Goethe, Marx and Brandes and its latest development in the west as exemplified by the new explanation and definition of world literature by David Damrosch.

Chapter Five, “Comparing Themes and Images” deals with traditional issues in this discipline, that is, of theme and image in comparative literature. It analyzes Thomas Hardy’s novel *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* to show the effect of contextualized meaning in the misunderstanding of a theme. It also addresses the phenomenon of variation in constructing the national images by way of exploring images of certain countries, thus pointing out the unreliability of such national images being the real indicator of the images of the countries concerned. Based upon this, the author of the book here further explains the necessity of advocating a move from discovering similarities to investigating the differences and the reasons underlying such differences. Lastly, thematization is discussed so as to be used as a defense of thematics as being viewed as simple and superficial.

Chapter Six, “Comparative Literature and Translation” places the issue of translation at the core of discussion, which has increasingly attracted the attention of scholars worldwide in comparative literature and translation studies. It elaborates the role of the translator and that of translation in studies on world litera-

ture and comparative literature as starting from the following aspects. First, the (in)visibility of translation by pondering over the strategy of “foreignizing” and “nativizing” in translation proposed by Lawrence Venuti, the former of which aims at moving the reader to the original author while the latter proceeds in the opposite direction. Second, transduction by discussing the “literary polysystem” by Itamar Even-Zohar and Gideon Toury and a translator’s role in filling up indeterminacies of a text. And third, the problem of untranslatability, which refers more to the difficulties in representing the original outer forms of a work in the target culture than carrying across the meanings.

Chapter Seven, “Comparative Literary History” traces itself back to the understanding and explanation of the term by Paul Van Tieghem, Claudio Cuillén and Franca Sinopoli according to its content and organization. It explores the relations between comparative history and comparative literary history and the lessons drawn from the former to the latter, thus considering the possibility of a comparative literary history by way of analyzing five papers published in this regard. The last section of this chapter is devoted to the latest achievements made by AILC and ICLA Committees. But comparative literary history is not free from its challenges, one significant aspect being the abandoning of “the presupposed autarky of literatures in European languages” (Domínguez 103).

Chapter Eight, “Interartistic Comparison” handles comparison between or among the artistic objects other than literature, the validity of which lies in either literature or other forms of art being certain kinds of “semiotics” and having artistic effects on the feelings of human beings. It, in particular, surveys the comparison between literature and music as exemplified by Gioseffo Zarlino’s *Institutioni harmoniche* and the three complementary perspectives thereof, and between literature and cinema in the case of adaptations of Shakespeare’s works in films.

Chapter Nine, “The Return of Literatures” envisages the future of comparative literature in a new historical and social environment and the impact of technological development on literature in the new era. To put it more concretely, the effect of the medium’s evolution such as that of the printing press illustrated by McLuhan in his *Gutenberg Galaxy* and the links between TV and cultural form. It also addresses the possibility of electronic writing replacing printing culture as seen from the three main genres of cyberdrama, hypertextual narration and cyberpoetry. The technological development has a great bearing on the making of canons in the new times and the duality of time in literature lies at the center of people’s rejection or embracing of such new development in medium, which calls for new pedagogical methods in education and a new kind of cosmopolitan ethics, two key elements to the development of comparative literature.

A brief review of the content in this book brings to the front a rather prominent feature of this book, which could be termed as a strong sense of “diversity” and “dialogue” from the following aspects. Firstly, it is at the level of the identity of the authors. It is co-edited by three scholars in this field, two (César Domínguez and Darío Villanueva) from Europe and one (Haun Saussy) from the U.S.A., a rare case in the former handbook on comparative literature. Though there could be inconsistencies in the case of co-editing a book, the benefit counts more in this case, bringing together different inspiring thoughts on this discipline and triggering a dialogue between the two important places for comparative literature: Europe and U.S.A. As is known to all, the French school broke through the boundary of nation in comparative literature featuring insistence on the empirical and positivistic approach, and the American school turned its focus on the literariness and advocated for interdisciplinary dimension in research, both of which have helped a lot in the theoretical development of this discipline and also in its overcoming of the historical crisis. But comparative literature until now is still beset with problems, both theoretically and practically, for instance, the comparison of heterogeneity rather than in similarities: “The comparison is to discover the differences out of similarities and the similarities out of the differences of various literatures”(Cao xxi). It is especially true if seen from a trans-civilizational perspective, for instance, comparison of literatures between the east and west, and scholars from the east have a rather keen awareness of comparison in differences. Thus, co-editing between the European and American scholars is beneficial in promoting exchange and mutual understanding, and it would be even better and consolidating to bring in the scholars from the east, such

as Japan, China, or India, etc., to achieve a real dialogue in the worldwide scale, though the three authors here do mention theories and the latest development in these regions of the world when needed in various degrees.

Such “diversity” is also manifested at the level of its content. It not only addresses conventional issues such as the origin, the definition, the issue of translation, the comparing of themes and images in comparative literature, but also touches upon aspects of comparative literature under the influence of literary theory (such as the decolonial studies) over the past several decades and the scientific and technological development (the Internet) in the new circumstances, the latter part of which is elaborated in the last chapter of the book. The authors here have a keen sense of the transformation of media in bringing about the shift in the paradigm of comparative literature and its existence in a new world, opportunities as well as challenges in a time-space compressed globalized world which gives rise to the unprecedented high frequency and prosperity of cross-cultural communication. Every time the occurrence of the transformation in medium, either from orality to manuscript, from writing to printing, or from printing to cyber writing, triggers people’s anxiety and creates new forms of literature, and leads to the adoption of new methodologies in comparative literature. Thus, it is rather insightful to include a discussion of medium of literature in exploring the future orientation of comparative literature, the material constituting the research object and also building up the environment of comparison: “As a privileged locus for cross-cultural reflection, comparative literature should analyze the material possibilities of cultural expression, both phenomenal and discursive, in their different epistemological, economic, and political contexts. This wider focus involves studying not only business and bookmaking but also the cultural place and function of reading and writing and the physical properties of newer communicative media” (Domínguez 129-130).

The last aspect refers to “diversity” at the level of its research perspectives, not only in temporal terms as demonstrated by the adoption of the latest theoretical progress in other fields of literature, but also in the sense of spatial terms by paying attention to achievement made in the parts of the world other than in the Europe and U.S.A. Thus, the accelerating temporal and spatial changes have not eradicated the significance of differences among different cultures. Instead, with much easier access to the Internet, people from many parts of the world are increasingly confronted with, sensitive to and sometimes interested in cultures and literatures of “the other.” Literature from the peripheral regions of the world before, such as that of China, other than that of the western countries, begins to show its presence in the arena of world literature by way of translation. So it is the same case with the research focus of world literature by scholars both at home and abroad. This book is no exception against such a backdrop. A good example in this regard is the devotion of Chapter Two to the interliterary theory by Đurišin. Additionally, the Chinese novel *The Story of the Stone* is used in investigation of the comparison about the links of things to their corresponding contexts underlying the meanings and the names of Wang Wei and Su Dongpo are mentioned in discussion of the links between painting and literature. These are rather encouraging aspects of the research since it displays a sense of cross-cultural interpretation, experimenting with use of the literary theory from one culture to explain literature from another one, thus promoting the dialogue between the two cultures, identifying the deficiencies of the theory involved and discovering new meanings generated in this process. At the same time it helps facilitate the introducing of literary works other than the western ones and theoretical endeavors made by scholars in this field to the rest of the world.

Though a new breakthrough in including these theories and works in relevant discussions has occurred, still some room is left for further improvement, that is, to integrate the theory from the peripheral regions into concrete analysis in a more natural way. For instance, in discussion of constructing national images by “the other,” the unreliability of such images in uncovering the real images of the countries concerned is indicated without further explaining the underlying causes for such unreliability, which could be well justified if seen through the variation theory of comparative literature. The variation theory takes difference as the basis of comparability and sets great store by exploring comparison against a trans-civilizational context and the heterogeneity of cultures: “The paradigm of variation theory offers a new changing

and dynamic mode for the study of heterogeneity. It is different from Francois Jullien's detour since though 'detour' constructs a dynamic path that ranges between itself and the other, the path in essence is static for it always follows the pattern of 'itself—the other—itsself', which could reduce 'the other' to a static object of reference. Orientalism can be seen as a product of such a 'detour' ” (Zhang 173). It is also enlightening in explaining the variation of images of “the other.” As a branch of influence studies by the French school, imagologie aims to research the image of a foreign land in a literary work. But in practice, the difficulties encountered in research could not be adequately solved by the paradigm of influence studies. Thus, scholars are hesitant in including it within influence studies: “The imagologie of comparative literature surveys the image of the other, that is, the research in the image of a foreign country in a literary work. Thus, it is no longer confined to the scope of national literature, but entails research in a cross-lingual or even interdisciplinary level on the basis of positivist exploration,”(Yang 235) thus raising the issue of the incapability of methods in influence studies in explaining the variation of images, especially in a cross-cultural context. A good way to work out the situation could be the inclusion of imagologie within variation theory. The constructing of an alien image is subject to uncertain elements, be it historical, social, cultural or psychological, thus varied from the real image of the other: “If we survey the alien image from the perspective of variation theory, focusing on the variation of the image, the variation element of the alien image could be identified whether in social collective imagination or cliché. Therefore, variation theory could help solve the problem of the disciplinary affiliation of imagologie, opening up a new vista of research in this regard” (Cao 121).

On the whole, the book presents a quality and comprehensive view of the past and the status quo of comparative literature in such a limited space. It explores the relevant issues of comparative literature with a broad perspective while addressing certain important topics in detail. It is condensed in forms and simple in terms yet profound in exploration. Its rich content, systemized framework, and medium size of the book make it a good and competitive choice for students in this major and also for those cherishing an interest in this discipline.

---

### **Bibliography:**

---

Cao, Shunqing. *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*. Heidelberg: Springer, 2013.

Cao, Shunqing 曹顺庆 and Zhang, Lili 张莉莉. “从变异学的角度重新审视异国形象研究” (“Reexamine the Alien Image Studies from the Perspective of Variation Theory”). *Journal of Xiangtan University* 3 (2014): 121-125.

Domínguez, César, Saussy, Haun and Villanueva, Darío, eds. *Introducing Comparative literature: New Trends and Applications*. London and New York: Routledge, 2015.

Yang, Naiqiao 杨乃乔. *比较文学概论 (A General Introduction to Comparative Literature)*. Beijing: Peking UP, 2006.

Zhang, Ting 张婷 and Qin, Ling 秦岭. “作为比较文学学理基础和身份标识的“和而不同” (“Harmonious but individual”—Theoretical Basis and Identity of Comparative Literature Studies”). *Cultural Studies and Literary Theory* 1 (2014): 170-78.