

The Variation Theory: A Brief Review of Its First Decade

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Abstract:

Variation theory, which aims at solving some problems in the discipline of comparative literature, is a theory possessing unquestionable originality and academic value. After a decade of development since its original creation in 2005, in which it has gone through a number of adjustments and theoretical elaborations, this theory provides satisfactory guidance for many research practices of comparative literature. This theory sharply updates the theoretical system of comparative literature, reactivates certain traditional research areas, and offers inspiration to other related disciplines. We, however, are also able to observe a few problems and limitations of the variation theory, namely, its lack of elucidation of the concept of “variation,” neglect of synchronic studies of comparative literary theory, and the relative shortage of direct and effective interaction with domestic and international academia. These problems need to be solved soundly to ensure a brighter prospect for variation theory.

Key words: variation theory, comparative literature, comparability

The variation theory, a comparative literature theory with unquestionable originality, has gone through a decade of development and adjustment since it was first proposed by Shunqing Cao, the former chairman of Chinese Comparative Literature Association (CCLA), at the 8th annual conference of Chinese Comparative Literature in 2005, and later polished in his book *The Study of Comparative Literature* (Bijiao wenxue xue). A few adjustments of this theory's system have been made during these ten years. The latest definition of this theory appears in *The Introduction to Comparative Literature* (Bijiao wenxue gailun):

The variation theory of comparative literature, researches the variation status not only of the influential communication between different

countries/civilizations' literatures, but also the mutual elucidations between different countries/civilizations. This theory inquires into the regularity of literary variation, focuses mainly on the comparability of heterogeneity. Its research scope includes five aspects: variation of literary phenomena across different nations, variation of literary phenomena across different languages, variation at the level of literary texts, variation at the level of culture, and variation at the level of civilizations and literary domestic appropriation. (161)

Due to the increasing influence of the variation theory in the field of comparative literature, it is very much necessary to delineate its first decade, which can give us a better understanding of this theory's current situation and future development.

A Decade of Theoretical Elaboration

The variation theory of comparative literature emerged from a specific time and space and had its own academic background. In a journal article, Cao pointed out that, "It is a basic trend of western current critical theory to turn from the pursuit of truth/ultimacy/homogeneity to that of variances/normalcy/heterogeneity... in terms of current international discords, more attention should be paid to the conflicts between civilizations" (Cao and Zhang, 144-45), and according to these facts above, deconstructionism and cross-civilization study came naturally to be this revolutionary theory's basic theoretical support. Shengpeng Liu also expressed a similar viewpoint on this issue. He believed that the variation theory "overturns traditional research methodologies and completes the conversion both from essentialism to non-essentialism and from structuralism to deconstructionism within literary research area" (134).

Any theory is put forth because of its theorist's primary motivation, and unexceptionally, Cao attached great importance to this since the very start and mentioned, in different articles or monographs, his initial incentives for proposing the variation theory. According to the relevant research materials, it is reasonable to summarize his motivations as follows:

The first explicit motivation is Cao's discontent with Chinese academia's diachronic description on the development of comparative literary theory. For a long time it has been a prevalent mode of textbook creation among Chinese comparatists to simply mix together the typical views taken from the French school, American school and Chinese school. In this mode, these textbooks become closer to the

history of comparative literature, rather than theoretical frameworks which can properly guide our academic research. In addition, there is a considerable overlap among these three schools' theories, which brings great difficulties to classroom teaching of comparative literary theory. Through proposing the variation theory, Cao intends to "integrate existing theoretical sources synchronically" (*The Study* 20) and then reconstruct the research paradigm of comparative literature.

Another explicit motivation is Cao's introspection on the holistic deficiency of current comparative literary theoretical systems: Homogeneity, same-origin identities, and analogy, the similarities among literatures of different countries, or between literatures and other subjects, are the comparability criteria of influence studies and analogy studies (or parallel studies). In other words, in their research practices, whether it should be influence studies or analogy studies, their goal is to seek "similarities," all the while neglecting, intentionally or unintentionally, "dissimilarity." This theoretical deficiency has been producing a range of negative consequences: the "betrayal" of imagology from inside of the French school, and the controversy as to "whether there is a boundary or not in the scope of comparative literature" within the American school. On the basis of reflection on the aforementioned defect, the variation theory compensates the flaws within the views on comparability of the French and American schools with an emphasis instead on variation and heterogeneity.

The implicit motivation of proposing the variation theory can be found by looking back on Cao's academic career: from the revelation of academic aphasia to the attempt to rebuild the discourse of Chinese literary theory, from the summarization of cross-civilization study to the proposal of a Chinese school of comparative literature and the variation theory, the attitude behind all these efforts by Cao is consistent: namely, respect for heterogeneity between different civilizations. It is safe to say that the variation theory is the crystallization of Cao's years of contemplation on heterogeneity and definitely the milestone in his research career.

It is worth pointing out that the variation theory has been elaborated or restructured several times over the past decade. In *The Study of Comparative Literature* (Bijiao wenxue xue), the first book that systematically described the variation theory, the existing theoretical resources of comparative literature were synchronically organized into four parts, literary cross-study, literary relation study, general literary study, and literary variation study. In Cao's opinion, the literary variation includes four different levels, the variation of language, the variation of image, the variation of literary texts and the cultural variation. The

literary variation study involves six specific research areas: Medio-translatology, Imagology, Reception Theory, Thematology, Genology and Cultural Filtration & Literary Misreading (The Study 184-293). Although this theoretical frame is carefully arranged, the following problems must be seriously considered: (1) Is it appropriate to take Literary Cross Study as one independent research areas? (2) Is it appropriate to cancel the Parallel Study proposed by American School? (3) Is it appropriate to put all the six specific research areas mentioned above under the term Literary Variation Study?

In *The Course of Comparative Literature* (Bijiao wenxue jiaocheng), the problems above were solved in a proper way: the basic theoretical frame of comparative literature was generalized as “one essential characteristic” (crossing) and “four research areas” (Positivistic Influence Study, Literary Variation Study, Parallel Study, General Literary Study). Within this frame, the Parallel Study was reconfirmed and reemphasized as one research area of undeniable practical and theoretical value, Thematology and Genology were reclassified as specific research areas of Parallel Study. All the adjustments that appeared in this book made Literary Variation Study become more concentrated than before. In the year of 2013, Cao published his first English monograph, *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*, in which he first delineated his variation theory to Western academia. With the latest definition that appeared in *The Introduction of Comparative Literature* (Bijiao wenxue gailun) published in 2015, a more clear and tenable theoretical system was presented in front of us after more than ten years’ elaboration.

Due to heterogeneity becoming a hot topic of both Western and Eastern academia, there are many scholars also reflecting on heterogeneity and trying to propose their own theories to interpret this trendy phenomenon from different perspectives, all of whose ideas share something in common with the variation theory. For example, Traveling Theory, proposed by Edward W. Said, intends to inquire about the fact that literary theories vary according to different time and place, and its similarities to the variation theory have been elucidated in Xingming Wu’s “Traveling Theory and the Variation Theory, an Inspection on the Standpoint or Perspective of One Research Area”. For another example, based on his years of research experience on Northeast Asian literature and culture, Shaodang Yan of Peking University puts forward the concept of the “Literary Variant,” which greatly inspired the emergence of Cao’s variation theory. Compared with these aforementioned theories, the advantages of variation theory mainly lies in its wide academic vision and synthesizing ability. Just as Xiangyuan Wang’s evaluation in

his monograph *The Genealogical Study of Comparative Literature* (Bijiao wenxue xipuxue):

Except from emphasis on the “variation” as a research perspective, Mr. Cao’s variation theory is also an all-inclusive concept, through which he intends to surpass the analytic mode such as “Influence/Parallel Study,” and to tackle subfields in comparative literary highly related to variation phenomena together. (237-38)

After a decade of theoretical elaboration, the variation theory has become one reasonably comprehensive theory that can provide perfect guidance for the research practice of comparative literature.

A Decade of Theoretical Application

Since its first proposal, Chinese academic circles have given high acclaim to the variation theory of comparative literature. In “A Crosswise Investigation on Discipline Theory of Comparative Literature, and the Variation Theory Studies of Chinese School,” Jinrui Shi points out that the variation theory, based on a deep understanding of the fundamental difference between the East and the West, breaks the theoretical basis—commonness—of the prior discipline theory of comparative literature and is conducive to remove the negative influence of cultural centralism in comparative literary researches (86). Not only has this theory deeply reshaped the disciplinary theoretical system, but it also has greatly inspired the birth of multiple creative academic research results, which can be roughly categorized into the following three parts.

(1) With the application of the variation theory, the discipline of comparative literature theory is sharply updated.

For example, the most important dimensions in comparative literature’s theoretical system, such as “Comparability,” “Influence Study,” “Parallel Study,” and “World Literature,” has been reexamined or reinterpreted discreetly. With respect to “Comparability,” Yu Zhang points out that the variation theory’s emphasis on heterogeneity originates from the profound understanding upon the differences between heterogeneous cultures, and has enriched the connotation of comparability, the core concept of comparative literature (143-50). When Speaking of “Influence Studies,” Yan Li, by looking back over the development history of Influence Studies, pointed out that traditional Influence Studies “unilaterally overstress the central position of the influencer,” while the Influence Studies shaped by reception

aesthetics “improperly exaggerate the function of the receiver’s subjectivity.” Thus both these tendencies above “inevitably lead to an unbalanced situation in cultural ecology.” However, with the advent of the variation theory, “not only could we rediscover facts of literary variation, but also, we found a communicational platform where different civilizations can dialogue as equals” (1-10). In regards to “Parallel Studies,” Mingfeng Qiu holds that due to “the suspension of existing differences,” even though Parallel Studies “partly correct the defect of Influence Studies,” it still is enmeshed in Western-centralism, cultural monism, and superficial comparisons like “X+Y” (192-94). All those problems in Parallel Studies can be solved with the introduction of the variation theory, and furthermore, this theory can help us “to redefine or reexamine the differences, changes and variations presented in diverse civilizations, and to promote more efficient conversations among varied literatures” (59-63).

Finally, it reconsiders “World Literature,” a concept first proposed by Goethe in 1827 and considered both the very beginning and the ultimate purpose of comparative literature for its broad vision and lofty aspiration. In recent years, American comparatists, represented by David Damrosch from Harvard University, put forward a new exposition mode of “World Literature” characterized by its attaching of importance to the “variability” within literary works. On the basis of discreet comparison between the viewpoint of American comparatists and the variation theory, Zhao Liang believes that these two theories share common features with each other — “although they are originated from different academic backgrounds and are proposed for different academic purposes, they all focus on how comparative literary can properly conduct research when confronted with problems caused by heterogeneous cultures and civilizations” (“The Variation” 74) — and should thus be regarded as the new direction of comparative poetics.

In light of the research approaches above, we can coincide with what is concluded in “The Introspection and Development of Comparative Literature in the Horizon of Variation Theory”: “the variation theory not only changes the usual understanding of comparative literature but also endows it with traditional influence studies and parallel studies in comprehensive manner, and it definitely qualifies as a general theory of comparative literature” (23-24).

(2) Under the instruction of the variation theory, some traditional research fields of comparative literature, especially empirical influence studies, were activated with a few stimulating factors. “Literary works from foreign areas, so long as translators and readers represent or reproduce the original text by using the target language,” Cao points out, “are inevitably regulated and influenced by the grammatical

structure of the target language and local readers' reading habits, under whose influence then variations occur" (The Writing Group, *The Introduction* 170). In other words, the cross-language/culture variations are not only inevitable but also universal. Based on this fact, researchers put a lot of energy into this field and gained abundant academic results.

These variations first abounded in the intra-civilization circles to which researchers particularly paid attention. For example, in "Changing and Writing: on the Selective Acceptance of the Story of Zhu Maichen in Japanese Literature," the author probes into the inherent rules and constants of the process of literary diffusion by tracing that story's reception, adaptation, and creation after its introduction to Japan (190-200). More variations, in fact, exist in the collisions and fusions between different civilizations. Within the scope of this research field, the most conspicuous academic project in China has been carried out in Cao's research project "Translations and Studies of Chinese Literature in English-speaking World" sponsored by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. In the last decade, Cao and his other project members "have published more than 30 research pieces (including monographs and dissertations)," and their research topics range from Pre-Qin dynasties' texts (for example, Weirong Li's dissertation "Studies on I-Ching in the English-speaking World"), Tang poetry and Song lyrics (for example, Li Huang's dissertation "Studies on Lyrics of the Tang and the Song in the English-speaking World") to Ming-Qing and modern Chinese literatures (for example, Guang Shi's "A Study on Translations of Wang Shi-zhen's Poems in the English-speaking World" and Jing Xu's "Studies on Lao She in the English-speaking World"). These studies not only "offer detailed catalogues, from which Chinese scholars can enjoy one convenient and easy source and point of access from which to acquaint themselves with the status of current overseas research. These studies include, for example, than names of foreign Sinologists, their works, and other literary terms, but they also "offer a lot of vivid examples and evidence of the variation theory, broaden the research scope of comparative literature, and contribute to a better understanding of translation activities of Chinese literary works." More importantly, these research pieces "make a breakthrough in Chinese classics studies with the aid of 'the eye of the Other' " (286-98).

(3) Along with the presentation of variation theory, lots of innovative research results emerge in other related disciplines. For example, Dr. Song Shi successfully introduced the variation theory into the field of film studies in his monograph "The Imaginative Acceptance and Variation Research of Chinese Movies in the West" and many other journal articles attempting to "analyze the underlying reasons of

the differences present in Chinese and Western scholars' studies on Chinese movies in a more reasonable and comprehensive way" (140). For another example, there are scholars introducing variation theory into the field of music studies, such as a study on the variants of the Chinese folk music song Jasmine Flower during the process of its dissemination overseas, or a study of the variation phenomena of American Jazz in China suggesting a new concept, Sinicized Jazz, for its Chinese counterpart (254-68). In addition, some scholars focusing on communications hold that "cross-cultural communication studies lacks specialized theories to analyze the variation phenomenon...the variation theory of comparative literature matches perfectly with communication studies and serves properly as a remedy to the theoretical lack in this research area." (147-52). Based on all the facts mentioned above, it is safe to draw the conclusion that the variation theory has already shown and, predictably will continue to show, a great potential to have an effect on other disciplines, not merely on literary studies.

Next Decade: Retrospect and Prospects

We, however, have to acknowledge that a few problems still exist in the system of variation theory which need to be solved soundly in the next decade. It is necessary to point out these problems in a careful retrospective look at it as a system and to attempt to give some appropriate advice so that this theory has even brighter prospects.

(1) A clear and detailed elucidation of "Variation," the core concept of this theory, has still not been given by its advocates, which is mainly reflected in two aspects.

a. Lack of necessary prescription for the term "variation."

"Variation" is one abstract and neutral word, which makes it perfect to generalize shifts, distortions, and clashes during the process of literary/cultural communication, and, on the other hand, it is a term that is also somewhat all-embracing for specific textual variation cases and cultural research practices. Specific variation phenomena have different values and characteristics, the term "variation," however, does not provide us a clear distinction of what "variation" is. Expansive implications of this term produce a hidden peril that confounds positive variation, for example, Ezra Pound's translated works from the Chinese and his imagist poems (161-68), with negative variation, for example, certain faulty translation projects by irresponsible translators. If we allow for the absence of any value judgement to prevail in our research and accept every "variation" simply as a neutral "variation," variation theory, just like the sprawling comparative literature,

will face a crisis, and even maybe its death in the end. The proposal of the term “destructive treason,” which is created by Xiangyuan Wang in response to the abuse of “creative treason,” can provide a useful example to variation theory (“Creative Treason” 141-48).

b. Lack of precise description for the extent of the term “variation.”

The variation theory has an extensive theoretical framework. However, it lacks details to support its answers to the questions below: Where and why “variation” arises? Are there differences on level, scale, and extent among different “variations”? If there are, how can we describe these differences precisely? Is there a basic law regulating the occurrence, process, and accomplishment of a “variation”? In response to these questions, the variation theory team should resolve the imminent problem below: how can they “invent” or “produce” more concepts, which have yet to be completed in this theoretical system, in order to enhance their ability in describing variation phenomena? Perhaps the variation theory team can draw inspiration from “Literary Genealogy”, which is founded by Shaodang Yan and contains a series of special terms to describe the process of its research subjects, for example, literary variants, original discourse, middle medium, catalyst and literary texts, etc. (76-95). All these terms, mentioned in Literary Genealogy, make it a positive point of reference for the variation theory team.

(2) Most research results related to the validity of variation theory are diachronic studies, surveys on the current status of the French and American school are inappropriately neglected, which makes these works synchronically untenable.

Some Chinese scholars have already noticed this problem in advance of this article. “The French and American school,” the authors of “Analysis of the Variation of Comparative Literature” point out, “were confined to specific historical periods,” and deemed that “taking the French and American school within their historical contexts as a reference for recent studies, in fact, is to overlook the disciplinary focus shift and the overstatement of the crisis of comparative literature” (64-66). Peina Zhuang also realized this problem in her “On Research and Application of Variation Theory of Comparative Literature in China,” in which she mentioned that “most researches currently conducted adopt a diachronic perspective while rarely using the synchronic one. Most papers tend to elaborate on variation theory against the backdrop of the diachronic development of the discipline of comparative literature (...) which could reduce the dynamic and multi-dimensional discipline paradigms to a static and flat one.” From this statement she pondered: “What are the changes made by Influence Studies and Parallel Studies?” She then suggested “the future research focus should be properly shifted to the synchronic dimension,”

which “may better interpret the uniqueness and universality of variation theory as a discipline paradigm of comparative literature.” (Cao and Zhuang, “On the Research” 60).

It must be admitted that the variation theory reaches a constructive assessment on the gains and losses of the French and American schools, just like Douwe W. Fokkema’s evaluation found in the preface of Cao’s monograph *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*. There, Fokkema states that, “Shunqing Cao’s characterizations of the ‘French school’ and of American comparative literature studies may strike us as quick abstractions from a complex reality” (“Forward” vi). However, the variation theory team must take the synchronic contexts into consideration and follow suggestions like Ma’s and Zhuang’s if they want to make this theory into a more persuasive theory for academic circles.

(3) According to my observation, there is not enough feedback on the variation theory offered by Chinese and Western comparatists, the relationship between the voice and its echo is, disappointingly, out of balance.

“Reflection on Some Theoretical Problems of Comparative Literature,” the doctoral dissertation of Peiyong Cheng, is one of the few works that focuses on the issues of variation theory, but there is still no proper response made by the variation theory team. This fact goes against this theory’s original intention and undermines its development potential. Some critical opinions in Cheng’s work are really reasonable for the variation theory. For example, Cheng wrote that “the variation theory never touches upon studies of ‘variation,’ the Comparability of ‘difference’ and practical research method, which leads to an ambiguous attitude on methodology.” This point of view would correspond to my critique already mentioned above. For another example, Cheng holds that the general path of any type of comparative literary research should follow a “sameness-heterogeneity-sameness” pattern and believes that “heterogeneity is fact, while sameness is construction.” On this point, Cheng expects a more penetrating elucidation on “sameness” from the variation theory system (Reflection 255-86). Fokkema shows the same concern for the issue of “sameness” by stating that “the variation theory recognizes sameness as well as differences, but how to identify sameness?” (“Forward” vi). Queries falling into such category require further exploration in the next decade.

“After grinding the sword for a decade,” Tang dynasty poet Jia Dao wrote, “I present it to you today.” From this brief retrospection on the history of the development of the variation theory during its first decade, we can realize clearly that this theory has already shown its great theoretical and practical potential and

confirm with great confidence that this theory will have one promising future. In the next decades we eagerly look forward to having more scholars involved in the discursive space opened up by this innovative theory of comparative literature study.

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