On the Mainland and Taiwan Comparative Literature Studies: Similarities and Differences

Sichuan University  Yan Hong and Deng Shizhong

In recent years, the globalization waves have provided Chinese present context with an unprecedentedly grand cultural trend. On the one hand, a continual tension between globalization and localization makes all the more prominent such dichotomized cultural patterns as traditional vs. modern, China vs. the world, marginal vs. central, and cultural conservatism vs. cultural radicalism; on the other hand, the identity of national culture in the globalized context and the emergence of pluralistic cultural context both call for a dialogue and an exchange between exotic civilizations, which are able to moderate and deconstruct the above-mentioned dichotomized cultural patterns. Based on the two aspects, we can examine the process of development of a hundred-year-old Chinese comparative literature cause. Chinese comparative literature cause seems to have been following the globalization since its birth. Such a kind of comparative literature is following a trans-cultural yet literature-centering road to comparative literature studies, which escapes the west-centerism and diversity-conscious modernity. Though the mainland and Taiwan comparative literature studies are different in political conditions, cultural contexts, question consciousness, thought patterns, research
methods and discourse, both share a similarity in the cultural stand, viz., an identity of national culture.

And consequently, this present paper intends to analyze the founding of cultural subject existing in the mainland and Taiwan comparative literature studies and define the stand of national culture existing in the globalized Chinese comparative literature at three angles: a hypothesis for the Comparative Literature Chinese School, a discipline-conscious for comparative literature and a focus on comparative poetics.

I

Mr. Said pointed out that the process of constructing cultural identity is “a repeated one including historical, social, knowledge and political aspects where individuals and institutions of all communities compete against each other.” Similarly, Chinese comparative literature cause has been stressing the characteristics of national culture since its birth, and the localization consciousness has been playing an important role in various phases of Chinese comparative literature studies. Though in the 1970s and 1980s Taiwan and mainland a heated discussion about the cultural identity of post-colonialism did not take shape, today such a discussion has become a focus of the mainland-Taiwan scholars’ attention in the globalized post-colonialism time. The reasons are as follows: 1) there have been changes in the global economic structure and ideology; 2) spiritual cultures value has been replaced by commodity exchange value when facing western culture industry; and 3) the consciousness of national culture and localized culture has been weakened. The “local literature” movement and “localization” movement that began in the
1970s Taiwan, a call for reconstructing Chinese literary theory discourse current on the 1990s mainland as well as the ever-lasting nationalism, and the discussions on “Chinese Nation Studies”, “aphonia” and “reconstructing Chinese literary discourse” are all a positive act in the process of pursuing the identity of national culture in the globalized context.

A nation can utter her voice and manifest her character on this condition that she is fully aware of her own existence. The predominant goal for pursuing and constructing the cultural identity is to make certain what kind of character her own character is. In the post-colonial time, the west’s rule over the discourse of the third world has a tendency to diminish the opposing voice involved in it, and therefore forms an eminent domain of discourse by means of adopting a universalistic attitude and a current discourse in the world. As a result, the culture and knowledge of the third world have to return to a marginal sphere and get no equality with the western discourse, thus losing its own uniqueness and identity. However, such a sort of aphonia is not so serious as that in the small nations of east and the countries of Africa. So far as Taiwan is concerned, the phenomenon of colonialization is quite complicated. Once China confiscated Taiwan from Japan’s hand, traces of Japanese colonialized culture and western culture, esp. American culture, began to be closely connected. This much worried the then intellectuals. The saying “English plus western style clothes means a professor” current in the 1950s and 1960s Taiwan, a sign of western culture, changed much the cultural identity of Taiwanese. Simply, external culture was internalized as a mark of Chinese identity. Contrastively, many intellectuals who wearing Chinese-style jackets
and black-cloth shoes emerged everywhere in Taiwan. This case still continues in today’s Taiwan. In 1988, when professor Jian Jinsong of a certain Taiwan university attended a seminar on Hong Kong-Taiwan literature at Hong Kong University, “he was dressed in a long gown. It’s a wonder in the eyes of Hong Kong people”. In this way did these learned people including Jian Jinsong intend to struggle with a maginal tendency of local culture and obtained a cultural identity. For comparative literature scholars, the overseas Taiwan scholars have a strong awareness of their own identity about where they are from and persistently create their own spiritual homeland even if they stay outside the motherland. For example, professor James Liu once wanted to build up “the world general literary theory” including the east theory; Wai-limp Yip now is exploring a “model” and a universal law existing among Chinese-western literatures and civilizations so as to realize an ultimate goal for comparative literal theory studies.

On the 1980s mainland, a large number of western civilizations were imported, and therefore “a culture craze” arose. Many people, based on the modernized west, launched a serious attack on traditional culture. This reflects a “non-nationalists” tendency and engendered Chinese’ deep concern for the identity. It probably preludes the disputes on culture and literature that follow. In a discussion on modern theories sponsored by the 1992 issue of “Literary and Artistic Research”, a few middle-aged and young scholars expressed their stand for defending the native language and culture of the third world. Wang Yuechuan pointed at that in “a keen competition between the discourse of the first world and that of the third world, the sub-experience of history ought to be allowed to
Zhang Yiwu said, when we borrow the west discourse, we are blamed for neglecting the identity of local culture; when we decline the west discourse, we lack of a set of discourse to interpret our own language and beings. Considering this awkwardness, Chinese theoretical circle has to maintain a “post-Utopian” spirit, viz., to defend the native language and culture of the third world and obtain the national character. They all proposed that the “sub-experiences of history” depressed by the west, such as the language, the cultural heritage, the life experience, and the national character of literature an art, should be “released” so that the “memory” of subject can be restored; that is the identity of national culture can be reconstructed.

The cultural identity focuses its attention on the striking features of a nation and those of a culture in culture and literature studies. Specifically, when carrying out trans-cultural east-west literature studies, Chinese comparative literature community often tries to compare the fundamental differences between exotic literatures or to explore a common core and a striking feature through the differences. This just shows an importance and an exploration of the identity of national culture. The initial Taiwan comparative literature circle once advocated employing the west literary theory and methods to interpret Chinese literature: it makes Chinese-West comparative literature research get notable results in achieving the similarity through the differences. But a question accompanies with it; how to get comparative literature rooted in Chinese soil? That is to say, under the social circumstances of Taiwan which has lost a cultural root, Chinese comparative literature research will be a subject of the West if it painstakingly pursues the critical methods of the West
literature instead of emphasizing the local experience. In other words, only when we pursue both the critical methods of the east and the critical methods of the west can Chinese comparative literature research lay a solid foundation and advance along the road of dialogue and exchange between eastern-western culture and literature. This is the core of discussion about one-way “Interpretation Studies”. In present-day comparative literature research of Taiwan, scholars concentrate their attention on the traces of national culture of China; especially, Wai-limp Yip enjoys combining his own research with the construction of cultural identity and a way to a dialogue and exchange in a sense of sincerity and equality arises. On the contrary, the identity of national culture has been a common sense of the mainland comparative literature community since it revived as a result of the importation of the west studies. At a seminar run by Dushu Editorial Board and Peking University Comparative Literature Association in 1982, Professor Zhu Guangqian said that “a genuine research depends on the vertical tradition and the horizontal influence... We must study hard our own cultural tradition and open our eyes to see the outside world”, Professor Yan Shaodang said that “we have to build up a Chinese School with oriental characteristics, which may as well suit a long history of Chinese literature and a unique position of it in the world literature”. More ever, at the 1993 Tianjin Symposium on Comparative Literature, Professor Zhu Weizhi said that “as Chinese literature has a long history, Chinese School is by no means a tail of or a supplement to Euro-American schools”. From the 1980s on, the mainland comparative literature research just aims at exploring the similarities and differences between Chinese and Western literary theories and building up a bridge of mutual understanding and mutual
dialogue by staring with the stand of national culture of China. This sort of awareness of cultural identity manifests itself in such works as Cao Shunqing’s *Sino-Western Comparative Poetics*, Huang Yaomian and Tong Qingbing’ *The Systems of Sino-Western Comparative Poetics*, Zhang Longxi’s *Tao and Logos* and Yu Hong’s *Chinese literary theory and the western poetics*.

II

As a theoretical category of post-colonialism, the cultural identity is closely related to the concept of deconstructing center and authority. According to it, imperialism and colonialism get all the established ideas and institutions rooted in people’s mind by adopting cultural invasion and hegemony, which may have control over every field of the humanities today. Comparative literature scholars, esp. the scholars born of the east, have a strong awareness of this inequality in culture, so their major task is to reflect on a set of ideological systems inherited from imperialists and colonialists and to deconstruct cultural colonialism and hegemonism by entering into the former colonial culture. The 1970s, assumption of “the Chinese School of Comparative Literature” and the 1990s, initial founding of the discipline theory of such a school are both a realization of the major task above mentioned. At its beginning stage, Professor Li Dashan advocated not only a mid way which can intensify the traditional Chinese culture and mix together the French School and American School, but also a struggle with the seeming-authoritative thought pattern of the West. Though the Taiwan scholars Gu Tianhong and Chen Pengxiang speak of the west literary theory, they still persist in publishing their own points of view on the cultural
On the mainland, discussions about "the Chinese School" and "Interpretation Studies" all aim at establishing the identity of national culture. The process of emerging and maturing of "the Chinese School" is just a successful practice of diminishing the West-centralism in the history of comparative literature. But according to Said, any kind of identity is unstable, especially, such essential elements that constitute the cultural identity as languages and customs are interacting with others' culture in the globalization time today. Identity, as Derrida perceives, needs reconstructing forever. It depends upon the relationships with others, and the discourse represents a response to the other meaning. In this sense, the purpose for cultural identity is to make a dialogue with equality. On the one hand, "the Chinese School" emphasizes the subjectivity and identity; on the other hand, it does not overstate the identity. Obviously, the dialogue between Chinese and Western literatures or poetics and reconstructing studies advocated by this school on a basis of cross-culture are an embodiment of such a relationship with a specific cultural context.

Apart from the building of "the Chinese School," both the idea of recognizing Comparative Literature as a discipline and the attitude toward Comparative Literature reflect the common national and cultural identity.

The name of Comparative Literature originated from the rapid development of modern science and technology in Europe, where different scholarships sprang up, and has become established as a discipline along with as long period of continual arguments. The key point is that comparability is only a method fit for all scholarship or a
discipline independent of others. The earliest contraction came from Benedetto Croce, who said, “The comparative method is one of the simple research suitable for all sorts of disciplines,” and, therefore, such a method is not a foundation on which such a new discipline as Comparative Literature should be based. Since then, such view and arguments have continued into 1980s when Comparative Literature revived in China. The literary circle either in Chinese mainland and Taiwan, however, have, in an open manner, taken Comparative Literature as an independent discipline for study, and even few ideas that are against it were soon drowned in the flourishing growth of the discipline building.

II

Why do the Mainland and Taiwan agree that Comparative Literature should be a discipline instead of a method? Methods “are the ways, means, principles, and manner,” etc. On the other hand, a “discipline”, as the result of a scholarly classification, a branch of a science in a special intellectual field, is closely connected with social ideology. Being a discipline in social science, it has much relation with government, society, and social policy-making, thus having its own aim and value. After the foundation of Chinese Comparative Literature Association in 1985, Cheng Ma published an article entitled “The Bridge and Its Purpose,” in which he pointed out that the “ultimate goal” of Comparative literary research is to summarize literary principles. But it “particularly emphasizes the priority of common principles in literary individuality.” And one of its main aims is “to do serious research on the basic task of summarizing literary principles on the premises to admit that literature in different nations
and countries of the world—for instance, the cultures of the world are classified into four different types: European, Arabic, Indian, and Chinese—has its own independent features that can not be arbitrarily replaced or changed. That is to say, one of the purposes of Chinese comparative literary research is to eliminate the Western scornful attitude towards China. John Deeney said, “Between the second half of 19th century and the beginning of 20th century, there were indeed many Westerners in Asia posing an arrogant and scornful air before China.” He even quoted Qian Cunxun’s article by saying, in those days, “missionaries and people in other trades coming to Asia often filled their travelogues and reportages with misunderstanding, distortion, and scorns. If only we could again criticize and clarify such mistakes in reportages and other writings.” To criticize and correct the prejudices of the West to China, the discipline of Comparative Literature is a proper position and a force. The purpose naturally expresses itself in the value selection. The emphasis of the value selection in Comparative Literature is obviously represented itself in the series of advocates and theories in “the Chinese School.” According to John Deeney, comparability is to “adopt the comparative method to reevaluate Chinese literature in the thread of the World literature.” That is to say, Chinese scholars wish to find their own identity, and their own position of the world in the new and modern cultural context. If Comparative Literature were to be simplified and degraded to be a mere method or technique that any discipline may use, there could be no related principles, rules, and other knowledge, no establishment of systematical theories, no basis of communication and dialogs with Western comparative circle. Nor could the force be gathered to challenge Euro-centralism, thus
there could be no attention the West should have paid to the Oriental literature and the change of concepts in the comparative field of the West. In a word, Chinese literature and literary theory might lose a footing to reconstruct its own discourse, and there would be no talking about the national and cultural identity, its confirmation, or establishment. The goal of so-called communication and dialogs between East and West in their cultures and literature could not be achieved. From the practical point of view, the increase of research in Chinese literature and comparative Literature, the depth of exploration of methodology, and the matured theories in the Chinese literary circle of 1980s—all helped to enter the established discipline of Comparative Literature. There existed no problem of whether it was an independent discipline, but a new Eastern vision into Comparative Literature for a fresh and vital force.

IV

Another problem worth studying is that even at the beginning of the reconstruction of Comparative Literature both in Chinese mainland and Taiwan research went into the field of comparative poetics. In Taiwan, literary studies have continued the tradition of “guoxue” (studies of Chinese ancient civilization) and emphasis is often laid on different editions and textual research of language and literal words while neglecting theoretical issues. In Chinese departments of universities, there might be no courses given on literary theory, or even on modern literature. The department of foreign languages and literature pays more attention to teachings of literature, but they major in giving courses on foreign literature; it also has little concern with literary theory. However, ever since Ph.
D. candidates in Comparative Literature were enrolled in early 1970s, stress has always been laid on comparative studies of Chinese and Western literary theories. The research scope of the Ph. D. courses is of three aspects: 1. Comparative studies of Chinese-Western literary theories; 2. Comparative studies of Chinese-Western literary contents and techniques; 3. Comparative studies of the relationship between Chinese-Western literature and society. The comparative study of theories is ranked first. The first collection of Comparative Literature studies, with the title of *The Beginning and Development of Comparative Literature in Taiwan* was published in Taiwan in 1976. It contains 14 articles, of which five are concern with Chinese-Western literary theories. For example, “Literary Creation and Shensi (Literary Imagination)” by Chen Huihua compares “shensi” in tradition Chinese literary theories and “imagination” in Western theories and lists the difference of the two: the former is uncertain with subject and object in one while the latter often refers to the media connecting subject and object; the former describes “shensi” from the aesthetic viewpoint while the latter regards literary creation from a wider angle yet more mechanically. *The Evaluation Standard in Chinese Literary Criticism* by Ku Tim-hung surveys the standard of in traditional Chinese literary criticism under the classifications of Eric D. Hirsch for reevaluation of its characteristics and advantages and disadvantages. Later, William Tay published Literary Theories and Comparative Literature in 1982, and another eleven books with the preface by Wai-lim Yip and the series title *Comparative Literature* came out from 1983 on. All of the eleven books are monographs on comparative literary theories. In the preface, Wai-lim Yip pointed out that one of the main purposes of the book series was to seek the
possibility of common literary principles, common aesthetic concerns through trans-cultural and trans-national literary works and theories, showing full concern about comparative poetics. Until the end of the century, Comparative Literary circle in Taiwan exerted much energy into the research of literary theories. For instance, in late 1990s Zhang Hanliang got a large-scale research program of literary theories which “does close research on the relationship of ‘texts’ and influential contemporary literary theories through the survey of ‘texts’.” It “involves in such themes as national allegories, literary history, ideology, textuality, gender and city studies, and try to explore the definition of ‘texts’ and its changes in all levels as well as other issues.” On the mainland, the call for comparative studies of literary theories was accompanied with the reconstruction of Comparative Literature. In 1982, Dushu Monthly held a symposium with the participation of Comparative Literature Association of Beijing University. Ji Xianlin pointed out, at the meeting, the importance of “clarifying our theoretical system of art and literature”; Zhang Longxi agreed with the word, “Only by the emphasis of theoretical comparison could the concrete works be profoundly compared and studied.” As far as books published are concerned, from Qian Zhongshu’s On Art, and Wang Yuanhua’s On the Creation of Wenxin Diaolong (The Literary Mind and Carving of Dragon) coming out at the beginning of the reconstruction period to Cao Shunqing’s Sino-Western Comparative Poetics, Huang Yaomian and Tong Qingbing’s The Systems of Sino-Western Comparative Poetics at the turn of 1980s and 1990s, The most influential books in this field are those in comparative poetics.

So why did both Taiwan and mainland scholars devote much
enthusiasm and energy to comparative poetics? Heh-hsiang Yuan once commented on early Taiwan comparative literature by saying that owing to the then “limitation of conditions, no materials and books concerning traditional influence studies could be obtained, while doing comparative literary research, except finding materials for comparison among ancient literature or native Taiwan literature (works published in Taiwan). ” The lack of research materials became one of the main causes of “forcing early comparative literary studies in Taiwan onto the road of anti-parallel and anti-influence research,” so there followed Yip’s trial to seek “common poetics”—“the sameness besides the difference.” If, according to Heh-hsiang Yuan, scholars in Taiwan who could not read modern Chinese writers of 1920s and 1930s came to the theoretical literary comparison, then, how to explain the fact that, besides modern literature in the short period of several dozen years, the materials of Chinese literature with several thousand years could still be traced for influence and parallel studies? Also, he himself asked in the article, “Can’t the ‘model’ or common poetics be involved with some parallel studies? Can’t the exploration of cultural patterns concerning literary research in the period of the end of Han Dynasty, Sui and Tang Dynasties, and even modern times be independent from influence studies?” What is more, since the reconstruction of Comparative Literature on Chinese mainland, the difficulty of the lack of materials did not exist there. Why should it also be much interested in comparative poetics? It seems that there are other causes.

It is well known that Comparative Literature has long been regarded as a branch of literary history ever since the birth of French School, and influence studies seeking factual relations have always
been the orthodox of Comparative Literature. Although the study of literary theories, with the rise of American School, has become more and more important since 1960s and even literary history could not neglect theoretical research, particularly after 1964 when the Fourth International Comparative Literature Association was held in Fribourg, Switzerland, literary theories became the research topics entering all sorts of international symposiums in different countries. From the actual research context, however, the two main Comparative Literary journals in the United States, i.e. *Comparative Literature and Comparative Literary Studies*, emphasized material collection and upheld the *l'esprit positif* until 1980s. Mr. Aldridge, the chairman of American Comparative Literature Association, even made speeches in both The First Comparative Literature Conferences of Hong Kong and Third International Comparative Literature Symposium in Taiwan in 1979 to express his attitude of excluding literary theories. He believed that Comparative Literature ought to focus on digging up the analogue of literature between different nations without the foundation of theories so that it could move towards the World Literature. Until 1985 when the International Comparative Literature Conference was held in Paris, the heated debates continued between those who were for the combination of Comparative Literature and new literary theories and those who were against or suspicious of it. Chinese Comparative Literature under reconstruction and development then came to embrace the advocates who support literary theories combined with Comparative Literature, and its approaches of research and achievements almost stand at the similar starting line with the Western scholars. Such condition revealed that comparative poetics fit for the development of Chinese
Comparative Literature in the West has the tradition of actual literary contact and influence within their own cultural scope, and even the American School who launched the parallel studies emphasized literary comparison within Western culture. Therefore, if any strides should be made between Eastern and Western cultures and literature, merely to clear the limitation of actual contact and influence was not enough, and the ice could be broken beyond influence studies. This required that Chinese scholars in Comparative Literature think deep of some issues confronted with Chinese and Western literature in order to seek theoretical foundation and methodology for such literary comparison. Literary theories could provide a research basis that enables us to study literary works of any sorts that have no cultural contact.

Notes:
① Said. “Orient is not oriental.” Beyond Horizon4(1997).
② Wai-lim Yip. “Colonialism, Cultural Tools and Deconstruction of Desires.” In Post-Colonial Theories and Criticism. Beijing University Publishing House, 1999: 368.
③ Gong Pengcheng. Self-account when I am forty. Taiwan Jinfen Publishing Co. Ltd, 1996.
④ A Study of Culture and Arts. 1(1993)
⑤ The Almanac of Chinese Comparative Literature. Beijing University Publishing House, 1987: 106,113.
⑥ The Almanac of Chinese Comparative Literature. Beijing University Publishing House, 1987: 357.
⑦ Gu Tianhong. “East-West Comparative Literature: An Brief Inquiry of Its Categories, Its Methods and Its Spirit.” 1st Issue in Vol. 7 of Chinese
Comparative Literature: East & West

and Foreign Literature, 1990.

8 Peng-hsiang Chen. "The Theory and Steps of Establishing Chinese School of Comparative Literature." 1st Issue in Vol. 19 of Chinese and Foreign Literature, 1990.

9 Croce, Benedetto. "Comparative Literature." In A Collection of Early Essays in Comparative Literature. Ed. H, Schultz. North Carolina; University Publishing House, 1937.

10 Chinese Encyclopedia. HuaXia Publishing House, 1990: 63.

11 Cheng Ma. "A Bridge and Its Aim." The Almanac of Chinese Comparative Literature. Beijing University Publishing House, 1987; 46.

12 Deeney, John. The New Directions in Comparative Literature. Taiwan Lian Jing Publishing Co., 1978; 9-10.

13 Deeney, John. The New Directions in Comparative Literature. Taiwan Lian Jing Publishing Co., 1978; 1.

14 “Chinese-type Comparative Literature." Literary Review17(1985): 68.

15 Chen Changfan. "A Study of Foreign Literature and Comparative Literature." Taiwan Literary Almanac in 1997. Taiwan Literary Review Publishing House, 1998; 72.

16 He-hsiang Yuan. “From Munich to Utopia." Vol. 17 of Chinese and Foreign Literature11(1989).

17 “East-west Relations: Universal Literature’ Yes; Common Poetics’ No”, Tamkang Review, 10, N. 1 (1979); Chinese-western Comparative Literature: Theory and Strategy, ed. John Deeney (Hong Kong: Chinese University press, 1980.).