Is there a Future for Comparative Literature in the Age of Globalization?

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In the current era, almost everybody is talking about globalization. This has already become an academic fashion. But why are there so many people talking about globalization, especially those of the humanities and social sciences? Will globalization bring to us a happier life, or will it make our humanities and social sciences flourish? If the question is not necessarily yes, why? Because there is indeed a lot to say about this hot topic: economic globalization, financial globalization, cultural globalization and even mass media globalization, all of which are influencing our mode of thinking and penetrating our daily life in varying degrees. As comparatists involved in such a debate, or more broadly, as intellectuals of the humanities and social sciences under its shadow, we are much more concerned about the possible consequences that globalization might cause in our cultural and intellectual life, and what strategy we shall adopt toward such a severe challenge. Or more specifically, we are concerned about where our discipline is going in such an age of globalization in which different cultures are becoming more and more homogenized with individual some culture losing its national identity. Undoubtedly, we have entered a new century, as well as a new millennium along with the advent of ghost-like globalization. Scholars both in the West and in the East are trying to describe from different perspectives the characteristics of the present
age. In my view, it is certainly appropriate to call the present time as an age of globalization of which different scholars have already offered various descriptions, and even in the Chinese context. In such an age, intellectuals, writers, critics and scholars of literary and cultural studies cannot but take pains to conceive or picture the future orientation of literary and cultural studies. Since I am a Chinese scholar dealing with comparative literature, what I am concerned about most is the new orientation of Chinese comparative literature studies in the process of globalization. So first of all, I will deal with the current literary situation challenged by popular culture which has risen in the age of globalization.

It is true that comparative literature studies in the process of globalization is confronted with various challenges which even threaten the survival of literature as a canonical product of elite culture. As a discipline dealing with all the literary phenomena in a cross-cultural and comparative way, comparative literature is especially challenged by Cultural Studies which are even more flourishing in the age of globalization. Before the end of the 19th century, in speaking of literature of the turn of the century, we cannot but think of the term fin de siècle, for literature of the fin de siècle always reminds us of the decadent literary trends in the last turn of the century. It sometimes even discourages people who love literature and who are very much worried about whether literature will come to an end in the future. It is therefore not surprising for people to raise such a question: will literature of the new turn of the century be like what it used be like at the end of the 19th century? Since we are in the process of globalization with the expansion of internet growing wider and wider, what impact it might make on literary creation and comparative literature study? If the answer to the first question is not, then what will the future orientation of literature be as it is now suffering from severe challenge raised by popular culture.
and even consumer culture? As for the answer to the second question, I think the impact is so big that it is certainly beyond our expectation. Now the 20th century has become an immediate past, so what we are worried more about should be the future orientation of comparative literature as we are involved in theoretical debate and literary and cultural studies. As for this, I cannot help first of all reflecting on the status quo of Chinese literature as well as comparative literature studies in the turn of the century.

Let me first make an observation on the current Chinese cultural and literary situation in the age of globalization. In the past few years, especially since the international postmodernism debate swept China in the latter part of the 1980s, the rise of popular culture has upset more and more intellectuals and scholars of canonical literature. We can easily notice a conspicuous phenomenon in Chinese cultural and intellectual life, especially after China's practice of socialist market economy at the beginning of the 1990s. Postmodernism of "Chinese characteristics" has been transformed from the once dominant avant-garde intellectual rebel against traditional realist and modernist literary conventions to the challenge raised by popular culture against elite culture and literature. The increasingly shrinking literary market is filled with various books of "petites histoires" rather than those of "master narrative". And in the face of cultural globalization, serious literature is challenged by the rise of popular literature and even the so-called "internet literature". Serious writers can hardly find the similar sphere of functioning as they did in the New Period (Xin shiqi) when writing for life's sake or for art's sake dominated writers' writing consciousness. Literary creation and criticism have entered the so-called "Post-New Period" (Hou xin shiqi). The aesthetic dominance has shifted from art's for life's sake or for art's sake to art's for market's sake. To this, Chinese intellectuals and men of letters respond or react in differ-
ent ways and even argue among themselves, because many of them are not fully prepared for such a sudden change in their work and life. Some of them simply view it as a sort of negative escape from political and social responsibility, which is characterized by undermining the incomplete project of Chinese modernity since the May 4th period in 1919 which marked the beginning of new Chinese culture and literature. They are obviously not satisfied with the drastic change in Chinese literary tradition caused by the May 4th Movement. Nostalgic as they are, they try to return to the splendid cultural tradition before China's opening up during the May 4th Movement, or even at the end of the 19th century. So they want to reverse the verdict of that movement. They even accuse the comparatists of bringing in the recent cultural trends and literary thoughts from the West which have indeed "hybridized" the originally "pure" Chinese literary and critical discourse. But to return to the past is apparently impossible, for China now has opened its door wider to the outside world and has been practicing economic reform in a more and more market-oriented direction, and cultural and literary trends are almost progressing in the same way with those in the West, especially in the current era.

No doubt we are now in an age of globalization, both economically and culturally, with the latter more complicated. To many intellectuals, the future of the humanities and social sciences is not so bright, nor is the future of comparative literature as it is also challenged by Cultural Studies which might well gulp this elite-oriented discipline. As we all know, cultural globalization is undoubtedly a direct consequence of economic globalization. It is characterized by spreading Western, especially American cultural value, over the world. As a result, world culture is more and more homogenizing with the weak cultures' national identity becoming more and more obscure. So it is not surprising that such an attempt is resisted by the other
force: cultural localization. As long as the project of cultural globalization is in progress, it should be resisted by the attempt of cultural localization. World culture will develop in the context of the two forces being juxtaposed: now conflicting and now communicating, but finally, coming to have negotiation and dialogue. In this way, we might well expect that in the context of globalization, the new framework of world culture in the 21st century is characterized by different cultures coming to dialogue and merge in some degrees rather than “cultural conflict” expected by Samuel Huntington in 1993.

In such a cultural context, we find the unique role which has been and will be played by comparative literature: since world culture is developing still in a pluralistic direction, comparatists have much to do. Eurocentrism was long broken through, but it was not before it has been replaced by West-centrism along with the rise of American economic and cultural forces. As comparatists from the Orient, doing East-West comparative study of literature and culture is long term but hard work. Thus we could say that there is still some hope for the future of comparative literature in the age of globalization. Since economy could be “globalized” from the West to the East, why not culture “globalized” from the East to the West as Oriental culture was once of very splendid heritage? Strong economy will not necessarily bring about rich and colorful cultural products. Cultural industry cannot take the place of cultural studies. So my argument simply lies in the fact that Cultural Studies, in this narrow sense, comes more or less from literary study, especially when we speak of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. When I deal with North Frye’s role played in contemporary Cultural Studies, I point out that among the contemporary practitioners of cultural studies, Frye is one of the few far-sighted scholars who take the initiative in putting literary studies in a broader context of cultural studies. But what is very much of concern to schol-
ars of comparative literature is this phenomenon: in today’s atmosphere of globalization, many issues dealt with in Cultural Studies have been going farther and farther away from literary studies. So it is not surprising that some traditional scholars of comparative literature fear for the future of comparative literature studies, which is being almost gulped by Cultural Studies. In my view, by broadening the scope of comparative literature studies, Frye actually paved the way for the possible confluence of comparative literature studies with cultural studies.

Another case is F. R. Leavis, a literary scholar who is recognized as a pioneering figure in contemporary cultural studies, in spite of his elite sense of cultural theory. It is certainly understandable that Leavis speaks for (canonical) “English” literature. It is also understandable that Leavis wants to heighten the general level of people’s culture by offering them a list of canonical literary works. To him, ordinary people can raise their cultural level only through reading a body of canonical literary works. Obviously this sort of enlightenment project in the present era will not work as literary study itself is in danger. Although the later scholars of Cultural Studies have long surpassed the level or Leavis’ cultural theory, they cannot forget the pioneering role played by him in putting literary studies in a broader context of cultural studies. And the reason why Cultural Studies could develop swiftly after Leavis is largely because they have stepped out of the elitist Leavisian mode of cultural study. Then we must redefine Cultural Studies as it is not a “well-established” branch of learning characterizing by being “anti-institution” and even “anti-theory”.

According to its basic definition, Cultural Studies covers such a wide range of areas: ethnic study dealing especially with postcolonial and diasporic study, gender study concerning female and even lesbian study as well as queer study, area study concerning Asian and Pacific study, and media study dealing with contemporary media and internet.
But on the other hand, Cultural Studies could be done on three levels: exploring theoretical problems of culture itself, pointing to contemporary popular and even consumer culture, and last but not least, dealing with literary study from cultural perspectives rather than just from formalistic perspectives. Since many of the theoretic issues discussed in current Cultural Studies come from literary study, why do we think that comparative literature study should be opposed to Cultural Studies? Obviously, we comparatists have already noticed the fact that doing comparative literature study cannot just confine ourselves to the narrow domain of literature proper, for the scope of literature is expanding, and the traditional literary theory is being replaced by the more inclusive critical theory. The same is true of our discipline. In my view, comparative literature study in its highest sense should be done in a cross-linguistic, cross-cultural and interdisciplinary way. But it must start with literary phenomena and come, after some theoretic and interdisciplinary analysis, back to literature thus making some construction of literary theory itself. The practical achievements made by Frye and Leavis have prove this. The same is true of the themes discussed in the past few congresses of the International Comparative Literature Association at which cultural issues are dealt with more than mere literary phenomena. Thus I could reach a tentative conclusion: there is still a future for comparative literature if it does not want to confine itself to the strong elite sense of mere literary study and if it does want to be opposed to Cultural Studies.

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