COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND THE PLURAL VISION OF DISCOURSE

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Summary

Comparative literature was established in nineteenth-century Europe as a discipline of literary study transcending monolingual national traditions. Before World War II, the French approach of influence study predominated in the field with emphasis on factual contacts and international relations, the influence and reputation of important writers abroad. In postwar America, with many comparatists emigrated from Europe and the ideology of nationalism discredited, a new approach emerged to promote a more inclusive model of parallel study of different literatures without the positivistic notion of factual contacts and relations, and with emphasis on literary and aesthetic values of texts. This liberal-humanistic approach in comparative literature was increasingly displaced by literary theory and cultural studies since the 1970s, but the eclipse of literature as the center of reference has created an identity crisis for comparative literature. Part of the problem is that comparative literature is still largely Eurocentric, while there has been a tremendous increase of interest in non-Western literatures and cultures. Once comparative literature frees itself from Eurocentric limitations and assumes a truly global perspective, new areas of pursuit and development will open up and will offer comparatists not only new challenges, but also the possibility of new insights and achievements.

1. Introduction

Emerged as an approach or methodology of literary study that drew inspiration from such scientific studies of nature as comparative zoology or comparative anatomy with an imbedded conviction in the efficacy of Darwinian evolutionary theory, comparative literature was first and foremost a distinctly European endeavor in the nineteenth century. The Romantic notion of nature as an organic unity with different species encouraged scholars to view literary works as related to one another beyond linguistic
and national boundaries, with comparable themes and features, to form some kind of unity of literary expressions and aesthetic sensibilities. By definition, therefore, comparative literature is an intellectual pursuit that goes beyond the boundaries of linguistically uniform and politically unified national literatures.

Comparatists are polyglots with a wide range of interest and knowledge of different literatures. Given the geographic, linguistic, and cultural proximities, it is natural that the early work of comparative literature concentrated on the interrelationships among European literatures; and even today much of comparative literature still remains largely Euro-American despite the many changes and transformations it has gone through since its early start in the nineteenth century. The best scholarly work in comparative literature, some of the classic works, such as Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, Robert Ernst Curtius’s *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, Frank Kermode’s *Sense of an Ending*, and many other works of a similar stature and influence, are all concerned with Western literature. More recently, however, limitations of this largely Eurocentric or West-centered discipline become increasingly apparent, and comparatists have started to go beyond the West, while they see comparative literature in the traditional sense has come to a sort of dead-end. There have appeared some works, though few, which have made significant contributions to comparative literature from a truly global perspective and offered opportunities for further development.

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Biographical Sketch

Zhang Longxi was born in Chengdu, China, in 1947. He received his MA in English from Peking University in Beijing, China, in 1981, and his Ph. D. in Comparative Literature from Harvard University in Cambridge, Mass., USA, in 1989. His major field of study is east-west comparative literature.

He has taught at Peking University, the University of California, Riverside, and currently the City University of Hong Kong in Kowloon, Hong Kong. His major publications include The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992); Mighty Opposites: From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Allegoresis: Reading Canonical Literature East and West (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); and Unexpected Affinities: Reading across Cultures (University of Toronto Press, 2007, Toronto). He has a wide range of interests in classical Chinese literature, Shakespeare and seventeenth-century English literature, literary theory and criticism, and East-West studies.

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