

Variation in Synchronic Development of Literature: Mutual Learning

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the processes of cross-lingual, transnational, and cross-cultural communication and interaction of world literary classics. The author argues that world literary classics are actually the result of the variation of the exchanges between various “ethnic” literatures. Comparative literature is essentially a discipline of scholarly study of the synchronic developments of literature and culture. Although scholars have long recognized the perspective of variation in diachronic development, there has been less attention to variation in synchronic development. The formation of world literary classics is also closely related to the synchronic development of literature. Thus, variation studies in comparative literature not only reveal the perspective of cultural innovation but also find creativity in the variation of cultural and literary communication as well as innovation in the variation of literary interpretation.

Keywords: Comparative Literature; Variation and Literature; Mutual Learning and Culture; Synchronic and Diachronic Developments of Literature.

Professor Cao Shunqing proposes a new comparative literature discourse with two crucial points: First, he puts forward “variability” as an innovative viewpoint in comparative literature. Second, he argues that variation is the universal law of horizontal development that is evident in the synchronic development of literature (See “*Comparative History of The Development of World Literature*” 1) . This paper focuses on the latter viewpoint in variation studies: the law of mutual learning and cross-civilization variation in the synchronic development of literature and the formation of world literature.

The development of literature is both diachronic and synchronic. Diachronic development involves inheritance and transformational development within a nation’s literature, that is, how the past literature of the nation influences the literature of later generations and how the literature of later generations continues or reforms the development of traditional literature. On the other hand, synchronic development involves

mutual influence and variation among nations. Each nation experiences periods of openness or closedness, isolation, or frequent interactions with other nations, gradually forming their universal connection. In synchronic development, literatures of all nationalities collide, blend, and variate, demonstrating the historical momentum of world literature that moves from decentralized development to overall connection. (*“Comparative History of The Development of World Literature”* 1).

THE “INHERITANCE” AND “VARIATION” IN LITERATURE DEVELOPMENT

These diachronic and synchronic developments construct national literatures and world literature. Thus, the two fundamental dynamics of literature development are the general diachronic change and synchronic influence and variation. Scholars of Chinese literature have long recognized the law of variation in the diachronic development of literature and have formed systematic theories on the subject. For example, Xie Liu summarizes the diachronic development of Chinese literature as “flexible adaptability to varying situations” (通变) (*“The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons”* 188). Liu points out:

The genres to which literary compositions may belong are definite; an individual composition is permitted stylistic flexibility. How do we know this is so? Because in the case of genres, like Shih, or poetry; Fu, or poetic narrative; Shu, or epistolary writing; and chi, or memoir, their names and content correspond; therefore, they are definite. However, as for literary expressions and vital force, they must adapt themselves to varying situations in order to endure; therefore, they are flexible. The genres, because of the definite correspondence between their names and content, have to base themselves on established principles; but because the style must maintain its flexible adaptability to varying situations, its very essence is its sensitivity to new modes and cadences. Only by observing this truth can a writer gallop on a road that does not end in an impasse, or drink out of a spring which is inexhaustible. [夫设文之体有常，变文之数无方，何以明其然耶？凡诗赋书记，名理相因，此有常之体也；文辞气力，通变则久，此无方之数也。名理有常，体必资于故实；通变无方，数必酌于新声；故能骋无穷之路，饮不竭之源。] (*“The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons”* 188)

The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons discusses the diachronic development theory, stating that literature needs both inheritance and variation: “If it changes, it will endure; If it adapts itself to the changing tide, it will lack nothing. [变则其久，通则不乏。] (“*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*” 190).” Furthermore, Guowei Wang's *The Notes and Comments on Ci Poetry* emphasizes change even more:

The corruption of the four-character poetry and Ode of Chu, the corruption of Ode of Chu and the five-character poetry, the corruption of the five-character poetry and the seven-character poetry, the corruption of the ancient poems and the quatrains. One type of style has been popular for a long time, and there will be more people writing it, and gradually it will form routines and habits. Finally, even the masters of poetry could hardly write creatively from them, so they innovated new styles and sought freedom and new ideas. From the beginning of prosperity and development to the final decline, all styles are due to this reason. (Trans. Cao Yina) [四言敝而有《楚辞》，《楚辞》敝而有五言，五言敝而有七言，古诗敝而有律绝，律绝敝而有词。盖文体通行既久，染指遂多，自成习套。豪杰之士，亦难于其中自出新意，故遁而作他体，以自解脱。一切文体所以始盛终衰者，皆由于此。] 15).

Western literary diachronic inheritance and development theories are mostly reflected in the dispute between ancient and modern literature. Such dispute has a long history in French literature. One fierce debate happened at the end of the 17th century regarding the substantive question: Inheritance or variation? Boileau published *The Art of Poetry* in 1674, in the third chapter of which he criticized De Marais and resolutely maintained myth as the main subject of poetry (30-54) . Later, on January 27, 1687, Charles Perrault read his poem “The Century of Louis the Great” aloud at the French Academy, claiming that modern writers are not inferior to ancient Greco-Roman writers. This opinion was immediately met with the rebuttal of the literary authority of Boileau, La Fontaine, Racine, La Bruyère, and other famous scholars. Until 1713, the dispute between the past and the present did not wholly subside. However, the final victory of this controversy belongs to the modernist school, which advocated innovation in literature. In sum, the Chinese and Western arguments and views on “inheritance” or “variation” within the framework of the diachronic development of literature have a long history and diverse opinions.

“Inheritance” and “variation” happen not just in diachronic development but also in synchronic development as well. What are the rules of inheritance and variation of synchronic and diachronic literature development, and how do they influence each other and promote the development of literature? Firstly, if the diachronic “inheritance” and “variation” is the critical law of the diachronic development of literature history, then the synchronic “influence” and “variation” of national literature is the vital law of the synchronic development of literature. Secondly, the diachronic “inheritance or variation” debate caused a long-term controversy between the ancient and the modern in the history of literature. At the same time, the synchronic “influence,” “transplantation,” “learning,” and “variation” caused a long-lasting internal and external dispute, that is, the long-term “Yixia debate” and the fierce “China-West controversy,” which was a driving force in the development of Chinese literature in the 20th century. Thirdly, according to Liu, “It illustrates for us how deeply literary development is influenced by the course of worldly events, and how directly the rise and fall of political powers bear on the trends of literature. [文变染乎世情，兴废系乎时序]” (“The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons a Study of Thought and Pattern in Chinese Literature” 252). The relationship among literature, race, social conditions, and the times are the concern and driving force of the diachronic development of literature. On the other hand, the nationalization or globalization of literature constitutes the crucial issues for the synchronic development of literature. Fourthly, the diachronic development of literature depends on political and economic development. Thus, the imbalances between literature and political and economic development, especially the leaps, variations, and ruptures in the development of literature, are what drives literature to change synchronically.

As such, diachronic and synchronic developments are the two intertwined, fundamental driving forces of literary development. Only by investigating their operations can we truly understand the laws of world literature’s development. In this development process, “inheritance” and “variation” exist objectively and are widespread and even inevitable. Regarding the driving forces of the diachronic development of literature, people are first concerned about diachronic inheritance and variation, and the continuation of or innovation in literary aesthetic forms as interpreted

by readers over generations. However, it should be emphasized that the synchronic development of literature is also a significant driving force of literary development. In other words, the driving force of literary development lies not only in diachronic changes and chronological progress but also in the synchronic exchanges and collision, influence, and variation. The fundamental laws of literature development cannot be adequately covered without understanding the synchronic dynamics of literary development.

MUTUAL LEARNING AMONG CIVILIZATIONS IN THE SYNCHRONIC DEVELOPMENT AND THE WESTERN LITERATURE HISTORY

The second argument I would like to make is that mutual learning among civilizations in the synchronic development of literature is the foundation of literary comparison, and world literature is formed by synchronic variation and mutual learning among civilizations. The history of world literature has been understood through a lens where the diachronic development of Western literature is the primary track, with ancient Greece being its starting point. However, this is a dated understanding about the history of Western literature. We now know that ancient Greek literature actually results from mutual learning among civilizations, of which the synchronic variation is a part. In fact, the historical facts demonstrate that the fruit of human literary wisdom originally comes from other parts of the world. The earliest civilizations were considered to be the Lydian and Hittites, Phoenician and Cretan, Babylonian and Egyptian. However, the true origins date further back. The earliest dawn of human civilization and literature occurred in Sumer.

In 1956, Mesopotamian archaeologist Professor Samuel Noah Kramer published *History Begins at Sumer* (1988). Prior to this, C. L. Wooley, who personally worked on the excavation of Mesopotamian city sites, had already stated that if we judge human performance purely from their achievement, the Sumerian culture, after considering the chronological and environmental factors, should be considered worthy of praise, even though its achievements were not very remarkable. The Sumerian culture belongs to the earliest human culture, and its emergence illuminated the primitive and savage world (Ralph 131). *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is the oldest

known heroic epic in the world. The Sumerians passed down more than 4,000 years ago and refined over the centuries before being put into written form during the Ancient Babylonian Kingdom (19th-16th centuries BC). *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is a hymn about the hero Gilgamesh who ruled the Sumerian city-state of the ancient Mesopotamian region. Although the hymn is fragmented, we can still observe the Sumerians' worship and praise of their great hero in the remaining 2,000 lines. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is believed to date from 2,700 to 2,500 BC, more than a thousand years before the ancient Greek epics. Moreover, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* has also influenced ancient Greek epics. For example, a famous passage of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is the story of the water god Oia who uses a flood to destroy humankind, referred to as the Mesopotamian version of Noah's Ark by later generations. Greek scholar Ioannis Kordatosr believes that many chapters show the subtle connection between *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Odyssey*. Some also argue that the flood chapters of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* are related to the biblical story of Noah's Ark and other ancient civilizations' accounts of the flood, suggesting that the biblical section on the flood evolved from the account in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Thus, the Sumerian culture has profoundly influenced human history. The above facts prove that ancient Greek literature was a product of the synchronic development of literature, but not the singular starting point of Western literature.

Besides, ancient Greece is not one of the ancient civilizations in the first place. There are four ancient civilizations in the history of world civilization: Sumerian/Babylonian (Mesopotamia), ancient Egyptian, ancient Chinese, and ancient Indian. Most of our knowledge in philosophy, science, literature, and art are built on the contributions of these civilizations. Each has its own calendars and language. The Indus (Indian), Yellow River (Chinese), and Mesopotamia civilizations used pottery wheels to make pottery. Egyptian and Mesopotamian ones calculated the pi ratio; the Babylonian and the Chinese discovered the Pythagorean theorem and its practical applications; and the Indians invented the Arabic numerals. They also have their own myths and legends, as well as great literary works, such as the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Book of the Dead* of ancient Egypt, and the *Book of Songs* of China. Besides, the four ancient civilizations independently produced their own writing systems. In general, they were independent civilizations with

a clear lineage of civilization and writing production, discovery, and continuation. However, Greek civilization is absent among the ancient major civilizations.

Why is ancient Greece not an ancient civilization? According to academic research, the ancient Greek civilization was not primitive and original, but a secondary civilization formed by absorbing other ancient civilizations after the ancient Egyptian and Babylonian civilizations disappeared. The pieces of evidence are as follows. Each of the four ancient civilizations has its original writing systems: the hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt, the cuneiform writing system of Mesopotamia, the oracle bone inscriptions of ancient China, and the Dravidian script of ancient India. However, ancient Greek writing is derived from the Asian Phoenician alphabet. Modern archaeologists have discovered thousands of clay tablets of alphabetic writing written with wedge-shaped symbols in the ancient city of Ugarit. Moreover, scholars found a Literacy Reader, the world's first alphabetical text table. The Phoenician alphabet was formed when the Phoenicians alphabetized dozens of simple pictographs based on cuneiform characters around 1,500 BC. Almost all the present alphabetic scripts can be traced back to the Phoenician alphabet, such as the Hebrew alphabet, the Arabic alphabet, the Greek alphabet, the Latin alphabet, etc. Phoenician characters are consonantal letters; there are no letters or symbols representing vowels, and the pronunciation of words must be inferred from the context. In the West, in the eighth century, the ancient Greeks developed the ancient Greek alphabet based on the Phoenician alphabet, added vowels, and later formed the Latin alphabet based on the ancient Greek alphabet. Afterwards, the ancient Greek and Latin alphabets became the basis of the alphabets of Western countries.

Thus, ancient Greek civilization was a secondary civilization under the influence of the two ancient primitive civilizations, ancient Egypt and ancient Mesopotamia. Ancient Greek is a new civilization spawned by the synchronic development of civilizations. Later, the ancient Greek civilization moved west to ancient Rome, where it inspired the birth of the ancient Roman civilization and finally the origin of the entire Western civilization. Judging from these facts, the interaction of, or the synchronic development of and variation in civilizations is a significant driving force for human civilization and literary innovation. This historical fact also fully

demonstrates that different civilizations are often the result of mutual learning and promotion.

Civilizations learn from each other, which forms a variation process in the synchronic development of the world's national literatures from closed to open, from isolation to convergence. At the micro-level, it is manifested as the specific contact of a writer's works and the specific communication of the literature of different nationalities. However, the existing research on world literature still lacks a comparative history of the development of world literature where diachronic development and synchronic development are intertwined, contrasted, and consciously supplemented. This is closely related to the academic community's insufficient understanding of the critical role of the synchronic development of literary variation.

The history of world literature (including the history of national literatures) is incomplete without accounting for the synchronic development of literature. Nevertheless, most existing works on the history of world literature only talk about diachronic historical development. They do not consider synchronic communication and influence, producing a monotonous literary history with only the separate diachronic and synchronic lines. Simultaneously, there is no parallel comparison between Chinese and foreign literary development, resulting in an isolated literature history that lacks reference and comparison. This literary history fails to combine the mutual influence and acceptance by variation in world literature and fails to place Oriental and Chinese literature in the whole picture. Thus, people cannot deeply understand the value and characteristics of Chinese literature in comparison and reference. This perspective is unable to combine the parallel study and influence study of comparative literature to research the synchronic development of Chinese and foreign literature. The result is often a deficient comparative literary history. Nevertheless, this kind of deficient history of world literature has been taken for granted for a long time. Synchronic development, variation, and rich literature content have long been excluded from the compilation of world literature history, which is highly detrimental to global academic research and the teaching of world literature history.

The study of comparative literature is a discipline devoted to exploring the laws of the synchronic development of literature. Regrettably, the Western comparative literature theories have not discussed the law of

variation in the synchronic development of literature. The core issue of the theory of comparative literature is the synchronic influences and communication of literature as well as the synchronic development and comparison of literature, which is the study of world literature with an international mind and vision. The most basic disciplinary feature of the transnational, cross-linguistic, and cross-civilizational study of comparative literature is the synchronic influence of literature communication and synchronic transcendence comparison. On the one hand, it is the theories of comparative literature of the French and the American schools that gave comparative literature the characteristics of synchronic “transnational” influence research, transnational and cross-cultural synchronic parallel research, and “interdisciplinary” research. From the history of comparative literature, we can see that the early broad-minded generations studying comparative literature vigorously advocated for breaking the closed-door, self-defensive stance in literature and promoted synchronic expansion. For example, Goethe firmly believed that “Poetry is the common property of mankind...looking around the situation of foreign nations” (Goethe 113). He also pointed out with great foresight “The era of world literature is coming, and everyone should now contribute to making it come soon” (113). According to Guyard, a representative scholar of the French school, the characteristic of comparative literature lies in the study of the synchronic relations in literature, in the synchronic influence across national, linguistic, and ethnic boundaries. Guyard believes that Comparative literature is the history of international literary relations, where the comparative literary practitioner stands at the linguistic or national margins and watches the mutual penetration of works of literature in terms of subject matter, ideas, books, or emotions (87). He is concerned with the synchronic development of literature—the central issue of the French school of comparative literature. The American school is also concerned with the synchronic comparison of literature. Many scholars endorse Henry Remark's definition. He believes that comparative literature is the study of literature beyond the scope of a country, and the study of the relationship between literature and other fields of knowledge and belief (Zhang 1). These positions all emphasize the synchronic relations and comparisons in literature.

Even though we have made clear that the French and American schools of comparative literature first endowed the study of synchronic

comparative literature, the current theory of comparative literature is flawed because it only investigates “inheritance” and not “variation”; or rather, it considers “inheritance” or “similarity” as the primary criterion. It does not consider variability in the synchronic development of literature. The Western discourse of “commonality” has dominated comparative literary theory. Similarly, the French school is opposed to investigating differences in comparative literature. The French comparative literary scholar Baldensperger wrote a programmatic introduction in the inaugural issue of the *French Review of Comparative Literature*, “The Name and Nature of Comparative Literature,” and strongly opposed the chaotic comparison of differences (33). Apparently, only homology matters in the French school, and comparison without homologous relations is a “chaotic” comparison. “Sameness” is the most fundamental criterion for comparability. In the American school, the theory is based on comparing analogies, and without analogies, comparisons are “chaotic.” That is why Ulrich Weisstein opposed cross-civilizational literary comparisons, arguing that only within a single civilization can we find common elements in thought, feeling, and imagination that consciously or unconsciously sustain tradition (14). Nevertheless, variation is a basic fact of literary and cultural exchange, and it is also a fundamental law of cultural exchange and civilizational convergence and innovation. Influence research does not study variability, which is the biggest shortcoming of either the French school or the American school. The lack of a theory of “variation” is a problem for both of them, making it impossible for them to consider and discuss the problem of heterogeneity and variability in literary studies. To blindly seek commonality is to ignore variation in the synchronic development of literature.

THE IMPACT OF FOREIGN LITERATURE ON CHINESE LITERATURE: LITERATURE RUPTURE, VARIATION, AND APHASIA

There have been literary breaks and ruptures in modern Chinese literature’s synchronic development, in which the occurrence of variation is often referred to as “the redirection of Chinese literature.” During the May 4th Movement, Chinese culture began to “divert the river” and bid

farewell to traditional literature with the slogan “Down with Confucianism.” Although there have been many cultural clashes in the long history of Chinese civilization, Chinese civilization has always been in the mainstream, which is characterized with deep roots and a broad, eclectic and tolerant atmosphere. There has never been a real sense of cultural crisis. However, from the end of the 19th century to the early 20th century, the roots of Chinese culture were severely challenged by the West’s powerful ships and cannons. In the national cultural crisis, the concern to save the nation and to survive forced the Chinese nation to “seek new voices in foreign countries” at the expense of Confucianism and the traditional culture. Since the May 4th Movement, Chinese culture and literature have experienced a vast cultural fault line formed by variation in the synchronic development of literature. The external military, political, economic, and other forces caused the fracture and variations in Chinese culture. These developments did not contribute to the diachronic development of Chinese culture; therefore, they were abnormal fractures and variations in the cultural development.

The aphasia of Chinese culture and literary theory caused by synchronic variation has become the most severe problem in studying Chinese literary theory in the past hundred years. For a long time, modern and contemporary Chinese literary theory have not diachronically inherited their preceding traditions but basically synchronically borrowed a set of Western discourses. This resulted in a long-lasting state of aphasia in literary expression, communication, and interpretation. Since the May 4th Movement and “Down with Confucianism,” traditional Chinese literary theory has been abandoned and studied by only a few scholars as “Qin Dynasty bricks and Han Dynasty tiles,” while the Western literary theory became the building blocks of China’s modern literary edifice. Later, after the founding of People's Republic of China, we fell in the arms of Russian and Soviet literary theories. Since 1980, various new and old Western literary theories have been absorbed in Chinese literary circles, which almost caused indigestion in the hungry belly of the contemporary Chinese literary circle. As one scholar pointed out, in the seventeen years after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, literary criticism had become a set of literary theories imported from the Soviet Union. The theoretical frameworks of Belinsky, Chernyshevsky, and Dubrolyupov, together with “instrumentalism,” had long restrained Chinese literary

critics (“*Comparative History of The Development of World Literature*” 50). This background of theoretical poverty rendered any theory or criticism with a dazzling synchronic transplant of “new” color. As the Chinese literary circles did not have the time to sum up a set of literary theory rules from the practice of new literary creations, various Western literary theories had already landed and firmly controlled the Chinese literary world. Since then, contemporary Chinese literature had to grow up by absorbing the nutrition of Western literary theory: realism, romanticism, aestheticism, and Aristotle, Plato, Croce, Nietzsche, etc. Since birth, Chinese modern and contemporary literary theory was doomed to its congenital aphasia. This so-called aphasia does not imply the lack of a set of discursive rules, but it means the inheritance of the Western literary theory’s discourse system. This cultural and literary break in the variation in the synchronic development of literature is caused by the overall switching of the Chinese and Western knowledge pedigrees. From a theoretical point of view, the most crucial aspect of this transformation is not the synchronic change of detailed thoughts, concepts, or even language styles but the overall synchronic switch to Western knowledge genealogies. Cultural transitions did happen in ancient China, such as in the Wei and Jin dynasties. However, previous transformations involved only a diachronic ideological change, such as the transition from the study of Six Scriptures to metaphysics, from the “kingly way” to the “meaning of human life,” rather than a sweeping change of the overall knowledge system and quality of culture as is the case in the 20th century. In ancient cultural transformations, the essential knowledge quality and the overall framework of the knowledge system were not fundamentally changed. Afterwards, the local traditional knowledge could multiply and develop along with new theories. However, the modern transformation of Chinese culture is quite different. The overall switching of Chinese and Western knowledge pedigrees directly has led to changes in the quality of knowledge. The modern knowledge form after the modern synchronic transformation is based on the importation of modern Western learning.

THE IMPACT OF THE SYNCHRONIC DEVELOPMENT OF LITERATURE PROMOTING THE RECONSTRUCTION OF LITERARY CLASSICS

The 20th century was an era of significant collisions between Chinese and Western cultures. The 21st century may turn out to be an era of global cultural dialogue. The impact and variations in the synchronic development of literature promoted the reconstruction of literary classics, and one of the critical phenomena in this process is the foreignization of literature. The Sinicization of Western literary theory and the Westernization of Chinese literature are what we call the “phenomenon of foreignization.” The foreignization of literature refers to a more profound variation in national literature after its spread to other countries, which involves cultural filtering, translation, and acceptance. This variation is mainly reflected in cultural rules. The literary discourse of spreading one country’s literature itself is fundamentally transformed by other countries, thus becoming part of other countries’ literatures and cultures. This mutual transformation bespeaks new cultural rules and literary discourse of national literature.

What is literary discourse? Discourse is a linguistic term derived from the Latin *discursus*. It originally means conversation and speech. After Bakhtin, Foucault, and others, the discourse has been associated with ideological beliefs, value pursuits, world outlooks, and power. This viewpoint quickly spread throughout the Western academic system. As such, the meaning of discourse has gone far beyond the linguistic level and has come to involve universal power relationships because it determines who has the right to speak about “truth” and the authority of such speech. It is a kind of power coming from representation and concealment. The basic rules of discourse are the rules of discursive expression and discursive language. “Discourse power” means the power to control the way discourse is generated and spoken. Therefore, whoever has the power of discourse can make the rules, maintain authority, determine the truth, write history, and even suppress others.

The synchronic development of culture and literature led to the encounter and collision of Chinese and Indian civilizations, resulting in the mutual appreciation and variation in Chinese and Indian civilizations and new classics. When Buddhism entered China, its strong momentum

of synchronic development caused a fierce collision and even a subversive shaking-up of the traditional foundations of Chinese culture. According to the theory of Sanpo by Daoist priest Gu Huan, “(Buddhism) enters the country and breaks it, enters the family and breaks it, enters the body and breaks it” (“*Out of Confusion Theory*” 533-554). However, Buddhism itself must have undergone variations to overcome barriers of language and culture as it entered China. For example, after a difficult period of “matching the meanings” (格义), Sinicization began in the translation of the sutras. The most critical problem and the most fundamental characteristic of the Sinicization of Buddhism are that the Indian cultural rules, which focus on logic and language, have been transformed into Chinese cultural rules, which are intuitive-- “no writing, communicate with the heart” (“*Out of Confusion Theory*” 550; Trans by Cao Yina). The transformation of Buddhism based on Chinese discursive rules truly realized the Sinicization of Buddhism, leading to the founding of Zen Buddhism, which has become the pillars of Chinese culture along with Confucianism and Taoism.

VARIATION IN THE SYNCHRONIC DEVELOPMENT OF LITERATURE AND THE FORMATION OF THE WORLD LITERARY CLASSICS

The formation of world literature is closely related to global synchronic communication and the variation in literature. The organization of world literature is a complex process of influences, exchanges, confrontations, and dialogues among different cultures. After a culture is foreignized, it will inevitably participate in a renewal and re-creation process, which ultimately leads to the formation of world literary classics. This discovery of the law of cultural variation is an innovative path for literature development.

What constitutes the classics of world literature? Scholars have believed that world literature has been the sum of all national literary classics for a long time. However, this view is no longer convincing. National literary classics is an essential source of world literary classics; however, this does not mean that all national literary classics can enter the ranks of world literary classics. With the current developments of literary theory, the concept of literary classics has also changed. As summarized by David

Damrosch: World literature is an elliptical refraction of national literatures, which means writing that gains in translation subject to a mode of reading, but does not mean a set canon of texts (298). Thus, world literature involves variation. With increasing globalization, world literature is not destined to be an internal exchange of national or regional literatures and a rough aggregation centered on national literary classics but a crystallization of the synchronic development of and variation in literature. Hence, the world literary classics are formed by synchronic development, communication, and literature variation. For example, with the interaction of different cultures, the Chinese Yuan drama *The Orphan of Zhao* has grown into a world literature classic. According to statistics, the Yuan Dynasty, which lasted less than one hundred years, produced more than 200 writers and playwrights. There are 737 kinds of plays and 208 Zaju, represented by Guan Hanqing, Zheng Guangzu, Ma Zhiyuan, and Bai Pu. The classic works include *Dou E Yuan*, *A Beautiful Girl Left the Soul*, *Han Palace Autumn*, and *Wutong Rain*. Ji Junxiang's *The Orphan of Zhao* hardly ranks as a Chinese classic among the Yuan dramas. However, it has grown into a world literature classic due to the synchronic interactions of heterogeneous cultures. In the 18th century, it was first received in France, then in Britain, and widely spread abroad afterwards. This process lasted for 20 years, from the mid-1930s to the early 1960s, which is a significant event in the history of literary exchange between the east and the west. Voltaire's adaptation of the play is a critical literary variation, bespeaking to the play's worldwide influence. Based on this drama, Voltaire wrote *The Orphan of China*, set in the era of Genghis Khan, which is more familiar to Western readers who are at home with European neoclassical theatrical norms. In the end, *The Orphan of Zhao*, having undergone cross-national and cross-cultural exchange and variation, returned home and was performed in China. In fact, it has been constantly adapted and performed in modern and contemporary China, gaining a new life. The variation in such synchronic literary communication has helped *The Orphan of Zhao* to establish its classic status in world literature.

CONCLUSION

From the perspective of variation studies, this article has demonstrated how synchronic literary exchanges and variation influence the formation

of world literary classics. Due to differences in languages and cultures, ethnic literature will inevitably have a mutual influence in the exchanges between heterogeneous cultures, which produce the results of variation. This is precisely because the world literary classics, after undergoing variation, not only accept the influence of other countries' literatures but also affect them. Therefore, differences coexist with universality, and the world literary classics formed on this coexistence are not a simple list or translations of national literary classics. National literature must overcome the barriers of heterogeneous cultural differences to become a world literary classic. Comparative literary variation, which focuses on heterogeneity and variability, demonstrates how national literary works can grow into world literature classics. World literature in the era of globalization should be regarded more as a process of global interconnection rather than that of isolating a particular nation or region. Ultimately, world literature should be formed through the synchronic exchange and interactive variation in national literature on a global scale so that the world's readers can recognize themselves through the appreciation of the other. For that, we should first recognize the important function of variation in the synchronic communication of literature among national literatures.

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