

## Cross-cultural Communication and Cultural Variation

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**Abstract:** In "Cross-cultural Communication and Cultural Variation" Yina Cao discusses the concept of "cultural variation" (Cao Shunqing) as an extension of the discipline of comparative literature. She argues that the concept of cultural variation explains many problems in the field of cross-cultural communication while it can also provide a unique research perspective for the phenomenon of cultural integration. By summarizing and sorting out the problems which need to be solved in "cultural variation" and the core cases of cultural variation (e.g., "journey to the West"), Cao discusses the phenomenon of *aphasia* in the process of cultural foreignization, cultural transmission, and cultural variation and attempts to imagine a new approach in scholarship in order to explore new theoretical tools for the future of the discipline of comparative literature with the use of Cao's variation theory.

**Keywords:** Cultural Variation; Cross-cultural Communication; Cultural Aphasia; Cultural Foreignization; Comparative Literature; Chinese Culture

### INTRODUCTION

Since the introduction of Cao Shunqing's "variation theory" in Chinese comparative literature, the concept has been gaining increasing interest not only in Chinese scholarship but also in English-language scholarship (see, e.g., Cao, "The Construction"; Cao and Han; see also "What is Cultural Variation"). In his 2013 book, *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*, Cao posits that "cross-culture is the basic feature of the Chinese school of Comparative Literature" (159). In the context of cultural variation, Cao also discusses culture filtering and the theory of imagology in comparative literature. Under the umbrella of "cultural variation" the phenomenon of cultural foreignization is worthwhile to mention because both culture and literary theories can be "converted" under certain historical and cultural circumstances and this "conversion" is known as "foreignization." The term "variation" is not only a feature of comparative literature, but also an important part of cultural communication. Thus, variation is not an isolated discourse category, but a holistic and general discourse system rooted in Chinese philosophy. The first work to elaborate on this structure

was an ancient Chinese divination text called *I Ching* 易经 (also known as *Yi Jing*, *Classic of Changes*, *Book of Changes*). As the oldest Chinese classic, it was published in the late ninth century BC. Unlike Western philosophy, which focuses on Aristotle's materialism and Plato's idealism, variation is the most important epistemological concept in ancient Chinese philosophy. As an important branch within the discipline of variation, cultural variation studies contain a distinct theoretical connotation, research focus, and research objectives. In the present study I explore parameters of cultural variation by examining the peculiarities of cultural phenomena in terms of communication and interpretation. Specifically, this refers to studying the phenomena of variations in different countries and cultures in terms of exchange and differences in interpretation.

In communication studies, variation is an inevitable phenomenon that occurs during the process of cross-cultural communication. Therefore, when exploring the many examples of cultural communication, the concept of cultural variation can follow theoretical thinking, which may include the following structure: 1) Describing the variation mechanism of certain cultural components and forms in the process of foreignization; 2) Researching foreign images in media through domestic television networks and social cultural phenomena (i.e., imagology); 3) Researching a country's culture, including variations of heritage and cultural classics that occur during the processes of dissemination and acceptance; and 4) Researching the parameters of variation in various cultures during processes which involve different cultural phenomena. I posit that "cultural variation" is an expansion of Cao's variation theory from the concept's use in the discipline of comparative literature to its wider employment in cultural studies and cultural communication.

#### FROM WESTERN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE TOWARD "VARIATION THEORY" IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

Feng Xin and Shunqing Cao discuss some of the shortcomings of theoretical frameworks in comparative literature, specifically with regard to the French and U.S.-American schools of the discipline. Following the glory days of comparative literature (including the above-mentioned schools), for the last two decades or so the discipline has undergone an

increasingly "downsized" presence and impact in many Western countries, including France and the U.S. (on this, see, e.g., Tötösy de Zepetnek; Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári). In Feng's and Cao's view, while scholars in the French school emphasize the study of influence by including international literary relations at its core, scholars in the U.S.-American school emphasize the commonality of similarity. In contrast, in Cao's variation theory the basic standpoint of comparative literary variation proceeds from the heterogeneity of different systems within cultures and variations within the process of cultural communication. While similarities can be compared, differences are more valuable.

Scholars interested in cultural variation focus on the comparability of differences within a wide scope of transnational variation, inter-lingual variation, cross-civilization variation, and cultural foreignization. Specifically, this branch of research may explain many issues currently relevant, such as the importance and relevance of global cultural communication, various issues related to the global spread of Chinese culture, the controversy over whether translated literature is "foreign" literature, etc. In short, the notion and theory of cultural variation represent a platform that can be utilized to explain the complexities of the phenomena of international cultural exchange. Cultural variation has a theoretical objective, a practical significance, and an ultimate purpose. The theoretical objective involves highlighting the current cultural heterogeneity in cultural exchanges between China and the West to facilitate communication and integration between different cultures and help construct a world that is "harmonious but different" as mentioned in *The Analects of Confucius* (论语). The theoretical basis of cultural variation refers to the diversity that is produced by different cultures during the processes of communication and exchange. A genuine cultural variation (i.e., a qualitative and fundamental variation) is that of a cultural phenomenon that only occurs during a cross-civilization journey. The study of cultural variation across different civilizations references the development of heterogeneous civilizations in a way that is complementary and mutual. Regardless of literary or cultural variation, creativity is a prominent feature that is embodied in variation. Thus, variation is an important manifestation of cultural creation. Many new products, cultural classics, and objects and aspects of cultural heritage

throughout history have been the result of hybridization and cross-civilization, moving from one country's culture to another. Therefore, research on cultural variation aims to elucidate creativity in, explain the various complex mechanisms of variation, and the reasons for creation.

## TRANSLATION AND CULTURAL VARIATION

Cultural variation not only explains many cultural phenomena and matters of scholarship beyond the scope of comparative literature studies, but it also involves many circumstances like cultural foreignization. The transfer of literature and culture from one country to another results in variation, including that of language translation, acceptance, etc., which leads to *trahison créatrice* ("creative treason") (Escarpit) when it comes to cultural filtering, misreading, and even translating. There is even variation in foreignization. Today, since cross-civilization dialogue between different countries is indispensable, cultural studies of foreignization can be analyzed as a core case of cultural variation. Cao provides a definition for "foreignization" of culture: "A deeper variation that occurs once the culture of one country has been transmitted to other countries through cultural filtering, translation, and acceptance. This variation is mainly reflected in the cultural rules and discourse of the communicating country, which has been fundamentally assimilated by another country and thus becomes a part of its culture" ("Variation Theory" 149; Trans. Cao Yina). The most important sign illustrating that a culture or body of literature has realized foreignization is when its cultural rules and discourses have undergone a fundamental transformation and become a part of the receiving country's local culture. Although this is considered the final stage, the process through which foreignization is realized (actualized) is more complicated and includes some general steps: interpretation, filtration, transformation, standardization, variation of discourse, qualitative change, and absorption in cultural communication. Numerous types of variation also occur during this process, including that of images, interpretations, cultural discourse, cultural rules, sense-making, speech style, and creative treason in the translation process.

*Journey to the West* is classic novel of Chinese mythology, which was written during the Ming Dynasty and based on traditional folktales, as well

as historical events. The novel tells the story of Sun Wukong, the Monkey King of the Tang Dynasty, who protected the monk, Tang Sen, during their journey westward in search of Buddhist scriptures. Over the course of the story, they experience eighty-one challenges. The characters in *Journey to the West* undergo significant changes during the foreignization process which serves as an example of image variation. In the Japanese version, for example, Tang Sen's image transforms from an honest and kind (but sometimes timid) monk into that of a woman who wears white attire and emits a sense of purity. Similarly, Sun Wukong's intelligent, clever, and active image transforms into that of a middle-aged man who lacks vitality (monkey spirit). Meanwhile, it is difficult to distinguish between Zhu Bajie and Sha Heshang (Pig and Friar Sand) because they are both relatively thin in the Japanese variant, while they have completely different appearances in the original version (e.g., they are fat and strong). The original version portrays Zhu Bajie as a pig with a large body, black and gray skin, and tusks that grow from his mouth. His appearance is ugly and frightening, but he has tremendous martial arts skills and considerable strength. In the English-language TV series *The Lost Empire*, Tang Sen is depicted as a modern male with thick hair, wearing a shirt, while the image of Guanyin Bodhisattva, however, transforms from a holy and compassionate person into someone who is sexy and flirtatious. These image variations reveal some differences in the cultural conceptions and backgrounds between countries such as the U.S. and China. For example, Buddhism is far less prevalent in the U.S., a predominantly Christian country. Also, since Westerners have a strong modern ideology and do not consider it a hardship for women to undertake a westbound journey, they consider the whole affair to be wonderful. Moreover, when the four individuals encounter difficulties, their rescue by Guanyin Bodhisattva is not the key moment in the story: when Buddha and Bodhisattva extend their help, it is not to recover the protagonist's strength of heart, but to allow Tang Sen's love affair. The difference between Chinese and U.S. culture have caused significant deviations when it comes to understanding the main characters of *Journey to the West*. Thus, the Chinese characters have undergone "foreignization" and gained an uncompromising image in the foreign countries they were received in.

In Disney's animated films *Mulan* (1998) and *Mulan II* (2004), for example, "the initial goal for Mulan's journey to the battlefield is to seek self-knowledge and personal value" (Yang 55). After being transplanted from the *Ballad of Mulan* in China's Northern and Southern dynasties to a Disney film, the core of the story changes from a romantic legend to a story about a woman's awakening and independence in the Disney version, while the image of Mulan transforms from that of a folk hero into an independent female princess: "There is no doubt that the motif for this variation is caused by the commercial selection of the theme and ways of expression to fit the universal taste of the audience when facing the modern tendency of feminism and the commercial market" (Yang 55). Therefore, the foreignization of Mulan is caused by commercial selection within the U.S. market. Numerous examples of interpretation variations exist in transnational and intercultural communication. The "foreignization" of culture and literature is often realized through errors that occur after the language's transformation (i.e., "creative treason" that happens during translation). For example, Ezra Pound's study of Chinese literature began with his translation of Chinese poetry. His translations, however, were not literal, but creative re-workings of the original, and such creative rewriting reinvigorates the development of a certain genre and style of national literature, which eventually becomes an important genre within the native literature or culture of the receiving country. Owing to the images and linguistic energy of Chinese characters, Pound relied on *Matthews' Chinese-English Dictionary* and *Morrison's Chinese Dictionary* in his creative interpretation of *The Analects*. Both dictionaries provide intuitive images (and even actual pictures) that explain the origin and composition of Chinese characters, which Pound used to disassemble the text's meaning.

A vital ingredient in Pound's success was that he not only comprehensively studied Chinese characters and Han culture (e.g., their way of thinking and expressions), but he also based his unique understanding of poetry on these conceptions and localized Chinese literature according to his way of thinking and speaking. Thus, he transformed and created poetry to suit the habits of his own culture and literature. When Pound succeeded in "foreignizing" Chinese poetry during the process of translation, cultural innovation was simultaneously realized

as cultural variation. Thus, cultural variation is the expression of cultural innovation, while cultural innovation is the essence of cultural variation. English translations of Chinese classical, literary, and imagist poetry may be regarded as typical cases of cultural variation and other types of foreignization.

## THE SPREAD OF INDIAN BUDDHISM IN CHINA

An important rule of cultural variation is discourse variation. The differences between cultural discourse and related cultural rules provide the necessary conditions for other types of foreignization while promoting the finalization of cultural foreignization and achieving the fundamental transformation of a culture's very nature. The spread and Sinicization of Indian Buddhism in China is an important case of cultural variation. Buddhism originally spread to China from India during the Eastern Han dynasty and became widespread in the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern dynasties, thus instigating cultural conflict and debate between China and India. When Buddhism was first introduced to China, its powerful momentum caused a subversive restructuring of China's traditional culture. The Sinicization of Buddhism was realized with 格义 (*Geyi*), a kind of analogy or philosophical concept. The root, *ge*, means "compare" or "measure," while *yi* refers to "name," "item," or "concept." As the name implies, it refers to the use of comparison and analogy for explaining and understanding the concept of a cross-cultural background. Moreover, the rules of Indian culture, which emphasized Hetuvidya logic, gradually changed to suit Chinese Buddhism. When Buddhism was first introduced in China, in order to weaken or eliminate barriers of transmission in language and culture it had to include a certain degree of variation. Confucianism was facing collapse, so many fought against Buddhism's proliferation. This was not necessarily due to a problem with Buddhism, as it may have not been fully Sinicized upon entering China and therefore deemed unsuitable for that environment/period. Thus, it underwent a gradual process of Sinicization and after a long period, it had come to incorporate Chinese cultural rules and discourse. The Sinicization of Buddhism began with a translation of the Buddhist scriptures into Chinese, by not only maintaining the basic meaning of the Sanskrit

Buddhist scriptures, but also including numerous beautiful sentences. In terms of etiquette, the characteristics of many Confucian rituals were absorbed (e.g., the ceremony for teachers and students, kneeling ceremony, bowing ceremony, etc.).

From early on, in Chinese philosophy there were explanations of concepts by describing the specific images of things or telling stories. This has had a hidden effect since the real mystery is often indirect and these features provided the foundation for Zen. After Buddhism's introduction in China, it began to merge with China's inherent culture to a certain extent, so its original discourse and cultural rules played a vital role. The formation of cultural features (e.g., "不立文字, 以心传心" ["no text, transmission from mind to mind" and "enlightenment"] see Pu 101) represented the formal constitution of Zen Buddhism with Chinese characteristics, which played an important cultural role, eventually influencing many literary and poetic theories in China.

The "Poetry on Zen" ("以禅论诗") theory in *Canglang Poetry* (沧浪诗话) serves as an example of this influence. Yan Canglang writes: "Discussing poetry is like discussing Zen: poems written in the Han, Wei, Jin and Tang dynasties are first-rate. The poetry after Dali has fallen to the second-rate. The poetry of the late Tang dynasty is third-class and fourth-class. The poetry of Han, Wei, Jin, and Tang is worse than that of Linji. The poems after learning Dali are worse than those of Cao Dong. In general, the way of Zen lies in intuitive apprehension, so does the way of poetry. For instance, Meng Chiao's learning was far inferior to Han Yi's, yet his poetry was superior. This was due to his complete reliance on intuitive apprehension. Only through this can one be one's true self and show one's natural colors" (Trans. Cao, Yina).

("论诗如论禅：汉、魏、晋等作与盛唐之诗，则第一义也。大历以还之诗，则已落第二义矣。晚唐之诗，则声闻、辟支果也。学汉、魏、晋与盛唐诗者，临济下也。学大历以还者，曹洞下也。大抵禅道惟在妙悟，诗道亦在妙悟。且孟襄阳学力下韩退之远甚，而其诗独出退之之上者，一味妙悟故也。惟悟乃为当行，乃为本色" [Yan and Guo 11-12]). Yan Yu and Guo Shaoyu determined that the standard for judging poetry was the level of enlightenment and proposed that enlightenment 悟 is comprised of a poet's 当行本色 ("natural colors"). This demonstrates Zen's deep influence on Chinese



culture and literature, allowing us to observe how Chinese traditional culture has influenced and changed the original concept of Buddhism that came from India into a unique, native version. Owing to mutual influence and interaction, Chinese Buddhism (Han Buddhism), particularly Zen, has also affected China's inherent culture and literature. The Sinicization of Buddhism is a prominent, significant case of cultural foreignization and cultural variation.

## THE FOREIGNIZATION OF LITERATURE

The foreignization of literature involves two basic situations. First, the receiving country perceives that their national literature has been transformed by another country's national literature (see Cao, "Variation Theory" 149). For example, in 1915 a new cultural movement emerged in China and by 1919 the May Fourth Movement erupted. One of its main themes was to promote new literature and oppose the old, corresponding to the trend that poems should be entirely written in the form of foreign poems. Although written in modern Chinese, these new prosaic poems lacked strict rhyming schemes or poetical meter, and as such, they differed entirely from ancient Chinese poems. Since then, Chinese poetry and literature has been Westernized, resulting in negative consequences. For thousands of years, China has been a nation of poetry that paid attention to lyricism and excelled at lyrical expression through imagery. Since Chinese characters naturally entail a sense of beauty in rhyme and form, it is understandable that ancient Chinese poetry should develop into the modern style (e.g., rhymes and quatrains) that contains the same number of lines and neat arrangements. While the success of poetry and 词 (Ci) lifted Chinese literature to its peak, many scholars now consider it to be outdated. The ancient style of poetry created by modern and contemporary Chinese writers is seen as unworthy of entering the canon. Although numerous excellent creations that reflect ancient poetry exist in modern and contemporary China, the textbooks of contemporary Chinese literature exclude their mention. Thus, the history of this branch of literature has become fragmented.

From the perspective of cultural foreignization, this extreme, one-sided, and unscientific "bringism" (see Lu 103) (i.e., to absorb the advantages of

foreign things for my own use) is worthy of recognition because it serves as a false step. The success of Buddhism's Sinicization is based on an important foundation, which involved retaining much of its cultural crystallization during the process of Sinicization, while combining it with China's Confucian and Taoist cultures. Conversely, the birth and growth of modern Chinese literature is based on overthrowing traditional culture and literature. Literary scholars and writers believe that writing new poems will cause the old ones to be rejected, while writing modern and contemporary literary history will suppress the modern and contemporary poetic creations of the ancient style. Sinologists are only observing the conflict between the old and new literature but lack the perspective that both are inheritances of Chinese literature. In the special era of the May Fourth Movement, this is understandable, but today's scholars have not paid attention to this problem. The second manifestation of Chinese literature's foreignization involves the communicator's perspective. After the literature of the communicating country spreads to other cultures, their national literature interprets and transforms the original work to varying degrees in a way that is beneficial to their literature's development. Once factors become absorbed under the national literature's transformation, it causes changes in the overall national literature in terms of discourse. Finally, the literary foreignization process will be complete (see Cao, "Variation Theory" 150).

The spread of Hanshan poetry in the U.S. is a classic example. A Hanshan poem is one that was written by the monk, Han Shanzi, during the Tang dynasty. Although it is not easy to understand because of its particularity of expression, Hanshan poetry is called popular, or vernacular, poetry. In China, Hanshan poetry is rarely seen in books or textbooks about the history of Chinese literature, but in the U.S. during the 1950s and 1960s, both Hanshan poetry and Han Shanzi were popular (see Wei, Zhang, Wang, Wang, Liu). At that time, Oriental Zen culture was prevalent in the U.S., so Hanshan poetry's emphasis on Zen coincided with the spiritual pursuit of many U.S.-Americans. Hippie youth craved the lifestyle of wandering in nature that these poems echoed. In 1997 Charles Frazier published the novel *Cold Mountain* (this was later adapted into a movie), which is a direct translation of *Hanshan*. Therefore, Hanshan and his poems have been successfully "foreignized."

## CONCLUSION

Based on the successful Sinicization of Buddhism, the Westernization of Chinese poetry and the "foreignization" of Hanshan poetry, we can summarize some of the pressing issues that the study of Chinese literature and culture ought to address concerning the processes of foreignization. It can be concluded that literature foreignization must be based on the cultural rules and discourse methods for accepting national literature (i.e., the way of thinking and speaking). First, the receiving country must recognize the importance of its literary tradition and respect its cultural rules and words. Second, the receiving country should carry out the localization transformation based on the characteristics of the national and foreign literature by adhering to the rules of national literary culture (see Cao, "Variation Theory" 155-57). The order of these priorities cannot be reversed. The foreignization of literature or culture can only be truly realized when the culture of the receiving country can spread literature and culture in a way that is nationalized. The meaning of literature's foreignization involves participation in the renewal and recreation of the literature in the recipient country. However, in the process of cultural communication and variation, the phenomenon of cultural aphasia remains a significant issue: "Chinese modern and contemporary literature and art theories basically borrow a whole set of Western discourses and have long been in a state of 'aphasia' of theory, communication, and interpretation" ("Aphasia of Literary Theory" 51; Trans. Cao Yina). As far as the spread and variation of Chinese cultural history is concerned, aphasia has appeared at least three times throughout history. The first instance occurred when Sima Qian's *Historical Records* did not contain a biography of the important historical personage, Mozi, in the period between 770-476 BC. This may be related to the concept of respecting culture and education, while ignoring science and technology in Confucian discourse. Whether Sima Qian, a historian and essayist of the Western Han dynasty, was subjected to political pressure or not, his core thoughts were reflective of a typical Confucian scholar.

During the second occasion, the hegemony of classical Chinese in ancient times became overshadowed by an important cultural group, namely the school of vernacular poetry in the Tang dynasty. And then the

rise, spread, and variation of Hanshan poetry in foreign countries after a thousand years has prompted domestic scholars to return their attention to the vernacular poetry of the Tang dynasty. The third time aphasia appeared concerned vernacular hegemony. Since the New Culture Movement (the progenitor of the May Fourth Movement), the concept of Westernization has dominated the creation and study of Chinese literature. Promoting new literature means promoting vernacular writing so that the vernacular becomes a symbol of the new. In fact, the vernacular also existed in ancient times, and indeed vernacular poetry flourished in the Tang Dynasty, while that of the Hanshan, Shide, and Wang Fanzhi periods remained influential. In turn, 文言 (written language) based on ancient Chinese and processed through its literary style, is also present in modern times. It represents the wealth of Chinese history and culture as it is not only derived from but for the people of ancient China. Therefore, China's modern and contemporary literary history textbooks do not include current poetry in the ancient style. This continues the hegemony of the vernacular in contemporary Chinese culture and it represents a lack of understanding about history and an inadequate conception of reality. Hence, I argue that the major shortcomings caused by this one-sided vernacular predominance and the lack of confidence in China's excellent traditional culture present future challenges.

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### **Bioprofile**

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