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### About the Chinese School of Comparative Literature

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**Volume 17 Issue 1 (March 2015) Article 3**  
**He Lin and Danqing Huang,**  
**"About the Chinese School of Comparative Literature"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss1/3>>

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 17.1 (2015)**  
Thematic Issue ***The Study of Chinese Literature in the Anglophone World***. Ed. Shunqing Cao  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss1/>>

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**Abstract:** In their article "About the Chinese School of Comparative Literature" He Lin and Danqing Huang discuss the development of the Chinese school of comparative literature since the 1980s. Lin and Huang describe how based on traditions in Chinese literary history, comparatists constructed a system of theoretical frameworks and methods. They argue that the Chinese School should not be criticized as "Chinacentric" just for the fact that its practitioners perform Chinese-Western comparative studies within its own historical and cultural context. Further, they defend the Chinese School by examining the achievements it has made in comparative poetics and the study of reception of Chinese literature in English-language cultures.

## He LIN and Danqing HUANG

### About the Chinese School of Comparative Literature

The notion of "Chinese comparative literature" was proposed initially by Tianhong Gu and Huihua Chen in their 1976 book *比较文学之垦拓在台湾* (Comparative Literature in Taiwan). The notion was adopted in Hong Kong by John Deeney in 1977 (see also Peng-hsiang Chen's 1992 *From Thematics to the "Chinese School" of Comparative Literature*). In the 1980s the notion began to be adopted by scholars in Mainland China and by the 1990s it has been established. However, there are scholars who do not endorse the notion. For example, in their 1984 book *比较文学导论* (Introduction to Comparative Literature), Kanghua Lu and Jingyao Sun introduce the term of "Chinese school," but claim that it is not yet the right time to establish such a school since there are no systematic theories and methodologies (331) and in 2004 Hyung-Jun Jeon criticizes the idea of a "Chinese school" suggesting that it is based on Sinocentrism. In 2005 Daiyun Yue took a hesitant attitude and suggested that a "Chinese school" embodies just one of the various theoretical claims in comparative literature. According to Yue, the term might trap Chinese comparatists in a narrow field because a school of thought is formed naturally in history and thus for example the French school or the US-American school of comparative literature evolved "naturally" (see also Yue and Cai). In 2006 in their article "Western Literary Theories in China" Dan Shen and Xiaoyi Zhou even warn that "The founding of a 'Chinese School' of literary criticism and theory may be nothing more than an inverted form of 'aphasia'" (149). And as recently as in 2013 Xiaoyi Zhou and Q.S. Tong wrote that "A careful examination of ... a Chinese school of comparative literature shows a lack of substance, as well as impracticality... What underscores this proposal is a politics of recognition that aims to establish Chinese comparative literature as an equal partner on the international stage of comparative literature" (279) and also in 2013 Xiaolu Wang and Yan Liu wrote that the "Chinese school" puts too much emphasis on "Chineseness" and hence it may hamper the pursuit of the study of literature in a general context: "Such so-called 'Chineseness' in comparative poetics makes no sense because, in our view, the importance and relevance of the humanities—and especially of comparative poetics—is to study and explore different cultures and literatures, thus maintaining and transferring knowledge" (248).

We begin our argumentation for a Chinese school of comparative literature with a brief excursion about the notions of "school" and "discipline." In principle, while a school of thought can be across disciplines, a discipline is defined by a more or less closed environment whereby institutional administrative aspects are important. However, there can of course exist schools of thought within disciplines. Hence with regard to comparative literature it is a "discipline" and within it there are French, US-American, Russian, East European, etc., schools of comparative literature. While comparative literature as an approach within the study of literature started in European scholarship in the early nineteenth century, it was after World War II when comparative literature became a discipline. For example, in 1951 Marius-François Guyard claimed that the "French school" is not an issue of nationality and that comparative literature should not be viewed as something to do with one's "passport" because some US-American comparatists could be grouped into the "French school" and some French comparatists would, because of the approach they employ in their work, could be considered with the US-American school. And in 1960 Henry H.H. Remak used the term "French school" in an attempt to give a definition for comparative literature and gave the term currency. In fact, the two schools have more or less absorbed each other's principles and methods and the same is the case with other schools of comparative literature while at the same time each has distinct and specific characteristics. Thus, a school of thought is not derived from self-advocacy and self-assertion, but as a necessary part of the development of a discipline.

With regard to a Chinese school of comparative literature, we submit that the same way as we posit above, it is not monolithic and hence we caution against the suggestion that it represents a "centric" composition and content ideologically or otherwise. From the first proposal by Taiwan scholars to its echoes in the Mainland and to the general recognition by Chinese comparatists in recent decades, the term has been experiencing changes. In 1976 Gu and Chen wrote that "We might as well declare that the methodology of studying Chinese literature by borrowing, testing, and revising Western literary theories and methodologies can be called 'the Chinese School of Comparative Literature'" (unless

indicated otherwise, all translations are by Lin and Huan) ("我们不妨大胆宣言说, 这援用西方文学理论与方法并加以考验、调整以用之于中国文学的研究, 是比较文学的中国派 [2]). In the 1970s Taiwan witnessed an upsurge of the idea of "returning to China" characterized by identification with traditional Chinese culture. It happened under such circumstances that the Taiwan Comparative Literature Association was founded in 1973. Since then Taiwan comparatists were known for their preference and promotion of Chinese literature (of note is that in Taiwan scholarship since the 1990s cultural studies appears to sideline comparative literature). At the same time, it is important to note that because Taiwan has been an ally of the West while Mainland China experienced the restrictions of the Cultural Revolution, Taiwan scholars were able to access scholarship in Western languages including and of course mainly such in English. One downside of this has been and remains the case is that in Taiwan comparative literature scholarship there is a strong reliance on Western comparative literature (and literary theory altogether) and less attention to Chinese thought on literature and its history including theory and methodology. Deeney admitted in his influential 1977 "manifesto" that "As a matter of fact, 'Chinese' school is still in the process of construction and has not yet produced much influence ... It is much more a manifestation of goal and strategy or an interim manifesto than a declaration formed through literary practices and verified by history" ("事实上, '中国'学派迄今仍在建立的过程中, 没有一定的规模...与其说是一份由经验凝成, 经历史验证的中宣言, 毋宁说是一种揭橥目标与方针, 属于意识形态的临时声明"[139]). Despite this, Deeney constructed a roadmap for the development of a "Chinese school" by which he meant to seek for "Chineseness" within national literature, to propel literary movements within a region (such as East Asia), to be the spokesperson for non-Western nations, to produce new theoretical thought so as to challenge Western frameworks and thus to arrive at a true cosmopolitan comparative literature. Unfortunately, the blueprint for such a notion of comparative literature has never been carried out satisfactorily. Similar to Taiwan comparatists, also early Mainland Chinese comparatists and practitioners adopted Western theoretical frameworks and methods and hence the early Chinese school was criticized for its overemphasis of the "universality" of Western theory.

However, since 1980s comparative literature has been reinvigorated in Mainland Chinese scholarship. Interestingly, different from the Western practice where comparative literature—particularly so in the U.S.—is usually a separate institutional and administrative unit, in Mainland China comparative literature is located in Chinese and only in very few cases is the discipline located in foreign language departments. An important milestone was the founding of the Chinese Comparative Literature Association in 1985 and the first journal of comparative literature *中国比较文学* (Comparative Literature in China) was inaugurated in 1984. It is notable that from the 1980s Chinese comparatists expressed a strong awareness of the disciplinary frameworks of comparative literature in Chinese (hence the discipline's location in Chinese). The inaugural issue of the journal *Comparative Literature in China*, for instance, includes a number of studies on the Chinese school of comparative literature thus suggesting that Chinese comparative literature ought be based on a Chinese literary context instead of Western contexts thus enabling work against Eurocentrism (which remains the case with Western conceptions of comparative literature including US-American comparative literature [on this, see, e.g., Zhang, Yingjin <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss1/2>>).

As said above, by the 1990s Mainland Chinese scholarship adopted and practiced a Chinese school of comparative literature and many comparatists worked based on theoretical thought, methods, and approaches located in Chinese literary history. For instance, in 1995 Shunqing Cao conceived the notion of the "cross-cultural study" of literature and summarized several distinctive approaches: "elucidation studies," "contrast and comparison," "cultural-model-seeking," "dialogue studies," and "synthesis" (see Cao, "Probe") and Jingyao Sun proposed the "holistic method," etc. Again, the importance of this is that Cao's approach is based on thought in Chinese scholarship and not on Western scholarship. Thus, theoretical and methodological frameworks drawn from Chinese thought mark the comparative literature as practiced in Chinese scholarship. However, how do we explain those doubts and even indifferences in recent years towards Chinese school of comparative literature? Zhou and Tong, for instance, hold that the pursuit of "literariness" in Chinese scholarship is delicate and that it represents a pursuit of national identity. According to them, this pursuit merely reinforces "national pride, while the call for establishing a Chinese school of comparative literature is just a reflection of such national pride, behind which, they believe, there is a binary mode of thinking such as traditional/modern, Eastern/Western, less developed/advanced, etc., which is in fact a repetition of the way

the West has been constructing the world. Therefore, Zhou and Tong call upon comparatists to go beyond literariness and reach into a much wider domain of social politics (279-80). This view is shared by some scholars who view the advocacy of Chinese school as the pursuit of "Chineseness" (see Wang, Liu 248).

In our opinion above understandings including the critical view of a Chinese school of comparative literature—are based similar to the situation in Taiwan comparative literature on the influx of the field of cultural studies popular in the U.S. and in the West in general and thus said dissent underscores the often claim in the West that comparative literature is "dead" (e.g., Bassnett; Spivak). This trend manifests that in a wider context of humanities, the status of literary studies is becoming more and more compromised, and disciplinary borders more ambiguous. As a result, the object of literary research is prone to deviate from literature proper. Research paradigms characterized by being interdisciplinary, anti-elitist, and anti-hierarchical can easily bear the mark of "political correctness" in the age of globalization, and will definitely exert great impact or even new crisis on literary study. This is why Susan Bassnett declared in 1993 that "comparative literature as a discipline has had its day" (161) and ten years later Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak announced the "death" of the discipline of comparative literature and described it as "the last gasp of a dying discipline" (xii). But another ten years later, comparative literature still exists in different parts of the world, although it is often renamed as "cultural studies," "comparative literature and cultural studies," or "world literature" as advocated in recent years. Importantly, while it may be the case that comparative literature is more and more constricted in the West including the U.S., in other parts of the world it remains important and vibrant.

As a crystallization of basic methodologies and approaches of a discipline, textbooks/books can reflect the general situation of the development of comparative literature in China. According to degrees of attention and statistics of academic conferences and publications, comparative literature in Asia, especially in China, is noticeable. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Louise O. Vasvári presented a survey of the publication of books in comparative literature worldwide and based on the statistics of books published across languages it is clear that the publication of books in comparative literature in the Western "center" has decreased. Compared with Europe and the Americas, the publication of books in Asia is more outstanding. Particularly, in the period of 1980-2012, the number of book publications in Chinese, Indian, and Arabic languages is remarkable. In addition, there is an obvious increase of textbooks of comparative literature published in Chinese in the past ten years (see Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári 9-10). Further, according to Miaomiao Wang's survey, there are at least thirty-five important books and collections in comparative literature published in Chinese from 2000 to 2013 (<<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2370>>; with regard to Western scholarship and publications in Mainland China see, e.g., Lin <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2668>>). Further, according to statistics compiled by Jianqing Tang and Yuelan Zhan in their book *中国比较文学百年书目* (The Booklist of Comparative Literature in China in the Twentieth Century), there are more than 1000 books on comparative literature by Chinese scholars (including Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau). Most of the books are studies from the vantage point of Chinese-Western comparison, but that reflects Chinese comparatists' preference of doing comparative literature studies from their own historical and cultural contexts.

The interest by Chinese comparatists to construct a "school" is not simply concluded as a compulsion to emulate Western comparative literature or to suggest the "superiority" of Chinese culture. Rather, the reason is that scholarship should not be divorced from its native background because then in many ways—as practiced often for example in Taiwan (see above)—scholarship turns out yet another form of Western imperialism and a "colonialism of knowledge." A scholar's theoretical vision and intellectual depth are contingent upon one's individual experience, but are bound to be influenced by cultural heritage and historical conditions. This is why, for example the French school in its initial period inclined to focus on literary relations between nations (mostly European nations) while US-American comparatists were willing to push the frontier of comparative literature across different disciplines, but neglected to include the literatures of the East. However, when examining theoretical constructions of the Chinese school of comparative literature, we should not overlook the fact that Western culture will exert greater impact on "Third World" cultures and literary studies in the context of globalization rather than vice versa (see, e.g., DeSousa, Henton, Ramanathan <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol12/iss2/>>; Wang and Guo

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss2/>>). And this can explain partially why scholars subscribing to the Chinese school of comparative literature are most likely to study Chinese literary works with Western theory. On the reverse, by focusing on their own historical and cultural context and drawing on their own resources, comparatists extend the boundaries of and thus enrich comparative literature. For instance, Indian comparatists, from the vantage point of realities they are experiencing, believe that under the circumstance of multilingualism in India, the tool of Western comparative literature is not qualified enough for comparative literature study in India (see, e.g., Ramanan and Mukherjee <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol14/iss2/>>). With an aim to set up a new direction for Indian comparative literature, they appeal to establish "comparative Indian literature" and propose an Indian school of comparative literature (see, e.g., Dev). From this standpoint, comparative literature in India has made accomplishments in such domains as Indian and Western comparative poetics, Sanskrit criticism, postcolonial theory, etc.

Taking the example of the Indian school of comparative literature—which has not been criticized as "centrist"—we argue that the criticism of a Chinese school of comparative literature is misguided. Comparatists, be it Indian, French or US-American, have their own preferred research methods and fields and hence Chinese comparatists also play an indispensable role for the development of comparative literature. It remains another issue when comparative literature insists on the paradigm of nation and this we too object to: instead, what we propose is that a Chinese school of comparative literature based on Chinese literary history and its sources of theory and methodology ought to be performed in conjunction with theoretical frameworks and methods wherever such are useful, but so without what European comparative literature insists on, namely the national paradigm. In 2005 Yue proposed that the development of comparative literature can be delineated as the phases of Europe, the U.S., and Asia, with each phase seeing the boom of comparative literature in a specific area. The Asian phase of comparative literature does not mean comparative literature currently exists only in Asia and the current status quo of comparative literature can tell us that even when the attention has been shifted to cultural studies, interdisciplinary studies, and the notion of world literature, comparative literature studies is still in progress particularly outside of Europe and the U.S. as for example Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Louise O. Vasvári argue in 2013 in the volume *Companion to Comparative Literature, World Literatures, and Comparative Cultural Studies*.

It is true that since the wide institutionalization of comparative literature after World War II some Western scholars have given much consideration and recognition of the literatures of the East. As early as in 1963 René Etiemble called for a widening of comparative literature to take in all of the world's literatures and particularly such major literary traditions as the Arabic, Indian, Japanese and Chinese, and suggested that the future of comparative literature and world literature might well lie with Chinese (on this, see D'haen 168). Or, while Ulrich Weisstein did not mention a single word about the literatures of the East in his 1973 *Comparative Literature and Literary Theory*, by 1986 he showed awareness of Chinese literary traditions in terms of literary genres and terminologies and suggested that Western literatures are lacking such variety and pointed out that hence Western comparative literature would benefit by studying Chinese literature (see Han 380-81). The 1995 Report of the American Comparative Literature Association suggested that abandoning Eurocentrism and conducting literary studies on a global scale can provide important insights into cultural differences and similarities (see Bernheimer), in 1998 François Jullien took Chinese philosophy as the ideal tool to save Western philosophy from prejudices by using what he calls a strategy of "detour" (3), and in 2011 Douwe Fokkema promoted the value of Chinese literature and wrote that "by accepting the different appearance of utopian fiction in China and the West, the pitfall of Eurocentrism could be avoided" (6).

Important texts published in China include Shunqing Cao's 1988 *中西比较诗学* (Comparative Poetics: China and the West), which is the first book titled "comparative poetics" in Mainland Chinese scholarship. By comparing literary categories, Cao aimed to transcend the "illustrative method" (his term to describe interpreting Chinese literature with Western theory) by early Chinese comparatists and to find critical discourses more appropriate for Chinese literature. In 1991 Yaomian Huang and Qingbing Tong published *中西比较诗学体系* (A System in Chinese-Western Comparative Poetics), another ambitious work whose authors aimed to establish a theoretical platform for an equal dialogue between Chinese and Western poetics. In 1992, Longxi Zhang published *The Dao and the Logos*, in which he discusses hermeneutics from the perspective of Chinese-Western comparative poetics and in

1999 Hong Yu published *中国文论与西方诗学* (Chinese Literary Theory and Western Poetics) which reminds us of the fact that classical Chinese literary theory and Western poetics are compatible and that they can benefit each other and above scholars anticipate a new orientation in theoretical explorations and practices towards a Chinese school of comparative literature. Their scholarship suggests that Chinese comparatists have become more sensitive to the heterogeneity of different cultures. At the same time, they urge us to be conscious of the negative impact of Western theory on Chinese literary studies and call for the "localization" of Western theory when applied in Chinese scholarship and suggest an awareness of heterogeneity in doing comparative studies. Inspired by pioneering works such as those by Guowei Wang (1877-1927), Zhongshu Qian (1910-1998), and Xianlin Ji (1911-2009), the notion of a Chinese school of comparative literature is relevant because both early and contemporary works can result in the "modernization" of ancient Chinese literary theories, that is, to discover the value of literary notions and categories contained in Chinese classics for modern readers and literary practitioners. The other relevant aspect is "appropriation" in order to use them because thus transformation can be achieved through borrowing and modifying literary theories and notions from Western scholarship.

The methods and perspectives adopted by the Chinese school have also been used in exploring the "traveling" (Said) of Chinese literature and its study in foreign countries. For example, the study of translation and research of Chinese literature in the English-speaking world is a current research project many scholars in Mainland China engage in. For example, at Sichuan University several doctoral dissertations have been and are currently being written on the reception of Chinese literature in the English-speaking world (although the majority of such is with regard to the U.S.). Of course, there is more interest in Chinese scholarship to study Chinese literature's and scholarship's "travel" than US-American scholars in studying the reception of English-language literature in China. We submit that this situation ought not be perceived as a reflection "Chinacentrism"; rather, the study of the reception of Chinese literature in English manifests an effort to seek for perspectives of the "Other" which can be viewed as practices from the vantage point of the cross-heterogeneous-cultural vision of the Chinese school.

In conclusion, we discuss briefly the recent (i.e., since the 1990s and mostly in US-American scholarship) development of the notion of "world literature(s)" (see, e.g., Juvan <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/>>; Sturm-Trigonakis; Wang) and we argue that with regard to said developments of the notion John Deeney's blueprint of thirty-odd years ago seems still relevant today. Importantly, the current notion of the field of world literature(s) suggests a wider scope for the discipline of comparative literature and thus suggests to rethink the relation between the national literary tradition and a new world literature(s), the relation between East and West, and the Chinese school as a part and comparative literature as a whole (all without the national paradigm): "The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of 'otherness'" (Bhabha 12). In this sense, with the shift of attention to cultural heterogeneity and variations in literary exchanges and dialogues, to cross-civilization literary comparison between the East and the West, comparative literature as a discipline and practice worldwide should become more open to and compatible with the Chinese school of comparative literature.

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