

# From “Aphasia” to “Chinese Discourse”: The Variation Theory of Chinese Comparative Literature

**Du Ping & Bernard Franco**

**Abstract:** Chinese scholars have been fundamentally different from Comparative Literature researchers in the homogeneous civilizations of Europe and US since the moment they entered the field, facing not only language differences but also collisions and reflections from various civilizational positions. Chinese Comparative Literature has long been in a weak position, almost submerged in the strong Western discourse, suffering from “Aphasia.” The new discourse of the Variation Theory constructed in this context by the Chinese School of Comparative Literature, as a “Chinese discourse” rooted in the deep structure of Chinese philosophy, has received great attention from the international academic community and triggered in-depth discussions among international scholars including French, which marks that Chinese Comparative Literature researchers have completely broken away from the “Aphasia” and made a “Chinese Voice” of their time.

**Keywords:** The Variation Theory; Aphasia; Chinese discourse; Cross-civilization Studies; the Chinese school of Comparative Literature

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**标题：**从“失语症”到“中国话语”：中国比较文学变异学理论

**内容摘要：**中国学者自从踏入比较文学领域，本质上便与欧美同质文明圈中的比较文学研究者不同，面对的不仅是语言差异，更是不同文明立场的碰撞和思考。比较文学中国学派长期处于弱势，几乎淹没在西方强势话语中，患上了“失语症”。比较文学变异学理论作为中国学派在此背景下建构的“中国

话语”，植根于中国哲学的深层结构，受到国际学界包括法国在内的广泛关注和来自世界的比较文学学者的深入研讨，标志着中国比较文学研究者彻底从“失语症”中摆脱出来，发出了属于本时代的“中国声音”。

**关键词：**变异学理论；失语症；中国话语；跨文明研究；比较文学中国学派

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### Cultural Context and Shaping of the Variation Theory

Chinese scholars have been fundamentally different from Comparative Literature researchers in the homogeneous civilizations of Europe and the United States since the moment they entered the field, facing not only language differences but also collisions and reflections from various civilizational positions. As Huntington's article entitled “Clash of Civilizations” in 1993 explained, the dominant factor of conflicts in the world's political landscape in the post-cold War time was no longer ideology, but the “clash of civilizations,” namely, the great differences in cultural dimensions. Besides, Edward W. Said also noticed the discrepancies among civilizations, and declared that the Orient in the views of the West was not the real East, but a kind of distortion or misunderstanding of the East from their own standpoint, which was a so-called Western cultural hegemony. French scholar François Jullien also said: “We are in an era of the standardization of the Western concepts and model. The reconstruction of everything makes it impossible for the Chinese to spell over their culture; the same is also true with the Japanese” (Qin 82).<sup>1</sup> Chinese civilization is one of the ancient civilizations in the world, with a long history of about 5000 years. Tu Weiming, a scholar of Harvard University, said in his *Clash of Civilizations and Dialogue*, “Confucian ethics can provide resources for global dialogues between civilizations” (Tu 13).<sup>2</sup> However, Chinese literary theories have long been in a weak position, almost submerged in the strong Western discourse, “once leaving the Western literary discourse, it is almost unable to speak, and becomes a living academic ‘mute’” (Cao, “Aphasia of Literary Theories and Cultural Pathosis” 51).<sup>3</sup> Given this, Cao Shunqing raised the issue of “Aphasia” as early as 1995 in his article “The Strategy of the Development of Chinese Culture and the Reconstruction of Chinese Literary Discourse in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” which

1 This citation is translated from Chinese into English by the author.

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sparked a decade-long debate in the academic field. According to him, “Aphasia” has got two meanings: “firstly, it embodies the loss of traditional Chinese literary theories; Secondly, the modern transformation of the Chinese cultural phenomenon itself, namely, the variation of Chinese theory itself” (Cao, “Variation Theory: A Significant Breakthrough in the Theoretical Study of Comparative Literature” 10).<sup>1</sup> When it came to the discourse of Chinese and Western civilizations, the symptoms of “Aphasia” could be categorized into two specific aspects: on one hand, the Western literary paradigm has been used to interpret ancient Chinese literature, causing a misinterpretation of its true meaning. In modern Chinese history, there has been a wave of interpreting Chinese literature via Western literary theories. During that time, Chinese literary works have been interpreted and explained by Western literary discourse mostly without looking into their historical and social contexts, resulting in lots of phenomena like oranges sweet in the south but bitter in the north, and some even being exposed to ridicule. For example, there were lots of phenomena of “X+Y” pattern (the random and superficial comparison without consideration of the comparability of the two), such as interpreting the ancient Chinese poet Li Bai’s poetry in terms of Western romanticism, while explaining Du Fu’s verses of worries about the country and the people in terms of Western realism, and even evaluating Chinese ancient poems by utilizing the methods of New Criticism. For instance, Yan Yuanshu connected the image of “candle” (“烛”) in the line “She thinks her man is like the burning of the bright candle” (“思君如明烛”) with sexual metaphor from a New Critical perspective, namely, a phallic symbol, which also deviated from the principles of traditional Chinese cultural discourse. On the other hand, when Chinese literary theories collide with western ones, the discourse has been activated and a new quality has been produced in the changing process, the so-called Chinization of Western literary theories or Foreignization of Chinese literary theories. In different civilization systems, when the literature of one culture travels to another, a process of acceptance, selection, filtering, misinterpretation and re-creation will inevitably occur, which makes the literature of the source culture definitely carry more or less exotic colors of the target culture. If we use Said’s “Travelling Theory” in 1992 and “Travelling and Transgressive Theory” in 1994 to explain, it means that a literary discourse needs a distance transversed when literature “travels” from one country’s space and time to another. Distance means difference, and when such difference exists, the theory is bound to make more or less changes and produce variations, thus being given the characteristics of locality.

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The theories of Comparative Literature have been developed in China and the Variation Theory has been proposed and invented at the intersection of the two trends of difference and cross-civilization studies. Cao Shunqing proposed this new theory at the Eighth Annual Conference and International Symposium of Chinese Comparative Literature in 2005, arousing heated discussions for more than a decade thereafter. It distinguished itself from the French School and the American School which both carry the comparative study within the same circle of civilizations, and its focus converted from "seeking the sameness" into "seeking the difference," just as Cao put himself:

Chinese scholars pay attention to cultural differences between the East and the West, focus on the recognition of the heterogeneity of traditional genealogy, and take heterogeneity as the basis of comparability. In this sense, the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature and literary research, in general, have made a significant contribution. (*The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* 47)

The Variation study is an innovation on the basis of the Influence study and the Parallel study, and it takes heterogeneity and variability as comparability in addition to homology and similarity between heterogeneous texts. The proposal of the Variation Theory is a conceptual change in the thinking mode of Comparative Literature, with the study focus shifting from seeking homology to heterogeneity. That's to say, the basis for the comparability of Comparative Literature includes not only homology and affinity but variation and heterogeneity. Only if the four aspects are organically combined, can the discipline of Comparative Literature stand stronger when confronted with various questions, challenges, even the "Crisis Said" and the "Death Said" put forward by Bassnett, Spivak and other scholars.

However, the new discourse of the Variation Theory constructed by the Chinese School of Comparative Literature is not an isolated discursive existence, but a holistic discourse system that is rooted in the deep structure of Chinese philosophy. For instance, the Variation study adopted the Chinese philosophical wisdom of the "three connotations of changes" from the variant thinking mode in the *Book of Changes*, the head of all the various Chinese ancient classics. "According to *Yiwei Qianzaodu*, 'Yi (Change), one name with three connotations, the first called conciseness, the second called change, the third called constancy'" (Kong 7).<sup>1</sup> *Book of Changes* talked about "change," but more than "change," and it constructed the generation system of meaning with the trinity of "change," "conciseness" and

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“constancy.” “Change” is the law of the universe: the change of four seasons and five elements, the cycle of day and night, and the permanence of things in the universe. Although everything in the universe is changing and changeable, every object occupies a certain spatial order and a kind of time and state—the Heaven is above and the Earth is below, the sovereign face the south and ministers face the north, the elder and the young have a certain order of respect, which means “constancy.” “Conciseness” means that all the changes in all things in the universe have a certain regular rule to follow. It emphasizes the basic relationship between “change” and “constancy.” Everything in the universe can “change” or remain “constant,” while there follows a simple and feasible law between the “change” and “constancy”: “the intersection of change and constancy, the indivisibility of subject and object, the transformation of opposites, and thus the establishment of an overall relationship with the whole world” (C. Wang 451), which is exactly the theoretical characteristics of Chinese Variation Theory. In his later book *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* published by Springer in 2014, Cao Shunqing made a latest and improved structures and contents of the Variation Theory: I. Transnational Variation, in which the most typical variation are Imagology and Reception. II. Cross-Language Variation, with the Medio-translatology proposed by Chinese scholar Xie Tianzhen carrying the factor of variation as one of the representatives. III. Cross-Cultural Variation, with cultural filtering being one of the important issues. IV. Cross-Civilization Variation, with the emergence of Zen Buddhism in China being the most typical example. V. Domestic Appropriation of Literature. The proposal of the Chinese discourse, especially the Variation Theory, constitutes the plurality of the discipline of Comparative Literature and also clearly shows Chinese scholars’ efforts and great determinations of contributing to the development of the international Comparative Literature studies.

### **Global Influence of the Variation Theory**

The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature, as a “Chinese discourse” of Comparative Literature, has received great attention from the international academic community since its introduction, especially the publication of the English version of *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*, which has triggered in-depth discussions among international scholars and made the Chinese academic discourse have a wide impact on the world. Many internationally renowned scholars of Comparative Literature have expressed their concerns about the Variation Theory respectively.

Douwe W. Fokkema, the former President of the International Comparative

Literature Association and an emeritus professor at the Utrecht University in the Netherlands, personally wrote “Foreword” for *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*. He firstly pointed out the global influence of the Variation Theory: it’s not only “a welcome attempt to break through the linguistic barrier that keeps most comparatists in China enclosed within their own cultural domain,” but also “aims to open a dialogue with scholars abroad, in Europe and North and South America, India, Russia, South Africa, and the Arab world” (Cao, *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* v). He then emphasized the importance of the Variation Theory to the disciplinary development of Comparative Literature:

The Variation Theory is an answer to the one-sided emphasis on influence studies by the former. “French school” as well as to the American focus on aesthetic interpretation, inspired by New Criticism, which regrettably ignored literature in non-European languages. Our Chinese colleagues are right in seeing the restrictions of former comparative studies and are fully entitled to amend these deficiencies. (Cao v)

Besides, he especially discussed the question of the basis of comparability shifting from seeking homology to heterogeneity from the aesthetic perspective by giving examples. Of course, he fully showed his rigorous academic attitude towards the newly invented theory: “Shunqing Cao’s argument contains many pertinent observations and, where we have reason to disagree, we must express our own views so as to continue the discussion” (*The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* v), and called upon the academic discussions and questions from the world: “My advice is to try to understand Professor Cao’s Variation Theory; try to apply it; and, if you believe that it does not work, publish your doubts or contact Professor Cao so that the cross-cultural dialogue he is hoping for will materialize” (*The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* vii). Cesar Dominguez, a member of the European Academy of Sciences and a Jean Monnet Chair Professor at University of Santiago de Compostela, and Haun Saussy, a member of the American Academy of Sciences and a professor at the University of Chicago as well as other scholars, co-authored a book entitled *Introducing Comparative Literature: New Trends and Applications*, in which the Variation Theory was highly evaluated:

Another important contribution in the direction of an imperative Comparative Literature—at least as procedure—is Cao Shunqing’s 2013 *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*. [...] In this case, Cao starts by making his

*etic location* visible. [...] From this *etic* beginning, his proposal moves forward *emically* by developing a “cross-civilization study on the heterogeneity between Chinese and Western culture” (43), which results in both the foreignization of Chinese literary theories and the Sinification of Western literary theories. (50-51)

What’s more, the pages 50-51 of the same book also specifically quoted part of *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*: “In contrast to the ‘French school’ and ‘American school’ of Comparative Literature, Cao advocates a ‘third-phase theory’, namely, ‘a novel and scientific mode of the Chinese school’, a ‘theoretical innovation and systematization of the Chinese school by relying on our own methods’ (*Variation Theory* 43; emphasis added)” (Dominguez, Saussy and Villanueva). Besides, when discussing the topic “Similarities Between Comparative Philosophy and Comparative Literature?”, the book especially mentioned that Cao Shunqing and Zhi Yu’s typology of approaches to intercultural dialogue through the comparison of literary theories worldwide was strikingly similar with Panikkar’s five varieties of Comparative Literature, and also gave a detailed analysis of it as one of the strong evidences (Dominguez, Saussy and Villanueva 49).

David Damrosch, the Ernest Bernbaum Professor at Harvard University and the former President of the American Comparative Literature Association, explained that the introduction of the Variation Theory was a useful attempt to present the global dissemination of the disciplinary discourse of Comparative Literature from the Chinese perspective, “It represents a most welcome outreach to give a Chinese perspective in English. Your emphasis on variation provides a very useful perspective that helps go beyond the simplistic Huntington style clash of cultures on the one hand or universalizing homogenization on the other.”<sup>1</sup> In his book *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age*, the Variation theory of Chinese Comparative Literature got highly appraised: it “seeks to free Chinese scholars from the ‘aphasia’ of losing their own voice through a wholesale adoption of Western theories” (Damrosch 312). When it came to the discussion of comparability, David pointed that Cao’s “another kind of comparability can be constructed through heterogeneity, in a mode of comparison that creates inspiration and astonishment” (Damrosch 312). He finally pointed out that “For Cao, a cross-cultural Comparative Literature with ‘Chinese characteristics’ will be based on an integrated awareness of the classical and modern Chinese traditions, not treated in

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1 See the academic comments on the Variation Theory in the email written by David Damrosch to Cao Shunqing.



isolation but enriched and modified through a judiciously selective use of elements taken from foreign literatures and theories" (Damrosch 312).

In his book *Mo Yan in Context: Novel Laureate and Global Storyteller*, Angelica Duran, a professor at Purdue University, specifically referred to the article "Variation Study in Western and Chinese Comparative Literature" written by Cao Shunqing and Wang Miaomiao, and pointed out that the article provided a methodology for the present and the future in the context of Chinese scholarship, and a review of the development of Comparative Literature in China could show that Chinese scholars reconstructed the existing discipline of Comparative Literature and focused on the phenomenon of variation between different literatures. In addition, it also clearly stated that the Variation Theory was the direction for the continual development of Comparative Literature: "Cao, has developed in recent decades in order to assess heterogeneity and variability between literatures rather than assume literary universalism. They outline how this direction of the research can contribute to the ongoing development of comparative literature" (Duran and Huang 13). Theo D'haen, a member of the European Academy of Sciences, regarded the Variation Theory as a marker of an important stage in the development of Comparative Literature, breaking free from a dominant Western-centered approach to a more universal one. Besides, a number of important international academic journals have published the review articles or the book reviews on the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature. In the journal *Orbis Litterarum* (Vol. 70, No. 5), Svend Eric Larsen, Academician of the European Academy of Sciences and an emeritus professor at Aarhus University, Denmark, published a book review of the English version of the *Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*. He evaluated the book as "an invitation to enter into a dialogue with established Western comparatism" (Larsen 438), and emphasized its cross-disciplinary study and an open to cross-cultural dialogues. Besides, the academic journal *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* published by Purdue University also published the article titled "Variation Theory and Comparative Literature: A Book Review Article about Cao's Work," pointing out that "The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature is an important contribution to the discipline" (N. Wang 2) and stating the reason as well: "While the long-standing bias of Orientalism still dominated, the value of Chinese culture and literature must be acknowledged and incorporated in comparative literature studies and it is here where Cao's work is timely and relevant" (4). Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta at Jadavpur University in India, shared his ideas about the Variation Theory. According to her, the practice of the discipline would be based on the existence of an equal ground of cultural communication, but the fact was



that the ecological balance of world culture had been destroyed in the context of thoughts and the theoretical formulation due to the historical circumstances today. She believed that the Variation Theory appealed to comparatists to make a new beginning of the in-depth cross-cultural conversation. Besides, other international scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a professor at Columbia University, USA, Hans Bertens, the Former President of the International Comparative Literature Association and an emeritus professor at Utrecht University, Netherlands, Christoph Bode, a member of the European Academy of Sciences and a professor of Literature at the University of Munich, Germany, and many other scholars, all showed their ideas or comments on the Variation Theory.

### **The Situation in the French Context**

The French context appears as a specific field in Comparative Literature, asking this main question: Is Comparative Literature based on the comparison of literary works, i.e. on a principle of analogy? In the French academic tradition, it was a moment to settle the famous conflict between the “American school” and the “French school” of Comparative Literature, which broke out in particular in 1958, at the ICLA congress in Chapel Hill. While the former, inspired by structuralism, proposed to develop theoretical approaches, the latter remained in the line of literary history.

To a certain extent, the search for analogies between singular works was a way, for French comparatism, to get out of this confinement: it was a question of opposing, to literary history, the comparative poetics, based on the search for analogies between works having no historical link between them.

In many respects, the study of parallels in Comparative Literature appears to be the ultimate form of comparison, the one that consists in putting two works or two authors face to face. The notion seems recent in the history of the discipline, and Jürgen Siess underlines that it does not appear “in the operative concepts” retained by Didier Souiller and Wladimir Troubetzkoy, who do take into consideration “reception” and “intertextuality,” but do not mention either “comparison” or “parallel”; he also notes that Francis Claudon and Karen Haddad-Wotling, although they devote a brief chapter to the two notions, only retain them as “figures.”<sup>1</sup> However, the term is old in poetics, and one often cites the examples of Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* or Perrault’s *Parallel of the Ancients and the Moderns*, which do not construct an opposition, nor do the two versions of Stendhal’s *Racine and Shakespeare*, which chooses, by the end, to associate the authors, whereas the

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1 See Jürgen Siess, “‘Parallèle’, un concept opératoire en littérature comparée?” *Revue de Littérature Comparée* 2 (2001): 225-230.

or would have opposed them.

This critical position, as Pierre Brunel and Daniel-Henri Pageaux note, is not exclusively specific to Comparative Literature, but it enters the field of the discipline as soon as the two works put in parallel do not belong to the same literary domain: "after the time of parallels between Racine and Corneille, between Voltaire and Rousseau, would come the time of Proust and James, Sartre and Dos Passos, Brecht and Ionesco" (198). But immediately the question arises: how to choose the two authors to be put in parallel, and what should be the nature of the link that brings them together? The question leads to a questioning of the very definition of the parallel.

As Jean Bessière remarks: "Dictionaries define parallel as a comparison" (325). Such a definition is a way, of course, of placing the method of parallels at the heart of the discipline, but at the same time of depriving it of any specificity within it: "discussing parallels is perhaps only a way of dressing up the very notion of comparison with some rhetorical ornament and of avoiding returning to the strict conditions of the discipline" (Bessière 325). But Jean Bessière then nuances his point of view and, referring to the meaning of the adjective in Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, which necessarily has nothing to do with the discipline, he emphasizes that the usefulness of such a critical practice consists essentially in "returning to one of the possibilities of the discipline: the mere comparison," at a time when the adjective "compared," in "Comparative Literature," "no longer necessarily implies the notion of comparison, strictly understood" (328). The parallel thus makes it possible to identify two comparative practices, that which, according to the terms of Daniel-Henri Pageaux, touches the "sources," the "relations of fact," the "bonds of causality between two texts or series of texts," and that which rests on "elective affinities," "confluences and not influences, rapprochements and not groupings, confrontations which are neither juxtapositions nor superpositions, but rather settings in regard, in consonance" ("Perspectives liminaires" 200). The allusion to Goethe's famous novel, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, published in 1809, from which Goethe himself took the notion from the Swedish chemist Bergman, is suggestive here. For Goethe, by fictionalizing, in a sentimental plot, what Berman called *attractio electiva duplex*, postulated precisely not only an analogy, but a profound unity between literature and natural sciences and, behind this unity, that between inert matter and living matter.

If Daniel-Henri Pageaux underlines the role of the critic, who sets himself up, in the establishment of the parallel, as the third term, the one who makes the link, one sees what is paradoxical about this method compared to the other comparative

method, which associates two data by a third one, whether it is a question of a common source or of a concept allowing to group them together. For the parallel, as Jean-Marie Grassin remarks, is the situation of two lines that “never meet” (232), and the rapprochement operated by the comparative criticism thus appears as contrary to the laws of physics. The risk of the parallel established between two authors who do not know each other, who owe each other nothing, and who do not share any common source or belong to any common movement, is of course that of arbitrariness. According to Daniel-Henri Pageaux, the parallels must be made “between texts that must be different without being too similar.” The principle seems to be that of the middle ground: “Neither absolute principle of identity, nor absolute difference” (Pageaux, “Perspectives liminaires” 202). The parallel would thus be situated between identity, which removes all possibility of comparison, and the incomparable, which would make the comparison arbitrary, reducing even the singularities of each author, and forgetting what is at stake in the creation, that is to say, the individuality, even the unicity.

But this right measure seems to be left to the appreciation of the critic, and subject to a certain subjectivism. For the authors put in parallel only present an analogy such as it is perceived by the critic, a link that Jean-Marie Grassin calls “parallelity,” and that he defines as “a kind of gemellity, as much as to say; a community of disjointed similarities, a recognition of oneself in the other, of the other in oneself.” Once the objection of the arbitrariness or the impressionistic approach of the comparison is overcome, the setting in parallel brings thus, by the tricking of the other, an enlightenment on the self, and its utility is of interpretative order: to explore, by the means of the comparison, an aspect still ignored of the work of an author, to make emerge the sense. Daniel-Henri Pageaux underlines the “seductive perspectives,” sometimes too seductive, of such a practice, which “allows, for example, to go back to a creative principle, to become aware of the limits of the writing, to open, but with prudence, on an inevitable movement of interpretation” (“Perspectives liminaires” 202).

The criticism, but also the literary creation has the analogy as a cardinal principle, whose value is both heuristic and hermeneutic. “The most exalting word we have is the word LIKE, whether this word is pronounced or not.” This very famous quote from André Breton, taken from *Signe ascendant*, is often used to understand surrealism as a poetics based on a principle of analogy opposed to the logic proper to a withering rationalism. In fact, the first Manifesto of Surrealism affirmed “the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association neglected until then. The analogy thus became a poetic principle, in that it was at the same

time an instrument of freedom and a movement towards the infinite: "The key of the mental prison resides in the free and unlimited play of the analogies."<sup>1</sup>

Under the title *Poetics of Analogy*, Christian Michel published, in 2013, an essay comparing Hans Henny Jahnn's *Perrudja*, William Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* and Claude Simon's *Les Corps conducteurs*, *Triptyques* et *Leçon de choses*. It was of course a question of revealing, through analogy, a common principle of fictional composition, but also of characterizing as a "poetics of analogy" this common principle, consisting in interweaving "several independent narratives, which have no factual link":

Each of the narratives that go into the composition of these novels is further divided into several parts. The dispersion is thus double: several stories per novel, and several parts per story. This dispersion is reinforced by the entanglement of the parts, since the parts that enter into the composition of a story are mixed with the parts of other stories. The different stories are thus not juxtaposed, as in a collection of short stories, but intertwined. (Michel 9)

The analogy was thus at the same time, in the perspective of Christian Michel, the method of analysis to which he resorted, but also the creative spring of the works which he approached and this spring took the place of the principle of composition, defining an "analogical novel."

Thus, this poetic principle which, in the analogical novel as in the surrealism, substituted the comparison to the logical links, could become in its turn, under the pen of Christian Michel, a critical principle. The border between these two relations to the literature, criticism and creation, disputed by the German Romantics who affirm that "a judgment on the art, which is not itself a work of the art, has no right of city in the kingdom of the art" (Schlegel, "Poesie kann nur durch Poesie kritisiert werden. Ein Kunsturteil, welches nicht selbst ein Kunstwerk ist, [...] hat gar kein Bürgerrecht im Reiche der Kunst" 162), is still called into question about the comparison. Irrationalist movement, the first German Romanticism had contested, behind the border between criticism and creation, that between the human faculties, imagination and reason: Friedrich Schlegel made the praise of the book V of *Wilhelm Meister* of Goethe in what it commented Hamlet in the thread of its fiction, and reproduced in the novel the setting in abyme of Shakespeare: by the recriture, the analogy became at the same time principle of the literary creation and foundation of the union between criticism and creation. And it is undoubtedly partly in the lineage of such a

1 See Robert Bréchon, *Le Surréalisme*, Paris: Armand Colin (coll. U2), 1971, 59.

movement that surrealism rehabilitated the analogy against logic.

In *L'Ame romantique et le rêve* (Romantic Soul and Dream), where Albert Béguin affirms his debt to surrealism, he raises the question of the ambivalence of dreams: "Am I the one who dreams at night? Or have I become the theater where someone, something, unfolds its shows, sometimes derisory, sometimes full of inexplicable wisdom?" (XII) It poses then the question of the subject, in its relations to the conscience, and puts in stake that of the literature which could never be considered as an individual creation: "That an image, retained by the word of a poet or evoked by the arabesque of a bas-relief, comes infallibly to arouse in me an affective resonance, I can continue the chain of the fraternal forms which connects this image to the motives of some very old myth: I did not know this myth, and I recognize it" (Béguin XII). This theory of the recognition refers of course to the Platonic conception of the knowledge, just like to the Aristotelian anagnorisis, but it is especially based on the principle of the analogy: "Between the fables of the various mythologies, the fairy tales, the inventions of certain poets and the dream which continues in me, I perceive a deep kinship" (Béguin XIII). This kinship is the one that links together firstly a collective imagination, secondly consecrated genres, and thirdly individual works; three spheres that Albert Béguin takes up through three notions that function as paradigms: "The dream, the poetry, the myth" (XIII). But these three spheres cannot themselves be dissociated from a subjectivity that is that of the reader. For Albert Béguin bases his critical approach on the refusal of objectivity: "Objectivity, which can, and undoubtedly must, be the law of the descriptive sciences, cannot fruitfully govern the sciences of the mind." With the expression "sciences of the spirit," he alludes to the term *Geisteswissenschaft* defined by Dilthey in 1883, in his work *Einführung zu den Geisteswissenschaften*, and which the French university has appropriated under the translation of "sciences humaines." According to Albert Béguin, the humanities are distinguished from the exact sciences, or the sciences of nature, by what he calls "interest," that is to say, the involvement of subjectivity in the object studied:

Any 'disinterested' activity in this sense requires an unforgivable betrayal towards oneself and towards the "object" studied. The work of art and thought interests, indeed, as the reminiscence and the dream, this most secret part of ourselves where, detached from our apparent individuality, but directed towards our real personality, we have only one concern: a concern which is to open us to the warnings, to the signs, and to know by there the amazement that inspires the human condition, contemplated one moment in all its strangeness,

with its risks, its whole anxiety, its beauty and its disappointing limits. (XVII)

The legitimacy of approaching a literary corpus by means of comparison seems to find some basis here, even if it also comes up against impassés. For, on the one hand, the work is defined as such as a unique phenomenon, as such incomparable, and it is precisely this uniqueness that criticism must account for in order to bring out the meaning. But on the other hand, any reading is analogical and is elaborated by comparisons, just as any literature is built in its turn by a game of quotations and rewritings, any author being himself a reader. This is why, in the famous fragment 116 of the *Athenäum*, the Schlegels defined their ideal of romantic poetry by the idea of a "progressive universal poetry" ("Die romantische Poesie ist eine progressive Universalpoesie" 51) —a poetry that would absorb all that precedes in order to surpass it. Finally, the relationship of the text to the genre, and the link with its context, in particular its historical context, are as many places where the comparison appears necessary. Does the elaboration of the meaning escape then the setting in relation to the texts? But is the meaning of the work limited to the comparison of the text with its sources? In many ways, comparison appears both as a key to the interpretation of texts and as a limit to the understanding we can have of literature.

The characteristic of this search for comparison is undoubtedly the critical work of Marcel Bataillon who, in 1945, succeeded Paul Hazard both at the Collège de France and at the direction of the *Revue de Littérature Comparée*.<sup>1</sup> A few years later, in 1958, the year in which Jean-Marie Carré and Fernand Baldensperger, the founder of the journal, but also the first holder of the chair of Modern Comparative Literature at the Sorbonne, died, Bataillon participated in the second Congress of the International Association of Comparative Literature, in Chapel Hill. This was the moment when the conflict between the "French school" of Comparative Literature, still situated in the exclusive perspective of literary history, and the "American school," impregnated with structuralism and oriented towards more theoretical approaches, broke out. We know the famous work that Etiemble drew from this cleavage, published in 1963 under the title *Comparaison n'est pas raison*, and he sees in it, according to the subtitle that he gives to his work, a "crisis of Comparative Literature."

But two years earlier, in 1961, Marcel Bataillon published, in the *Revue de Littérature Comparée* (290-298), a kind of assessment of this situation of the discipline, under the title "Nouvelle jeunesse de la philologie à Chapel Hill."

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1 See Daniel-Henri Pageaux, "Le comparatisme selon Marcel Bataillon," *Perspectives comparatistes*, edited by Jean Bessière and Daniel-Henri Pageaux, Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999, 19-39.

He sees in this cleavage not a crisis of the discipline, but a sign of its richness, and expresses his attachment to the diversity of disciplines, “some historical, others formalist.” He refuses the accusation of historicism and positivism that the American school addresses to the French school of Comparative Literature, attached to the studies of “sources” or “fortune,” and reminds all his attachment to the researches presenting “aims of history of the culture.” At the same time, he accepts the reproach of an insufficiency or a monotony of an approach limited to a “history of cultural influences,” and he takes note of a “structuralist comparatism,” which he defines as “oriented towards aesthetic analysis.” But, far from taking a position between these two approaches, he defines himself as an “eclectic” and affirms his “sympathy for both orientations.”

This eclecticism linked to comparison is illustrated in his own practice. Of course, his doctoral thesis, devoted to Erasmus in Spain, published by Droz in 1937 and reissued in 1991, placed the historical approach at the center of the comparative approach. But, on the occasion of the Chapel Hill Congress, he had proposed a paper entitled “Pour une histoire exigeante des formes: le cas de *La Célestine*”<sup>1</sup> (For a demanding history of forms: the case of *La Célestine*). As specified in the title, the historical perspective, that of literary history, was combined with a reflection on the form, considered as “prototype of a restricted genre,” and associated with a “structure,” defined as “the general architecture,” both being determined by an end or an “intention.” If the method was intended as a conciliation between the French and American schools, he had illustrated it earlier, in 1940, in an article devoted to the genre of the self-sacramental. The subject was surprising from the point of view of the comparative approach, since it consisted precisely in showing that the genre was a unique phenomenon, and therefore incomparable. But Bataillon claimed a comparative approach, and on two levels: on the one hand, once again, through the study of forms, in a perspective of general literature; on the other hand, through a project of “general and comparative poetics” (Pageaux, “Le comparatisme selon Marcel Bataillon” 23) consisting in exploring adaptations, in reflecting on close forms, in questioning the capacity of certain forms to extend, at the cost of variations, to other contexts.

In this relationship to criticism illustrated by Marcel Bataillon, Comparative Literature and general literature are only two modalities of comparison, just as the historicist approach and the structuralist approach of the French and American schools were only two modalities of comparatism: “Comparison is only one of the

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1 See Marcel Bataillon, “Pour une histoire exigeante des formes: le cas de *La Célestine*,” *Proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress of ICLA* t. I (1959): 35-44.



means of what we call with a name that says very badly what it means, comparative literature," he affirms in a report entitled "For an international bibliography of comparative literature," presented to the General Assembly of the ICLA, on the occasion of its first Congress in 1955 in Venice (Bataillon 136-144). In it, he sets out a true comparative program, and reflects on the very label of the discipline, which places comparison in the foreground: "Often, I say to myself that general literature would be better, and then I immediately see the disadvantages that there would be in adopting a new term that would make one think of generalities and no longer of concrete relationships between living works" (Bataillon 136-144). The two labels refer in reality to the two modalities of the comparison: the one that establishes relationships or connections between individual works and the one that is induced by a more global reflection on the genre, which supposes to relate sets of works. Now, this second part of the comparison is for him central in any comparative approach, which "cannot do without a background of theoretical reflection on literature in general" (Bataillon 136-144). If the finality of Comparative Literature resides, for him, in the questioning on the nature of literature, and thus on a completely theoretical approach, what place does the discipline leave to the individual creation? Comparative Literature, according to Marcel Bataillon, can integrate "the more or less advanced analysis of the conception of a work and its elaboration," but it is "a precious element for the phenomenology of a genre."<sup>1</sup> This is the meaning of the comparison: from the point of view of Comparative Literature, the work cannot be considered as incomparable, because it always gives an account, in its own process of creation, of the literary fact in general and, showing its belonging to literature, it questions its identity.

It is in this tension that literary comparison is situated. When, in 1963, Etiemble entitled his essay on Comparative Literature *Comparaison n'est pas raison* (Comparison is no reason), it was indeed to a crisis of Comparative Literature that he referred through his criticism of comparison. Can this one give an account of the literary fact? Pierre Brunel mentions Jean-Marie Carré's famous sentence, which appears in the foreword to Marius-François Guyard's book on Comparative Literature, published in 1951: "Comparative literature is not literary comparison." Jean-Marie Carré had "wanted to warn against too great an assimilation and the risk of seeing in comparative literature only the resumption or the transposition of the parallels of the old rhetoric between Corneille and Racine, Voltaire and Rousseau etc" (9). This is no longer a criticism of comparison per se, but a refusal to identify

1 See Marcel Bataillon, "Pour une histoire exigeante des formes: le cas de *La Célestine*," *Proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress of ICLA* t. I (1959): 35-44.

the discipline with the act of comparison. Pierre Brunel takes care to nuance the statement, affirming that Comparative Literature should not be limited to literary comparison, while being able to integrate it. Whether it is because it denies the uniqueness of the work and blurs its individual character, or because it cannot be set up as a defining criterion of Comparative Literature, comparison raises objections.

But in the opposite direction, it is suggestive that Frédérique Toudoire-Surlapierre includes as an epigraph to her essay entitled *Notre besoin de comparaison* (Our Need for Comparison), published in 2013, this sentence by George Steiner, taken from *After Babel*: “Reading is comparing. For any act of reading functions by associations, if only by the position of a work within a literary genre, which presupposes comparison; and any critical reading is necessarily historical, which also presupposes a series of connections of the work with others. Now, this comparison can be of two types: the first is the analysis, historical, of the relations to the foreign, which can be considered through the paradigm of foreign orientations, to paraphrase the title of Fernand Baldensperger’s thesis, *Orientations étrangères chez Balzac*, or Pierre Brunel’s, *L’Orientation britannique chez Claudel*; the second type, more directly turned towards comparison, concerns the analysis of parallels, considered from a comparative point of view, that is to say, one that is radically different from that of the old rhetoric.

In its very foundations, Comparative Literature comes up against an immediate objection: by being the study of relations between literary works, how can it account for the uniqueness of the work, which constitutes its very matter? On the other hand, isn’t putting works in relation, whether by comparison or in any other form, the only way to make distinctions and to measure precisely this uniqueness? Behind the search for analogies, a comparatism of difference could thus serve interpretation by making it possible to understand, behind the similarities or the effects of repetition at work in a literary text, the singular meaning that the variations introduce. The analogy is thus caught in a vice, likely to mask the singularity of a work, and at the same time only capable of revealing it and of enlightening its meaning.

The idea of a comparatism of difference, not of analogy, could then settle in the critical landscape of French Comparative Literature in the context of globalization that opened it to extra-European modes of thought. The publication, in 2013, of Cao Shunqing’s *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* was widely distributed in Germany (the publisher was Springer) and in the Anglo-Saxon world (the work was published in English), but had little echo in France. My own book on *Comparative Literature*<sup>1</sup> was the first to mention it, when it was first published

1 See Bernard Franco, *La Littérature Comparée. Histoire, domaines, méthodes*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2016.

in 2016, by raising the question of the uniqueness of the work approached from a comparative perspective. However, understanding the comparatism of difference he proposes can only be done in the light of a traditional Chinese philosophical thought unfamiliar to Western literary theorists. There is no doubt that the French translation of the book would allow a better knowledge of this thought of the unique in the perspective of comparison, and to bring an innovative light to the European comparatism of difference.

### Conclusion

Comparative Literature has come to China from far away and found fertile ground for its growth in China. By drawing from Chinese traditional culture, and with its innate cross-cultural international perspective, Comparative Literature has grown and developed in China. The study of Comparative Literature in China is not only the introduction of important research results of international Comparative Literature, interpreting Chinese literature in terms of Western theories, but also the introduction of cross-cultural studies and the Variation Theory proposed by the Chinese school, which have become important references in the development of international Comparative Literature. Chinese Comparative Literature researchers have completely broken away from the "Aphasia" and given the Chinese voice of their time. The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature gives priority to the heterogeneity and variability in cross-cultural studies, which both theoretically broadens the scope of comparability in Comparative Literature and practically cares for the variability in literary influence relationships, as well as taking into account the variability and creativity of literary relations between different countries, nationalities, cultures and disciplines. As one of the main representative theories of the Chinese school of Comparative Literature, the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature has been widely applied in literature, media, art, translation and other cultural fields, and has a certain degree of universal value. Since its birth, the Variation Theory of Comparative Literature has become a theoretical discourse that is gradually understood and accepted by the international community, marking an innovation and a major breakthrough in both the disciplinary theory of Comparative Literature and the Chinese discourse with "Chinese characteristics." The Variation Theory with "Chinese characteristics" requires not only the ability to highlight national characteristics and draw from the wisdom of traditional Chinese culture, but also the ability to have a global mind and international vision, to address the actual crisis that Comparative Literature is confronting, and to guide the international academic circle to conduct extensive and intensive discussions.

Actually, Cao Shunqing himself once talked about the original intention of the introduction of the Variation Theory. On one hand, he hoped to draw the attention of Western Comparative Literature scholars and carry out more academic discussions. On the other hand, with Chinese scholars' attempts and efforts in the theoretical discourse of the Comparative Literature discipline in the Chinese context, discourse with "Chinese characteristics," in the process of the precipitation of time and the test of practice, can be improved and perfected, and may even become a discourse with "world characteristics," a more universal theory and marker concept recognized by the international academic circle, thus promoting the innovation and development of the discourse of Chinese literature theories, realizing a truly equal dialogue in global discourse and building a "harmonious world without uniformity."<sup>1</sup>

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1 The concept of "harmony without uniformity" is a philosophical view of life and great wisdom for the Chinese to understand the world. There is an old saying from the Spring and Autumn Period: "Harmony is the principle of creating things, while uniformity cannot be continuous and everlasting. To combine many different things and bring them into balance is called harmony, so that they can grow in abundance." (Discourse of the States Zhengyu) The Analects of Confucius also said: "The superior men harmonize without demanding conformity; the base men demand conformity but do not harmonize." (*The Analects of Confucius Zilu*) Yue Daiyun, the Former President of the Chinese Association of Comparative Literature, has borrowed the philosophical concept of "harmony without uniformity" to expand the space for the development of the Comparative Literature discipline, reflecting the inclusiveness and dialectical thinking of Chinese scholars, which is also the ultimate goal of the Variation Studies.

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