The Ironies of Comparison: Comparative Literature and the Re-Production of Cultural Difference between East and West

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Introduction: What’s at Stake?

1 During a fairly recent lecture at University of California, Berkeley, Rey Chow (Andrew W. Mellon Professor of the Humanities at Brown University, where she teaches in the Department of Comparative Literature and in the Department of Modern Culture and Media) argued that Area Studies – a mode of producing and circulating knowledge about the East allegedly prevalent in the U.S. ever since the end of WWII, predicated on an attempt to fully grasp non-Western cultures and societies by approaching them from as many different perspectives as possible – is fundamentally grounded in a (more or less unspoken) assumption about the ultimate transparency of non-Western languages. By studying non-Western languages, one acquires some indispensable tools for grasping and conveying the truth about non-Western cultures. Language is envisioned as an authentic form of unmediated expression in non-Western contexts. Language is culture. I would suggest that the commonplace stereotype of Chinese as a language that is inherently incapable of abstraction, or the equally ungrounded idea of Chinese as a writing system bearing a direct, or at least less mediated relationship (not being encumbered by phonetics) to its referents, could be brought up as instances of this “linguistic culturalism”.1

2 The dense, multilayered lecture that Rey Chow (a scholar whose work spans from modern Chinese literature and cinema to the politics of visuality, psychoanalysis, and much more) gave on that day centered on new possible ways to understand the complex, tense
relationship among Comparative Literature, poststructuralist theory, and Area Studies in an increasingly globalized academia. As a member of the audience (which was fairly heterogeneous but mostly formed of graduate students as well as scholars of relatively young age) I had the sense that the aforementioned argument about the “reflectionism” prevalent in Area Studies was received with some uneasiness. That very uneasiness struck me, at the moment, as a picture of the unresolved, lingering tension in the relationship between Comparative Literature as a project that has historically centered on the West for more than one century, poststructuralist theory as a highly problematic critical tool spanning from the West to the non-West, and Area/Asian Studies as a model of knowing and “disciplining” the East by isolating it from the non-East.

According to Charles Bernheimer, “comparative literature is anxiogenic”. In the introduction to a volume titled *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism* (1995), Bernheimer sketches the anxieties of comparison by tracking an imaginary graduate student in Comparative Literature at an American university during the 1990s. She “begins her course of study with an excited sense of broad horizons opening before her. A year or two later, she discovers that she has no firm ground under foot”. Some of the anxieties Bernheimer refers to in his introduction are, I believe, well known to scholars and students in the field. These range from the effect of multiple pressures on any student (or any scholar) expected to satisfy multiple requirements of expertise, to being subjected to sneaking accusations of dilettantism because of a lack of specialization in one field, to a sense of impending crisis and diffused uncertainty peculiar to the very field of Comparative Literature. Moreover, as Bernheimer’s edited collection reminds us, multiculturalism and transculturality as conditions inherent to our age seem to pose new questions to Comparative Literature as a discipline attempting to come to terms with its own history. Here I would like to offer some tentative reflections on the discipline of Comparative Literature as situated in a problematic, highly charged dimension – not only among different academic disciplines but among different spatio-temporalities, cultures, and “discursive orders”. As I believe and shall argue, Comparative Literature is nowadays a discipline that attempts – employing very heterogeneous strategies – to come to terms with cultural difference as value.

My use of the term “value” here intentionally plays with an economic overtone. I believe that Comparative Literature at the turn of the twenty-first century is a “changing economy” trying to figure out possible investments in cultural difference in order to serve the most disparate aims and projects. While cultural difference may well be a fact and a value and richness in itself, it is nonetheless its deployment as cultural capital, I believe, that ultimately determines its tremendous appeal in both Western and Eastern universities nowadays. In the global age, cultural difference has increased in value; yet it must be continuously re-invested, as well as continuously re-cast into new forms, in order to re-produce itself as plus-value. I would argue that this valorization of cultural difference makes Comparative Literature a highly charged space of strategic economic confrontation as well as a disciplinary space for the deployment of the most heterogeneous – the most radical as well as the most conservative – patterns of cross-cultural encounter. Conceiving of cultural difference as value and capital can perhaps contribute to explain why the stakes of Comparative Literature seem to grow higher and higher in the new century.

Comparative Literature as a discipline is nowadays widely recognized (albeit with different ideological overtones) as fundamentally Eurocentric in its origins and still
prevalently grounded (in the United States as well as in Europe) in the study of “high”
European literary traditions and canons: British, French, German, Italian, Spanish,
Russian. While the stronghold of Western Europe (and its canon) is still advocated by
some nowadays, the majority of scholars in the discipline claim not to subscribe to such a
“politically incorrect” stance by now. In spite of its history of Eurocentrism, Comparative
Literature is increasingly making efforts to open itself to cultural dimensions beyond the
West and to accommodate non-Western languages, literatures, and cultures in its scope.
This opening is fraught with old and new questions: as I shall attempt to demonstrate,
these questions can (and indeed should) be read as mirroring a wide range of “stakes”
related to the re-investment of cultural difference as cultural capital, as well as to the re-
invention of Comparative Literature as an increasingly globalized yet fundamentally split,
even schizophrenic discipline. Here I shall attempt at briefly highlighting some of the
“stakes” of Comparative Literature as a field potentially spanning East and West,
particularly taking into consideration China as a subject/object of discourse in its
relationship to the discipline. I do not in the least claim to be exhaustive or to encompass
all the huge scope of the issues revolving around the possibility of East-West comparison
and mutual communication in literary studies. Quite the other way, my focus will be very
limited, and shall be directed onto some strategies for deploying cultural difference at the
intersection between Western literary theories and Chinese cultural, literary objects as
in/commensurato them. It is my conviction that such intersection interestingly
illuminates some conflicting approaches; albeit serving different cultural(and/or
academic)agendas, these approaches appear to converge, as we will see, in a tendency to
cast Western “high theory” as a tool applied to problematic non-Western “objects”.
Correspondingly, I shall reconnect these approaches to different politics of re-investment
of East-West cultural difference according to different possible practices of “Comparative
Literature”. My arbitrary choice of “China” as a synecdoche for Asia is dictated by my
interests, curricular history, as well as by my perception of Chinese literature and culture
as a “cultural capital” whose accumulation and global reinvestment is likely to play an
important role in the cultural politics of this century and to be re-deployed in new
flexible forms of cultural hegemony. As a young scholar in Comparative Studies and
Comparative Literature trained in both “Eastern” and “Western” matters, I grew
interested in the global deployment of “Chineseness” as translated between different
cultures while I was working on my doctoral dissertation in late 2003. My graduate work
in Comparative Literature was centered on Chinese American and Chinese Diaspora
women’s literary representations of the body as a sign of cultural translation. Gradually, I
became more and more interested in Chinese American literature and Chinese Diaspora
literature as controversial and inherently problematic bodies of texts that cannot but be
situated in the space between different cultures, where they negotiate different versions
of Chineseness according to different translational strategies. While attempts at East-
West Comparative Literature are still fairly recent and new in the Italian academic
context, I hope that my tentative effort might perhaps contribute to enlarge the stage of
East-West comparison in a European country that is still new at it. In this sense, my
ongoing period as a visiting scholar at UC Berkeley has offered new interesting and
exciting perspectives: as suggested by the aforementioned examples, Comparative
Literature, and especially East-West Comparative Literature, is currently at the center of
a large debate in the American academia – a context registering, among other things, a
growing presence of Asian and Chinese scholars in the field. Here, at the crossroads of
different perspectives, I am stricken by some of the different ways in which Comparative
Literature as a problem has been approached from Chinese and Western perspectives. It seems to me that, on the one hand, differences in perspective and approach can possibly converge on mutual interests; and that, on the other hand, a (perhaps apparent) commonality of perspective or approach can serve different projects or different cultural politics. In what follows, I shall attempt at offering a few instances of this.

**East-West Comparative Literature as Panacea**

For a long time and in correspondence with different historical moments, Comparative Literature as an academic discipline has been perceived as being “in crisis” in the West. Berheimer goes on tracking his imaginary graduate student in the field:

> So is this field constantly in crisis? she wonders. How does this jibe with comparative literature being, by all accounts, an elite discipline? Is one of the qualifications of this elite the ability to sustain the anxiety of an academic field whose identity is perpetually precarious?

Comparative Literature has always been controversial, but extreme controversy and a feeling of being at the edge of dissolution seem to characterize the discipline at the turn of a new century. While some scholars – and Bernheimer among them – acknowledge the possible benefits of an exchange between Comparative Literature and other disciplines that have come of age in the past twenty years (postcolonial studies, ethnic studies, diaspora studies, transnational studies, and so forth), Comparative Literature seems constantly to live out of an attempt to define the locus of its field as essentially separated from those. One of the big issues generating a heated debate is, of course, whether Comparative Literature should define its borders by re-assessing the *literariness* of its object of study – namely, literature in its various and transnational manifestations. This is where the problematic and “electric” boundary between Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies comes into play and becomes a zone of reciprocal vindications. Attempts at enlarging Comparative Literature to accommodate and re-absorb Cultural Studies originate further anxiety in scholars, because this move apparently threatens to bleed into its opposite and to prefigure a “swallowing” of Comparative Literature on the part of Cultural Studies, resulting into a further blurring of any distinctive qualities that such a controversial discipline may have claimed for itself. Comparative Literature at the turn of the century is, to go back to Berheimer’s words, highly anxiogenic, and even depicted as an ailing discipline “in need of cure” – or perhaps the patient is already dead, as ironically implied by Gayatri C. Spivak and Emily Apter, and needs to be resuscitated.

Within this gloomy picture of besiegement, East-West Comparative Literature occupies an ambiguous position. According to Yingjin Zhang, the field of East-West Comparative Literature is marked by “profound ironies”. As remarked by, among others, Y. Zhang himself and Zhang Longxi, East-West Comparative Literature in the Western academia (here the aforementioned scholars are referring to Chinese-Western Comparative Literature as their main concern) is still struggling to come out of marginality within a field that is traditionally dedicated to comparing the literatures of the Western world. Yet such possible overcoming of marginality is a chance *for the discipline itself* that is too precious to be missed. Zhang Longxi echoes Claudio Guillén when he argues:

> Given the marginality of East-West comparative studies today in the eyes of many Western scholars of comparative literature, the most effective response to the challenge is not a call to form a particular school, but the solidity of the scholarship, the significant result of intellectual pursuit from Chinese comparatists
While the discipline seems in urgent need of care in the West, Comparative Literature in the East, according to several enthusiastic reports, is in full bloom. In China, the discipline has experienced an unprecedented growth during the past twenty years. Among other scholars, Yue Daiyun, President of the Chinese Comparative Literature Association, has in several occasions remarked the growing health of the field in the academic institutions of the People’s Republic. According to Yue, a pivotal moment in the establishment of Comparative Literature in China was a 1985 Conference at Shenzhen University, marking the coming into existence of the Chinese Comparative Literature Association:

Significant guidelines for the future of Chinese Comparative Literature were formulated in October 1985 in when the first conference marking the foundation of the Chinese Comparative Literature Association, and its first international symposium, was convened at the newly established Shenzhen University in South China. On this occasion 120 Chinese scholars met 14 distinguished comparatists from Europe, North America, Japan, Taiwan [...] and Hong Kong [...]. This conference, which reviewed the current situation of Chinese comparative literature, was also an occasion for academic interaction between Chinese and foreign scholars. Following the dialogue made possible by the conference, comparative literature in China entered into a new stage of development.

So, if we envision Comparative Literature from a non-Western – and, in this case, “specifically Chinese” perspective – the discipline itself, its history, and its most recent praxis seem to testify to a different trajectory. If East-West Comparative Literature, although tentatively gaining momentum, is nonetheless perceived as still marginal in Comparative Literature departments in the West, Chinese Comparative Literature in all its forms is growing steadily in Mainland China as well as in Taiwan.

This might well be envisioned as an ironic turn for a discipline with a long history of Eurocentrism; or it might be read as yet another token of China’s global rise to power in the twenty-first century. Yet I would like to draw attention to something different: what strikes me, as I hinted before, is how different interests seem to converge in these overlapping calls to East-West Comparative Literature – calls echoed from the East to the West and vice versa. The two aforementioned discourses – healing Comparative Literature in the West and making space for a healthy Comparative Literature in the East, articulated from different geopolitical as well as institutional position, appear to me as blurring into a larger discourse – one that is fundamentally palingenetic in its thrust. Yue Daiyun openly links Chinese Comparative Literature to the future of Comparative Literature as a global discipline:

Chinese comparatists are actively engaged in, and looking forward to, furthering the development of comparative literature in China and to significantly contribute to the development of the discipline worldwide. The strong and continuous development of comparative literature in China may have further international implications of importance. The discipline is apparently under considerable pressure in countries where it has been traditionally prominent (United States and Europe). This is due to the emergence of cultural studies and to the “appropriation” of many tenets of the discipline by other branches of the study of literature. Perhaps it may turn out that the strength of Chinese comparative literature will result in a diverse development and that there will be a new renaissance of the discipline in the West.
The palingenesis of Comparative Literature seems to have relocated in the East – and this casts, undoubtedly, as remarked by Yue herself, another layer of historical irony. If it is so, which different cultural politics or interests could this palingenesis serve? I think the question is worth serious inquiry. This convergence of interests in the transnational development of Comparative Literature from a Eurocentric discipline to an increasingly globalized one within an increasingly globalized academia, and even predicated on East-West global confrontation as its own key to survival, calls for a re-thinking of a number of issues revolving around the triangulation among the “East”, the “West”, and “Literature”, and simultaneously projects such issues on a global scale – or a global stage. First of all, a lasting anxiety about the ontological status of the “Chinese text” emerges.

**Western Theories, Chinese Texts?**

The practice of comparing Chinese culture and “things Chinese” with Western ones arises in China at the turn of the twentieth century as an attempt to resist Western imperialism. In the context of a perceived national weakness in comparison to the West as the powerful “Other”, Chinese intellectuals reacted by “appropriating” those aspects of Western culture that were thought to make the West stronger than China.12 According to Yue, Comparative Literature in the Chinese context can be traced back to Wang Guowei and Lu Xun, who first self-consciously applied “foreign”, Western theories to the study of Chinese literature.13

As a counter to this trend, a good number of scholars have spent much energy pointing to a fundamental gap between Chinese literary texts and non-Chinese literary theories. Many of these scholars consistently argue that Chinese literary texts are uniquely embedded within Chinese culture and should be exclusively approached through Chinese literary tools in order to be fully grasped, understood, and appreciated.14 The idea of language as a transparent tool for apprehending non-Western truths seems to bear on such approaches to Chinese literature. According to Chow, the issue of language is reflected in “an unproblematic linkage between Chineseness-as-such and Chinese literary writing”:

In such linkage, what is Chinese is often imagined and argued as completely distinct from its counterparts in the West, even as such counterparts are accepted in an a priori manner as models or criteria for comparison. [...] The assertion of Chinese difference tends often to operate from a set of binary oppositions, in which the Western literary tradition is understood to be metaphorical, figurative, thematically concerned with transcendence, and referring to a realm that is beyond this world, whereas the Chinese literary tradition is said to de metonymic, literal, immanentist, and self-referential (with literary signs referring not to an other-worldly realm above but back to a cosmic order, of which the literary universe is part.)

From this perspective, the “Chinese text” is Chineseness incarnate and inescapably embedded within itself. “Western theories” to be avoided – or sparingly applied to say the least – range from categories of literary genre, to categories of literary history, to “literary theory” (otherwise known as “cultural theory” or “poststructuralist theory”) as allegedly the most recent product of Western thought to have traveled to the non-West. In this regard, “poststructuralist theory” is envisioned as nothing more than the newest intellectual instrument of the ubiquitous West.16 One of the reasons why East-West Comparative Literature is still marginalized and looked upon with discomfort, Zhang
Longxi argues, is the apparently unbridgeable gap between traditional “Sinologists” and modern “theoreticians”:

The very effort to identify certain points or degrees of comparability between Chinese and Western literatures and cultures is likely on the one hand to arouse the suspicion and contempt of some sinologists or Chinese traditionalists who insist on the unique and incomparable nature of things Chinese, and in the other meet with doubt and indifference from those theoreticians and critics who thrive on the discourse of difference and cultural relativism.\(^\text{17}\)

The putative incommensurability of the Chinese text (especially the pre-modern one, written prior to contact with Western culture in the late nineteenth century) to any Western critical approach is openly foregrounded in a number of recent studies on the status of East-West Comparative Literature.\(^\text{18}\) It is worth noting that this foregrounding of “otherness” in the Chinese text has not materially prevented scholars from effectively performing comparisons between Chinese and Western texts as well as between Chinese and Western literary concepts.\(^\text{19}\) While it is undoubtedly important to be respectful of cultural otherness and to avoid applying Western categories simple-mindedly by uncritically assuming them to be universal, or naturally transcultural, the potential drawback in this foregrounding of otherness resides in a very material risk of ascribing the Chinese text, and Chinese literature as a body of texts, to an abstract realm of pure “Chineseness” secluded from interaction with the rest of the world – in other words, secluded from interaction with history itself. In its most radical forms, this perception of alterity results into a forceful acknowledgement of the impossibility of any comparison and the futileness of any attempt at it. This “sino-centric” approach claims to be free of any ideological bias and equates Chinese literary texts to pristine objects to be protected from violent intrusion. In making Chinese literature the secluded kingdom of a (very limited) number of specialists, these approaches ascribe Chineseness, Chinese literature, and Chinese culture, in Zhang Longxi’s words, to a “cultural ghetto”.\(^\text{20}\)

An effort in maintaining a balance between the most extreme forms of the “Sinological” and the “theoretical” emerges in the work of a group of very active and innovative (both Chinese and Western) scholars, revolving around the Chinese University of Honk Kong during the 1980s.\(^\text{21}\) Scholars such as Andrew Plaks, William Tay, Yip Wai-lim, Heh-hsiang Yuan, and Douwe W. Fokkema attempt to situate themselves in a space in-between an orientalist fetishizing of Chineseness as embodied in a relic-text on the one hand and an indiscriminate application of Western theories and poetics on the other. The work of these scholars mainly consists of attempts at developing a common poetics and/or a common methodology for approaching Chinese and Western literary texts on grounds of equality, while at the same time accounting for the “radical otherness” of “the Chinese text” and its reference to a set of literary categories (form genres, to readership, to publication history, etc.) other than those that inform Western literature. In terms of material attempts and results at East-West comparison, this group has perhaps been the most productive, although critical efforts such as *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays* (1979), edited by Andrew Plaks, have been described as recurring to a certain degree of “defensiveness”.\(^\text{22}\)

David Palumbo-Liu echoes Zhang Longxi in retraceing a fundamental split between “Sinologists” and “Theorists” in the debate concerning the application of (Western) theory to Chinese literary texts.\(^\text{23}\) According to Palumbo-Liu, “Chinese Comparative Literature” is an essentially “utopian project”. Its “u-topianess” – in other words, its being grounded nowhere – is due, Palumbo-liu argues, to some fundamental assumptions
shared by both “Sinologists” and “Theorists”: widely apart as their approaches to Chinese literary texts may be, “Sinologists” and “Theorists” share an ultimate faith in the possibility to contrive a methodology for comparison that is ultimately “free of ideology” – in other words, that might let the texts “speak for themselves” and be self-evident. Such a result is supposed to be attained – and here Palumbo-Liu detects an interesting convergence in the language used by critics on both sides – by chastising any “excessive” engagement with the text and ultimately (and paradoxically) limiting criticism to an activity of “pure description”.

In dealing with the problematic boundary between Western theory and the Chinese text, literary criticism and Comparative Literature seem to have attained an almost idealized, ascetic purity of practice. And yet, as Palumbo-Liu remarks, “how do we divide off what [a] poem says from what it says to us?” Moreover, as Louis Althusser pointed out, ideology works at its best when it conceals itself under the guise of naturalness or self-evidence. In Palumbo-Liu’s terms:

... it is always [...] easier to see someone else’s ideology than one’s own. One’s own seems rather invisible, but it is articulated in two ways: “negatively” (in the polemic negation of others as “ideological” ...); and “naturally” (ideology appears in statements such as “that is the way things are, have to be, will always be, need to be”). This latter mode of articulation removes itself from debate precisely because there is nothing to debate about – the “other” is, simply, wrong, and here, wrong because it is ideological.

While Palumbo-Liu envisions East-West comparative literature as grounded nowhere – a U-topia – he simultaneously does not foreclose the possibility of comparison; rather, he suggests that, instead of “banish[ing] ideology” as an instrument of over-intervention in literary criticism, ideology itself should be seriously engaged in its various relationships to aesthetic and theory, so as to open up a non-Utopian space for an “analysis of discursive formations – their constitution, function, and residual effects on our understanding of literature”. Once again, huge benefits for Comparative Literature and Chinese Comparative Literature could come out of such an engagement:

Comparative Literature is presented with the tremendous opportunity to enter the debates about culture and its transnational negotiations; Chinese comparative literature in particular has arrived at a moment when it must face the crisis in the humanities, rather than attempt to retreat from it and into an ideologically innocent utopian space. The stakes are simply too high.

Reappropriating (Particularized) Theory? The “Chinese School” of Comparative Literature

I detect one more “irony” among those marking East-West literary comparison in the transnational emergence and recent revival of the “Chinese School” of Comparative Literature (Bijiao wenxue Zhongguo xuepai). Proponents of the critical approach identified with this “school” usually trace its origins back to the work of two Taiwanese scholars, who launched the term and the concept in 1976. According to Gu Tianyong and Chen Pengxiang, the core of the “Chinese School” project consists in applying Western criticism to Chinese literary texts – and, in so doing, testing, re-thinking, and modifying the very tools of Western criticism.

I find interesting how these early theorists of the “Chinese School” seem to subscribe to the split between “Western theory” and “Chinese text” that we have observed at the heart of some critical attempts at reading Chinese literature within a Comparative
Literature framework. Twenty years later, Cao Shunqing re-opened up a heated debate on the distinguishing features of the “Chinese School” as a quintessentially “Chinese” strategy to Comparative Literature. According to Cao, the “Chinese School” is different from the “French School” as well as from the “American School” of Comparative Literature: “if the French School is predicated on “influence studies” as its founding character, and the American school is grounded on “parallelism studies”, we can say that the Chinese School is essentially characterized by “intercultural studies”.

Now, claiming “interculturality” as a distinctive scholarly feature in an increasingly cross-cultural world is a bold attempt. It seems to me that we can remark a very interesting epistemological shift in this attempt. “Chineseness” here is not the meaningful core to be detected at the heart of Chinese literary texts; it is, increasingly, a key-word attempting to characterize and define a widely heterogeneous methodology – aimed, in its very diversity, at shaping the very course of Comparative Literature on the global stage of academic disciplines: “it does not matter how many borders, how many critical methods pertain to the “Chinese school”: its essence consists in making Eastern literatures, and Chinese literature as part of them, the basis for Chinese Comparative Literature Studies and Chinese-Western Comparative Literature Studies.”

With its emphasis on a cultural difference and a cultural agenda that are unique to China, the “Chinese School” casts itself as a response to the international stalemate of Comparative Literature. Self-consciously constructing itself as opposed to two other “schools” – “French” and “American” –, the “Chinese School” ascribes to itself the historical aim of enlarging the boundaries of Comparative Literature and rejuvenating the discipline in the twenty-first century.

If, on the one hand, as argued by Rey Chow, the obsessive particularization of everything “Chinese” as a cultural strategy is deeply embedded in a reconfirmation of Western theoretical and/or critical paradigms as neutral and universal – unrecognized as “Western” while uncritically assumed as a priori criteria for comparison –, the deployment of particularized cultural difference on the part of the “Chinese school”, on the other hand, could perhaps be read as an interesting, strategic reappropriation of “Chineseness” as an ultimately incommensurable cultural difference produced under the eyes of the West. This reappropriation of Chineseness exposes the Western cultural bias at work in Comparative Literature as a putatively ideology-free practice: “some Euro-American scholars suggest that we should not differentiate among schools. To tell the truth, such scholars embody a Eurocentric perspective.”

What kind of interests, which cultural politics (or cultural economics) does the emergence of the “Chinese School” buy into? The recent debate around the “Chinese School” of Comparative Literature is once again situated in a transnational, globalized space where different interests converge – or, alternatively, diverge. Accordingly, this debate contributes to expose some disciplinary issues emerging in the ideologically charged spaces where these transnational encounters take place. For instance, from the perspective of John Deeney, who self-consciously assumed the role of spokesperson for the “Chinese School” during the late 1970s and well into the 1980s, among the historical aims of the “Chinese school” range the opening up of Comparative Literature, the discipline itself, to East-West comparison, and a revolutionary contribution to dislocate Europe and the West as the traditionally privileged centers of comparison.

The debate around the “Chinese School” of Comparative Literature strikes me as yet another discourse where different academic, cultural, and political agendas overlap with
each other. As I have attempted to demonstrate, this debate illuminates, on the one hand, several attempts (mostly on the part of Western-based scholars) at drawing Comparative Literature out of its perceived Western crisis and self-confinement (as advocated across almost two decades by, among others, John Deeney and Zhang Longxi). On the other hand, the same debate could be read, I believe, as a most interesting and revealing embodiment of the ongoing re-definition of Chineseness (no more exclusively embodied in “the Chinese text”) against the grain of “the West”. Framed in this context, the approach advocated by the “Chinese School” could also be imagined as a strategic counter-discourse, a re-appropriation of Western theory as serving a new moment of Chinese cultural / national self-strengthening. Simultaneously, this process resonates in the global context, in its possible confluence with the “historical mission” of the “Chinese School”, whose aim is to bring international Comparative Literature to new heights. As Rey Chow has pointed out, the “Chinese” particularization of theory is yet another deployment of the power unbalance between the “West” as universal and ubiquitous and the East as particular and localized. The “Chinese School” of Comparative Literature thus takes, in my eyes, the shape of an ironic re-appropriation of Chinese particularity at the intersection between Chineseness and theory.

Wang Ning’s argument about Comparative Literature, theory, and cultural studies is another interesting case of Chinese particularization/reappropriation of theory. According to Wang, “theory” travels along with global commodities and economic globalization from the West-as-center to the non-West-as-periphery. Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies (in this order) historically followed the same route; “[g]lobalization is no doubt a traveling process from the West to the East”. Having acknowledged a number of flows from the West to the East, Wang heartily advocates for an opening to such flows on the Chinese part, for the sake of Chinese culture and Comparative Literature:

> The strong mechanism of Chinese culture is more and more affected. As comparatists, we cannot and should not stop such a process, but we could make full use of this opportunity to “globalize” our discipline in an attempt to broaden its ever-shrinking domain and to make it a truly globalized research field [...] If we face the challenge in a critical way and try to develop our national culture in a broader international context, we will most probably highlight the Chinese national and cultural identity and make it known to the international community.

While allegedly translating between the West and China, Wang’s rather clear-cut view seems, on the other hand, to buy into a narrative of crisis “all too often lead[ing] to a quest for cultural identity based on a reification of China versus the West”. In Wang’s argument, Chinese Culture within the field of Comparative Literature is to be promoted as a highly profitable commodity to be sold on the global market. Once posed, the “foreignness” of globalization, of traveling theory, and of Cultural Studies is assimilated within the capacious belly of Comparative Literature and transformed into Chinese capital, put to the service of a “Chinese strategy” for success and profit in the global academia.
Some Tentative Reflections in Lieu of a Conclusion: Returning Ironies in the Production of Cultural Difference

28 The anxieties and the ironies of comparison, taking the changing shape of new historical missions, new palingenesis, and new ironies emerging from those, undoubtedly mirror a widespread sense of elation as well as returning uncertainties in an ever-shrinking world where the boundaries between “self” and “other” (and this has by now become a truism) are increasingly perceived as inherently instable. It is my belief that these anxieties/ironies also reflect the predicament of individual survival in an ever-specializing, all-encompassing academic job market where hierarchies are perhaps more easily subverted but are nonetheless always ruthless.

29 On the one hand, Comparative Literature as a traditionally Western-based as well as Eurocentric discipline cannot but face (as argued by several scholars) the “challenge” of East-West comparison. On the other hand, Comparative Literature has been spreading constantly in East Asian university – in China, Taiwan, and Japan among else – in the past two decades. East-West Comparative Literature is emerging at the intersection between the alleged crisis of Comparative Literature in the West and its new palingenesis in the East. At this intersection, cultural difference can be re-produced according to very different cultural politics – sometimes overlapping, sometimes opposing each other. It seems that some “Chinese strategies” paradoxically need a re-assessment of the “East” vs. “West”, “text” vs. “theory” split – a dichotomy that is far from self-evident even while it seems to be taken for granted by several scholars, both East- and West-based. I have attempted to draw attention to the fact that this apparent dichotomy between text and theory is in itself highly unstable and constructed according to different strategies of East-West negotiation. It is crucial, among other things, to remind that “Western theory” – and especially much-debated, yet often oversimplified “poststructuralist” theory – is in itself a highly problematic construct – and that “theory” as we nowadays conceive of it owes a huge debt to the work of non-Western, postcolonial scholars (like Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said, Homi Bhahba, Rey Chow, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Naoki Sakai, to name but a few). The relationship of a non-Western intellectual to theory is inherently ambiguous, but not necessarily passive: “‘Western theory’ is there, beyond my control; yet in order to speak, I must come to terms with it”41. If theory “travels”, as Wang would have it, from the West to East, it is not so easy to determine what “theory” is, nor what it is supposed to be, before it leaves its Western “home”. And, if theory travels in that direction, why should we overlook another travel – namely, that performed by non-Western intellectuals that relocate in the West with their own unique burden of multiple cultural allegiances? In Eugene Eoyang’s words, “binary oppositions between Western and non-Western exclude a significant population of people who are both Western and non-Western, or to put it another way, who are both Chinese and non-Chinese”42. If, in an effort at abstraction that seems to be one of the distinguishing (and to me most disquieting) features of Comparative Literature as a discipline, we align ourselves with the unfolding of Comparative Literature’s global manifest destiny, “China” as a new frontier shall not assuage our anxieties; quite the other ways, it will present us (going back to Zhang Longxi’s terms) with some “profound ironies”. Yet these ironies, I am arguing, are themselves a cross-cultural space worth exploring.
NOTES

12. Among the phantasmagoria of studies on the topic, see Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity, China 1900-1937*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995, for an approach that pays due attention to the manifold aspects of cross-cultural translation between China and the West at that pivotal historical moment.
13. See Yue Daiyun, op. cit., p. 4.
16. This question echoes a wider debate on the “application” of poststructuralist theory to non-Western cultures in general as well as on the cultural status of theory itself. Yet the very “location” of theory is, I believe, problematic. I shall return to this issue in the last part of this essay.
17. Zhang Longxi, op. cit., p. 27.

21. Hong Kong as a hybrid, post/colonial space offered perhaps an apt location for the development of such comparative work.


25. Ibid., p. 170.
26. Ibid., p. 168.
27. Ibid., p. 175.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.; my emphasis.
30. Ibid.

31. See Gu Tiantong and Chen Pengxiang, Bjjiao wenxue de kentuo zai Taiwan [Breaking Ground for Comparative Literature in Taiwan], Taibei, Dongda tushu gongsi, 1976.

33. Meng Zhaoyi, Bjjiao wenxue tonglun [Introduction to Comparative Literature], Tianjin Shi, Nankai daxue chubanshe, 2003, p. 86; my translation.

34. See Chow, op. cit.
35. Meng, op. cit., p. 86; my translation.


37. As noted by Yingjin Zhang, it is ironical that summons to the “historical mission” to be fulfilled by the “Chinese School” take shape side by side with skeptical arguments about the impossibility of transparent comparison (such as Palumbo-liu’s). See Y. Zhang, op. cit., p. 2.

39. Ibid., p. 597.


41. Rey Chow, Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading Between West and East, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p. XVI.

ABSTRACTS

Comparative Literature as a discipline is nowadays recognized as fundamentally Eurocentric and prevalently grounded in the study of “high” European literary canons. In spite of this history, it tries to open itself to non-Western languages, literatures and cultures. In this article, I shall attempt to address some of the stakes of Comparative Literature as a field potentially spanning East and West, taking into consideration China as a subject/object of discourse in its relationship to the discipline.

La Littérature Comparée en tant que discipline est aujourd’hui reconnue comme fondamentalement eurocentrique et principalement ancrée dans l’étude des « grands » canons littéraires européens. Malgré cette tradition, la discipline fait actuellement des efforts pour s’ouvrir à des langues, à des littératures et à des cultures non occidentales. Dans cet article, nous essayerons de comprendre certains enjeux de la Littérature Comparée en tant que discipline potentielle de rencontre entre Est et Ouest, en prenant en considération la Chine comme sujet et objet de discussion.

En tanto disciplina, a la literatura comparada se le considera fundamentalmente como eurocéntrica, ancrada sobre todo en el estudio de los “grandes” cánones literarios europeos. A pesar de dicha tradición, la disciplina lleva a cabo un esfuerzo para abrirse a lenguas, a literaturas, a culturas no occidentales. En este artículo intentaremos comprender algunos de los alcances de la Literatura Comparada como disciplina a través de la que se pueden encontrar Oriente y Occidente, tomando a China como tema y objeto de discusión.

AUTHOR

SERENA FUSCO