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Variation Study in Western and Chinese Comparative Literature

Shunqing Cao and Miaomiao Wang

Abstract

In "Variation Study in Western and Chinese Comparative Literature" Shunqing Cao and Miaomiao Wang present a theoretical and methodological framework designated as "variation theory." With the development of comparative literature in China, Chinese scholars are reconstructing the existing subjects and addressing the phenomenon of variation between literatures defined linguistically and nationally, not historically. Variation theory integrates transnational, cross-linguistic, cross-cultural, and cross-civilization variation, as well as images of Otherness. The framework is focused more on heterogeneity and variability than on universalism. As such, this framework promises to initiate innovation with regard to dialogues and cultural exchanges between East and West. Cao and Wang outline how dialogue and exchange contribute to the ongoing development of the theoretical foundations of a global comparative literature.

The study of the phenomenon of variation helps to account for the conflicts, differences, and similarities between Eastern and Western literatures and cultures. Both deconstruction and cross-cultural study emphasize differences and the problem of differences has become a core issue in current international and transnational research. While differences among cultures and literatures have been an issue in scholarship and scholars have designed many approaches, comparative literature and comparative cultural studies in particular can contribute to fostering dialogue (the latter is a framework developed by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek since the late 1980s, with the most recent representative text being his collected volume *Companion to Comparative Literature, World Literatures, and Comparative Cultural Studies*). With the development of comparative literature in China since the 1980s, Chinese scholars have begun reconstructing existing theories and subjects, both homegrown and imported (see, e.g., Chen and Sheng <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2367>>; Wang and Liu). Starting in the early 2000s, Shunqing Cao developed "variation

theory," a framework and methodology that is making inroads inside and outside China (see, e.g., Wang, Miaomiao <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2370>>; Wang, Ning <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2371>>). Variation theory integrates contemporary theories about the exchanges of literary phenomena and interpretations between different cultures in a transnational, cross-linguistic, cross-cultural context, as well as with regard to the image of Otherness. This theory focuses more on the heterogeneity and variability than on universalism.

The type of cross-cultural study advocated here is related to the theory and practice of Chinese comparative literature and its resources. When the study of comparative literature with its Western background was introduced in Chinese scholarship, scholars noted that the discipline did not incorporate non-Western literatures and thus remained Euro- and US-American-centric: "while the French School conducts the study on the influences among different European countries by crossing the borderlines of countries and the US-American school further crosses disciplinary boundaries and conducts studies on the literatures of different countries which did not have any connections before, the Chinese School intends to connect Eastern and Western literatures and reconstruct the concept of world literature by crossing the wall between Eastern cultures and Western cultures, as well as breaking through the barriers formed by different cultures" (Cao, "Chinese School" 22; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are by Miaomiao Wang; see also Li and Guo <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2358>>). As such, variation theory bypasses limitations in Western comparative literature. An especially important contribution of variation theory is its attention to cultural filtering, "the selection, modification, transplantation, and filtration of communicative messages by the recipients based on their cultural background and cultural tradition in literary communication. It is also a retroaction on the original information as a result of the creative acceptance by the recipients when one culture has influence on another" (Cao, "Theory" 184). In other words, cultural filtering is the mode of acceptance and comprehension of literary texts in heterogeneous cultures.

Three aspects of cultural filtering are particularly important. The first is the cultural background of the recipients: each recipient grows up in a specific time and space and thus is marked by a set of unique cultural, historical, and national characteristics. These characteristics are bound to play their roles in cultural communication (see, e.g., Morin). The second aspect is the subjectivity and selectivity in reader reception, which acknowledges that subjectivity is a basic prerequisite of cultural filtering and an admission of the possibility and necessity for recipients to select, deform, camouflage, permeate, rebel against, and create information in cultural and literary communication. In the course of cultural exchange, different recipients are influenced differently depending on the strength or weakness of the relationship between individuals and their cultures. Reader reception of course interacts with external forces such as the selection of types of text as determined, for example, by anthologies; the

ways of reading taught; and translations, including the acceptance and influence of foreign cultures even within the same time and space. The third aspect is the reactions by the recipients: in cultural dialogue, influence acts and reacts through individual recipients. A prerequisite of cultural dialogue and communication is a diversity of opinions. To have cultural dialogue means to "permit contest, competition, and confrontation, which is to permit the conflicts between thinking, concepts, and views of the world in the diverse cultures" (Qin 21-22). Where there is translation, there is variation. When Chinese literature is introduced to the West, cultural filtering occurs as a result of cultural differences displayed in the form, content, and inherent ideas of the text. Victor H. Mair's translation of Chuang Tzu's (庄子) *Wandering on the Way* (逍遥游), a classic of Chinese literature, is a typical example. He translates 天和道 as "God." However, the Chinese original inscribes the Daoist concept as "heaven," which does not denote or connote the individual presence that the "God" of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam does: "The 天 in Chinese is neither a term for 'heaven' nor for 'God' and rather it is a term in-between, which combines both the connotation 'heaven' and 'God'" (Yao 47).

Another example that forefronts the aspect of cultural filtering described in variation theory is from the English translation of the fable "Dismembering an Ox by a Skillful Butcher" in Arthur Waley's *Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China*: "one has only to look at an ordinary Carver to see what a difficult business he finds it. One sees how nervous he is while making his preparations, how long he looks, how slowly he moves. Then after some small, niggling strokes of the knife when he has done no more than detach a few stray fragments from the whole, and even that by dint of continually twisting and turning like a worm burrowing through the earth, he stands back, with his knife in his hand, helplessly gazing this way and that, and after hovering for a long time finally curses a perfectly good knife, and puts it back in its case" (73). The cumulative effect of Waley's translation is to characterize the carver Pao Ding as meek: 怵然为戒 is translated as "nervous" (tense), 动刀甚微 as "some small, niggling strokes" (triviality of the skill), 为之四顾 as "helplessly gazing this way and that" (having no choice but to watch), and 踌躇满志 as "hovering for a long time" (shilly-shallying). This characterization opposes the image in the original work as super skillful, positive, and self-confident, virtually a master of his craft.

The differences just shown are representative of the great variation that occurs between Chinese texts and their translation to English. The mischaracterization of the butcher is particularly relevant in the Western reception of Mo Yan's work because of the reference to the character in *POW!* The meat-loving narrator of the novel, Luo Xiaotong, recalls the butcher Pao Ding early on in Mo Yan's novel: "Father made his living by his wits. In ancient times, there was a famous chef named Pao Ding who was an expert at carving up cows. In modern times, there was a man who was an expert at sizing them up—my father. In Pao Ding's eyes, cows were nothing but bones and edible flesh. That's what they were in my father's eyes too. Pao Ding's vision was as sharp as a knife, my father's was as sharp as a knife and as accurate as a scale" (27).

Anglophone readers who had read and accepted Waley's translation might be led to think that the narrator is undercutting his father's prowess, when instead he is expressing great filial pride. They would then also miss the reference to Pao Ding as the pinnacle of butchering expertise much later in the novel when a minor official introduces Luo Xiaotong's father, Luo Tong, as "the plant manager, an expert on meat. He has an unerring eye, like the legendary chef Pao Ding" (Mo Yan, *POW!* 236). The degradation of meat production at the factory contrasts with the high quality of the ancient butcher and chef, which Mo Yan highlights by again having the minor official call Luo Tong "Pao Ding" (236): "Pao Ding ... it's up to you to see that no water is injected into the meat" (236). Luo is evasive in response to the praise because he knows that the meat is not only injected with water but also human urine.

Likewise, variation arises when Western literature, specifically Anglophone literature, is introduced to Chinese, as is clear from observing Chinese translations of Anglophone works, as in the case of Charles Dickens. His *David Copperfield* has many Chinese translations, each accompanied by a number of variations ranging from language to culture. The most famous Chinese translations of the novel are 块肉余生述 (The Life of an Orphan) translated by Shu Lin and Yi Wei, 大卫·科波菲尔 (David Copperfield) by Qisi Dong, and 大卫·考坡菲 (The Personal History of David Copperfield) by Guruo Zhang. As expected, there are differences between the original works and the translations, as well as between the Chinese translations. Lin and Wei adopted the method of domestication to cater to the reading habits of Chinese readers at the time and replaced Dickens's original title *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, which their free translation renders as *The Life of an Orphan*. In addition, Lin and Wei delete what they consider unimportant information such as some interjections, onomatopoeias, titles, and content in relation to religion. Their most obvious alterations reflect their attitude toward women. In Dickens's original, the wife Emily asks her husband David to respect her: "It was because I honoured you so much, and so much wished that you should honour me" (330). Lin and Wei replace Emily's request for equality with the traditional Chinese ideal of the "husband guiding the wife." In turn, Dong attempts literal translation, and while his Europeanized sentences are similar in form to the original, the logic of the original is lost. Zhang's translation has long been referred to as a well-translated version characterized by a combination of literal translation and free translation. Yet variation persists especially in terms of the religious differences between Eastern and Western cultures. Such is the case, for example, with regard to the altar in David's wedding ceremony. Zhang's translation as "matchmaker God" (月老神前611) introduces a matchmaker like the one in China into the English text and this encourages a misreading.

Variation occurs also at the macro level. For instance, *A Personal History of David Copperfield* is regarded in the West generally as Dickens's representative work. Conversely, it is *A Tale of Two Cities* that is often included in Chinese text-

books of foreign literature. In the most recent *Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*, George Sampson asserts that *A Tale of Two Cities* lacks the author's typical style (9). Why would such deviation in evaluation occur? Western readers or at least anthologizers may be more interested in Dickens' style and narrative structures, while Chinese readers and anthologizers may put more emphasis on themes. As Zhongxiang Wang posits, *A Tale of Two Cities* is chosen as Dickens's representative work in China because of its "reflection on thinking development of the writer and generalization of depth and width of history spirit" (24).

Literary misreading

When cultural filtering occurs heavily in communication, cultural misreading will inevitably ensue: misreading is the ultimate product of the actions and interactions of various factors in the process of cultural filtering. A primary factor is the individual because first and foremost there is the subjectivity of the reader. Readers from different cultures interpret heterogeneous cultures with the understanding of dislocation according to their own cultural traditions and habits of thinking, which is bidirectional. From the perspective of the relations between the leading role translators play in the process of translation and the original work, when translators encounter the original work, whose composition is activated by intervention, they will also absorb the original work in an open schema. Second, variation occurs owing to not only the difference of geographical space but also to dislocation across history.

A good example of misreading in Anglophone literature is the misreading of the description of the "delight" the narrator of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 130" takes "in the breath that from my mistress reeks" (112). Regarding "reeks," editor Stephen Booth writes that "a modern reader must be cautioned against hearing this word as a simple insult" given that in Shakespeare's day "reek" could have meant simply to "emanate" rather than to "stink" (454). A key example in Chinese literature can be found in a line by the Chinese monk Han Shan of the Tang Dynasty. A denotatively accurate rendering of the line "炼药空求仙" (Han Shan qtd. in Xia 1662) is to go into remote mountains to beg the immortal to produce the elixir. Beat poet Gary Snyder translates it as "tried drugs, but couldn't make immortal" (12). Snyder transforms the meaning of the character 药 rendered as "life-prolonging herb" or "elixir" as "drug" involving heroin or marijuana as possible meanings. At the hands of Snyder, Han Shan becomes a forerunner of the Beat Generation rebelling with decadent thoughts.

Variation stems from the diversity and asymmetry between two languages: to be freed from the restrictions and constraints of language means a kind of innovation and "the subtle differences experienced in different languages' world" into others (Xia 572), and thus translator Yuanchong Xu notes the inevitability of variability in Chinese-English translation: "Chinese is the character of comparative art, which is characterized with fuzziness. When translated into English, it is hard for the

translator to indicate the 'subtle differences,' which needs a translator's creativity. Creativity will involve originality and variation, so translation is the process in which variation happens" (138). Such variation is increased when poets-as-translators bring their own creative penchants to bear on their translations. *Analects of Confucius* includes the adage that "to learn and at due times to review what one has learnt, is that not after all a pleasure" (学而时习之，不亦说乎 2457). Ezra Pound renders it as "to study, with the white wings of time passing is not that our delight" (34). He divides the single character 習 into what in Chinese would be rendered as two characters 羽 (wing) and 白 (white). His quest for imagery overrides his quest for accuracy of the original meaning. He does so again in the Confucian adage "after setting the object of pursuit, one will be able to calm down" (定而后能静 1673), which he renders as "having this orderly procedure one can grasp the azure, that is, take hold of a clear concept" (Pound 99). Again, the single character 静 would be rendered as two characters: 青 (azure) and 争 (grasp). In *Investigations of Ezra Pound, Together with an Essay on the Chinese Written Character by Ernest Fenollosa*, Pound wrote that the "Chinese character is based upon a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature," and "a large number of the primitive Chinese characters, even the so-called radicals, are shorthand pictures of actions or processes," and that the radicals of the synthetic character show that "two things added together do not produce a third thing but suggest some fundamental relation between them" (8-10). In Pound's misunderstanding, Confucius becomes a forerunner of imagist poetry, the effect of which radiates throughout the West. It is also along this line that traditional Chinese poetry, especially with Pound's translations and transformation of Chinese Tang poetry, is often understood as imagist poetry. However, as André Lefevere has noted, "a direct presentation of cultural context is often essential if we are to avoid an assimilation to our own norms, and this requires us as readers to accept the translation's mediating role: 'When we no longer translate Chinese T'ang poetry "as if" it were Imagistic blank verse, which it manifestly is not, we shall be able to begin to understand T'ang poetry on its own terms'" (78).

Images of Otherness

In variation theory the image of Otherness refers to the literature of one country that is introduced in another country, necessarily attended by deep-seated variations through culture filtering, translation, and acceptance, reflecting the assimilation of the cultural rules of the national literature and its literary discourse and making the national literature of a country part of the literature and culture of the recipients' countries (see, e.g., Andraş). From the perspective of the image of Otherness, we can understand the phenomenon encapsulated by the statement proposed by Chinese scholars that "not all translated literature is foreign literature." It is with this perspective of variation theory that we now turn to Mo Yan's work as a representative case.

Mo Yan is the most successful contemporary Chinese writer in terms of the number of translations of his works into foreign languages and his global reception. With at least *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, variation is performed by translator Howard Goldblatt working from a unique original, as he notes: "Some changes and rearrangements were effected during the translation and editing process, all with the approval of the author" (xii). In most Chinese-to-English translations, however, variation is primarily the product of the translator's Westernization of the original. In a creative rather than literal translation, Goldblatt revises parts of Chapters 19 and 20 of the English version of *The Garlic Ballads*. For example, in Chapter 19 defendant Zheng Changnian's son says "thank you for reminding me, Your Honor. I'll get right to the point. In recent years the peasants have been called upon to shoulder ever heavier burdens: fees, taxes, fines, and inflated prices for just about everything they need" (26) while the original reads "谢谢审判长的提醒, 我马上进入实质性辩护。近几年来, 农民的负担越来越重。我父亲所在村庄, 种一亩蒜薹, 要交纳农业税九元八角。要向乡政府交纳提留税二十元, 要向村委会交纳提留三十元。要交纳县城建设税五元(按人头计算), 卖蒜薹时, 还要交纳市场管理税、计量器检查税、交通管理税、环境保护税, 还有种种名目的罚款!" (340). While Goldblatt omits some details of Chinese law and policy with which Anglophone readers would be unfamiliar, his translation is successful because he uses the creative approach to adapt to the habits and tastes of Anglophone readers, and he is faithful to the art and aesthetic of the original form. Thus he employs creative discretion to help his readers accept and understand Chinese literature better.

Variation is less idiosyncratic or intentional in cases where translations are secondary translations, a centuries-long practice in which translations are based on other translations. Wolfgang Kubin notes that German translations of Mo Yan's work are based not on the original Chinese but on English versions. We observe then how contemporary English translations serve as the authority for Western language habits and aesthetic tastes (replacing the nineteenth-century predominance of French translations as the base). Mo Yan does not assume a regulatory role as other authors or publishers might. Instead, Mo Yan's translators are allowed to translate freely for their respective readers, and this way a dialogue ensues with and within successful variation (see Fu and Zhang <<http://www.infzm.com/content/trs/raw/41156>>).

The result of Chinese-to-English translations done by nonnative Chinese speakers is the insertion of a nearly invisible barrier based on the difference between Eastern and Western cultural psychology and patterns of narration. It seems fair to say that the widespread reception of Mo Yan's works owes much to the domestic appropriation conducted by excellent translators, rather than the exportation of native Chinese translators. Therefore, the translation of the national literature of a country is easily adapted to the recipient's country based on its language, culture, and readers' tastes. This is one major way that cultures can win nonnative readers' acceptance. And only when an effective transmission is achieved can the

genuine charm of a culture and literature be circulated in the world. Estimating whether it can be defined as an image of Otherness lies in whether or not the rule of discourse changes.

Heterogeneity between Chinese and Western discourse

"Discourse Rule" is a useful term to refer to any one of the basic rules such as speculation, interpretation, and expression in specific cultural traditions, social histories, and formations of national cultural psychology. It influences theoretical thinking, the generation of meaning, and linguistic expression, which embody in discourse rules and speech methods in philosophy, aesthetics, and literary theory. Discourse rules generate historically and originate from different cultural systems resulting in heterogeneity. For example, a Chinese traditional discourse rule is the generation of meaning and style of language with Daoism as its core (see Cao, "Discourse" 5). Especially important for literary studies is the heterogeneity between the generation of meaning and style of language of the Western *logos* and Daoism. Take one line in *Lao Zi* for example: "Daoism produces one. One produces two. Two produces three. Three produces all things," and this is to say that everything is derived from Daoism (Lao Tze 44). Another passage of *Lao Zi* expresses an anti-*logos* stance on Daoism as origin and expression: "The beautiful words are not true, the true words are not beautiful, the way that can be spoken of is not the constant way; the name that can be named is not the constant name" (Lao Tze 3).

Daoism cannot be spoken as questioning, and the tension between unspeakable Daoism and Western *logos* causes the form of the generation of meaning and the style of language with Daoism as its core. Languages can communicate ideas of daily life, but when rising to the aspect of Daoism language is always poor even in its original: "The greatness of anything may be a topic of discussion, and the smallness of anything may be mentally imagined. But that which can be neither a topic of discussion nor imagined mentally cannot be said to have greatness or smallness" (Lin 99). No matter the greatness of the topic or the smallness of the imagined, Daoism is beyond topic and imagination and thus beyond language. On the one hand, the Chinese discourse rule with Daoism as its core emphasizes that meaning cannot be spoken. On the other hand, it uses implication and metaphor forming a unique way of expression. The speaker does not say, the reader does not speak, but the thought can be communicated. Attempting to convey this Chinese discourse rule is difficult because of the contradictory Western discourse rule of logocentrism characterized by scientific, systematic, and analytical verbal expression. There are many similarities between *logos* and Daoism, but among "being and invisible being," "speakable and unspeakable," and "language analysis and understanding" there are great differences, which in turn determine differences between Western and Chinese discourses (see Cao, "Tao" 54). Daoism and *logos* share the traits of being eternal and constant. Daoism tends to indicate invisible being, while *logos* tends to mean being. Accord-

ing to Heraclitus *logos* itself means being, although people do not understand it as such (see, e.g., Botten). Exploration, questioning, and analysis on being from *logos* makes Western culture, literature, and literary theory seem to be more precise and systemic, focusing more on the causality of logic and plot structure. Conversely, the invisible being from *Lao Zi* directs Chinese literary theory to emphasize spirit and neglect type. Another example of the image of Otherness is the Sinicization of Buddhism: "The process for Sinicization of Buddhism is simultaneous with the Buddhismization of China" (Zhang, Mantao 76; on the history of Buddhism and China, see, e.g., Mitchell and Duran). There are many aspects for the Sinicization of Buddhism including the translation of sutras, which was gradually Sinicized by methods of comparison and analogy to explain and understand the concept against a cross-cultural background. The Sinicization of Buddhism has gradually fused Buddhism and Chinese culture, forming Zen Buddhism.

In conclusion, variation theory represents the approximation of Chinese and Western thought, including literary and culture theory and translation theory and practice. Chinese ways of thinking and discourse rules can absorb and transform Western literary theories and vice versa. The most promising Chinese appropriation of Western literary theories will strive first to combine its own literary practice with traditional culture and cultural sources, understand native discourse rules, and consider its unique qualities in order to add value to Western literary theories. When compared with Western literary theories, we should aim at discovering similarities and differences between the two.

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