

A Note on Cao Shunqing's Contributions to Comparative Literature

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Abstract: This Note is an introduction to the Special Column *Cao Shunqing and Chinese Scholarly Discourse*. It provides a brief description of Prof Cao's academic background and his most important contributions to the development of Comparative Literature. The Note also describes the cultural context against which Cao offers his main arguments "Aphasia" and "Variation Theory," and the long-term impact they make on the scholarly world.

Keywords: Cao Shunqing; Comparative Literature; Aphasia; Variation Theory

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标题：曹顺庆对比较文学的贡献

内容摘要：本文是“曹顺庆教授与中国话语”专栏的导言，主要介绍曹顺庆教授的学术背景以及他对比较文学的发展所作出的重要贡献。本文指出了曹顺庆教授主要学术主张“失语症”和“变异学”提出的背景及其长远的国际影响。

关键词：曹顺庆、比较文学、失语症、变异学

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The following five essays in this special column are all interpretations and critical reviews devoted to Prof. Cao Shunqing's scholarly achievements.

Cao has been studying, teaching and researching on Comparative Literature for almost half a century at Sichuan University, China. In March this year, friends and colleagues held a seminar in honour of the 45th anniversary of Cao's teaching career, and of his contributions to Chinese scholarship, especially to the discipline of Comparative Literature. His remarkable achievements, though having received huge attention within and without China, still deserve a more profound scrutiny, since they provide a key to a crucial problem in the cross-cultural human science that still

baffles scholars around the world.

The problem in question is, in short, how to handle the huge gap between the widely different traditions in humanities, and how could a researcher, raised in one of the two cultures, scale the huge gap between, since the wide chasm is not only resulted by two cultural histories but by the basic difference in two linguistic structurings that have virtually nothing in common. Ideally such comparative studies could breed an understanding between the two, but often than not they meet criticism and resistance from both sides, and are even criticized as deepening the misunderstanding. Around the debate there often formed two camps: the Traditionalists who complain that their rich cultural heritage are capable of dealing with all issues involved in such studies, and the nation's cultural life in prosperity today is a telling witness. On the other hand, "Assimilationists" (I coined the word to replace the denigrated "Westernisers" or the self-styled "Modernists"), on the contrary, insist that such studies should basically be handled through Western scholarship, which, in its surprisingly dazzling development in the modern times in the Western countries, has built an all-encompassing system that superseded and reinvented all knowledge on human science accumulated this far. Both sides point out with indignation that the other side has gone totally astray, doing great harm not only to scholarly studies but to the ideological health of the nation.

The debate has engulfed the scholarly circles all around the world, with almost all the cultures involved, though perhaps most intense in China, a nation proud of its world's longest continuous civilization. Indeed even the Chinese language, as the only surviving ideogrammic language in the world, supports a very different thinking style. The situation is so serious that the two sides of scholars in universities are staffed in two different faculties that hardly even talk to each other, as they have almost no topic to chat about. Instead there is much resentment after fighting for the limited resources, for placement or funding.

We could say that this situation is all but natural since a similar competition could be more intense in some other fields, in medicine for instance. But in humanities, it should be resolved for whatever reasons, for human science is supposed to be a scholarship that aims to solve cultural misinterpretations. One of the greatest achievements of Cao's targets at this problem. As a scholar who has received excellent training in both sides, he is perhaps best equipped. His college training in strict Chinese scholarly guided by his mentor the great *Wenxin Diaolong* expert Yang Mingzhao. He has also familiarized himself with Western scholarship by studying in a series of universities outside China. Well-versed in both Chinese and Western literary scholarship, Cao tackles that encased knot that should have

long been disentangled.

In 1996, Cao raised the issue of “Aphasia” in a seminal essay in which he warns in clear-cut terms that it is definitely faulty, when analyzing Chinese literature, to recycle terms and concepts of Western literary theories without re-contextualizing them in Chinese cultural tradition. A careful reformation and remodeling is necessary if those terms and concepts are to be used in the Chinese context. Those who have been doing so without awareness are suffering from an “aphasia,” as they deprive themselves of their capability to understand Chinese literature in its own cultural context. Their efforts of directly applying Western terms and concepts could only result in a Procrustean effect, which is not in agreement with the spirit of Comparative Literature. Only a meticulous differentiation can provide a much needed cornerstone of legitimization upon which modern literary scholarship could be erected. Cao’s well-reasoned call for a change of basic attitude to cure the “aphasia” won huge response among Chinese as well as Western scholars since it is a clear-cut redefinition of the fundamental requirement of the cultural exchange between different literary traditions.

This debate, however, appears more like a diagnosis than a prescription. If we can’t find a way to improve the conditions, the “Aphasia” could become a disease incurable. Quite a few people hold a view that the “fundamental gulf” between Chinese culture and that of the West is unbridgeable as both sides are deep-rooted in their own millennia-long tradition and their widely-different linguistic structuring. Cao the initiator of the debate, nevertheless, does not take such pessimistic stand.

In Cao’s view, this is exactly where the discipline of Comparative Literature, the best tool to scale the seemingly unfathomable chasm, comes into play. In his 2005 book *Comparative Literature as Discipline* (Bijiao Wenxue Xue), he maps out how to make the discipline as a tool to bridge the cultural gap. He proposes, in unequivocal terms, to develop a new branch in Comparative Literature, which, in its almost two centuries long history, has been suffering from more failures than successes in handling literary issues between widely-different cultures. Cao suggests that the new branch could be called “Variation Theory” (Bianyi Xue) which regards changefulness, instead of similarity, as the pivot for literary comparison. A careful scrutiny of the “variation” provides the legitimacy for a comparatist’s scholarly study, of which the task is not to show the apparent similarity but to find the differences and their cultural causes. In this way, a much better understanding of both the literary phenomena under study could reveal more of the historical truth that lies encrypted in the texts.

Cao’s Variation Theory casts a new light onto the time-honoured discipline

of Comparative Literature which has been, in recent decades, declared repeatedly by Western scholars as “defunct,” or “in a dead end.” With the new branch, the discipline’s rejuvenation could be expected, as it is now more applicable to literature of extremely different tradition from that of the West, thus providing a huge fertile land for it to increase its effectiveness. In a word, the Variation Theory is far from a prescription for remedying Chinese scholars’ Aphasia, but an effectual cure for Comparative Literature itself to survive this new age of the multivariate cultural cooperation through differentiation. With its wide implementation, the “Weltliteratur” which Goethe boldly predicted two and half centuries ago could go today into miraculous blooming.