

Zhongxi Bijiao Shixue, *Comparative Poetics between China and the West* (中西比较诗学). By Shunqing Cao (曹顺庆). Beijing: Beijing Press, 1988 [First edition]. 274 Pp.. Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2010 [Revised edition]. 249 Pp..

In 1979, Qian Zhongshu's *Guanzhui Bian* (管锥编) was firstly published by Zhonghua Book Company, which was universally reputed as the commencement of revival of comparative literature in China. From that time on, the study of Chinese comparative literature had been enjoying 40 years of development. During this process, scholars from different fields and with different training experiences made their own contributions to this burgeoning discipline in many ways. The academic world witnessed changes from spontaneous, random researches to self-conscious, systematic studies in this area, from an arbitrary approach affiliated to other disciplines in literature to an independent discipline equipped with its own methodology and discourse system.

It would be worth looking back on those early research works if we intend to keep comparative literature on the track of benign development of continuity. *Zhongxi bijiao shixue*, which was written by Professor Shunqing Cao and published by Beijing Press in 1988, might perfectly serve this purpose. It is the first monograph by the name of “comparative poetics” in China, and lays the basic foundation for Chinese comparative poetics in the following decades. This book was reprinted in 2010 with several revisions and supplements, and then was translated into Russian by International Publishing Company ‘Chance’ (Шанс международная издательская компания) in April 2017. These facts above demonstrate its indispensable position in this academic area and increasing international influence even though it has been three decades after it first appeared. Therefore, there is still a need to re-read, reevaluate and review it here<sup>1</sup>.

By citing one of entries from *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, a brief definition of comparative poetics was given in the introduction section of this book, which is “the comparison of literary theories from various countries” (p. 3). In the next part of this section, Professor Cao discussed the general difference between Chinese poetics and western poetics and explored

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<sup>1</sup> Considering the revised edition contains more information than other versions, both the cited content and the page numbers appeared in this article directly come from *Zhongxi bijiao shixue*, China Renmin University Press, 2010.

reasons behind the difference from three aspects, namely the influence of economy and politics, the influence of religion, science and ethic, and the influence of thinking and language feature. The characteristic imprint of that times can be easily found within this analysis approach. However, the way of author's argument is fairly persuasive and the purpose of author is to separately present "the unique theoretical values, national features and meanings to the world of Chinese poetics and Western poetics" (p. 28), basing on which the main body of this book spreads out.

The main body is composed of five parts, namely, "theories of the nature of art", "theories of the origin of art", "theories of the thinking of art", "theories of the style of art" and "theories of the appreciation of art", which basically range over all elements in the general process of literary creation and form an integrated framework, under which the author could safely find a feasible way to conduct his ambitious project. In order to achieve the goal he set for this book, Professor Cao elaborately selects eleven criticism terms from Chinese literary tradition, and then compares these terms with their counterparts collecting from Western literary tradition one by one. This approach, in a sense, exemplify most of scholars' typical idea on comparative poetics that era. As Qian Zhongshu suggested in one reminiscence article written by Zhang Longxi, "...comparative poetics is an important and promising research area. One of the most important missions of comparative literature is to compare terms from traditional Chinese literary theory with that from the West ..." (Zhang 1981, 135). However, it is necessary to point out that searching counterparts for traditional Chinese literary terms is not an easy work to be done, which requires deep expertise in both areas. Let's take one pair of terms chosen by Professor Cao as example to briefly illustrate how he conducts his research.

In the chapter "Theories of the thinking of art," the author picks the *divine madness* of Plato and *miaowu* (marvelous enlightenment 妙悟) of Yan Yu (严羽) (ca. 1180-ca. 1235) as representative theories on literary inspiration in China and the West. Before their differences are discussed, Professor Cao delineates similarities these two terms share: both of them are put forward for explaining how literary inspiration begins and works; both of them are closely related to religious beliefs. Then much ink has been spilled over their major differences: (1) *divine madness* is related to an irrational status, while *miaowu* is more rational, the ideal status of literary inspiration Yan Yu ultimately pursued is "the harmonious unity of phraseology (*ci* 词), reason (*li* 理), idea (*yi* 意) and

inspiration (*xing* 兴)”.

(2) *divine madness* is related to a drastic, fierce status, while *miaowu* is slower and more peaceful, it underlines gradual enlightenment on the basis of knowledge accumulation. (3) In theory of *divine madness*, the inspiration is regarded as a gift from the gods, while the theory of *miaowu* emphasizes the inspiration is the natural result of continuous learning and increasing life experience. (p. 137-146)

Through applying this analysis mode, not only have their distinctions been clearly presented, but also their exact connotations could be dug out during the comparison process, which is hardly achieved if scholars merely paid attention to their own cultural circumstance. Another pair of terms in this book is also a good example for this. In the chapter of “theories of the style of art”, the author chooses Liu Xie’s 刘勰 (ca. 465-ca. 520) *feng gu* (wind bone 风骨) as the counterpart of Longinus’ *sublime*. For a long time, scholars in China could not reach a consensus about the exact meaning of *feng gu*. The text related to these two terms is examined at great length and the remarkable similarities between them are clearly stated in this chapter. It is Professor Cao who brought these two terms together and offered us a creative explanation on *feng gu* in a convincing way. This strongly confirms the advantage, necessity and significance of researching comparative poetics.

However, there are perhaps two flaws that need to be addressed here. The first one concerns *the West* employed widely in this book. It seems that the author regards this phrase as the counterpart of China; in other words, *the West* is one predetermined concept for Professor Cao. As Edward Said incisively pointed out in his brilliant book *Orientalism*, “the orient was almost a European invention” (p. 1). This then brings us to the following questions: “Is it proper to look upon *the West* as a whole entity before a precise definition and an extensive exploration are given on it?”, “Is it possible that “the West” is also an “invention” of Chinese comparatists based on their own cultural knowledge?” It is hard to find answers to these questions within this book, since the author has barely reflects upon the concept of *the West*. The second question concerns the context of these terms for making comparison. It is true they can represent the principal spirit of their own literary criticism traditions, but it is also true that they also have their own backgrounds and features of the times. Besides, their meanings always keep changing with the times. We will easily fall into the so-called “comparing for the sake of comparison” fallacy, if we intentionally ignored the time dimension in our researches. This problem still exists in recent studies and refers to the cornerstone

of comparative literature as a discipline, namely comparability, which has been discussed in pace with the whole development process of this young discipline. Together with the groundbreaking achievements this book has already gained, I firmly believe, the flaws mentioned above should also be one part of its legacy.

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