

# An Analysis on the Predicaments and the Solutions of the Undergraduate Comparative Literature Teaching in China from the Perspective of “Localization” and “Subjectivity”<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract:**

The Belt and Road Initiative creates a precious opportunity for China's stories to be diffused worldwide. In the field of Chinese higher education, the humanities are expected to play a crucial role in cultivating the story-tellers. As one of the internationalized humanities, comparative literature that features the intercultural and interdisciplinary studies should not decline to shoulder the story-telling responsibility. In the face of the current predicaments of the undergraduate comparative literature teaching among the Chinese universities, the strategies that are oriented to “localization” and “subjectivity” are regarded as the key solutions. To be more exact, only if the necessary reforms in terms of the compiling of the suitable course books and the redefining of the interdisciplinary roles played by teachers and students can be actually put into practice will a comparatively solid foundation be laid for the Chinese universities to cultivate the qualified tellers of the China's stories.

**Key words:** comparative literature, undergraduate teaching, localization, subjectivity, The Belt and Road Initiative

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Chinese President Xi Jinping clearly points out that China's capacity for engaging in international communication should be improved so as to tell China's stories well, present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China, and enhance China's cultural soft power (Xi, 2017). Whether or not foreign countries can obtain a comprehensive and accurate understanding of today's China is, to some extent, determined by the capability to tell China's stories well. In addition to the improvement of the capacity to get engaged in international communication, it is highly imperative to seize the precious communication opportunities. The Belt and Road Initiative, proposed by President Xi in 2013, can be regarded as such precious opportunity to effectively spread China's stories worldwide. To accelerate the diffusion of China's stories on the platform of the Belt and Road Initiative assigns a glorious mission to the Chinese literature. In other words, Chinese literature is playing a crucial role in diffusing China's stories well across the whole world in the new tides of the times. In order to fulfill such a glorious mission successfully, the efforts to further establish the humanities, including the education of Chinese literature, in the universities and other higher education institutions in China need to be greatly strengthened so as to create more concepts and descriptions that may both keep up with the times and correspond with the humanistic theories. The academic discourse system that is composed of such concepts and descriptions forms the basic humanistic resource for China to communicate with foreign countries academically. Thanks to this favorable situation, comparative literature (CL), a special discipline in literary studies that features such academic discourse system, is becoming increasingly significant in the improvement of China's capacity for engaging in international communication. Similarly, The Belt and Road Initiative enables the studies of the Chinese CL to get incorporated into the international academia more rapidly (Wang, 2016).

CL is characterized by an intercultural and interdisciplinary study toward literature. Therefore, CL study is academically internationalized and prospective by its nature. Originating from the western countries, CL, as is known to all, was introduced to the Chinese academia at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From then on, Chinese scholars attached great importance to the studies of CL, which laid a solid foundation for CL to enjoy rapid development in China. Up to the present day, Chinese comparatists have harvested outstanding achievements in terms of the construction of CL theories as well as the practice of criticism. It can be said that such achievements are enough to be placed on a par with those of the western countries. Nevertheless, compared with the remarkable achievements made in CL research and relevant studies, the CL education, especially the undergraduate CL teaching in the universities and other higher education institutions in China, actually lags far behind and leaves much to be desired. In 1998, China's Ministry of Education set "Comparative and World Literature" as a formal discipline. Since then, a favorable platform seemed to be built up from then on for CL learning and teaching to obtain faster development in China. Nonetheless, after more than twenty years of CL teaching practices among the Chinese universities of different levels, many predicaments have emerged. At present, some measures that are taken to deal with these predicaments mainly focus on such aspects as the recruitment of CL major teachers, the class hour arrangement, the emendation of teaching plan, and so forth. Schools, teachers and students are generally short of the broad vision and great courage based on the context of the Belt and Road Initiative and globalization to cope with the predicaments. The disadvantages of such shortage obviously hinder the further development of the

Chinese undergraduate CL teaching. The successful cultivation of the qualified tellers of China's stories is, to a large extent, closely linked with the teaching quality of the humanities represented by CL in the Chinese universities. As a result, to summarize and examine the thorniest predicaments in the undergraduate CL teaching and search for the relevant solutions in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative have been urgently needed so as to promote the development of the Chinese CL studies in a real sense.

### **1. The Most Noticeable Predicaments Needing to be Solved**

In the Chinese universities, whether CL is the compulsory course of the language major undergraduates or the elective course of the non-language major undergraduates, the overall CL teaching quality and effect are far from satisfactory for both teachers and students. The considerable content of the course within extremely limited class hours, on the one hand, puts great pressure on the CL teachers; the students, on the other hand, tend to shrink back at the sight of the abstruse theories in the thick and heavy CL course books. In the context of The Belt and Road Initiative, an increasing number of the Chinese universities are actively implementing the "liberal arts education" and the "classified recruitment". Due to the further development of this trend, how to enable the college CL teaching to benefit the non-language major undergraduates by expanding their horizon and enhancing their humanistic quality is of great significance. To fulfill this teaching target, the interdisciplinary attribute of CL is expected to be activated and practiced in the university CL teaching. This, however, is no easy job.

#### **1.1. The Applicability of the CL Teaching Materials Should be Improved**

According to the discipline classification issued by China's Ministry of Education in 1998, "Comparative and World Literature", as a sub-discipline, is subordinate to Chinese Literature. This indicates that the discipline status of CL has been formally confirmed. Since then, the CL course teaching has actually entered a new stage, grabbing the attention of more and more undergraduates in the Chinese universities. Such favorable situation accordingly made the popularity of CL grow rapidly. The ideal CL teaching in the university is unlikely to be realized without the suitable teaching materials or course books. Teaching materials are not only the tangible carrier of the key disciplinary theories, but also the reliable guarantee for the construction of disciplines and the cultivation of students. Therefore, suitable course books are of vital significance for the existence and development of a course and even a discipline. If CL teachers and students can use the suitable teaching materials, then twice as much will be accomplished with half the effort to improve the CL teaching quality.

While translating and introducing the classical western CL teaching materials, dozens of eminent Chinese comparatists have fruitfully compiled some CL course books in which their own perspectives or research results are largely contained. The majority of these course books, which mainly follow the classical stylistic rules and layout widely-accepted in western countries, are generally the products of the top educational publishing houses in China. These books tend to cover almost all the mainstream research types in the history of CL development. Moreover, each research type is based on the corresponding abstruse CL theories. Even though "A Concise Book" or "A Brief Introduction" can

always be seen from the titles of such course books, the enormous number of recondite theories contained in these books tend to throw cold water on the learning desire of the undergraduates, especially the non-language major ones who are interested in literature. Due to the degree of difficulty of the CL course books, the language major undergraduates who used to be passionate about CL will, similarly, become hesitant to attend the CL classes as well.

### **1.2. The Interdisciplinary CL Teaching Is Tough to be Operated**

“Interdisciplinary study” is not only among the essential academic attributes of CL, but also the primary reason why some non-language major undergraduates tend to get more familiar with CL via classroom teaching. Interdisciplinary study, just as the name implies, systematically connects literature with other disciplines. This particular and multidimensional connection expands the scope of literary research and sets up an interactive platform for literature and other disciplines. By virtue of such a platform, both CL teachers and their students are able to be aware that their research direction simply focusing on literature is inevitably too narrow. Then they may enjoy the opportunity to explore a wider research field to reexamine the literary studies with a new visual angle and ultimately gain extraordinary experience as well as comprehension toward literature. Although interdisciplinary study is among the three dominant CL research methods, it has to be admitted that in actual CL teaching practices, interdisciplinary study is unconsciously marginalized or even neglected. In the majority of CL course books, interdisciplinary study usually accounts for only one chapter, far less than the proportion enjoyed by “influence study” and “parallel study”. As a result, in the classroom teaching, interdisciplinary study tends to be laid aside and neglected in the limited CL class hours and thus overlooked by teachers and students. The major reason is that the theoretical construction of interdisciplinary study is far from enough. In other words, interdisciplinary study is in desperate need of adequate supporting theories. Due to this inherent shortage of strong theories, it is not uncommon for interdisciplinary study to find it extremely hard to make a single move forward in the classroom teaching. The other reason that can not be ignored is that interdisciplinary study itself has gone far beyond the literary studies, further highlighting the weak spot that CL teachers who are literature majors generally lack the knowledge reserve of other disciplines. CL teachers tend to be helpless when they are confronted with the selection and instruction of the individual cases. The classroom instruction without relevant cases is more unlikely to be convincing. In a nutshell, interdisciplinary study is just like a beautiful but fragile goblet and therefore becomes an accessory that may or may not be needed in CL classroom teaching.

## **2. An Exploration of the Localization-Centered Solutions**

CL is a broad and rich literary discipline that deals with literature across time periods, national borders, languages and genres and crosses boundaries between literature and other disciplines (Wang, 2012). It was the European scholars that originally established and reinforced CL as a discipline. For the Chinese academia, CL is an imported concept and discipline. Nonetheless, it has been fully proved by the history of CL development that “localization” plays a decisive role for CL to get out of the predicaments and achieve the ideal disciplinary development in the sense of undergraduate education.

It can be discovered in the history of CL development through the vision of the Belt and Road Initiative that the comparatists can overcome the adversity and accomplish further development by establishing their self-subject position well and sparing no effort to seek the localized characteristics of their own culture and literature. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Chinese comparatists' outstanding contribution fruitfully enabled the West-centered CL studies to get out of the stagnant research predicaments and enjoy the world vision to become a globalized discipline. To fulfill the substantial development of CL as a globalized discipline, the role played by CL education can not be denied. It is "localization" that is highly crucial for the Chinese CL undergraduate education to gain a way out of the current predicaments.

"Localization" refers to the process in which certain sorts of foreign concepts or objects are transformed into their counterparts that may satisfy the specific local needs. "Internationalization" and "globalization", just like the two sides of a coin, are obviously different from and closely related to "localization" (Fang, 2008). As far as the undergraduate education is concerned, "localization" is clearly embodied in the utilization of the key teaching elements that feature "local resources" as well as "local learning conditions".

"Localization" attaches the importance to the university teachers and students' personal attributes in a spatial sense. "Subjectivity", however, puts emphasis on the university teachers and students' positions and functions in the process of academic research or classroom education. With regard to CL research, the key role of "localization" must be played by the researchers. In this case, researchers' "subjectivity" will be accordingly dealt with. As for undergraduate CL education, "localization" and "subjectivity" should be discussed and analyzed respectively.

### **2.1. The Compiling of the CL Course Book---the Medium of Subjectivity Needs to be Rebuilt**

It is inevitable for the inapplicability of the CL course books to bring about the decline of the quality of the CL undergraduate classroom teaching. Such decline of CL teaching quality is more striking for the elective courses offered to the non language major undergraduates. A considerable number of CL teachers in the Chinese universities prefer to totally rely on some classical course books compiled by eminent comparatists from home and abroad, and simply repeat what the books say to the students. Thus the teaching quality in such CL classes can be predictable. Some CL teachers, on the contrary, are fond of instilling their personal CL studies in their students in class. This sort of knowledge cramming will apparently weaken or even ruin the CL teaching quality as well. As a result, whether or not the compiling of CL course books can be effectively "localized" to meet the students' needs plays a decisive role in the ultimate quality of the in-class CL education.

In the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Chinese universities that have offered the CL course are expected to be clear about the necessity to adjust the teaching content. In some Chinese universities, the CL course books are either the Chinese translation of the classical western CL teaching materials or the authoritative course books compiled by the eminent Chinese comparatists. The theoretical framework of both of the two types of course books tends to follow the western academic paradigms. Even though CL teachers may be allowed to accept and reject some teaching content from these course books according to their own comprehension or judgment, there are actually

huge distinctions in the Chinese universities at different levels or in the different regions. Such distinctions indicate that it is unlikely for ideal undergraduate CL teaching quality to be produced in different universities if they are required to use the classical western CL teaching materials or the domestic authoritative course books. In a nutshell, the Chinese universities at all levels should be encouraged to develop and compile the school-based CL course books that may suit their own “learning conditions”.

Course books are the essential knowledge carrier of university teaching and education. The major readers of university course books are obviously the university students, especially the undergraduates. Thus course books, on the one hand, are expected to take the responsibility to disseminate knowledge, which is the universality of the course books. On the other hand, the individualized compiling of the course books has become the only route which must be passed because individuation of the course books can further optimize the teaching quality. As a result, on the basis of diffusing and explaining profound CL theories in simple language, the compilers of the popular CL course books should view the “local resources” and “local learning conditions” as the key compiling indexes and fully take them into account, making the effort to fulfill the unity of universality and individuality to a maximum extent.

It should be pointed out that there are noticeable distinctions between the compiling of course books and the writing of academic monographs. Academic monographs mainly deal with the cutting-edge achievements in scientific research of certain disciplines and are, in most cases, the fruit of painstaking labor of one or at most a couple of writers. Course books, on the contrary, tend to absorb and swallow all the dominant theories and necessary knowledge, no matter conventional or the latest, of certain disciplines for the readers. The readers of academic monographs are usually the professionals of certain fields, therefore great number of professional terms or jargons can be available in academic monographs. The readers of course books, however, are mainly the relevant students who are the professional or academic beginners. So the language in course books should be highly informative, easy to understand, and suitable to impart rudimentary knowledge. If students can not accept the linguistic features of a CL course book, their interest or passion to learn CL is highly likely to be weakened or even damaged.

The compiling of CL course books should, on the one hand, be based on the platform of connotative development and, on the other hand, aim to actually improve the quality of classroom education. To be more exact, the compiling is expected to connect the representative literary samples with the simple and informative language so as to arouse students’ interest toward CL learning in a real sense. As a teacher of English from Northwestern Polytechnical University (NWPU), a top comprehensive university situated in China’s northwest Shaanxi Province, the author has had the teaching experience of combining CL with the traditional college English teaching for the undergraduates from all the schools of NWPU for nearly three years. In addition to the teaching practice, the author is also attempting to compile a CL course book that focuses on the “learning conditions” of NWPU. In the process of the compiling, the author has read at least ten authoritative CL course books from home and abroad and eventually picked out *Comparative Literature in University*, compiled by Professor Wang Fuhe, also a distinguished Chinese comparatist, of Zhejiang University

of Technology as the reference sample. *Comparative Literature in University* takes the non-language major undergraduates in the comprehensive universities as the target readers. Compared with other course books, *Comparative Literature in University* adopts a type of distinctive language style that makes the book look like a learning partner that initiates relaxing conversations with the readers. This typical language style effectively lowers the difficulty of the theoretical description and accordingly greatly shortens the invisible distance between undergraduate readers and CL theories. Relevant survey data show that *Comparative Literature in University* has been ranked in the most popular undergraduate CL course books among the comprehensive Chinese universities shortly after its publication. The result of some scientific research reveals that the discussion-based or conversation-based language style adopted by some college course books is more likely to activate the readers' nerve for thinking. As a result, the teaching goals can be obtained and connotation of the class can be more substantial thanks to such course books. The course book that is being compiled by the author attempts to follow the conversation-based language style in *Comparative Literature in University*. Moreover, the author puts greater emphasis on the selection of suitable literary texts to support the relevant CL theories by taking the local "learning conditions" into consideration during the compiling. As far as the author is concerned, during the compiling of the CL course book, the compilers should raise the self-consciousness and select the supportive literary texts by fully exploring the "local resources". To be more specific, the local literary resources should be given the top priority. The text selection is expected to keep abreast of the times and follow no set style. The texts can be supplemented to the CL course books in the form of loose-leaf. This will enable the CL teachers to allocate the class hours and add or reduce the teaching content in a flexible manner. In different provinces or regions in China, there are typical literary resources full of the local features. In this respect, Shaanxi province where NWPU is located can be taken as a representative example. The author has once compared the extracts of *Bai Lu Yuan* or *White Deer Plain*, a novel of late Shaanxi writer Chen Zhongshi with *Cien años de soledad* or *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the magnum opus of Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, the recipient of the 1982 Nobel Prize for Literature, in terms of the writing style of magic realism; the author also compared the representative works between famous Shaanxi writer Jia Pingwa and William Faulkner, an American writer who won the 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature in terms of multi-dimensional narration. *White Deer Plain* has been widely regarded as the best novel in China since the 1980s and has been adapted into film and television's most popular serials. The novels of Jia Pingwa are even more influential and popular than those of Mo Yan, the first Nobel laureate from Chinese mainland, before 2012. An overall comparison of the extracts between Jia's *Qin Qiang* or *Shaanxi Opera* and William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* has once aroused heated discussion in the author's classes. According to the result of a self-designed questionnaire answered by the author's students of the previous two consecutive academic years, an average of around 80 per cent of these young learners approve of the author's class instruction based on the combination of college English and CL. This, to some extent, confirms that the localized CL classroom education and course book compiling based on "local resources" and "local learning conditions" are feasible and promising.

## 2.2. The Highlight of the Interdisciplinary Attribute---the Subjects of Subjectivity Need to be Redefined

Thanks to the Belt and Road Initiative that has been recognized worldwide, the interdisciplinary orientation among the Chinese universities is increasingly evident. In the light of the development trend of the global higher education system, the international community is in urgent need of the versatile talents cultivated within the interdisciplinary system in the universities. This situation indicates that the traditional simplified layout of disciplinary framework, structure of knowledge, and research perspective is obviously unlikely to satisfy the social and educational development needs of the times. The studies simply focusing on literature in a traditional sense are facing great challenges. Hyperliterary and interdisciplinary studies of literature have represented the general trend of development. In other words, interdisciplinary orientation will definitely play a decisive role in the undergraduate CL education and determine the development momentum of university CL teaching in the future.

Nonetheless, there have been constant arguments about how to put interdisciplinary CL education into practice. Quite a few Chinese comparatists hold that too many irrelevant disciplines have been incorporated into CL research in the name of interdisciplinary study and, as a result, the scope of CL research is excessively enlarged. Such random incorporation, to a large extent, obscures CL research boundaries and directly brings about greater challenges or even obstacles to establish the widely-accepted theories for interdisciplinary CL study. Literary study that should have played the key role in CL research is overshadowed by other disciplines. Although such arguments are particularly significant for the development of CL research, they are making the interdisciplinary CL education tougher to be operated in classroom. For the CL teachers, no matter whether they are the researchers of Chinese literature or western literature, the central position of literary study is firmly irreplaceable during the interdisciplinary CL study or education. Such a central position will ensure that the interdisciplinary CL education will stick to the literature-centered development.

For the students who have a great interest in CL, the non-literary disciplines may be either their majors in the university or the fields they like out of curiosity. Nevertheless, the primary reason why they choose to attend the CL classes lies in their keen desire to explore the world of literature in an educational sense. In the actual CL teaching practice, the author finds that the in-class CL education enjoys distinctive advantage in such top comprehensive universities as NWPU. Such an advantage is particularly reflected in the interdisciplinary study. The author's English classes are actually composed of the students from different schools or departments of NWPU. That is to say, the knowledge of various science and technology disciplines tends to be gathered in the author's English classes. In a class with the focus on the interdisciplinary CL study, the author designed a topic about the comparison between the Chinese and western science-fiction literature and took Chinese writer Liu Cixin's *The Wandering Earth* and British sci-fi legend Arthur Charles Clarke' *2001: A Space Odyssey* as the sample texts. During the class discussion, the author invited the students from the school of aeronautics and the school of astronautics to present the necessary introduction and interpretation of the relevant scientific knowledge in the two novels. The introduction and interpretation greatly facilitated the subsequent in-class instruction and discussion and enabled the class to achieve ideal

teaching results.

CL teachers and their undergraduate students have the same status in all the class activities. In the author's classes, in addition, the truth of the saying "Two heads are always better than one" can be clearly exhibited. This exhibition may reflect the equal status shared by teachers and students in a CL class and highlight their advantages respectively. Based on this, teachers may fully activate their subjective consciousness and develop the students' own disciplinary knowledge that can clarify the texts in class effectively. By doing this, teachers may enable the students to make sense of the true essence of the literary texts that contain the relevant information related to the students' own disciplines with the perspective of literature; students, similarly, may arouse their own subjective potential to understand the literary texts from their disciplinary perspective, thus gaining the distinctive comprehension toward the subtle literary components out of the texts.

### **3. Conclusion**

CL is a special discipline that is full of renewed vitality. At the turn of the century, Chinese comparatists have made internationally recognized contributions in terms of the CL theoretical construction. Such remarkable achievement, however, can not cover up the fact that the CL undergraduate education among the Chinese universities appears obviously deficient in comparison. Fortunately, President Xi's proposition of the Belt and Road Initiative attaches great importance to the dissemination of China's stories. To respond to this precious opportunity and make use of the Chinese higher education resources to cultivate the qualified storytellers has become a mainstream trend to motivate the construction of the humanities represented by CL to play the crucial role. To compare literature of different genres is not simply a matter of methodology. Literary comparison here can be viewed as a standpoint, an attitude, and even a spirit that are exactly the ultimate attraction of CL as a discipline.

For the researchers who are engaged in the CL studies, the teachers who are dedicated to CL education, and the students who are passionate about CL learning, all of them are expected to retrieve their globalized vision and make a careful review of themselves. On the basis of this, they are encouraged to obtain a complete recognition toward and fully develop the key attributes of CL education that feature a combination of "local resources" and "local learning conditions". They are, to be more exact, expected to compile and utilize the suitable CL course books, and activate their respective "subjectivity" by redefining their interdisciplinary roles during the in-class discussions of the interdisciplinary CL study. These teaching endeavors will, to a large extent, enhance the undergraduate CL teaching quality in the Chinese universities. The ultimate goal of CL studies is to improve the cultural and humanistic environment, and pave the way for ideal diffusion of the novel humanistic spirit and successful construction of multicultural society (Liu & Liu, 2001). In a nutshell, university CL education aims to cultivate the talents with a broad humanistic vision and a great humanistic mind. It is such talents that are more likely to be equipped with the potential and strength to serve as the excellent tellers of China's stories whose contribution will enable China's stories to be disseminated worldwide in a wonderful and impressive way.

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