

# *"Comparative Literature" is not a Simple Comparison of Literature*

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**Abstract:** Comparative literature is a literary study conducted from a comparative perspective of cross ethnic, cross linguistic, cross cultural, and cross disciplinary perspectives. The establishment of this discipline takes the comparative perspective of the subject as the noumenon of the study. However, when academic circles associate "comparison" with "literature", it is easily understood as the meaning of using comparative methods to conduct literary research. Therefore, there is a misunderstanding in defining comparative literature solely from the use of methods, as long as literary research using comparative methods is regarded as comparative literature. Because comparative literature does not mean making a simple comparison of literature, and not all comparative studies conducted using the method of comparison are comparative literature. "Comparative literature" has its own disciplinary characteristics, research fields, and basic characteristics.

## 1. Introduction

The term "comparative literature" was first mentioned in the French book "Comparative Literature Tutorial", but it does not provide a detailed introduction to relevant methods and theories. The famous French literary critic and historian who was popular in comparative literature was Villmann, who was honored as the "father of comparative literature" by later generations. The current popular forms of comparative literature research can be divided into two types: one is impact research, which focuses on literary phenomena that have practical connections and mutual influences between different countries and ethnic groups; the other is parallel research, which studies parallel literature that does not directly affect communication with each other. It is also known as the "American School" because it is strongly advocated by American scholars [1]. When conducting comparative literature research, people often interpret it simply as the comparison of literature, because comparison is a research method often used by people, so "comparative literature" can easily be summarized as using comparative methods to study literature. There are some misunderstandings about this concept, because comparative literature is not a simple and arbitrary comparison of literature. The related concept discrimination is shown in Figure 1.

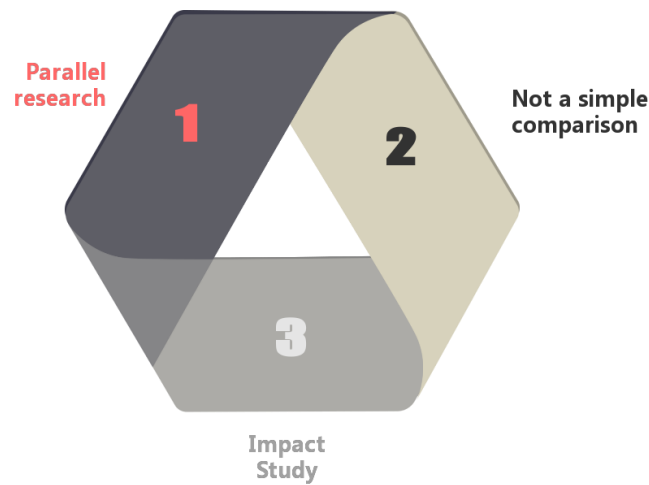


Figure 1: Forms of Comparative Literature

## 2. Definition and Domain

As early as the 1960s, Professor Ray Mark of Indiana University in the United States once defined comparative literature. In his view, comparative literature is a comparison between the literature of one country and that of another country or many countries, as well as a comparison between literature and other fields of human expression. By definition, comparative literature should include parallel research, while comparative literature should also include research on the relationship between literature and other disciplines, even other fields [2]. Therefore, comparative literature also includes "interdisciplinary" research, such as "synaesthesia" in physiology and psychology, which can be used to illustrate rhetorical devices in literary creation. This is a manifestation of interdisciplinary research in comparative literature, while literary comparison does not have this field, but is a purely methodological approach, rather than using a perspective perspective from the field [3].

From the definition, we can see that "comparison" in comparative literature is not limited to the meaning of general methodology, but is based on the concept of dual meanings: one is the comparison between domestic and foreign literature and the comparison between foreign literature, and the other is the comparison between literature and other fields. The former refers to comparative research across countries, while the latter refers to comparative research across disciplines. Ji Xianlin, a famous professor in China, also published an idea in the People's Daily in the 1980s: Comparative literature refers to comparing the literature of different countries, which can be said to be comparative literature in a narrow sense, while comparative literature in a broad sense refers to comparing literature with other disciplines, including the humanities, social sciences, and even natural sciences. The relevant definition analysis is shown in Figure 2.

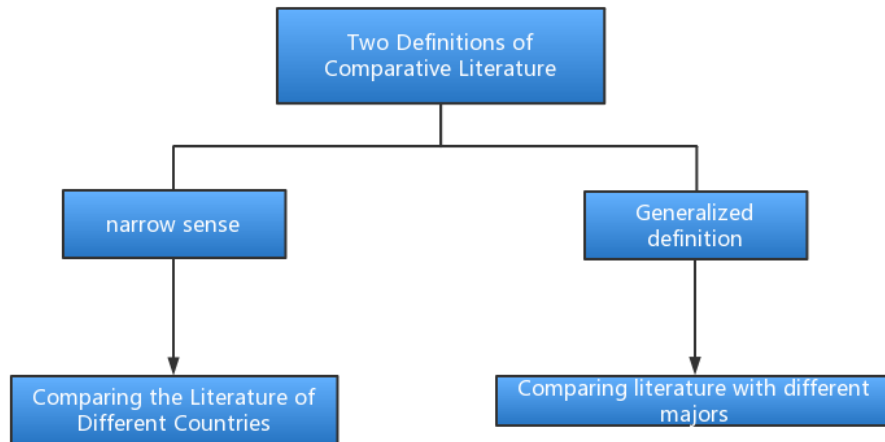


Figure 2: Definition of Comparative Literature

To sum up, "comparison" and research in comparative literature are premised, not arbitrary. It marks the crossing of disciplines and national boundaries, and only research with this premise can be called comparative literature. The meaning of "comparison" lies in crossing established boundaries. This is the essence of the discipline of "comparative literature", which means that it is a cross boundary literary study. "Simply comparing literature does not have this prerequisite limitation. Its research field is mainly in the field of literature, and it does not have the leapfrog nature of comparative literature.". For example, comparing the emotional similarities and differences between Li Bai's two poems can be said to be a literary comparison, but not a comparative literature [4]. Comparative literature and literary comparison intersect in the field of research, but they are not identical.

### 3. Discipline Characteristics and Research Methods

"Comparison" in comparative literature has specific and accurate theoretical content, and is not a simple concept mentioned in literary comparison. The purpose of comparative literature is to grasp some inherent connection in "bilateral" or "multilateral" literature, which is a relatively complex multidimensional perspective. To further understand the essence of the comparative object and even literature itself through comparison and perspective is a specific thinking consciousness, process, and research methodology. Comparative literature should have a "cross cultural thinking", so the study of literature in comparative literature is not a superficial comparison, but rather a transcendence of one kind of literature, or cross country, cross ethnic, cross language, and cross cultural academic research. Its value and academic nature have shown a deeper connotation [5]. In summary, comparative literature has its own academic and disciplinary characteristics. Therefore, some people call "comparative literature" the closest marginal discipline to international humanities and social science research, because it can quickly receive and perceive the latest information from various aspects, and explore the forefront of international academic research [6]. The characteristics of "comparative literature" are shown in Figure 3.

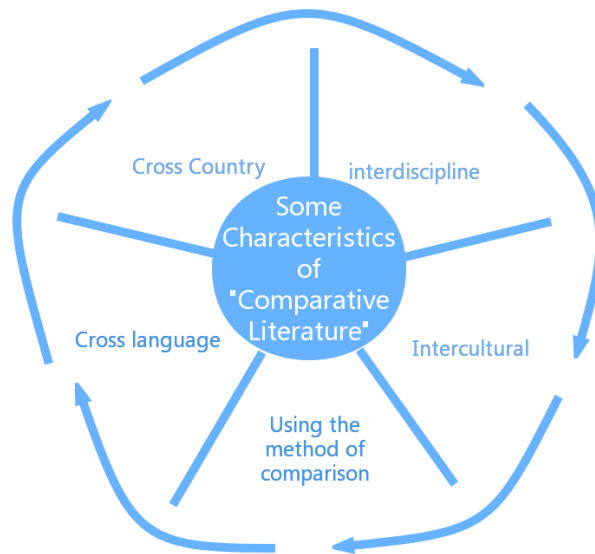


Figure 3: Characteristics of "Comparative Literature"

Comparative literature is a discipline established on the basis of "harmony but difference". It is committed to achieving the goal of new humanism of mutual interpretation, verification, and benefit through the practice of equal dialogue in world literature. However, simple comparison in literature does not have this requirement. Comparative literature continuously develops its own literary concepts through the comparison of multiple literary contents, while literary comparison is simply a comparison of two literary contents, and related research is more based on text analysis. Therefore, comparative literature is a concept of the category of words, while literary comparison is mostly a way of appreciating words [7]. The two concepts overlap in meaning, but they are actually two different concepts. "Comparison" in comparative literature has two meanings, one is across boundaries, and the other is across disciplines. Only academic research that meets the characteristics of comparative disciplines can be considered comparative literature. This method of comparison is only a commonly used method for identifying advantages and disadvantages, authenticity, and grasping the essence of things, and is not only applied to literature. Therefore, comparative literature cannot be simply summarized as a comparison of literature [8].

#### 4. An Analysis of "Comparability"

Comparative scholar Galileo once said, "Comparative literature is not equal to literary comparison." Mr. Qian Zhongshu's explanation for it is: "We must distinguish comparative literature as a humanities discipline from purely speculative and rambling comparisons. Due to the lack of a clear concept of comparative literature, some people draw some seemingly similar Chinese and foreign literary works to compare, without theoretical explanation or in-depth conclusions. For comparison purposes, such literary comparisons are meaningless." [9]The requirements for "comparability" in simple comparison of literature are different from those in comparative literature. Comparative literature selects objects with comparability for research, but the requirements for object selection in simple comparison of literature are much broader. More specifically, scholars' simple emotional analysis of two love poems in ancient poetry is a study using comparative methods. However, comparative literature first needs to determine whether the objects of comparison are comparable, and it requires a more macroscopic perspective to examine different literature before proceeding with the next step [10]. Refer to Figure 4 for relevant meanings.

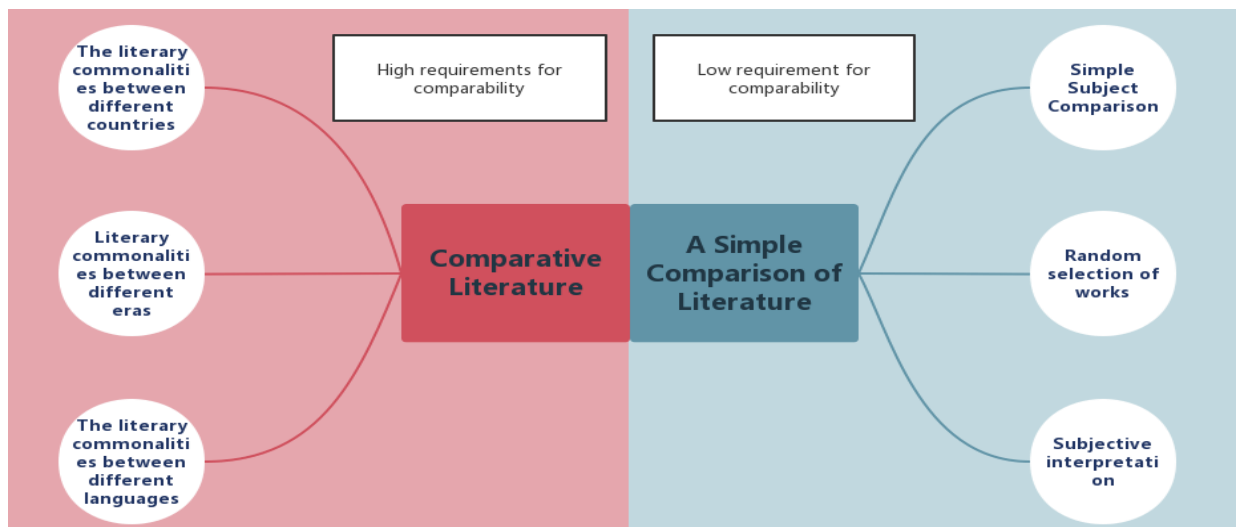


Figure 4: Conceptual distinction between the two and their characteristics

The origin of comparative literature needs to start with the development of literature. On the one hand, literary exchanges have led to a certain relationship of mutual influence and promotion in the literature of various ethnic groups; On the one hand, there is a certain relationship between literature and other disciplines and ideologies; In addition, national literature that has no apparent factual connection may also be influenced by various factors, resulting in the commonality of human literature in various aspects. Comparative literature regards these leapfrog literary phenomena as research materials, explores the essential literary connections among them, and believes that literary relationships are comparable. Superficial similarity does not mean comparability in literary comparison, while things that are far from being comparable on the surface are in essence comparable, which is not equivalent to the "comparability" required by literary comparison.[11] Comparative literature originates from the need for communication and understanding between people, taking comparative poetics in "comparative literature" as an example. Comparative poetics is a young and vibrant discipline, originating from Wang Guowei in the late Qing Dynasty, which gained preliminary development in the 1930s and was revived in the 1980s [12]. At the turn of the century, due to its diverse academic horizons and multi-level cultural connotations, a large number of scholars at home and abroad are attracting them to work hard on this land and have achieved fruitful results. Especially since the 1980s, various methods and viewpoints of aesthetic research have been widely applied to the study of comparative poetics, which not only enriches the research methods of comparative poetics, but also is closer to the "human nature" of poetics.

The American school that first proposed "aesthetic contemplation" and introduced aesthetic research into comparative literature emerged in the 1950s. It is of pioneering significance to study comparative literature from an aesthetic perspective. It broke away from the old model of the French School, which used textual research as the main means and focused on the specific historical facts of the interaction between international literature as the object, and redefined comparative literature as literary research that transcended linguistic boundaries. This is a significant transformation from impact research to parallel research and even interdisciplinary research. The inevitability of the development of comparative literature to comparative poetics inherently [13] determines that aesthetic research methods must also be flexibly applied to the field of comparative poetics research. "Aesthetic contemplation" has generated new significance and ideas in the new era and new field [14]. Therefore, in the study of comparative poetics, the "aesthetic contemplation" manifests a two-dimensional structure: taking the diverse world culture as the background, conducting comparative studies of Chinese and Western poetics on the level of poetic art, seeking

common literary laws, and striving to build a literary theory system with Chinese characteristics; Taking the diverse world culture as the background, comparative research on human survival issues is conducted at a deep level, so that the value of culture can be solidified and sublimated in the state of human survival. Poetics also takes the true face of "human learning", which is shown in Figure 5. This shows the requirement for comparability in "comparative literature".

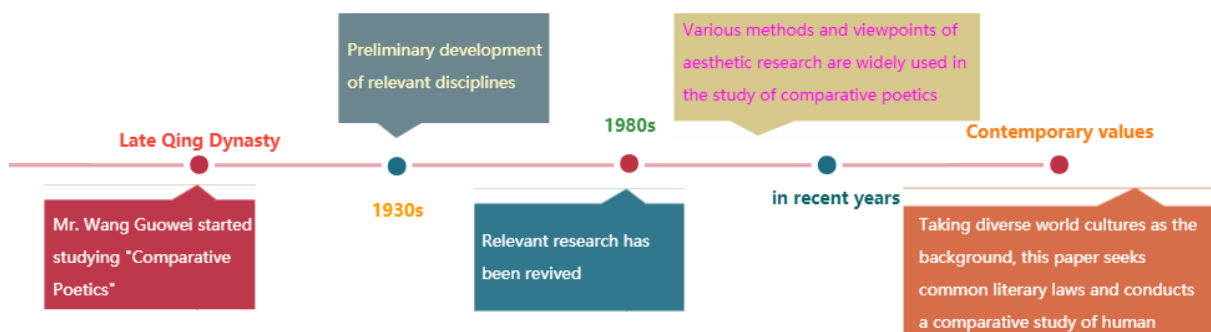


Figure 5: The Development Process of Comparative Poetics

The scholar Le Daiyun believes that if two cultures enter the same "cultural field" under certain conditions, new connections arise due to differences from the original. This relationship is sometimes obvious, and sometimes hidden. The subject of "comparative literature" studies the mutual understanding, understanding, and appreciation of literature between different cultures, while taking different literature as an example to seek the same or different responses to certain common issues, To achieve further consensus, absorb each other's strengths, complement each other's weaknesses, and interpret in both directions. The object of literary comparison is more simple, more arbitrary and subjective, and requires less comparability [15].

## 5. Conclusions

To sum up, comparative literature is essentially a special humanities discipline, while literary comparison is only a method of appreciation, which is more simple and casual. Literary comparison emphasizes the "comparability" of things, has its own specific disciplinary theories, characteristics, and requirements for research fields. It intersects with literary comparison, but the two concepts are different, so "comparative literature" is not a simple comparison of literature.

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