

The Transformation of Comparability in Comparative Literature: *The Story of Wei Sheng & Hero and Leander as an Example*

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Abstract:

Comparability is always a key question to ask before we embark on any comparative research. However, while arguing about the various norms and principles of comparability in Comparative Literature, very little attention is paid to the transformation of it under one certain definition. Based on the norm of “similarity” for instance, two literary texts that were comparable might become incomparable, and vice versa. This paper is trying to illustrate this idea by analyzing the narratives of two ancient love stories from China and Europe: The Story of Wei Sheng and Hero and Leander. By examining the changing process between being comparable and incomparable of these two stories under the rule of “similarity”, we can see that the norms of “homology” and “difference” are also involved. Therefore, this paper aims to argue for the flexibility and comprehensiveness of comparability in comparative literature.

Keywords: Comparative Literature, Comparability, Transformation, The Story of Wei Sheng, Hero and Leander

Comparability is always a key issue in the study of comparative literature. The arguments on comparability go on for centuries with the changing definitions of comparative literature, such as trans-culture “homology” represented by early French school, trans-discipline “similarity” proposed by American School and later on “variation” and “difference” developed by Chinese literature comparatists. “Without the consciousness of comparability, it is difficult to form the methodology of comparative literature” (Li, 2021). However, while arguing about the different definitions for comparability, there are few studies concerned with its transformation under one certain definition. As Jonathan Culler (1995) suggests, the assessment of comparability may risk itself generating a certain exclusive principle and falling into the imposition of a particular norm that is more bureaucratic than academic. According to Culler (1995), the academic “virtue of a comparability based on specific intellectual norms or models – generic, thematic, historical –

– is that they are subject to investigation and argument in ways that the vacuous bureaucratic norms are not” (270). Since the norms the comparability based on are open to investigation and argument, so should the transformation of comparability. This paper will take “similarity” as a point of departure to argue that A and B that were comparable might become incomparable, or vice versa. By studying this transformation, it aims to suggest a more comprehensive definition of comparability.

This paper is trying to illustrate this idea by comparing two ancient “love” stories from China and Europe, The Story of Wei Sheng (later shortened to four-character phrase: “尾生抱柱”) in Chinese literature and the story of Hero and Leander in its western counterpart. The earliest version of these two stories shared much in common while after being written and rewritten through a long history in both cultures, they become almost incomparable. However, later on these two stories surprisingly met in Japan and became comparable again. This changing process between being comparable and incomparable could be seen more clearly via the following narrative analysis.

Two lines of Li Bai (李白)’s poem Changganxing (长干行) “if you have the faith of Wei-sheng, why do I have to climb up the waiting tower” (“常存抱柱信, 岂上望夫台” translated by Yip) allow us to hear one of the most typical voices of Chinese love. This is a dramatic monologue poem that shows a teenage wife waiting for her newlywed husband who is sailing

away for business. The young woman's waiting bitterness is confounded by referring to two other love allegories: The Story of Wei Sheng and the story of "waiting tower". The Story of Wei Sheng originated from "Dao Zhi" in Zhuangzi (《庄子·盗跖篇》). In the original text, "Wei Sheng had a date with a girl under a bridge and he was waiting for her there, the girl didn't come but the water did. He kept clinging to the pillar of the bridge until he was drowned" ("尾生与女子期于梁下，女子不来，水至不去，抱梁柱而死") (Zhuangzi, 2007). It is noteworthy that in the original text, this story actually serves as an allegory for Dao Zhi to argue against Confucius's preaching of rightful faith and credibility. Dao Zhi despised the young man's foolishness and false loyalty. However, this anecdote has been developed into a variety of reverse versions that either praise the credibility of a righteous man or give tribute to the unreserved devotion to love.

The bitterness of endless waiting and death are certainly two of the major themes in love

tragedies all over the world. Looking into western literary history, Hero and Leander is one of the earliest love tragedies which also tells the desperate waiting and death. Hero and Leander, one being a priestess of goddess dwelt in a tower on one side of Hellespont, and the other was a mortal young man living on the opposite side of the strait. Somehow, they fall in love with each other, driven by passion and daring, Leander would swim every night across the strait to meet Hero who would guide him through the dark water by lighting a lamp at the top of her tower. One stormy winter night, while Leander is swimming across Hellespont, an unusually strong winter wind extinguished Hero's light, so Leander lost his way and drowned. After a long night of waiting, Hero finally saw his dead body at dawn, being overcome by extreme grief, she threw herself out into the sea to join him in death (W. Hansen, Ed. & Trans, 2017).

In both stories, the waiting lovers ended up dying in the water. In the original versions, they are both so short that many details are left out, which provides possibilities and necessities for further narrations. Both stories have become allegories of love and virtue, and the names become the symbols of persistent love. However, even if the theme and moral implications they share are much of a cliché nowadays, we could still refresh our understanding of both stories by comparing their narratives. Themes are limited and

relatively static, while just like what Roland Barthes (1975) suggested, the variety of narratives is infinite, and it is changing and varying more apparently with time and culture.

For example, by comparing Hero and Leander to The Story of Wei Sheng, we may scrutinize all the units from both sides so as to see what is included in and excluded from each of them, which may serve as an entry point for a broader discussion of their further variations in narratives.

Names	Hero and Leander	Wei Sheng and the Unnamed female character
Locations	The Hellespont, the tower	water, bridge, pillar
Male Action	Swimming at night	clinging to the pillar when the water goes
		up
Female Action	Jumping into the sea dawn	didn't come
Ending	Both Died	The male died

First about names, by comparison, the heroine's name is missing from the Chinese story and she stayed unnamed until the last century when the story was adapted into a new play 《Meeting on Blue Bridge》 (蓝桥会). (The name Wei Sheng has been changed into Wei Langbao, and the heroine has two names in the play, first Jia Yuzhen and later became Lan Yulian after being sold to another family.) Although in the western counterpart, sometimes only Leander's name is kept, for example John Keats's "A Picture on Leander", in most cases, Hero and Leander are presented equally. The absence of the female name suggests that the love is not mutual, in fact, it could hardly be regarded as a love story in Zhuangzi's version, since it only serves as an ironical allegory for Confucius's "false faith". For Zhuangzi, the faith Wei Sheng clung to is nothing but a kind of self-indulgence. However, for Confucian, faith is one of the major virtues for people, especially for educated men. This is the reason why the story was continuously allegorized and the name Wei Sheng or the action of clinging to the pillar (抱柱)

has been symbolized as a virtue of faith in later adaptations throughout the millennium. In Ji Kang's Qinfu, the faith of Wei Sheng is even paralleled with the loyalty of Bigan whose heart was cut out from his body by the tyrant for the righteous remonstrance. (比干以之忠，尾生以之信) Whether in love or in court, death is never an ugly deed, instead, it is usually a symbol of the highest virtue.¹

However, the image of the bridge continues to echo down the centuries as a sentimental expression, and became an inseparable part of many love poems, with various names such as “The Blue Bridge”, “Bridge on Milk Way”(鹊桥), and “Broken Bridge”. Besides, the bridge usually comes together with the river, the flowing river has been carrying Chinese people's dream of romance since the era of Shi Jing (Book of Songs) and Chu Ci (The Songs of Chu).

He whom I love, 所谓伊人,
Must be somewhere along this stream. 在水一方
I went up the river to look for him. 溯洄从之,
But the way was difficult and long. 道阻且长。
I went down the stream to look for him. 溯游从之,
And there in mid-water. 宛在水中央
Sure enough, it's he!
 (“Rush Leaves” from Book of Songs)²

Fragrant roots grow by the River Yuan, thoroughworts by the Li.
沅有芷兮澧有兰,
I long for the prince but dare not speak. 思公子兮未敢言
I scan the distance. There he is, or is he? 荒忽兮远望,
I watch the water flow endless and slow.” 观流水兮潺湲
 (“The Lady of the Xiang River” from The Songs of Chu)

¹ The followings are selected examples from Han to Song and Qing Dynasty.

“安得抱柱信，皎日以为期。”（两汉·佚名《穆穆清风至》）；“尾生信女子，抱柱死不疑。吾与丞相约，安得不顾期。”（宋·梅尧臣《泊姑熟江口邀刁景纯相见》）；“抱柱不是愚，汨罗无知音。尾生还抱柱，终以信为依。”（清·弘历《和李峤杂咏诗百二十首韵·其二十八·桥》）

² There are many other examples of water and love in the Book of Songs: “所谓伊人，在水一方。江有汜，之子归。”---《召南江有汜》“瞻彼淇奥，绿竹猗猗。”---《卫风淇奥》

“恣彼泉水，亦流于淇。□宿于沛，饮饯于祢。”---《邶风泉水》

However, after Wei Sheng and Qu Yuan's suicide, drowning became one of the major themes of tragedies. The famous Yuefu poem Konghou Yin (《箜篌引》) for instance originated from a story of drowning, the early lyric says "Don't cross the river, my lord, how dared you cross the river! You died, what can I do with you." This is the song sung by the desperate wife who heard the drowning of her husband, and she drowned herself too after finishing the song. In the story of Wangfutai (《望夫台》) which is mentioned above in Li Bai's Changganxing, the wife also drowns herself after hearing about the death of her husband. In Li Bai's another poem Don't Cross the River (《公无渡河》), the river is more fatal than the tiger because the tiger is conquerable but the river is not. ("虎可搏, 河难凭, 公果溺死流海湄"). Hence, in Chinese love tragedy narratives, the images of bridge and river actually have not just rich symbolic implications, but also structural importance. Three out of four most well-known love tragedies in China are built upon the water (either in the form of a bridge or river): "The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl" ("牛郎织女" they can meet only once a year on the bridge of Milky way), "Lady Meng Jiang" ("孟姜女哭长城", the wife drowned herself in the end), and "Legend of the White Snake" ("白蛇传" Flood over Golden Mountain) .

Likewise, the infamous image of water is rendered right in the opening line of Marlow's *Hero and Leander* (1821), "Hellespont, guilty of true love's blood...". Back in Ovid's version (2004), there is even another tragedy behind the name "Hellespont".

Poor me: this beach is beaten by a great surf and blackest
clouds wrap up the
day in hiding. Perhaps
Helle's devoted mother came to the sea
and grieves now with rushing tears the death by
drowning of her child or maybe
the stepmother, become a goddess,
tears at the sea that has been given the name
of the stepchild she hated so much (pp. 273-274).

Therefore, the water has been cursed with an evil name since very long ago. This is not a rare case in western literature, Ophelia in the Hamlet for instance is another “drowned virgin”. However, the major difference between The Story of Wei Sheng and Hero/Leander lies in their choices of action. Wei Sheng stayed clinging to the pillar while Leander swam across the water every night. Of course, the situations they are in are not the same, Wei Sheng is the one waiting but Leander is not, but Wei Sheng could have made a move, waiting somewhere nearby, but he didn’t, he chose to cling to the pillar until drowned. Clinging to the pillar certainly is an extravagant expression of his determined will and faith, and it is inherited by the later love narratives for the sake of it.

By contrast, Leander’s swimming signifies the strong initiative for action which is driven by his irresistible passion and desire. Although in this story, the female character Hero is the waiting one, like Wei Sheng she drowned herself, by the act of “throwing herself out into the sea”, her way of death is more active than Wei Sheng who stayed waiting and died passively. In fact, his death could hardly be seen as a death for love, rather he died for his “impeccable virtue”. This may be the reason why in later versions, it is mostly symbolized as a virtue for faith while Hero and Leander has been allegorized and told in a more dynamic way, full of narratives in passion, desire, faith, and doubt, all the subtleties that we could think of about love, especially in Ovid’s letters and Marlow/Chapman’s version. The first-person narrative in the Ovid’s letters for instance, allows us to enter the inner world of two lovers, the subtle changes of their psychological states, especially Hero’s struggling during the long waiting. And Marlow’s version (1821) is full of the narratives in sexual desire, for example, the detailed descriptions of bodies (“naked neck”, “white hands”, “smooth breast”, and “white belly” etc.) at the opening part already make a strong implication for their further sexual encounter. All of these can hardly be found in The Story of Wei Sheng. In short, there is a strong tension between virtue and desire which is lost in its Chinese counterpart.

The Story of Wei Sheng did not see any developments until Yuan Dynasty (13th-14th Century) when the famous playwright Li Zhifu wrote the play Wei Sheng’s Waiting and Drowning on Blue Bridge (《尾生期女淹蓝桥》). Although the original text has been lost, according to the title, it is identified as a merging version of the story Wei Sheng with

another love story Blue Bridge. In the story Meeting on Blue Bridge (《蓝桥会》), the male character Pei Hang met Yun Ying during his journey and fell in love with her, but his proposal was rejected by the young lady's mother who demanded the young man not to come back unless he obtained two jade tools for pounding the holy elixir left by some immortal. Surprisingly, the young man kept his promise and went back to the lady with the objects requested. Therefore, unlike The Story of Wei Sheng, this story sees a happy ending. While in later versions (including adapted operas and plays from Qing Dynasty to the late century), no matter with a happy ending or an unhappy one, the obstacles to love from family or other authority remained. In general, the story did not see much development, it either gives praise to the virtue of the male character or pities for the suffering of unfree females.¹ In these cases, we can hardly find any similarities shared by The Story of Wei Sheng and Hero/Leander, which makes the comparison of these two stories become relatively groundless.

Interestingly, although the story has remained relatively static through two millenniums in China, it is modernized under the pen of a Japanese author Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (川龍之介 1892-1927), the father of the Japanese short story. In his short story The Faith of Wei Sheng (1919/1972) we can no longer see any plots of obstructed love or marriage, nor the traditional praising for moral virtue. Instead, it depicts an image of a lonely man who has been occupied with meaningless work since he was born, waiting for something that would never come.

“I spend my life in desultory dreaming, day and night, waiting for an indescribable something that is bound to come. Just as Wei Sheng stood under the bridge at the end of the day, waiting forever for a lover who would never come” (p. 199).

To this extent, it is almost a Far East version of Waiting for Godot. The reoccurring lines of “but the woman still didn't come” feature a repetitive narrative that prevailed among western modernist writings, such as those by James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Earnest Hemingway. Although according

¹ As Chinese scholar Gu Jiegang concludes: “there should be countless women's blood and tears in it, because they wanted to break through the snare of unfree marriages but failed, thus had to fulfilled their wish through the reverie of Blue Bridge” (Gu, 1998).

to David Lodge, repetition “functions as a variation on the micro-level (of the text)”, as a typical strategy in the modern narrative, it also represents the lifeless muttering of the modern world, especially in the case of Wei Sheng, lifeless muttering gradually ends in hopeless death. However, the “slight breeze”, the “lonely rustle of reeds”, the river rising with “brutal tide”, the “blue evening sky” and the misty moonlight, all these images of nature in Ryūnosuke’s writing deliver an immortal spirit of beauty that serve as a salvation for the wasted modern soul. Although without developments in plots, the ancient tragedy is rendered with more subtle feelings and dynamic motions of human thoughts. The moral implications of “faith” have also changed from an external judgment for loyalty or credibility to internal self-questioning for the meaning of life.

More surprisingly, only two decades earlier than the Japanese Story of Wei Sheng, Hero and Leander also found its shadow in Japan. An Irish-Greek-Japanese writer Lafcadio Hearn (小泉八雲 1850-1904), in his book *In Ghostly Japan* (1899) told a famous Japanese story in which a fisherman’s daughter had a lover in Ajiro, and she used to swim to him at night and swim back in the morning. He kept a light burning to guide her. But one dark night the light was neglected— or blown out; and she lost her way, and was drowned. The story is highly consistent with Hero and Leander except for the switching roles between the male and the female, that is why after hearing this, the narrator said to himself “in the Far East, it is poor Hero that does the swimming. And what, under such circumstances, would have been the Western estimate of Leander?” (p. 117) However, this is definitely more than a matter of gender difference between cultures, what deserves more of our attention here is the trans-culture experience of the narrator (also the author) because this is certainly one of the typical features of early modernity and diaspora. The modern spirit is also marked with frequent self-questioning, for example, as the narrator swimming out to reach the drifting lantern in the dark sea, he questioned: “Are not we ourselves as lanterns launched upon a deeper and a dimmer sea, and ever separating further and further one from another as we drift to the inevitable dissolution?” (pp. 115-116) The extreme loneliness and the fear of melting into the “colorless Void” keep shadowing the “free” and “fresh” souls of the modern diaspora. Here, the stories themselves might only be the ingredients of the whole narrative, but the meeting of them is definitely related to the core of the modern world.

In these cases, though contributing to the different aspects of early modernity, *The Story of Wei Sheng* and *Hero and Leander* met surprisingly in Japan and become comparable again.

Conclusion:

In general, these two stories, in spite of their resemblance in origin, were hardly comparable in some of the later cases, and later became comparable again when met surprisingly in modern Japan. The patterns of their variations are also different, the Chinese one is more static while its western counterpart is more dynamic. Traditional Chinese love stories stay consistent with fragmented images such as bridge and river with the core of virtue in it, while in western romantic tragedies, the complexity of the human heart and desire could never see an end. Although the comparison of these two stories is based on the rule of “similarity”, but in the actual process, we can see that the rules of “difference” and “homology” are also involved. Therefore, the concern of comparability in Comparative Literature is not about any fixed principles, instead, it should be treated more flexibly and comprehensively. Comparing a long epic poem with a four-character idiom surely is impossible and illegitimate, however, the four-character idiom may be developed and so is the long epic.

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