

## CHAPTER 13



# When Do Different Literatures Become Comparable?

## The Vague Borders of Comparability and Incomparability

*Xiaofan Amy Li*

Although the mushrooming of studies in comparative and world literature in recent years gives the impression that comparison has become an accepted approach, and the claim that cultural differences invalidate comparison has lost much of its purchase, methodological concerns still remain at the centre of comparative literature and greatly influence how the discipline is developing. This is reflected by the constant questioning of comparative literature's status as a discipline. Not surprisingly, attempts to define the aims, methods, and boundaries of comparative literature in the past few decades have revolved around the notion and uses of comparison. Since the 1960s, as Spivak remarks, the term 'comparative' in 'comparative literature' has often been pointed out as a misnomer, for what is at stake in the discipline is not really comparison.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, comparative literature does much more than compare, and heavily involves cultural evaluation (R. Radhakrishnan), 'constant interaction' (Damrosch), or 'dis-parative' encounters that discover radical differences and shift the Eurocentric power balance towards the marginalized postcolonial side (Thomas Claviez).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as Robert Young argues, comparative literature is still haunted by the painful question 'What does the comparative do?', resulting in its 'recurring state of crisis'.<sup>3</sup> David Ferris's observation that comparative literature is an 'indiscipline' that 'eschews definition of itself'<sup>4</sup> further highlights the problematics of comparison, showing that it remains a crucial question. It is the aim of this essay, therefore, to clarify the concept of comparison and argue that it is still a fundamental operating logic in comparative literature, although it stays open to re-definitions and new uses. To do this, I will focus on the notions of comparability and incomparability because, although comparison is not singular and has different modes and purposes, in any comparative study there is always some notion of what is comparable or not. Nevertheless, the question of when texts become comparable to each other and when they are not is a controversial topic that needs further scrutiny. Here I will have recourse to recent philosophical studies on comparability, demonstrating

that they can shed light on how we make comparisons in comparative literature, especially in regard to the problem of evaluation, or the imposition of biased comparative frameworks on different literatures and cultures.

### Comparability and the Problem of Incomparables

Much of the discussion about comparability has in fact been advanced by debates about incomparability. Since the 1970s, critics in comparative literature have emphasized incomparability by anchoring their arguments in the poststructuralist view that there exist incommensurable differences between languages and cultures that would make the conceptual framework of any comparison an imposition of the logic of the more powerful on the less powerful. Thus comparison inevitably causes linguistic and interpretative violence. As Andrei Terian proposes, the incomparable was understood as three irreducibles: ‘cultural alterity’, ‘linguistic alterity’ (or untranslatability), and ‘historical alterity’.<sup>5</sup> Although the notion of absolute difference and the view that it entails mutual unintelligibility between cultures — characteristic of earlier debates during the 1970s–80s — have been convincingly criticized by scholars such as Zhang Longxi and Geoffrey E. R. Lloyd,<sup>6</sup> the concern about doing violence to cultural difference remains urgent in discussions about comparison. These three irreducible alterities, therefore, still have strong advocates who, instead of denying the possibility of any comparison, focus on the ethical and political problems that these alterities pose when they enter into comparison.

To start with, nowhere is cultural alterity more thorny an issue than in comparative studies that involve postcolonial literature. As Spivak observes, postcolonial literature always already engages with the spectre of the colonial master, so that from the very beginning comparison already places the non-Occidental Other in an unequal system of literary exchange and appropriation.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, the comparison is between two incomparable *comparanda* — incomparable because the Other’s alterity, if we agree with Levinas (as Claviez argues we should), is not based on ‘any quality that distinguish[es] him from me, for a distinction of this nature would precisely imply between us that community of genus which already nullifies alterity’.<sup>8</sup> Thus comparison is already an evaluation that re-affirms existing power hierarchies.

Secondly, linguistic alterity, which has been recently expounded forcefully by Emily Apter’s *Against World Literature* (2013) and Barbara Cassin’s *Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (2004), posits the untranslatability of culturally specific expressions and concepts, and in extension, the incommensurability of different languages and literatures. For instance, in Apter’s view, different narrative forms such as *midrash* in Hebrew, *monogatari* in Japanese, or *xiaoshuo* in Chinese are ‘continually re-translated and mistranslated’ when rendered into English terminology that denotes genres such as ‘fiction’ and ‘novel’.<sup>9</sup> Such untranslatables are therefore ‘proof of the manner in which some concepts or structures mean, in comparative literature, a limit of “commensurability”’.<sup>10</sup> Apter thus connects incomparability to untranslatability, proposing that just as we should allow untranslatable terms such as *xiaoshuo* ‘to

stand in their original languages',<sup>11</sup> we should appreciate different literatures in their original languages and forms instead of rendering them into a reader-friendly (i.e. customer-friendly) English that reinforces the commercialization of the global literary market. Apter's notions of the untranslatable and incomparable should, however, be understood as '*infelicitous* to translate/compare' rather than '*unfeasible* to translate/compare'. Her point is not that it is impossible to gain adequate understanding of a term or concept by discussing it in a foreign language (the fact that Apter explains the nuances and problematics of such terms already defeats such a claim), but that untranslatability and incomparability should be invested with the political significance of resisting the global capitalism that reduces different literatures and cultures to an easily digestible uniform idiom.<sup>12</sup> In the case of incomparable linguistic alterity, therefore, the crucial problem is again that of a linguistic power hierarchy that evaluates foreign languages and literatures through the currency of English — the *lingua franca* that allows non-Anglophone literatures into global circulation.

Finally, with regard to incomparability as irreducible historical alterity, Damrosch has maintained that this alterity exists notably in the radical remoteness of pre-modern literatures to contemporary critics and writers. 'The truly foreign literatures are not so much the works of [writers today] elsewhere, but rather the classical works of their own tradition'.<sup>13</sup> According to this view, in our globalized and well-connected world, different literatures and cultures interact much more with each other than with literatures of the past. The impossibility of accessing 'live' historical context leads to a temporal incommensurability which will always pose serious challenges when one compares dyssynchronous literatures, for as comparatists now we cannot but see history through our contemporary eyes, and discuss ancient texts by means of modern languages.

The above versions of irreducibility reflect a concern for the ethics of comparison. The question of comparability between different literatures, instead of denying the feasibility of relating literatures via comparison, is rather about how literatures and cultures can compare in ways that would not perpetuate various power structures, be it Eurocentrism, **Anglocentrism**, global capitalism or our bias towards modernity. Comparability and incomparability are no longer mutually exclusive diametrical opposites, but an oscillating relation that constantly re-negotiates between the inequalities of the *comparanda*. This is evidenced by recent scholarship that explores how incomparables can also be compared. Detienne's *Comparer l'incomparable* (2000) certainly pioneered this approach; more of late, in *Les Nouvelles Voies de comparatisme* (Academia Press, 2010), comparatists repositioned comparability in a scheme of more of less comparable, without an absolutely justified comparability, nor a complete incomparability;<sup>14</sup> in 2013, *PMLA* devoted an issue to comparative theory (vol. 128, no. 3) that probed how comparison could serve as a dynamic, non-superlative dialogue between literatures, and how there could be a 'comparativity' that reveals both the comparable and incomparable.<sup>15</sup>

In sum, contemporary discussions about comparability and incomparability have increasingly indicated that comparison is embedded in a politics of cultural

perception and evaluation, and is a dynamic practice that can be shaped in different ways instead of an abstract structure that promises neutrality. Comparability is no longer about surpassing differences (because differences should not be smoothed out), but about exploring differences and how they can be compared in more ethical ways that challenge cultural hegemonies. This reflects a fundamental conflict in comparative criticism: the evaluative and imposing comparison that is pre-disposed to favour one **comparandum** over the other, versus the dialogical comparison that seeks to be non-imposing and treat each **comparandum** on its own terms while our understanding of the **comparanda** can be deepened by their comparison. There is therefore an infelicitous evaluative comparability, and an apposite dialogical comparability. To examine their dynamics and explore how literatures can compare in more felicitous ways, I now turn to some relevant discussions in the philosophy of comparison.

In parallel to discussions in literary criticism, the concept of comparability has also received more philosophical interest recently, in both analytic philosophy and the rising field of comparative philosophy that attests to new interest in expanding the scope of philosophical investigation by bringing in non-Occidental thought traditions for comparative study. But comparative philosophy also has another meaning and use, as Ralph Weber has pointed out: namely, the philosophy of comparison, because the concepts of comparison and comparability still lack extensive philosophical analysis.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, a new strand of philosophy has formed around discussions of comparability, value theory, and cross-cultural comparison of thought systems. Here, Ruth Chang's pioneering edited volume *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason* (Harvard University Press, 1997) is particularly worth mentioning. In this book, philosophers probed questions such as the uncertainty of rational choice when confronted with qualitatively different items (sometimes seen as incommensurable), definitions of comparability and incomparability and the borders that separate them, and the structural characteristics of comparison. These important issues were followed up in 2002 in Chang's monograph *Making Comparisons Count* (Routledge). The philosophical concern with comparison has continued since these major publications and more recently various scholars from comparative philosophy like Weber and Brook Ziporyn have produced further discussions on the topic.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, these philosophical studies have revealed a tension between different modes of comparison similar to the above-mentioned conflict between evaluative and dialogical comparisons in comparative literature. This stems from the problematic relation between what Chang and Weber have recently called 'ranking comparability' and 'contrastive comparability'. In Chang's words, 'ranking comparability' is 'the comparability of items, perhaps reasons or alternatives for choice, with respect to some value or normative criteria that yields a ranking of those items' (e.g. comparing a candle-lit room and the same room with dim electric lighting in regard to brightness); whereas 'contrastive comparability' denotes 'the comparability of items where the point of the comparison is not to determine which item is better in a ranking sense but to draw out similarities or differences between

items in various respects that help illuminate each or something else to which each or both are related.<sup>18</sup> Thus, they are two different kinds of comparabilities that enable different comparisons and have their own distinct purposes. The problem is, however, as Weber points out, the distinction between ranking comparison and contrastive comparison is often furtively blurred. ‘Ranking comparison, it might then be said, presupposes contrastive comparison, and perhaps the inverse is also true. The first I take for granted (could you rank something without having compared it for its differences?).<sup>19</sup> Vice versa, in a contrastive comparison, ‘the result of a comparison is a relation between the *comparata* on the basis of the chosen respect [i.e. *tertium comparationis*].<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the result of such a contrastive comparison ‘is most often exemplified by relations such as “better than”, “equally good”, etc. In other words, [...] “ranking” is the very outcome of (contrastive) comparison.’<sup>21</sup> But this is deeply perplexing, because comparative philosophy aims to illuminate certain issues in different philosophical texts and traditions rather than evaluate which *comparandum* is better. Indeed, Weber argues that comparative philosophy has the ethical obligation to ‘not be about a ranking sense’; but ‘in many ways and certainly in actual practice, it is either surreptitiously or manifestly about ranking.’<sup>22</sup> Weber gives the example of comparing ancient Greek and Chinese philosophy, saying that in the case where the comparatist favours rational arguments over contradictions and correlation, then Chinese thought is disadvantaged by being labelled as ‘not logical’, or ‘lacking abstract concepts’; but in the case where the comparatist thinks contradictions are much more interesting and evocative than rational arguments, then Greek thought would be depreciated on this account.<sup>23</sup> Either way, a latent evaluation and ranking take place. This problem is the same as the one in comparative literature demonstrated above. Dialogical comparison in comparative literature is very similar to Weber’s ‘contrastive comparison’, especially if we remember Natalie Melas’s term ‘contrastive literature’,<sup>24</sup> but if dialogical comparison also starts with certain biased conceptions about literature, then one *comparandum* emerges from the comparison as superior to the other(s). The purpose of contrastive comparison to construct mutual insight between literatures and philosophies is compromised by the underlying evaluation.

At this point we may ask: do ranking comparability and contrastive comparability always have to intertwine? Is there a way to keep them distinct from each other or reposition their relation in a better way? To address this question I will examine more closely in the following sections the conceptualizations of ranking comparability and contrastive comparability, and how they can relate to the political dynamics between evaluative and dialogical comparisons in comparative literature. By way of doing this, I also aim to show that philosophy and literary criticism have much potentiality for cross-fertilization, for the theoretical rigour of the philosophy of comparison can complement and extend literary criticism so that it enriches the understanding of the uses and purposes of comparison in literature.

### Ranking Comparability and the Need for Vagueness

Ranking comparability means thinking in terms of degrees of difference. Take the pair ‘comparable’ and ‘incomparable’, for instance: we could think of their relation as the comparable gradually decreasing until it becomes the incomparable. That there is no precise cut-off line but rather a graduated spectrum between the comparable and the incomparable can be demonstrated in many cases. For instance, if you compare the sweetness of an apple and an orange, the measurable sugar content in the fruits does not directly translate into perceived sweetness, so you cannot be precise about exactly how much sweeter one fruit is than the other. Nevertheless, as Chang and Joseph Raz have observed, thinking of ranking comparability in terms of a spectrum of degrees involves the Sorites paradox, which poses interesting questions about how comparability and incomparability can be positioned in regard to each other.

To begin with, the Sorites paradox appeared in pre-Socratic debates among logicians around the fifth to fourth centuries BCE, and illustrates fundamentally the type of arguments that use the logic of little-by-little. One of its most famous examples is that of a heap of sand given by Eubulides of Miletus, famous for constructing paradoxes. This is also how the name ‘Sorites’ came about, for *sōrós* means ‘heap’ in ancient Greek. Eubulides’s question was, if you keep subtracting one grain of sand each time from a heap of sand, when will the heap be no longer a heap? On the other hand, if you start with a grain of sand, and keep adding to it a grain of sand each time, when will they become a heap of sand? The logical puzzle is due to the indeterminacy of the concept of a heap, for it seems that ‘no one grain of [sand] can be identified as making the difference between being a heap and not being a heap’.<sup>25</sup> We can also refer to Zeno’s paradoxes for more examples of the Sorites argument. Zeno of Elea was renowned for producing contradictions and dialectical arguments. Reputedly, he produced a Sorites paradox about ‘arguments against motion’, which was recorded by Aristotle in his *Physics* as: ‘That which is in locomotion must arrive at the half-way stage before it arrives at the goal’.<sup>26</sup> To give a concrete illustration, suppose I want to go to the train station. Before I can get there, I must get halfway there. Before I can get halfway there, I must get a quarter of the way there. Before travelling a quarter, I must travel one-eighth of the distance; and so on ad infinitum. This scenario poses the Sorites question as the infinite divisibility of a line and the infinite number of tasks one needs to complete when going from one point to another. Since it is impossible to complete an infinity of tasks I can never reach the train station and, in fact, I cannot move anywhere. Therefore Zeno argues, following Parmenides’s view that change is impossible, that no motion can really take place.

There have been many attempts in the history of philosophy to solve this paradox, some of which have successfully refuted it,<sup>27</sup> but that is not the concern of the present discussion. Instead, I would like to explore how this paradox reveals that the degrees of difference between comparability and incomparability need to be understood as *vague*. The nuances of difference that a ranking comparison produces do seem to map onto a Sorites spectrum, but then such a spectrum

involves an area of uncertainty of ranking or evaluation. Firstly, consider the words we use to describe a ranking comparison: 'more', 'less', 'as ... as' or 'the same'. This terminology puts different items of comparison under a certain perspective of evaluation and then determines how much they weigh against each other. This perspective of evaluation is what Ruth Chang calls 'a covering value':

Every comparison must proceed in terms of a value. A 'value' is any consideration with respect to which a meaningful evaluative comparison can be made. Call such a consideration the *covering value* of that comparison.<sup>28</sup>

Chang emphasizes that a comparison of different items cannot make sense unless you are comparing them in regard to something. The necessity of a covering value in comparisons means that comparisons must be relative, there is no comparison *simpliciter*. For instance, 'this rod may be greater than that one with respect to length or mass or conductivity, but it cannot be greater, period'.<sup>29</sup> By the same logic, for incomparability, you cannot say items are incomparable *simpliciter*, only incomparable in regard to something. Therefore, saying that apples and oranges do not compare does not say anything meaningful, since the specification of the aspect under which they do not compare is absent. We *can* compare apples and oranges in regard to their vitamin C content per 100g (oranges are richer in vitamin C), their hardness (apples are usually harder), or fruitness (they are equally fruits).

Returning to the Sorites problem, we may translate its logic of little-by-little into comparative situations, which then reveal an area of vagueness on the spectrum of difference. Let us consider the case that Chang proposes:

If A and B are equally good with respect to V [covering value], then A and B stand in the same value relations to all other items with respect to V. It follows that a small improvement in A with respect to V, no matter how small, makes the improvement A+ of A better than B with respect to V. If an improvement in one item does not make it better than the other, the original items cannot be equally good. That is, it must be *false* that they are equally good.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, if a slight improvement or impoverishment of one item does not make any difference in the comparison (i.e. does not make item A better or worse than item B in regard to V), then these two items are incomparable: they cannot be described by the comparative relationship of 'better', 'worse' or 'equally good'. This argument, which Chang terms the 'Small improvement argument', has the form of a Sorites paradox and shows that ranking is not always measurable or linear. As Chang suggests, we can try to compare Mozart and Picasso on creativity. Initially, we may say that Mozart and Picasso are both creative geniuses, but in different ways, so they are incomparable to each other. If, however, we create a spectrum of people with different amounts of creativity, say take Picasso and decrease his creative talent until we have a person who is just starting to learn how to paint and can imitate Picasso's style poorly. Call this poor painter P-. Then we compare P- with Mozart, and it seems quite acceptable to say that P- has less creativity than Mozart instead of being incomparable to him. The question now is: where are the borders of comparability between Mozart and Picasso? At the point where P- is compared with Mozart, we can say they are comparable; at the point where

Picasso is compared to Mozart, they are incomparable. But if Picasso and Mozart are truly incomparable, then a small impoverishment of Picasso's creativity should not make any difference in terms of their comparability. And by successive uses of *modus ponens* (i.e. 'the rule of logic which states that if a conditional statement "if  $p$  then  $q$ " is accepted, and the antecedent  $p$  holds, then the consequent  $q$  may be inferred'),<sup>31</sup> no amount of small impoverishments will ever make Picasso and Mozart comparable. But this seems simply implausible, because it is hard to believe that the greatly impoverished version of Picasso, P-, is not less creative than Mozart. Here the question about vague boundaries emerges: at what point do Mozart and P- become comparable? What kind of border exists between their comparability and incomparability?

The crux of the problem here, I believe, is that both *comparanda* (Picasso and Mozart) and the covering value (creativity) in this comparison are indeterminate and not precisely measurable. This indeterminacy goes beyond that of Eubulides's puzzle, for the latter is only indeterminate in terms of the *semantic* scope of the terms 'heap' and 'non-heap'; namely, this is a problem of the vagueness of language describing a reality, but not a problem of the reality *itself* — for at any moment the number of grains of sand can be measured precisely and we can know for certain how many more grains of sand heap no. 1 has than heap no. 2.<sup>32</sup> But comparing Mozart and Picasso is different, because it is not the terms we use to describe their relation that are vague, but the very reality we are trying to describe that is indeterminate, for we are comparing items of *qualitative* difference, not simply *quantitative* difference, in regard to a cover value that is highly contentious. (What constitutes creativity? What standards should we use to measure it?) This means that, with qualitatively different *comparanda* and non-objective cover values for comparison, we need a vague zone that allows for non-linear and ambiguous positioning of differences. In this case, the boundary between comparability and incomparability of such indeterminate *comparanda* is vague because it neither has a precise cut-off point nor is necessarily singular.<sup>33</sup>

If we return to comparative literature with this view of vague comparability, we can easily recognize that the *comparanda* of comparative literature — different literatures and cultural forms — are polyvalent, resist precise measurement, and therefore require vagueness in comparison. Nor can an accurately quantifiable or objective 'covering value' — in comparative literature's case, the respect to which two or more texts are compared and connected (*tertium comparationis*) — exist for such vague *comparanda*. The qualitative differences of different literatures make it impossible to position them linearly on a graded spectrum denoting a single value scale. Consequently, comparability is a flexible relation that depends on the interpretative context and is always open to contention. In fact, this problem of the indeterminacy of comparing literatures has been remarked upon by a writer and critic as ancient as Horace.<sup>34</sup> In his letter 'To Augustus' (*Epistles* 2.1), Horace asks: when it comes to evaluating Latin writers in comparison to Greek ones, how old does a writer need to be in order to be old enough to be considered an ancient classic? Horace criticizes the tendency of his contemporaries to set antiquity and



Greekness as the standards of literary excellence, then raises his question in a Sorites form:

Just because we know that of the Greeks  
 The earliest writers are best, we therefore use  
 The same set of scales to compare them with our writers  
 [...]
   
 If poetry, like wine, improves with age,  
 Then tell me, I'd like to know, how do you know  
 Exactly in what year a particular poem  
 Turns into a good one?<sup>35</sup>

Horace goes on to assert that it is impossible and absurd to fix a precise time limit when a poem 'matures' into excellence, because it is the text's qualitative aspects — its grace, polish, and didactic value, for example — that matter, not its quantitative historical age. Comparisons between Greek and Latin writers should therefore be made with regard to their literary quality, regardless of their antiquity or contemporaneity. It is worth noting that firstly, Horace denies that a precisely quantifiable *tertium* (temporal duration) can meaningfully compare Greek and Latin literatures; and secondly, he asserts that these literatures are comparable when the *tertium* becomes 'literary quality' instead. This implies that the same texts can be made incomparable or comparable depending on what *tertium* or relation the comparatist wants to construct them with. Although Horace, having clear ideas about the standards of literary merit, does not problematize the *tertium* of literary quality as critics now would do, he does not say whether one can decide *exactly* how much better one text is than another. Given his expressed disapproval of the mathematical way of evaluating literature ('He's bound to be baffled [... he] who counts by annals, grain by grain'),<sup>36</sup> very possibly he would agree that though a text can be superior in quality to another, its superiority cannot be stated as an exactly measurable amount. This example supports my argument that when it comes to comparing literatures, we need a vague comparability.

In what specific aspects does the notion of vague comparability transform our understanding and construction of comparisons between literatures? The first obvious conclusion is that ranking i.e. evaluative comparison is unsuitable for comparative literature, because literatures are complex bundles of qualitative differences and are vague *comparanda* (even in the case when the comparatist wants to rank literatures, as Horace did, the ranking can only be a fuzzy one). That ranking should not be the concern of comparative literature is significant, since many problems in the field are caused by consciously or unconsciously smuggling into the comparison a ranking evaluation (e.g. pre-modern Chinese narratives about the super-natural seen (erroneously) as a prototype of modern fiction; and the Arab novel judged as less advanced in literary realism than nineteenth-century French novels). I will come back to this point later. The second conclusion is that comparability and incomparability in comparative literature are not on a linear spectrum and the boundary between them is neither singular nor definite. The 'covering' topics and perspectives through which literary texts can be compared are numerous. Depending on what perspective they are considered under, the same

texts can be both comparable and incomparable. Therefore, to answer the question ‘when do literatures become comparable?’ (or incomparable), it can be said that depending on the particular construction of comparability, the borders between comparability and incomparability can be *anywhere*. For instance, it makes sense to compare nineteenth-century Romantic poetry with medieval Chinese poetry on their depictions of the human-nature relation, but it does not make sense to compare them on the use of idiomatic expressions in classical Chinese — this aspect being non-existent in Romantic poetry, which was not written in Chinese. Or one could compare Greek Surrealist writings by Nikos Engonopoulos and Andreas Embirikos with psychedelic writings of Aldous Huxley, Henri Michaux or William Burroughs on the use of incongruous imagery and exploration of madness; but it would be out-of-place to compare them in regard to how historicist these writers were in their literary creations, because historicism was not an issue which they engaged with. These examples show that comparability and incomparability in literature are not absolute: not only can the comparability of the same *comparanda* change depending on the viewpoint they are examined from, but also that the relation between the comparable and incomparable is a matter of vague extents of ‘more and less comparable’ rather than two mutually exclusive categories (the very notion of vagueness already pre-empts such mutual distinction). The ‘incomparable’ does not mean ‘not comparable at all’, but rather, ‘a degree of comparability so low that it makes the comparison not worth making’. For we must realize that the fact that texts can be compared on a certain point does not necessarily mean that the comparison is important or insightful. The crucial task for the comparatist is therefore to find a stronger and more significant comparability, so better instead of worse comparisons can be made.

The third conclusion following upon the second is that, since comparability and incomparability between literatures can be potentially constructed from any pertinent viewpoint, comparability and incomparability are decided not by *what* one compares, but by *how* one compares. From this we understand that the comparability or incomparability of the literatures that are compared does not exist *a priori* in the literatures themselves, but is invented by the particular comparison and comparatist in question (in the case of incomparability, it stems from the comparatist putting the *comparanda* in an unsuitable or insignificant comparison). Views that declare some texts and cultures to be incomparable or comparable are constructed discourses that reflect two fundamentally different worldviews: one that sacralizes an irreducible alterity that refuses comparison because it cannot enter into any exchange system where it can be ‘translated’ into a ‘common currency’ — be it the *lingua franca* of English, or the canon of world literature that has global circulation (Apter, Young, and Levinas as discussed above fall into this category);<sup>37</sup> and another worldview that recognizes alterity only in so much as it is always already the result of comparison, whereby asserting a fundamental communicability and openness between different things and phenomena in the world, and not least its languages, literatures, and cultures (Susan Friedman,<sup>38</sup> Zhang Longxi, Lloyd fall into this category).

### Contrastive Comparability and the Question of the *tertium comparationis*

The above examination of ranking comparability in philosophy gives new salience to the nature of comparison in comparative literature by highlighting how the latter is ill-fitted for evaluative judgement. Now we can turn to consider if Weber's contrastive comparability can better address comparisons between qualitatively different *comparanda* such as thought systems and literatures. As cited earlier, contrastive comparability is not about ranking, but considers similarities and differences between the *comparanda* in order to illuminate them and/or the covering topic of their comparison. This covering topic is the much-debated *tertium comparationis*, which exists for comparative philosophy as well as comparative literature. In Weber's view, the *tertium* is 'a point of commonality' with 'minimal and maximal conceptions': 'minimally, the expression refers to a "common" respect (equally relatable to both *comparata*) and, maximally, the expression refers to something like a "common" property (shared by both *comparata*).'<sup>39</sup> Now, in Weber's view, the problematic overlap between ranking and contrastive comparabilities, as mentioned in his discussion with Chang, is that there is a 'pre-comparative tertium' that preliminarily determines the *comparanda*. For instance, if I decide to compare the works of Aristotle and Xunzi on human nature, I have already assumed that Xunzi is at least a philosophical thinker if not a 'philosopher' in the Greek sense, that there is a notion of 'human nature' that Xunzi can relate to, even though there was no theoretical formulation of the concept at Xunzi's time (third century BCE).<sup>40</sup> But these assumptions are inevitably based on the biased view that it makes sense to talk about a 'human' nature that is presumably different from 'non-human' or 'animal' nature, on views about what philosophy is like and what concepts are. In this sense, the comparatist is already judging and categorizing Xunzi by certain criteria that do not necessarily apply to him. This pre-comparative determination of the *comparanda* therefore inevitably introduces inherent biases and imposed frameworks into the comparison.

This problem finds its parallel in comparative literature, which is why conflicts and debates arise between what I call 'evaluative' and 'dialogical' comparison. Indeed, in the early years of comparative literature, evaluation was crucial, for comparison aimed at drawing conclusions about cultural superiority and progress. For example, during the first few decades of the twentieth century, when China was looking eagerly towards European modernity in the hope of re-invigorating a Chinese culture that was seen to be weak and decaying, the critic Hu Shi compared Mohist (a school of rhetoricians in early China) argumentation with ancient Greek reasoning in his *Outlines of the History of Chinese Philosophy* (1919). His chosen *tertium* was, however, logicity in the syllogistic, namely, Aristotelian sense; and his aim was to prove that the ancient Chinese could think as logically as the Greeks, in short, that ancient Chinese culture was not inferior to the Greek. This is obviously a ranking comparison where the *tertium* imposes a culturally biased framework on one *comparandum*, for Hu Shi's conclusion does nothing other than reinforce the Eurocentric view that ancient Greek literature and culture are the standards for cultural greatness. Or, in *fin-de-siècle* France, when translations of Far-Eastern and

South-Asian literatures gradually increased against the background of Goethe's vision of *Weltliteratur*, the French school of *littérature comparée* still tended to compare French literature with foreign literatures to re-affirm the centrality and superiority of the former, and the exotic 'strangeness' of the latter.<sup>41</sup> This is evaluative comparison at its worst. Now, however, comparative literature has moved towards the dialogical, having gone beyond this simplistic, un-self-critical Eurocentric criticism, with comparatists being increasingly more aware of issues of cultural bias, power hierarchy, and the imposition of European ideas about literature on non-European texts. Nevertheless, the problem of evaluation and a neutral comparability has not disappeared and remains central. The pivot of this problem, just as in comparative philosophy, is still the *tertium*. I will now turn to discuss the *tertium* in more detail, referring to Weber's arguments for clarification at relevant points.

To begin with, the *tertium* has been one of the thorniest problems in comparative literature; as Haun Saussy has remarked, the history of comparative literature is nothing more than 'a series of attempts to discover or name the *tertium comparationis*.'<sup>42</sup> Whether a suitable *tertium* can be found is crucial to deciding the comparability of the texts in question. Nevertheless, it is important to first recognize that the *tertium* needs some vagueness in its definition. As I have argued, literatures are vague *comparanda*, therefore the *tertium* that connects them in comparison cannot be a measurable objective denominator like 'sugar content in grams' or a simple attribute like 'redness'. That Weber has denoted minimal and maximal conceptions of the *tertium* shows the *tertium* has a relatively flexible semantic scope. In comparative literature, we could broadly define it as the respect in terms of which literatures are compared, denoting a common ground such as a broad theme with which different texts can engage rather than a precise literary attribute that is a single aspect or quality shared between the compared literatures. For instance, the *tertium* can be a semantic field such as 'the grotesque' or 'humour' that includes a cluster of notions and themes that share family resemblances, but cannot be pinpointed to one definition. There is no need, therefore, to understand the *tertium* in too restricted a sense such as an invariant that levels the *comparanda* onto one scale. Secondly, the biggest problem with the *tertium* is that it seems impossible to find a neutral *tertium* for any comparison in literature. Since the *tertium* shapes the differences and relations between the compared texts, its bias is then extremely infelicitous, because the comparative framework becomes pre-disposed to weight one *comparandum* over the other, or reflects some broad ethnocentric prejudices of the comparatist. With regard to this, comparatists have generally divided into two attitudes: one denying that *tertium* can be found at all because of the incompatibility of differences between literatures; another asserting that *tertium* can be found, but that there never exists a completely neutral, non-culturally-centric *tertium*.<sup>43</sup> The first view asserts the impossibility of comparison, and is only endorsed by very few, mostly in the early phases of comparative literature, such as the Romanian critic Lovinescu, who believed that unless works 'are among the same content [...] and the same aesthetic formula', they are unintelligible and incomparable to each other.<sup>44</sup> This view carries to the extreme the particularity and singularity of each text, to

the extent that one can say that not even two contemporaneous texts written in the same language and cultural background can be compared. Being unpalatable and easily refutable, this view is not my focus here.<sup>45</sup> The second view, however, is the prevalent view among comparatists now, and can be further divided into two sides: one side concluding that because the *tertium* is always biased, comparison is a deeply problematic method and should be used with extreme caution and only in limited contexts (e.g. Radhakrishnan, Bruce Lincoln, Melas); another side arguing that despite the biased *tertium*, comparison not only needs to go on but also should be increasingly applied to more texts and topics (e.g. Alexander Beecroft, Wiebke Denecke, Lloyd). While I agree that comparison should be used carefully and as self-critically as possible, I am on the second side that advocates comparison despite its biases. This is because the *tertium*, I argue as follows, does not pose as many difficulties as it seems to.

What I find interesting is not the question of whether the *tertium* is neutral or biased, but that this question should arise at all. If one is enclosed within one's own biased conceptual frameworks, how could one even become aware that the *tertium* is biased? This is like the case of fish that do not know what water is. The very recognition of the prejudicial character of the *tertium* is already the result of an initial comparison. Without taking into account the foreign, marginalized Other, there would be no self-critical gaze. This confirms that comparison is not only an activity crucial to discovering one's own biases and trying to overcome them, but also a process of inquiry that, instead of starting from a perfect, unbiased and finalized *tertium*, progressively reveals more about it. Presumably, besides better understanding the texts that are compared, an important aim of comparison is to better articulate the *tertium* that connects the texts in comparison. This means that at the beginning of comparison, the *tertium* is incomplete, open to change and not an invariant. As Weber comments thoughtfully, after the comparison, both the *comparanda* and *tertium* are different from what they were at the start of comparison, for 'my understanding or knowledge of that which [...] I set out to compare is different from that which my comparison ends up having compared.'<sup>46</sup> This transformation of the *tertium* is the process of a certain topic being gradually fleshed out as comparison goes on. In this way, the *tertium* not only does not need to be completely justified right from the start, but also is the site where its inherent biases can be exposed through comparison. It is inevitable that we start with a *tertium* that depends on certain preconceptions and prejudices (because complete neutrality is impossible), but the strength of comparison is that it can help us discover these preconceptions and be more critical of them.

This processual idea of the *tertium* would require a processual notion of comparability, for the *tertium* is key to constructing comparability. As the *tertium* and the *comparanda* are transformed through comparative examination, comparability emerges as the process of developing and establishing comparability. Starting from a more biased and less self-critical point and moving to a more critical point where certain biases will have been deconstructed, comparability increasingly shifts from the ranking to the contrastive, the evaluative to the dialogical. The borders between

evaluative and dialogical comparabilities are therefore constantly changing. If we are committed to the view that the ethics of comparative literature should be dialogical instead of evaluative, then the expansion of comparative methods and studies should of course be commended, since one of the significant consequences of comparison is to increase our awareness of other literary traditions, linguistic and cultural particularities, and better resist ethnocentric presumptions and parochialism. As Geoffrey Lloyd argues in his most recent *Analogical Investigations* (2015), although comparatism (i.e. comparative method) has been used for various oppressive purposes, it can also be used as ‘a stimulus to revision, to criticism and to dissent, [...] allowing for differences but not in a bid to determine hierarchies of superiority or inferiority, nor yet to proclaim mutual unintelligibilities, but rather to make the most of the opportunities for broadening our horizons that those differences present.’<sup>47</sup> The understanding of comparability as processual, flexible, and multiple, which I have argued for, supports this positive use of comparison and envisages comparison as a dynamic act of inquiry rather than a category of reason’s ‘logical operation’ (as Kant saw it).<sup>48</sup>

### Conclusion

By way of conclusion, through relating the philosophy of comparison to comparative literature, I have argued that the notions of comparability and incomparability in comparative literature are relative, vague, and can be constructed in many different ways. Consequently, comparison in literary criticism is also a multiplicity of processes, concepts, and methods. By comparing comparison in philosophy and comparison in comparative literature, we can better clarify the particular uses and methods of the latter, thus showing that dialogues between philosophy and literary criticism can be fruitful. More specifically, in this essay I have also proposed the following points.

Firstly, comparison in comparative literature is not concerned with ranking measurable *comparanda*, and comparability and incomparability are not mutually exclusive but co-exist in a vague zone of ‘more or less comparable’. Moreover, depending on the viewpoint of comparison, the borders between comparability and incomparability can be anywhere. Thus, comparability and incomparability are dynamic processes emerging from the activity of comparison rather than conceptual structures that require determination before comparison begins.

Secondly, the flexibility of borders between the comparable and incomparable means that they are constructed through discourses that are, just like the much-criticized *tertium*, never neutral. Every comparative discourse tends to favour either incomparability or comparability depending on who is wielding the view to what purpose. The aporias of incommensurability and untranslatability, as well as the possibilities for comparability and translatability, do not exist *a priori* in the literatures that are compared or translated but are created through discussions that aim to make them so.


Thirdly, similar to ranking and contrastive comparisons in philosophy, a distinction between evaluative and dialogical comparisons exists in comparative

literature. I believe that the ethical imperative is that comparative literature *should not* be evaluative, but aim to show insight into the heterogeneity of literatures and languages, and break down cultural centrisms. Although the *tertium comparationis* always poses problems of bias, it can transform during the comparison as a process of revealing and deconstructing some (if not all) of its own biases, and enable comparatists to be more self-critical of their presumptions and conceptual limitations.

The vagueness and multiplicity of comparability and the *tertium* explain largely, in my view, why there is still much uncertainty about the status of comparative literature, to the extent that René Wellek's remark that comparative literature 'has not been able to establish a distinct subject matter and a specific methodology' still stands.<sup>49</sup> But this disciplinary fluidity is not necessarily bad. Indeed it can even be a strength that distinctly established disciplines do not have, for constant self-reflexive questioning avoids entrenching comparative literature into petrified positions and allows open-mindedness towards new and disparate ways of comparing texts, revealing numerous possibilities for interpretation, as well as new attempts to rethink the notions of literature and text. We do not, therefore, need to dismiss the 'comparative' from the discipline of comparative literature as a misnomer. If comparison is expanded so that it is increasingly protean and processual as a concept and constructed in increasingly diverse ways as a method, there is no reason why the comparative cannot accommodate and guide what critics in comparative literature are exploring. The transformation of the ideas of comparability, the *tertium*, and comparison would then be an interactive process that continues simultaneously as comparative literature shapes itself.

### Notes to Chapter 13

1. Gayatri Spivak, 'Rethinking Comparativism', *New Literary History*, 40.3 (2009), 609–26 (p. 611).
2. Thomas Claviez, 'Done and Over With — Finally? Otherness, Metonymy, and the Ethics of Comparison', *PMLA*, 128.3 (2013), 608–14 (p. 613).
3. Robert Young, 'The Postcolonial Comparative', *PMLA*, 128.3 (2013), 683–89 (p. 684).
4. David Ferris, 'Indiscipline', in *Ten Year Report on the Discipline, Comparative Literature in the Age of Globalization*, ACLA Report, 2006, pp. 78–99.
5. Andrei Terian, 'The Incomparable as Uninterpretable', *World Literature Studies*, 2 (2013), 52–63 (p. 53).
6. See Longxi Zhang, *Mighty Opposites: From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); and Geoffrey E. R. Lloyd, *Analogical Investigations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
7. Gayatri Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 406.
8. Levinas quoted in Thomas Claviez, 'Done and Over With — Finally?', p. 609.
9. Emily Apter, *Against World Literature* (New York: Verso, 2013), p. 587.
10. Terian, 'The Incomparable as Uninterpretable', p. 54.
11. Apter, *Against World Literature*, p. 590.
12. The possibility to translate/compare and whether they directly influence each other is an issue different from Apter's arguments. A comparatist who has a good grasp of the different languages of her compared texts may think that these texts are nevertheless untranslatable; vice versa, a critic who thinks certain texts are translatable may not think that they are comparable.

-  David Damrosch, 'Comparing the Incomparable: World Literature from Du Fu to Mishima', *Renya*, 3 (2012), 133–55 (p. 147).
14. *Les Nouvelles Voies du comparatisme*, ed. by Hubert Roland and Stéphanie Vanasten (Gent: Academia Press, 2010).
  15. See articles in *PMLA*, 128.3 (2013), published by the Modern Language Association (US).
  16. Ralph Weber, 'Comparative Philosophy and the Tertium: Comparing What with What, and in What Respect?', *Dao*, 13 (2014), 151–71.
  17. See Ralph Weber, "'How to Compare?'" On the Methodological State of Comparative Philosophy', *Philosophy Compass*, 8.7 (2013), 593–603; and Brook Ziporyn, *Beyond Oneness and Difference: Li and Coherence in Chinese Buddhist Thought and its Antecedents* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013).
  18. Ruth Chang, in Dao Article Discussion — Ralph Weber on Comparison in Comparative Philosophy, on website: <<http://warpweftandway.com/discussion-comparative-philosophy/>> [accessed 20 Dec. 2015]
  19. Ralph Weber, in Dao Article Discussion — Ralph Weber on Comparison in Comparative Philosophy, on website as previous [accessed 20 Dec. 2015]
  20. *Ibid.*
  21. *Ibid.*
  22. *Ibid.*
  23. *Ibid.*
  24. Natalie Melas, 'Versions of Incommensurability', *World Literature Today*, 69.2 (1995), 275–80.
  25. Dominic Hyde, 'Sorites Paradox', <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sorites-paradox/>> [accessed Sept. 2014].
  26. Aristotle, *Physics* VI: 9, 239b10, trans. by R. P. Hardie and R. K. Gaye, The Internet Classics Archive: <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/physics.6.vi.html>> [accessed 29 Dec. 2015].
  27. See the summary of different responses to the Sorites paradox in <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sorites-paradox/>> [accessed Sept. 2014].
  28. Ruth Chang, *Making Comparisons Count* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 3.
  29. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
  30. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
  31. See *OED* definition: <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/238362?redirectedFrom=modus+ponens#eid>> [accessed 28 Dec. 2015].
  32. I thank Derek Parfit for clarifying this point in his talk on 9 Feb. 2015 about avoiding the Repugnant conclusion.
  33. For more analysis of vagueness in philosophical comparison, see John Broome, 'Is Incommensurability Vagueness?', in *Incommensurability, Incomparability, and Practical Reason*, ed. by Ruth Chang (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).
  34. I am grateful to Sebastian Matzner for pointing out Horace's example to me.
  35. *Horace, Epistles 2.1*, trans. by David Ferry, *Arion*, 3rd ser., 8.2 (2000), 63–73 (p. 63).
  36. *Ibid.*
  37. As Durkheim observed in his 'Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse' (1912), to be sacred is to be valued incommensurably.
  38. See Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Why Not Compare?', *PMLA*, 128.3 (2013), 753–62.
  39. Ralph Weber, 'Comparative Philosophy and the Tertium', p. 153.
  40. See Weber, 'Comparative Philosophy and the Tertium', and discussion with Chang on website <<http://warpweftandway.com/discussion-comparative-philosophy/>> [accessed 20 Dec. 2015].
  41. See Siraj Ahmed on how colonial rule demanded that disparate literatures and cultures should be unified under one universal history of literature and civilization, 'Notes from Babel: Towards a Colonial History of Comparative Literature', *Critical Inquiry*, 39 (Winter 2014), 296–326.
  42. Haun Saussy, 'Comparison, World Literature and the Common Denominator', in *A Companion to Comparative Literature*, ed. by Ali Behdad and Dominic Thomas (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 60–64 (p. 62).
  43. Arguably, there is a third attitude, the view that the *tertium* is not necessary for comparison. I believe that advocates of this view in fact mean that a single universally shared *tertium* that can be



pinpointed in the *comparanda* does not exist. So this view objects to the strictly logical definition of the *tertium* which I already criticized, but does not mean that comparative criticism needs no points of contact to proceed. I will not examine this view here.

44. Cited in Andrei Terian, 'The Incomparable as Uninterpretable', p. 56.
45. Minimally, there are at least two *tertia* that can connect whatever *comparanda*: one is the fact that the *comparanda* all exist in the universe, existence being a universally shared aspect between any two or more things (as Moore observed); another is the comparatist who takes an interest in comparing these *comparanda*. So it is wrong to say that no *tertia* exist for literary comparison. Also, comparison cannot be between identical *comparanda* (which do not exist anyway).
46. Ralph Weber, in Dao Article Discussion — Ralph Weber on Comparison in Comparative Philosophy.
47. Geoffrey E. R. Lloyd, *Analogical Investigations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 40.
48. Kant included comparison as one of the three most fundamental logical operations: i.e., comparison, reflection, and abstraction, see Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Logic*, trans. and ed. by J. Michael Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 592.
49. René Wellek, 'The Crisis of Comparative Literature' (1959), in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*, ed. by David Damrosch, Natalie Melas and Mbongiseni Buthelezi (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 161–72 (p. 162).