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Post-Theory, Interdisciplinarity, and the Contemporary Possibilities of Comparative Literature: A Review of Jiang Yuqin's *Depth and Transcendence: Post-Theory and Interdisciplinary Studies in Comparative Literature*

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Abstract: *Depth and Transcendence: Post-Theory and Interdisciplinary Studies in Comparative Literature* investigates the disciplinary transition of comparative literature in the post-theory era. To address the dilemma of theoretical excess and blurred disciplinary boundaries, the book proposes reconstructing the critical and practical dimensions of literary studies through interdisciplinary research. Theoretically, it offers a dialectical analysis of post-theory, arguing for the construction of a localized discursive system while drawing on Western theoretical resources. It further points out that theory today is witnessing a revival and a trend toward global integration. Methodologically, through the exploration of space studies, cyborg and posthuman theory, the book offers new approaches and perspectives. Practically, it delves into the reevaluation of humanistic values in the technological age with analysis of science fiction written by Liu Cixin and Liu Yukun. The volume provides vital theoretical critiques and methodological insights for comparative literature in the age of artificial intelligence, revealing the discipline's potential for further development within a globalized context.

Keywords: Post-theory; Disciplinary Construction of Comparative Literature; Science Fiction

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标题：后理论、跨学科与比较文学的当代可能性——评江玉琴的《纵深与超越：后理论与比较文学跨学科研究》

摘要：《纵深与超越：后理论与比较文学跨学科研究》探讨了后理论时代比较文学的学科转型问题。面对理论过剩与学科边界模糊的困境，本书提出通过跨学科研究重构文学研究的批判性与实践性。在理论层面，本书辩证分析了后理论思潮的脉络，主张在吸收西方理论资源的同时构建本土话语体系，指出 21 世纪理论呈现星丛式复兴与全球化融合趋势。在方法论上，本书通过空间研究、赛博格理论和后人类美学等跨学科案例，展示了比较文学研究的创新路径，特别是对旅行文学与乌托邦/异托邦话题的探讨具有启发性。在实践层面，本书以刘慈欣、刘宇昆等科幻作家作品为例，深入分析了技术时代人文价值的重估问题，既关注科幻叙事中的情感救赎，也反思后人类主体性带来的伦理挑战。全书为人工智能时代的比较文学研究提供了重要的理论参照与方法论启示，展现了该学科在全球化语境下的发展潜力。

关键词：后理论；比较文学学科建设；科幻文学

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Introduction

Depth and Transcendence: Post-Theory and Interdisciplinary Studies in Comparative Literature (Sun Yat-sen University Press, 2022) explores new facets and possibilities of comparative literature in contemporary context, stating how the critical and practical functions of literary studies may be reconstructed through convergence of disciplines and intellectual suspension of theory. As the title suggests, the volume seeks to conduct in-depth analysis and transcend fixed disciplinary boundaries. Its significance lies first in the engagement with frontier issues, addressing the temporality and situatedness of contemporary developments in comparative literature. Jiang Yuqin (2022, p. 1) responds incisively to the present condition of theoretical surplus and the coexistence of multiple, non-dominant paradigms within the field, proposing practical and effective strategies to address these challenges. Several essays in the volume offer detailed examinations of how Western theories may be adapted to the Chinese context, thereby underscoring both the importance and the necessity of constructing a Chinese theoretical subjectivity. Furthermore, through the recontextualization of comparative literature in conversation with other disciplines (translation studies, cultural studies, and space studies), the book revitalizes the discipline's capacity to engage the humanities amid globalization and technological advancement. The scope of the volume is impressively broad, engaging contemporary intellectual concerns from post-theory to science fiction studies, and generating a series of rigorous and stimulating academic discussions. This review will focus on three major dimensions through which the volume illuminates the construction of comparative literature as a discipline: Discussion surrounding the concept of post-theory; the application of interdisciplinary methodology; discussion of technology and humanism.

1. The Predicament and Possibility of Post-Theory

In recent years, the so-called “end of theory” has become a prominent topic of debate in literary studies. This volume undertakes a profound and nuanced examination of that issue, exploring the reception of Western post-theoretical discourse within the Chinese context, and reflecting on the stance and responsibilities of Chinese scholars amid such intellectual currents.

Since the 1980s, Western scholars have begun to question the excess of theory—indeed, the condition of “theorization of everything”—that alienated literary theory from literature itself and from its core concerns. Some critics and writers have even declared the imminent demise of theory. Wang Ning (2010, p. 78) notes that “the theoretical trends of the post-theory era exhibit characteristics of hybridity and polyphony.” Confronting this shift, *Depth and Transcendence* makes a crucial clarification: post-theory does not signify an anti-theoretical position. Rather, the book argues with clarity and dialectical insight that theory remains an indispensable intellectual instrument.

More importantly, it situates the development of Chinese comparative literature within the historical context of the travel of theory. Sheng Anfeng and Liu Lihui (2022, p. 22) emphasize that the differing attitudes toward theory in China and the West are shaped by distinct historical trajectories and cultural foundations:

“The crises and difficulties encountered by the Chinese and Western academies are not identical, nor have their theoretical developments proceeded in synchrony. In critiquing the problems produced by theory, we must not neglect the agency of China’s translation and appropriation of Western theories, nor the question of subjectivity in our own theoretical construction.”

From this standpoint, the book advocates that Chinese comparative literature scholars must return to the Chinese intellectual context and participate actively in building a national theoretical discourse.

The authors also adopt a dialectical historical perspective, illuminating the complex interrelations among theoretical movements. For example, Zhao Xifang (2022) outlines the interaction between feminism and postcolonialism—two branches of radical critique—showing how feminism, once integrated into postcolonial theory, has both borrowed from it to critique contemporary Western feminism and, conversely, challenged the masculine centrism of postcolonial theorists.

The book’s discussion thus transcends a mere response to the “end of theory” narrative; it instead probes the multifaceted roles and meanings of theory within contemporary scholarship. Xia Donghong (2022) argues that theory, as an instrument of thought, offers an indispensable methodological framework for analyzing and interpreting literary phenomena. Yet, with the overexpansion and generalization of theoretical discourse, many scholars have begun to question its efficacy. By tracing the genealogy of Western post-theory, *Depth and Transcendence* reveals China’s distinct position and perspective in this global conversation. Chinese scholars, it argues, should neither follow Western paradigms uncritically nor reject them wholesale; rather, they should critically assimilate them while constructing a theoretical discourse grounded in Chinese experience.

The volume pays particular attention to the historical asynchrony between the West and China in the evolution of theory. While Western academia began to reflect on the exhaustion of theory in the 1980s, Chinese intellectuals at that time were only beginning to introduce Western theoretical discourses. This temporal

disjunction accounts for the divergent responses to theoretical crises in both contexts: Western scholars have tended to focus on the overproduction and abolishment of theory, whereas Chinese scholars are more concerned with its localization and creative application. By tracing this historical trajectory, the book calls upon Chinese academics to remain attentive to indigenous intellectual issues while engaging global theoretical debates.

The volume also highlights the intricate relationship between theoretical traditions. By revisiting the intersection between feminism and postcolonialism, it shows how theoretical dialogue and confrontation can generate new critical energy. Feminism's encounter with postcolonial critique not only exposed the limits of Western universalism but also enriched both fields, demonstrating how theoretical interaction can open new interpretive horizons for complex social and cultural realities.

In response to the controversy surrounding the crisis and renewal of theory, Mai Yongxiong (2022) advances the notion of reevaluation and a theoretical renaissance in the twenty-first century, arguing that theory has by no means disappeared. Instead, it has undergone globalization and transcultural integration, shifting from Western centrality toward more plural and global configurations. Theories once thought obsolete have regained vitality, forming myriads of intersecting ideas—what Mai calls a “constellation” pattern of both thematic convergence and internal differentiation. The movement from post-theory to anti-theory to a theoretical renaissance represents an open and dynamic process.

These perspectives display a keen sense of scholarly acumen and historical awareness, prompting readers to consider how, under conditions of globalization, Chinese academics might both absorb the strengths of Western theory and sustain intellectual sovereignty by constructing an indigenous theoretical discourse. Such reflection offers general readers new perspectives on the intertwined evolutions of literature, culture, and theory.

Another major contribution of the volume lies in its exploration of the development of theory in a globalized context. With the accelerating process of globalization, theory is no longer confined to a particular location or culture. Instead, it has become transnational and interdisciplinary. The globalization of theory manifests not merely in the dissemination of theoretical texts but also in their diversification and hybridization. Western theories, once transplanted into non-Western contexts, undergo process of localization and rearticulation, producing new theoretical formations. Such re-regionalization enriches theoretical discourse and provides new frameworks for addressing global intellectual challenges.

In discussing the renaissance of theory, the volume underscores the revival of twentieth-century thought in twenty-first-century scholarship. Theories once deemed outdated—such as structuralism and poststructuralism—have been revitalized through new interpretations and applications, generating fresh paradigms of thought. This revival demonstrates not only the resilience and adaptability of theory but also its enduring potential for future intellectual innovation.

2. Interdisciplinary Approaches and Case Studies

Beyond its theoretical reconfiguration, *Depth and Transcendence* also situates itself at the forefront of

disciplinary transformation by seizing upon the interdisciplinary turn in comparative literature since the turn of the twenty-first century. Through the integration of insights from political science, biology, cultural studies, and other disciplines, the book extends the frontiers of literary inquiry and enriches the methodology of comparative literature. Each case study embodies distinct theoretical originality and interpretive depth.

The volume applies the notion of space studies to the analysis of literature. Wang Xiteng (2022) interprets Fredric Jameson's theory of spatial politics from three interrelated perspectives—modernist literary criticism, postmodern cultural studies, and utopian thought—in order to illuminate Jameson's inheritance and transformation of the Marxist spatial tradition. Similarly, Tian Junwu (2022) explores the relationship among travel literature, utopia, and heterotopia. Since antiquity, travel has been regarded as a metaphor for the pursuit of knowledge, representing the crossing of spatial and epistemological boundaries. The distinctive nature of travel literature lies in its generic hybridity: it freely borrows from memoir, reportage, correspondence, and travel guides, blending the real with the imaginary. As a form marked by intercultural exchanges and interdisciplinary characteristics, travel literature is intrinsically related to utopian and heterotopian imaginaries. Heterotopia, in turn, provides a foundational framework for the study of urban imagery.

From a similar perspective, Huang Simin (2022) examines “the California Trilogy,” analyzing how urban space in these novels embodies the interplay of history and culture. Huang investigates how different social groups occupy and transform urban spaces, deepening class stratification and revealing intricate racial dynamics. Cities are not merely sites of alienation; they are also productive spaces where revolutionaries and marginalized subjects rediscover the profound implications of spatial justice within the public sphere.

Another notable contribution of the volume is its in-depth engagement with posthuman and cyborg theory from an interdisciplinary standpoint. Regarding posthuman aesthetics, Wang Xiaohua (2022, p. 51) advances an innovative conceptualization: “Posthuman aesthetics is not confined to human judgment or anthropocentric subjectivity; rather, it is oriented toward the ontology of things themselves. It constitutes an interactive aesthetics encompassing humans, machines, and natural entities—an embodied aesthetics that foregrounds the continuity between human and machine, and an expanded ecological aesthetics that incorporates nonhuman and machinic agencies.”

As Rosi Braidotti (2016, p. 13) has similarly argued, “critical posthuman subjectivity is nomadic, affective, and embodied.” This formulation transcends the former anthropocentric paradigm by expanding the boundaries of aesthetic inquiry to include human-machine interactions and the wider ecology of existence. It thus provides a new theoretical vantage point for contemporary aesthetic studies.

In explicating cyborg theory, Jiang Yuqin (2024, p. 49) repositions the cyborg within the cognitive frameworks shaped by contemporary biotechnological and technological developments that have produced the concepts of the posthuman. By defining the cyborg as the product of interdisciplinary cybernetic evolution, Jiang develops a systematic analysis along three dimensions: postmodern cultural critique, the politics of the body, and cyber-ecological studies.

First, Jiang (2022) emphasizes that postmodernism has furnished intellectual resources for cyborg theory, particularly through its deconstruction of subjectivity and identity, which in turn has laid the groundwork for

understanding the ontological status of the cyborg. Second, cyborg theory functions simultaneously as a representation of technological embodiment and as an articulation of body politics. This perspective illuminates how the deep integration of technology and corporeality reshapes the discourses of body politics and introduces new analytical frameworks for contemporary body studies. Third, the ecological dimension of cyborg theory merits particular attention: cyberspace serves as both the environmental field and the metaphorical habitat of the cyborg, offering a platform for examining the dynamic interplay between virtual and physical realities.

Another major insight of the volume lies in its examination of the position of cyborg theory within contemporary literary studies. Donna Haraway (2013, p. 150) famously asserts that “the cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation.” The influence of cyborg theory has thus transcended science fiction and popular culture, becoming a new mode of cultural representation. This cultural configuration is manifested not only in literary production but also across visual art, films, games, and digital media, forming what might be termed a distinctive cyborg cultural landscape.

More importantly, cyborg theory compels humanity to reexamine itself as the epistemological and moral subject of modernity. This reexamination entails not merely a redefinition of human identity but a profound reconsideration of the fundamental relationship between humans, technology, and nature. By situating literary interpretation at the intersection of these inquiries, *Depth and Transcendence* demonstrates how comparative literature can remain intellectually vital in face of the aesthetic, ethical, and ontological challenges of the posthuman condition.

3. Technology and Humanism in the Study of Science Fiction

In the age of thriving artificial intelligence, science fiction has emerged as a hot topic of literary scholarship. One of the genre’s most distinctive features lies in its imaginative visualization of scientific development. Yet, as *Depth and Transcendence* demonstrates, the science fiction texts examined in this volume share more than an interest in technological imagination: they are also deeply invested in reexamining and revaluing humanistic ideals.

As discussed in the preceding section, the advent of the posthuman era has deconstructed the faith in reason and belief in humanism since Renaissance. The various works analyzed in this volume each offer distinctive responses to this crisis of humanism. Zhang Dong (2022, p. 249), for example, investigates how human emotion can avoid alienation amid technological proliferation. In Liu Cixin’s fiction, Zhang observes, mythic narrative provides a means of synthesizing technology and lyricism. Through the creation of vast and awe-inspiring worlds characterized by “enormous objects, intricate structures, holographic layers, and expansive temporal scales” (p. 250), Liu achieves an aesthetic of the sublime. Moreover, *The Three-Body Problem* reveals love as a redemptive force—an affirmation of human kindness, emotional depth, and moral capacity that reflects a persistent humanistic value. This narrative is a continuation of the lyrical tradition of Chinese literature, offering a valuable creative model for articulating a distinctively “Chinese” voice within

science fiction.

A similar concern with humanistic value informs Fang Wanzhen's (2022) study, which approaches posthuman subjectivity through the perspective of cybernetics. Beginning with the dualism of consciousness and body in Ken Liu's fiction, Fang poses the question: What constitutes humanity? In Liu's narratives, consciousness does not only involve logic but also encompasses emotional perception and imaginative association. Thus, in an era of technological advances, human distinctiveness lies in the affective and reflective dimensions of thought and emotion. The humanistic orientation of science fiction, in this sense, remains essential.

At the same time, several contributors to the volume offer critiques of humanism in the posthuman age. Ding Jie and Lu Daofu (2022, p. 263) depict future scenarios that foreground the subjectivity of machine technology, dramatizing the ethical dilemmas and epistemological paradoxes of posthuman consciousness. Their analyses invite readers to reflect on the moral boundaries of agency and responsibility in a world increasingly mediated by technology. With technological advancement, the emerging notion of body without corporeality challenges long-standing philosophical assumptions regarding the relationship between the body and subjectivity. Cheng Lin (2022) provides an illuminating discussion by reinterpreting the term "Uncanny Valley" from the perspective of robotics. The discussion extends beyond humanoid robots to the perceptual structures of humanity itself: as humanoid machines increasingly blur the boundaries between self, other, and likeness, they destabilize human self-recognition and the sense of species identity. This disquiet—an affective uncertainty about what it means to be human—reveals the deepest layer of the uncanny, one that directly concerns the essence of humanity.

Although the contributors approach the problem of humanism from various perspectives, they share a common concern with the philosophical implications of technological progress. This question—what humanism means in an era of technological transformation—constitutes a central motif in much science fiction and continues to resonate across disciplines. The volume's discussion of this issue not only deepens our understanding of the ethical and aesthetic stakes of science fiction but also underscores the relevance of literary inquiry to broader philosophical debates in the posthuman condition.

Conclusion

Depth and Transcendence reexamines the theoretical foundations of comparative literature and envisions the discipline's future directions. The volume exemplifies how comparative literature, while engaging critically with post-theoretical discourse, can reconstitute its intellectual vitality and methodological diversity through interdisciplinary collaboration.

From a theoretical standpoint, the book offers a nuanced dialectical understanding of post-theory. It does not advocate the abolishment of theory but rather proposes a movement beyond theory—that is, toward a renewed theoretical awareness grounded in reflexivity and localization. By reinterpreting post-theory as a critical reorientation rather than a negation, the volume provides a constructive response to the epistemological exhaustion that has characterized the late stages of theory in the humanities. This approach underscores that the vitality of comparative literature lies in its capacity to integrate and transform theoretical paradigms across

temporal and cultural boundaries. The book's interdisciplinary perspective demonstrates how comparative literature can draw upon diverse fields such as space studies, posthumanism, and science studies. These frameworks not only expand the analytical tools available to the discipline but also redefine its object of inquiry—from textual comparison to the study of cultural systems, ecological interrelations, and technological imaginaries. Through such methodological pluralism, the volume exemplifies a comparative practice that is dynamic, open-ended, and responsive to the complexities of the contemporary world. On the level of praxis, the book's discussion of science fiction—particularly its engagement with authors such as Liu Cixin and Ken Liu—illustrates how comparative literature can address urgent questions concerning the relationship between humanity and technology. By examining the humanistic dimensions of the posthuman condition, the volume bridges literary imagination and ethical reflection, thereby reaffirming the enduring relevance of the humanities in an age increasingly defined by artificial intelligence.

Taken as a whole, *Depth and Transcendence* embodies a percipient vision for comparative literature in the twenty-first century. It reveals the discipline's potential to navigate the intricate intersections of theory and practice, literature and technology, and the local and the global. In doing so, it not only contributes to the ongoing transformation of comparative literary studies in China but also offers valuable insights for the international scholarly community. The work thus stands as both a timely theoretical intervention and a significant contribution to the global dialogue on the future of the humanities.

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