

A VARIATION STUDY ON THE THEMATIC
EVOLUTION OF CHINESE AND WESTERN OCEAN
LITERATURE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF
COMMUNICATION AND VARIATION THEORY

*Un estudio sobre la evolución de la literatura oceánica
china y occidental desde la perspectiva
de la comunicación y la teoría de la variación*

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ABSTRACT: In the communication between Chinese and Western ocean
literature, variation caused by factors such as cultural traits, conventional
atmosphere or translators occurs ineluctably. By teasing out typical themes in

Chinese and Western ocean literature, this article adopts the theory of variation study of comparative literature to discuss how themes change and how they are represented when Western ocean literature spreads to China. It also explores the cultural traditions, tastes and aesthetic preferences behind analysis of the cause of variation. On this account, we can reveal the mutual influence, mutual loan and their exchange of each other's needs.

Key words: Ocean Literature; Theme; Variation.

RESUMEN: Debido a la influencia de factores distintos como los rasgos culturales chinos y occidentales, costumbres y traductores, la variación inevitablemente tiene lugar en el proceso de comunicación e intercambio de la literatura oceánica entre diferentes regiones en China y Occidente. Basado en el resumen de los temas representativos de la literatura oceánica china y occidental, en este artículo se recurre a la teoría de la variación de la literatura comparada para discutir el proceso de la variación y la manifestación del tema en el proceso de la transmisión de la literatura oceánica occidental en China. Además, se analizan las causas de la variación desde aspectos como las tradiciones culturales, los hábitos estéticos y los intereses de apreciación con el objeto de revelar los efectos, referencias e intercambios mutuos de la literatura oceánica china y occidental.

Palabras clave: literatura oceánica; tema; variación.

Cao Shunqing, a professor in Sichuan University, proposed a new literary theory called «the variation study of comparative literature» that focuses on the differences which arise in the course of literary communication among different countries and civilizations to find literary «variation» (Cao 2008, 35). Cao believes that in literary communication—influenced by cultural background, social custom, aesthetic preferences, reception psychology, spreading media, linguistic translation and many other factors—variation inevitably appears in those spread and accepted literary works. Specifically, Western ocean literature on its way to China is wittingly or unwittingly underlined, weakened, deleted and reformed by Chinese readers, or sometimes fresh content is added to original texts according to different needs, which means one theme is interpreted differently in various cultures and leads to entirely different intentions of literary works.

1. REFLECTION ON THE VARIATION STUDY OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

It is certain that something new will be created if an object travels from one land to another, which is variation. In other words, when Western discourse enters China, it has mutated and is no longer purely Western, although its major architecture still belongs to an alien cultural system. For example, China's Zen Buddhism is not equivalent to Indian Buddhism because it is a mutated outcome of the combination of Indian and Chinese discourse (Cao 2008, 38). As an emerging perspective and theory of comparative literature, variation study remedies French and American schools' defect that merely stresses the similarity of different literatures. By focusing on «the boundary-crossing nature and literariness of comparative literature, it studies the variability in communication of literary phenomena among different countries, and it investigates the heterogeneity and variability in literary expressions of a similar phenomenon without actual literary relationship» (Cao and Li 2006, 83).

Variation study consists of six spheres, namely medio-translatology, imagology, reception theory, thematology, genology, and cultural filtration and literary misunderstanding. Its fundamental standpoint is that the heterogeneity of different literature is comparable. Cao deems that literary homology contains variation because in communication, homogenous literature mutates its texts, translations, literary images and cultural connotations, which is a manifestation of heterogeneity. Therefore, the cross-civilization comparison from the view of variation study not only inherits the tradition of «seeking for the common» but also integrates heterogeneousness, variability and complementarity, which fill the blank part about «seeking for the different» in comparative literature that has been neglected.

The proposition of variation study inspires scholars to reconsider issues such as translation, imagology and cross-civilization comparison, and hence it promotes a series of theoretical innovations¹.

Previous research on the themes of Chinese and Western ocean literature mostly centres around each other's history, features of times or some specific work, but it rarely attaches attention to the communication and variation between them. It is suggested, however, that this type of communication and variation not only exist objectively but also greatly affect the innovation and development of literature with different cultural backgrounds.

1. Related research results can be seen in CAO and ZHANG (2014), CAO and ZHOU (2015) and CAO and LU (2016).

Chinese scholars' research on ocean literature has covered both domestic and Western works. Researches on Chinese ocean literature mainly are about: (1) collecting and sorting ancient Chinese ocean literature and reviewing the history of its development, (2) analysing features of times and the achievements of ocean literature in various dynasties, (3) analysing different genres of ocean literature, and (4) focusing on works of some specific district and investigating the concept of the ocean and the imagination about foreign land.

The study of Western ocean literature involves the following aspects: (1) exploring its origin and history, dividing its development and analysing the traits of each stage; (2) analysing different genres of ocean literature; (3) studying famous writers in the field of ocean literature; (4) studying the ocean's and other relative images and investigating Western writers' concept of the ocean; and (5) the comparative study of Chinese and Western ocean literature and the comparative study of English and American ocean literature.

By contrast, research on themes of ocean literature is less common, among which Ye Dongna and Ye Xiangdong's work is representative. They studied the ocean literature of the Song and Yuan dynasties and revealed the value of marine economy expressed in the ocean literature at that time (2010). Zhai Xiaona, Shi Mengjiao and Ma Xianrui (2015) analysed *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Moby Dick*, *The Open Boat* and some oceanic poems collected in *Leaves of Grass*. They argued that the theme of human and the ocean's relationship where «conquest and return» and «struggle and harmony» coexist is seen throughout all storylines of American ocean literature (Jiao 2010, 110). Cao Xiaolan (2013) discussed four types of themes in Chinese and Western ocean literature from the perspective of comparative literature, including «expression of insight into life, myth of ocean, human's conquest of nature and pirate». He contended that as for ocean literature's themes, there are quite a lot of similarities between China and the West, but when it comes to «conquest of nature» and «pirate», Chinese ocean literature is far behind that of the West in terms of depth and breadth, or even we can say there is some essential difference in their representations of theme.

Little discussion has been had on the variation of themes in the communication between Chinese and Western ocean literature, and few scholars have paid attention to how this variation influences audiences' interpretation. Therefore, the application of variation study can provide a new view for the research of ocean literature. It explores how media helps express themes and how it shows the characteristics of different cultures, which is significant in displaying Chinese and Western ocean literature's interaction and mutual influence as well as the cultural innovation they initiated.

2. ANALYSIS OF OCEAN LITERATURE'S COMMUNICATION AND THEMATIC VARIATION

According to some scholars, the themes of Chinese ocean literature can be divided into three categories (nature, symbolism and ecology), which also reflect the evolution of human recognition towards the ocean (Li 2014, 88). Zhao Junyao (2002, 2008, and 2009) summarized the features of ocean literature in order of dynasty. His research suggests that descriptions of marine scenery and singings of ocean myth have appeared in ancient Chinese literature since Zhuangzi, the great Chinese philosopher and writer. Instead of emphasising the capricious and dangerous side of the ocean like Western ocean literature does in early times, Chinese writers prefer to «mythologize» and «beautify» the ocean, holding a romanticism fantasy about the unknown creatures and scenery of the sea. For example, Confucius' remark «My doctrines make no way. I will get upon a raft, and float about on the sea» expresses the admiration of the ocean. Generally speaking, ocean literature in the pre-Qin period mainly shows the exploration of the sea, the creation of oceanic gods and myths, and the expansion of marine transportation and trade (Zhao Junyao 2008).

In the Han-Wei and Six dynasties, with the gradual awakening of individual consciousness, themes of ocean literature kept expanding. Many of these themes are about seeking emotional sustenance on the sea, worshipping the ocean's heroism, praising the magnificence of the ocean, and cultural communication across the ocean. Until the Sui and Tang dynasties, the development of marine transportation and trade as well as cultural communication made ocean literature more open and diversified. Poets in the Tang Dynasty usually took oceanic scenery, sea creatures and anecdotes at sea as their chanting objects. Content such as overseas trade, shipbuilding, seamanship and slave trade appear. In these works, the characterisation of figures is vivid and depictions of maritime view are fantastic (Zhao Jianhong 2009, 16-18).

When it comes to the Song and Yuan dynasties, with the opening up of social background, ocean literature themes become increasingly richer, such as admiring the vast ocean, bemoaning people's bare livelihood, narrating naval battles' grandness, eulogizing sublime national integrity, enumerating prosperities of ship industry and praying to the god of the ocean for blessings (Zhao Junyao 2002). The Ming and Qing dynasties are another peak in the development of ocean literature. He Zheng's voyage to the Pacific and Indian oceans promote the progress of seafaring and foreign merchants, bringing much news that triggered people's interests in maritime exploration. Meanwhile, ocean literature grows rapidly, odes to the ocean emerge in great number, and their themes are more diverse. Works relative

to cultural communication, overseas stories and awareness of coastal defence spring up in abundance.

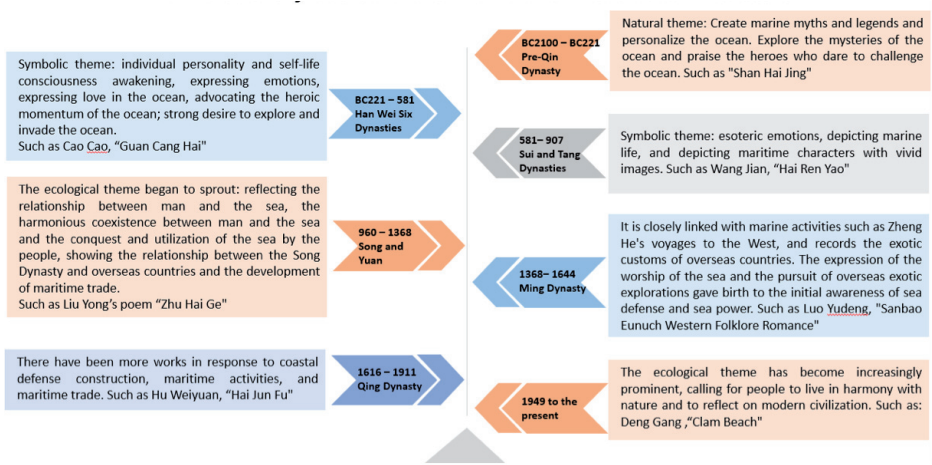


Figure 1: The evolutionary course of the theme of Chinese ocean literature.

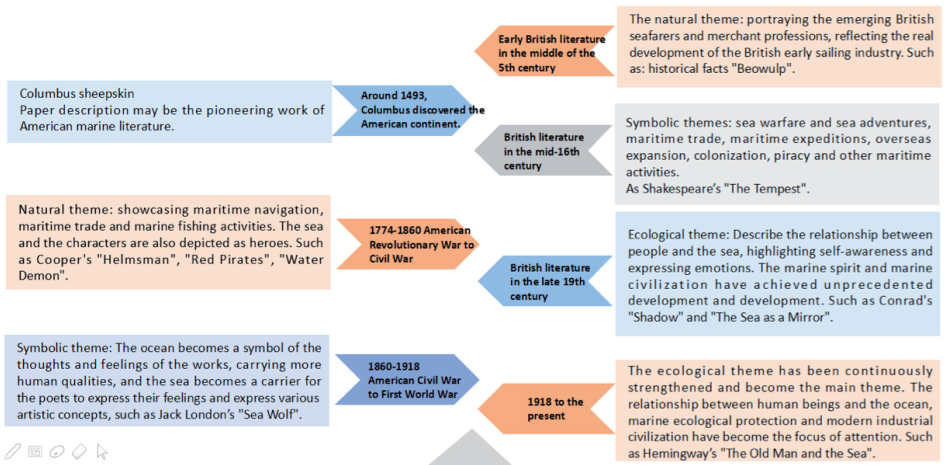


Figure 2: The evolution of the theme of the Western ocean literature.

Accordingly, the transition of Chinese ocean literature's theme can be summarised into three phases: natural representation of the ocean in early period, symbolic expression of sentiments caused by the awakening of

self-consciousness towards life in the second, and ecologism that human and the ocean harmoniously coexist in the third.

The basic trend of American ocean literature's development also fits these three phases. Bo Duan and Guiquan Zhang summarized four types of ocean poems' theme during the period from the early 19th century to the Civil War, which is the golden era in American maritime history: (1) the ocean being the wonderland and the source of romantic fantasies, (2) the terrifying and irresistibly destructive power of the ocean, (3) reflection on the circular pattern of life and creativity, and (4) discussion of America's future and destiny using the metaphor of a sailing boat.

2.1. *The Comparison of Chinese and Western Ocean Literature's Thematic Evolution*

As illustrated previously, both Chinese and Western ocean literature experienced three stages. Further, the *Book of Mountains and Seas* is the origin of Chinese ocean literature, while *Odyssey*, the epic by Homer, initiates Western ocean literature. They both imagine the ocean as a mysterious land and sea creatures as magic faeries, which provides abundant material for ocean literature in later days.

By comparison, the differences between Chinese and Western ocean literature can be summed up as follows:

1. The emergence of ocean literature in China precedes that in the West. In the pre-Qin period, there already were many poems which explore the secret of the ocean and eulogize it, while it was not until the sixth century that *Odyssey* was written down.
2. The thematic evolution of Chinese ocean literature predates that of Western ocean literature. After the appearance of a natural theme in the pre-Qin period, from 221 B.C. to 581 A.D. (namely the Han-Wei and Six dynasties), individual consciousness arises, and writers start to use the ocean as a metaphor to express personal emotions. Meanwhile in the West, ocean literature with symbolic themes springs up in Britain in the mid-twentieth century. From 960 to 1368, a period which corresponds to the Song and Yuan dynasties of China, people migrate southwards leading to a full development of a social economy in the Yangtze River Delta, and the Jin-Chu, Minyue and Nanyue areas. This then spurs the prosperity of all of southern China. Under this background, the ecological theme of Chinese ocean literature sprouts, and various works depicting maritime diplomacy and human-ocean relationship show up. As for Britain, the ecological theme is not the

mainstream until the nineteenth century when writers begin to reflect the ecological result brought by industrial civilization.

3. The thematic evolution of Western ocean literature occurs faster than that of Chinese ocean literature. It takes about 3,000 years for Chinese ocean literature to undergo its thematic evolution from primitive imagination to ecologism; this span for Western ocean literature is only about 300 years, counting from *Odyssey*. The reason for this difference is closely related to respective social developments. England in the sixteenth century is at a historical turning point when capitalism gradually is established and its comprehensive national strength increasingly improves. Themes like maritime expedition, overseas trade and piracy come along with British colonial expansion. Since the nineteenth century, especially after World War I, the negative effects of industrial civilization and modern technology become salient, and with frequent outbreaks of wars, people start to be anxious and panic. They pursue an interdependent relationship with the ocean and call for a harmonious coexistence of men and the ocean.

2.2. *Theoretical Contemplation of the Communication and Variation of Chinese and Western Ocean Literature*

Edward W. Said articulates the «traveling theory and transgressive theory» in his articles of 1982 and 1994.

Like people and schools criticism, ideas and theories travel from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another. Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and often sustained by this circulation of ideas. (Xie 1999, 138)

According to Said, any theory is in response to a specific social or historical situation, therefore theoretical variation is determined by the particular situation where it arrives. Said believes that during the whole travel of a theory, the decisive factor is always «circumstance» or «situation». The change of situation, in his view, firstly means the constraints of connotation or ineffectiveness of a conventional domain. The travel of any theory, concept or thought is supposed to contain four parts: origin, which is also the condition for its emergence; the method of travel, namely the media (including text, picture, audio and film, etc.) to represent some theory, concept or thought; the condition on which the theory will be accepted or not accepted; and the variation produced in a new situation. We can say that if a theory departs from its original context or situation and flows to

another context or situation that is regulated by different connotations, it will be encoded inevitably so its previously rich connotations will be distorted and even deconstructed and reorganized. During this process, a theory loses those connotations without explicable support; meanwhile, some new connotation is added that helps the theory spread more easily in a new situation.

The themes of Western ocean literature have sufficient and reliable meaning space for interpretation. History, culture, folk customs and reception psychology are the resources for its themes. When these themes and ideas travel to China and are represented by Chinese poems, novels, films and TV plays, a different social environment and different cultural practices in China become their restrictions in this new situation. Some of these themes are simplified, some are transformed, and some are infused with oriental elements, resulting in a new outcome that integrates both cultures. There also are some themes which are completely excluded from the new situation. The themes that enter the new situation already have been interpreted in a Chinese style so that audiences can understand them more easily and profoundly. Thematic connotations have changed in this kind of interpretation, however, and the allegedly more profound understanding will be increasingly far from the original theme.

3. PRACTICAL INTERPRETATION OF VARIATION IN ECOLOGICAL THEMES

The evolution of ecological themes in Western ocean literature is regular, which is inseparable from colonial expansion and the development of capitalism. The ecological theme in British ocean literature primarily appears in the late sixteenth century when Queen Elizabeth I takes the crown and concentrates on developing overseas trade. Privateers and royal pirates are encouraged to expand commerce and plunder wealth. In 1588, England, as the weaker force, wins a naval war against Spain, thus becoming the main force in fighting for maritime hegemony worldwide. British ocean literature in this period regards the sea as the source of fortune, and plenty of works describing marine adventures show up. In the 19th century, British ocean literature's theme gradually approaches ecologism, and man's sense of responsibility begins to awaken. Instead of conquering the ocean, people realize their interdependence with it.

The ecological theme of American ocean literature experiences similar changes. We find that early writers consider the ocean to be humanity's opponent and a target to be conquered. They use it in literary works as a tool to display adventures and treasure hunts, but at the same time the ocean

is literarily represented as the embodiment of disaster, misfortune, danger and mystery. With the accumulation of experience and knowledge, the role of ocean changes into humanity's friend and indispensable partner. It is our source of vitality and our spiritual home, endowed with human character and symbolic meaning (Jiao 2010, 110). From the American Revolution to the Civil War, American ocean literature is filled with naturalism. After the twentieth century, the damage caused by wars and scientific technologies draws people's attention. Issues like the relationship between human destiny and the ocean, ocean conservation and modern industrial civilization finally become the focus, and people's attitude towards the ocean exploitation and protection is further manifested and developed in literary works (Yang 2004, 195-98).

Traditional Confucianism in China values harmony; therefore works that express an antagonistic relationship between humans and the sea are not common in ancient times. After Zheng He's voyages to the Pacific and Indian oceans in the Ming Dynasty, there were some adventurous seafaring merchants, but their purpose was radically different from colonization. People still depend on the ocean to conduct trade, and their activities and the ocean are not opposite to each other in the creation of literature. In general, there is not a noticeable evolution in the ecological theme of Chinese ocean literature, which is its most distinctive difference from Western ocean literature in terms of ecological theme.

3.1. *The Eastward Spread of The Old Man and the Sea and its Thematic Variation*

The social contradictions in America were increasingly fierce in the late nineteenth century. After the outbreak of the Civil War, Americans start to focus on overseas trade and outward expansion. Ocean literature at this time under the influence of politics shows strong symbolic features (Xia 2009, 238). The theme of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* mainly expresses Western modern man's anxiety about post-war society, society's desperation and self-confirmation. People are alienated from their living environment, and the human-nature relationship is reversed. As a result, the interdependence of human and the ocean becomes a concern. People appeal to a harmonious coexistence of mankind and the ocean, which is the creation background of *The Old Man and the Sea*.

However, in the film *The Old Man and the Sea*, adapted by Johns Sturges, Fred Zinnemann and Henry King in 1958, the widely accepted theme among Chinese audiences is that the hero Santiago bravely

confronts and fights nature's challenge. The first Chinese version of *The Old Man and the Sea* in mainland China was translated by Guan Hai in 1957, and it shares the same theme with the 1958 film. They both display the value of humans with the old man's victory and reveal the relationships between humans and nature, delivering the idea that human beings can defeat nature. Both the Chinese translation and the film deliberately weaken the mutual understanding and interdependence between the old man and the sea. For example, in the original text, Santiago regards the ocean as a delicate woman, and they are not antagonistic. In fact, it proposes that if people get to know the capriciousness of this 'woman', they can coexist in peace (Song and Guo 2015, 47).

The animated version of *The Old Man and the Sea*, produced by Alexandre Petrov in 1999, tends to depict Santiago's mental activities and dreams, showing an old man with fading strength who tries to prove himself. It enriches the ecological theme of ocean literature with a reflection on life and humanity. For example, in his confrontation against the marlin, the old man recalls that he once held on for a day and night to win at arm wrestling when he was young, and he eventually beat his rival at dawn next morning. He depends on his memory to fight the marlin, trying to prove that he is still as powerful and dogged as before. In addition, the old man's fights with the marlin and sharks in this animation are not as fierce as in the novel. It keeps an oil painting style that is dreamy, gentle and vivid. Instead of being ferocious, the images of the marlin and sharks are ethereally beautiful. This artistic representation negates the antagonistic relation between humans and the sea, which can be demonstrated in the following episode:

Fish, he said softly, aloud, I'll stay with you until I am dead.
He is my brother. But I must kill him and keep strong to do it.
Still I would rather be that beast down there in the darkness of the sea.
It is enough to live on the sea and kill our true brother.
This fish is my friend too, he said aloud. I have never seen or heard of
such a fish.

Meanwhile, pictures show that Santiago swims with fish side by side in the sea. This episode reveals the old man's complicated affection towards the ocean and the marlin. He understands their interdependence, but he still has to subjugate and kill fish.

The relationship of the old man and the sea actually reflects the relationship between modern Western humans and the sea in reality. When this novel was written, Western society had entered the post-Darwinian epoch. The concept that humans are one part in the ecosystem and inseparable from environment was commonly accepted. On one hand, humans

rely on the ocean; on the other hand, they desire to conquer it, greedily exploiting its resources and ruling maritime space. This complicated emotion is not fully understandable in the Orient where an agriculture civilization dominates. Therefore, in the spread of *The Old Man and the Sea*, to cater to Oriental audiences, translators and movie directors strengthen the conflict more or less between Santiago and the sea, highlighting his struggling spirit and unyielding will, which finally shapes the image of a heroic old man. According to different academic options, however, whether the human-nature relationship expressed in this work is actually antagonistic or harmonious is still in doubt.

3.2. *The Variation in the Spread of the Pirate Theme and its Practical Analysis*

Pirates once played a significant role in Western countries' capital accumulation and overseas colonization. The imagination about pirates is romanticism, which leads to a unique «pirate culture», and the term «pirates» becomes a synonym for exploring and adventurous spirits. In Robert Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, however, pirates are sinisterly ruthless, barbaric, filthy and despicably avaricious men who abandon conscience as long as there is profit. All of these pirates are punished deservedly and end up miserably. This thematic variation originates under a particular social background. From 1690 to 1730, especially during the War of the Spanish Succession, the number of pirates in the Caribbean kept increasing and their activities became more frequent. Scholars called period from the 1660s to the 1720s the «golden age» for pirates when Queen Elizabeth I granted pirates letters of marque to decrease military spending and strengthen England's armament. These pirates authorized by the government were called «pirates of privateer» as well as «official pirates». They plundered considerable wealth for the queen, which boosted England's maritime commerce. They also played an important role in expanding overseas colonies and contending for English hegemony worldwide (Ronald 2009, 43-190). Pirates at this time admirably own legal status and publicly participate in government matters. Once King James I succeeded to the throne and the war with Spain ended, Britain ceased to give legal status to pirates. Their image turned from an instrument for exploitation under the cover of «legal permission» to one of «criminal» activity that the government strictly banned and cracked down on. The story of *Treasure Island* happens in the mid-late eighteenth century when official piracy had waned and the British government was anxious to cover up the stigma of official pirates, which is why the pirates' image in *Treasure Island* is inconsistent with that in traditional Western ocean literature.

Chinese readers, however, cannot understand this change of pirate identity in English history and are unable to interpret the theme in that historical context. Pirates in China had been invaders since ancient times. The negative characterization of pirates and the arrangement of their ending in *Treasure Island* is in accordance with Chinese readers' traditional thoughts.

3.2.1. The Eastward Spread of *Treasure Island* and Its Thematic Variation

Published in 1883, *Treasure Island* has been successively translated into various languages across the world. There are three relatively representative and influential Chinese translations. One was translated by Shizhi Xi in the Republican period, and another two were translated by Ruo Xin and Ru'de Song after the foundation of the People's Republic of China. This novel was labelled as children's literature when it was introduced to China, which fits the reception psychology of Chinese readers. The protagonist Jim is the embodiment of an «adventurous spirit» who satisfies teenagers' imagination about adventure. He sets a good example for children and meets parents' expectation that children are educated by reading, which is the main reason that *Treasure Island* spread widely in China. At the end of the story, pirate Long John Silver and his gang are punished and justice wins, which is consistent with Chinese readers' attitude towards pirates and their traditional value that «good and evil have their own rewards». This is not the original theme of *Treasure Island*, however.

The soar of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution created enormous wealth for the British. Countless people joined adventure teams with dreams of being rich. Jim and other characters in *Treasure Island* epitomise them. Jim, the hero, is a bourgeois pathfinder. He longs for wealth and this is firmly associated with his family and living environment. When he finally enters the treasure cave, witnessing the great heaps of coin and quadrilaterals built of bars of gold, he contemplates:

That has cost already the lives of seventeen men from the Hispaniola. How many it had cost in the amassing, what blood and sorrow, what good ships scuttled on the deep, what brave men walking the plank blindfold, what shot of cannon, what shame and lies and cruelty, perhaps no man alive could tell. (Ronald 2009, 29)

His exclamation is caused by the hardship that these pirates experienced in plundering wealth, who kill and rob at sea rather than perform the diligent work of labouring people who create wealth. Even the happy ending for Jim is that he returns with a large piece of money.

Another episode which is obviously racist is:

We cast anchor in a most beautiful land-locked gulf, and were immediately surrounded by shore boats full of Negroes and Mexican Indians and half-bloods selling fruits and vegetables and offering to dive for bits of money. (Ronald 2009, 35)

It can be easily found that Jim is the condescending conqueror in the story and this proves he is the representative of British colonist, while the «Negroes and Mexican Indians and half-bloods» stand for the colonized people who labour and create wealth.

By comparison, the theme of bourgeois economic plunder, capital accumulation and colonial expansion are simplified in China as an educational story focused on the growing of a teenager. The omitted parts also include the image of «official pirates» and the desperate situation in the beginning of the story. Jim's growing up and the idea that «good and evil have their own rewards» cover its original theme in Western context.

All in all, in the spread of Western ocean literature, due to the common nature in human behaviour, Chinese and Western ocean literature integrate, and thematic variation occurs when heterogeneous civilizations interact. Chinese readers' interpretations weaken the connotation of Western themes to some degree, emphasise some particular content or add new content to the original theme. These practices in literary communication enrich the perspectives for literature appreciation and update the themes in literary creation, which presents the diversified charm of literature study.

In addition, the thematic variation of Chinese and Western ocean literature in communication further reveals the globality and homology of literature. As the Soviet literary theorist Viktor Zhirmunsky (1891-1971) said, «There are common and regular ideas in general process of human society's development, which is the basis of historical comparison and study on literature of different nations» (Lu 1988, 98).

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