Comparative Literature: Issues and Prospect
——An Interview with Professor Svend Erik Larsen

Cha ZHANG
Sichuan Normal University
Svend Erik LARSEN
Aarhus University

Zhang Cha (hereafter as Zhang): Professor Larsen, I’m greatly honoured to have this chance to interview you.

Svend Erik Larsen (hereafter as Larsen): My pleasure. I’m looking forward to our conversation.

Zhang: As you’re an excellent scholar in comparative literature, my questions for you would mainly address this field. To begin with a general question: since its birth as a discipline some 200 years ago, Comparative Literature has been contested by scholars around the world. What is your understanding of this?

Larsen: In the beginning, the discipline did not meet positive or negative reactions from around the world, but only in Europe where it emerged, first as a set of ideas, then as a discipline within research institutions like universities. Later, it was seen in opposition to the study of national literatures which came to dominate literary studies for a very long time, also outside Europe. Later again, it was seen as a European colonial enterprise imposing a European literary canon and a European
research paradigm on the rest of the world. And later yet again, it was seen as fake science because no single scholar can master the necessary number of languages to be a true comparatist. So, the criticism that has occurred has to be contextualized historically.

This also means that each type of criticism will give rise to different and context specific counter arguments, such as the following: In its early days, comparative literature actually presupposed clearly delimited national literatures. Comparisons were established between works and authors within well defined national literatures. Although comparative literature was seen as opposed to the study of national literature, there was no real conflict between the two types of literary studies, but rather a mutual interdependence allowing the comparative perspective to enrich the understanding of national and local literatures.

Or, another rejoinder to a later criticism: Although it is true that the discipline gained ground outside Europe in a colonial and Eurocentric context, it is equally true that it offered new ways of studying non-European literatures in relation to other literatures and cultures and, by doing so, the discipline, at the same time, opened new vistas for the study of European literature. The growing interest in World Literature studies is an example of such developments of the discipline as a response to the criticism it has been met with in a post-colonial context.

Zhang: What is now the biggest problem in comparative literature studies?

Larsen: For me the development of World Literature studies during the last about 20 years has been the most important change of the discipline, opening the eyes of scholars and readers alike to the co-existence of a multiplicity of cultures in the globalized world we all live in. Moreover, this development will force us to redefine theories, notions and methodologies of comparison. So, how to handle the expansion of cultural contexts and languages to be taken into account, this is a problem we are dealing with right now around the world, not just because of the sheer number of contexts and languages, but because this challenge forces us to reorganize the way we work in the Humanities in general and open for more interdisciplinary studies and collaborations in research teams. There is a whole institutionalized individual mindset that will have to be changed and turned into new and more collective working habits.

But, in a longer time perspective, there will also be problems beyond this more familiar one. New insights in the technical sciences and in neuroscience call for new types of interdisciplinarity which we have not yet been able to establish, neither as a
paradigm nor as a working strategy. But it is clear that a discipline that works with languages and other media, that works with fictional scenario-making, that works with the role of human imagination and creativity, that works with subjectivity and identity issues, such a discipline will be needed: comparative literature. But this repositioning of the discipline requires fundamental change in the way we educate students and researchers, build our programmes and practice our discipline. There is a long way to go.

Zhang: A couple of years ago Professor Cao Shunqing published *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*, introduced by the late Douwe Fokkema. What's your comment on Professor Cao Shunqing's *Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*?

Larsen: Douwe Fokkema was a great friend of mine. We worked together in the International Comparative Literature Association when he was President of the association in the 1990s and later in the Academia Europaea. As you know, he took a great interest in the study of literature in China. Professor Cao Shunqing's book is one of many examples around the world today, trying to attack the problem of staying loyal to a local tradition and at the same time look to the larger context in an attempt to change both the local way of thinking and also the view from outside on this tradition, with the overall aim to foster a new interaction between them. Coming, as you do, from a large culture like the Chinese, which, however, is less known in the traditional comparative environments, or originating in a small culture on the margin of the cultural and linguistic world map, as I do, both situations point to the same basic experience with respect to the relation between the local and the global.

Zhang: For years the scholars in China have been talking about the formation of the Chinese School of Comparative Literature Studies. As to whether or not there exists such a school, different scholars have expressed different views. Do you think that there exists in a real sense the Chinese School of Comparative Literature Studies that stands alongside with the French School of Comparative Literature Studies and the American School of Comparative Literature Studies? If your answer is yes, what are the major features of the Chinese School of Comparative Literature Studies?

Larsen: This is a question that often pops up in various places, not only in China: do we need a local research profile to mark ourselves in the international research community? There may be different nodes around the world where the new trends in a discipline emerge. If they are pertinent, they will spread and their home will be irrelevant; if not, they will stay at home without reaching out to the world.
This is so whether they label themselves a school or not. Hence, it is completely irrelevant and against the basic idea of comparative literature, and comparative studies in general, to try to launch a national school. After a short while, such attempts have always been contradicted by the comparative practice which blows up the national confinement of authors, literatures and schools.

French theory as a school is more discussed in the USA than in France; the same goes for deconstructionism. Ecocriticism, to take another example, may have been launched in the USA, but has no national home anymore; or, where it still has, it is narrow and obsolete. Semiotics dried out in a sterile opposition between a European and an American school. With the emergence of World Literature, Digital Humanities, the Post-Human and such future oriented interdisciplinary fields that require comparative approaches, the idea of branding a national school is utterly insignificant and misleading. It will, as always, end with closed self-celebration instead of open self-criticism, the only way to important developments in science and culture.

If there is a strong movement toward creating a Chinese School of Comparative Literature, I would not recommend comparatists to join; if there is a strong movement toward creating a broad Chinese association for comparative studies to be used as a platform both for an open, self-critical view of the domestic practices and collaborations and for an open, critical and cooperative approach to the global comparative environment, this has to be welcomed. I hope you will move in this direction. My visit here and my acquaintance with colleagues nurture that hope.

Zhang: What do you think are the basic requirements for a qualified scholar of comparative literature studies?

Larsen: This is a question we all take with us as long as we live, constantly probing if we can live up to our own standards for scholarship. First, the most important basic requirements are shared by many disciplines and research domains, across the whole palette of sciences:

1) a solid knowledge of the basic material (in our case: literary and cultural artefacts) and competence to find out how to reorient and expand the present stock of knowledge;

2) an overview of theories and methods as they have been developed step by step by the disciplines over the years in order to enable the scholar to argue for his or her selection of material in relation to the research questions the scholar wants to address—research material as well as theories or methodologies are never just given
in advance as a set of ready-mades or already known tools, but always have to be selected, combined and developed, based on an argument initiated by a set of stimulating research questions;

3) an understanding of the present state of the art in the discipline in order for the scholar to judge the degree of relevance and originality of his or her ideas and research strategy.

When it comes to comparative literature in particular, two additional requirements come to the fore:

1) The capacity of the scholar to place his or her work within the larger context of Humanities. In the Humanities the point of departure must always be the role of human agency in its interaction with the world. It is never enough to know the rule of genres or the dates of authors and other trivial encyclopedic facts. How does my study of literature foster a broader understanding of the ways texts shape a world view, an idea of humanity, cultural values, etc.? This is the type of question that has to be an essential part of the scholarly endeavor.

2) The second requirement is more difficult: It is the capacity to have a flexible view of possible dimensions of the comparison itself, to constantly reconsider what comparison means in terms of material, theory, methodology and history. To compare literature and non-literary material is not the same as to compare a set of literary works; it is a different ball game altogether to compare works within a given culture or historical period in contrast to a project of pursuing a comparison between different cultures and historical periods. There is, and has never been, one comparative paradigm or strategy that fits all.

Zhang: To end with a more personal question: you are a famous scholar enjoying high reputation and have many fans here in China. You have rich experience in both personal life and academic research senses. Would you please give some words or suggestions to us comparative literature scholars especially the young ones in China based on your own experience?

Larsen: Thank you for the kind words. Luckily, in science we can never nominate the best in the world in any discipline. There will always be somebody else who also deserves the praise with an equal right, also when it comes to the Nobel Prize. So, going for fame is going for a short lived pleasure. The best you can ever get as a scholar is the respect and recognition from colleagues and students, because such recognition is based on personal encounters and mutual respect.

Moreover, it is often claimed that to be a scholar, particularly in the
Humanities, is a solitary experience. It may be so in certain exclusive moments when you are alone writing or scrutinizing the texts and savoring the rich experience of reading. But these situations do not constitute our work; they are just moments, and necessary moments, in the larger context of our work. Literature and the Humanities are about human life which is always a shared life, not a solitary life. Even when alone, I know that my body follows a rhythm that I share with billions of fellow human beings. Even when I day dream alone, I do so in a language I share with others. So, if we as professionals dive into the certain moments of silent solitude, it is always in order to get out again and translate our findings into language, communication or just a social and cultural practice. This is an important perspective, in our private life as well, because in the future our work in itself will take on more collaborative forms, which often, at least for my generation, is regarded as a radical change. It is not. We have always shared our knowledge in various ways with others in education and other types of dissemination. Why shouldn’t we be able to do the same in the research process as well? After all, research is nothing but a lifelong educational process, and nobody can be educated in permanent solitude.

My advice to young scholars is to go for respect from peers before going for fame, and to cultivate the shareable dimensions of our common passion; literature.

Zhang: Thanks for accepting the invitation to this interview. Thanks for your stimulating answers to my questions.

Larsen: Thanks to you. I enjoyed talking with you.

Cha Zhang, Ph. D. candidate in Comparative Literature and World Literature, College of Literature and Journalism, Sichuan University. He serves as professor of English Literature at School of Foreign Languages, Sichuan Normal University. His recent publications include articles on traditional Chinese culture and literature, British and American literature as well as comparative literature. Currently his dissertation focuses on T. S. Eliot in the English-speaking World.

Svend Erik Larsen, Professor Emeritus of Comparative Literature, Aarhus University. He is research director of the Humanities Research Center: Man & Nature (1992 – 1997); honorary professor, University College London; board member of the Danish National Research Foundation (2012 – 2015); Vice-President of the Board of Trustees of the Academia Europaea (2015 – ); Class Chair