

Comparative Literature and Comparative Cultural Studies: An Interview with Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek¹

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Abstract:

In this interview, Professor Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek discusses his personal and scholarly background and what he believes a comparative literature scholar ought to have training in. Further, Tötösy de Zepetnek comments on comparative literature and his theoretical framework “comparative cultural studies”. Tötösy de Zepetnek closes the interview with his thoughts about the notions of the “American Dream” and the “Chinese Dream” and his suggestion about how to improve comparative literature scholarship in China.

Keywords: comparative literature, digital humanities, literary canon, comparative cultural studies, the Chinese School of Comparative Literature

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Zhang (henceforth “Z”): Professor Tötösy de Zepetnek, I conduct this interview with you because you have been invited several times to teach at Sichuan University. Please allow me to start with regard to your background as a person and as a scholar.

Tötösy de Zepetnek (henceforth “T”): Indeed, I have been invited to Sichuan University three times: in 2013 as a guest professor and in 2014 and 2015 for the university’s summer program. I was born in Hungary in 1950 and left the country in 1964 because at that time (during the Soviet colonization of Hungary) “bourgeois” (i.e., “class alien”) people’s children were not allowed to attend high school. I attended high school in Germany and Austria and graduated in Switzerland. Following high school I worked in a fiber glass factory in Switzerland and then decided to leave Europe and immigrated to Canada where I completed my undergraduate and graduate education with a PhD in comparative literature at the University of Alberta in 1989. I taught at the University of Alberta until 2000 when we moved to the U.S. because my spouse Joanne, who has a PhD in neuroscience and pharmacology, received an offer in the pharmaceutical industry. Although I had a faculty appointment at Purdue University until my retirement in December 2016, I was also professor of media and communication studies at the University of Halle-Wittenberg (Germany) from 2002 to 2011, as well as had guest professorships in the U.S., Europe, India, Mainland China and Taiwan, etc. With regard to scholarship—and this has to do with my “cosmopolitan” and “migrant” upbringing and life—it is based on the use of several languages and an awareness of the benefits of “migration” resulting in familiarity with differences of culture, hence my natural affiliation with the “comparative.”

Z: You are an accomplished scholar in comparative literature and cultural studies and your list of publications² include more than two dozen single-authored and edited books and over 200 peer-reviewed articles in a variety of disciplines and fields of study in the humanities and social sciences. What would in your opinion be required to be a good scholar in general and in comparative literature in particular?

T: One matter I would insist on is that scholars of literature and culture in comparative literature (but also in the study of any literature) ought to be able to speak and read several languages. For example, in the U.S. most humanities scholars know at best one other language and this, in my opinion, is detrimental to scholarship. And the situation is similar in China where in the humanities including literary studies focus is more often than not on English only.

Z: It is interesting that one of your books appeared in Chinese. In 1997 Peking

2 <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/totosycv>.

University Press published your *Wenxue yanjiu de hefahua: yizhong xin shiyongzhu yi, zhengtihua he jingyanzhuyi wenxue yu wenhua yanjiu fangfa* (Legitimizing the Study of Literature: A New Pragmatism and the Systemic Approach to Literature and Culture, Trans. Jui-ch'i Ma). How did the book come about?

T: The book was the result of having been invited to Peking University as a guest professor in 1995 and 1996 (three months each) and I put the book together based on lectures I delivered there to graduate students. Some of the material in the book is available in English in my 1998 book, *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application*³.

Z: In addition to comparative literature and cultural studies, you taught and published in diverse fields including comparative media and communication studies, postcolonial studies, (im)migration and ethnic minority studies, digital humanities, film and literature, audience studies, European, US-American, and Canadian cultures and literatures, history, and bibliography. I am particularly interested in canon formation because you often discuss the concept of the literary canon. What are the criteria for a literary canon?

T: There is no single canon, but several canons and my take on this is that, in principle, canon formation is “cumulative.” The theory of cumulative canon formation consists of theoretical, as well as methodologically operational and functional aspects which prescribe the necessity of studying multiple and combined factors of the literary system in order to arrive at an understanding of canon formation. In other words, the “cumulative” factor consists of the combination of systemic categories, an innovative definition of the canon and canonicity and *catacaustics* (my term), while the operational and functional postulate must be satisfied by elements of observation (empirical data) and application. Among other factors such as critics’ and scholars’ work when “bringing” a text to attention, one of the most important components of cumulative canon formation consists of the situation, mechanisms, status and altogether systemic impact of readership.

Z: You propose in your framework of “comparative cultural studies” — a field of study you have been developing since the early 1990s—that the methodology of the systemic and empirical approach understood as “contextual” ought to include ethics. Would you please give us a brief explanation of your idea?

T: Indeed, ethics in its widest definition is a concern of mine when doing work in literary and cultural scholarship. Perhaps the quickest way to explain is to quote from my 1999 article “From Comparative Literature Today toward Comparative

3 Rodopi; the book is available online in the *Library Series of CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* at <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/totosycomparativeliterature1998>.

Cultural Studies”:

The second principle of comparative cultural studies is the theoretical as well as methodological postulate to move and to dialogue between cultures, languages, literatures, and disciplines. This is a crucial aspect of the framework, the approach as a whole, and its methodology. In other words, attention to other cultures—that is, the comparative perspective—is a basic and founding element and factor of the framework. The claim of emotional and intellectual primacy and subsequent institutional power of national cultures is untenable in this perspective. In turn, the built-in notions of exclusion and self-referentiality of single culture study and their result of rigidly defined disciplinary boundaries are notions against which comparative cultural studies offers an alternative as well as a parallel field of study. This inclusion extends to all Other, all marginal, minority, border, and peripheral and it encompasses both form and substance. However, attention must be paid of the “how” of any inclusionary approach, attestation, methodology, and ideology so as not to repeat the mistakes of Eurocentrism and “universalization” from a “superior” Eurocentric point of view. Dialogue is the only solution (Tötösy de Zepetnek 1999: 12).

The notion and application of ethics based on “dialogue” has also practical reasons, and the current migration crisis in Europe and the historical lack of policies and practices of and for the integration of immigrants in European countries is a good example. One can neither physically shut down all borders nor is it possible to wish away the impact of (im)migration. Hence, my argument that apart from a “universal” ethics of humanism, it makes no sense to insist on the maintenance of cultural homogeneity and its hegemony in any society. Positive cultural diversity means recognition and consequently inclusion and cultural homogeneity and hegemony means marginalization and consequently exclusion. Importantly, it makes no sense to do such in terms of the basic force of existence of the industrialized and technologically advanced world, that of business capitalism and market orientation: (im)migrant populations constitute a presence (and they are a significant market, as well as a significant job creation force). Therefore, it is preferable and a demonstration of business acumen to create an environment where positive cultural diversity is officially sanctioned and promoted by the various levels of government, the business community, the educational system, etc., in other words, in the whole of social discourse and practices.

Z: Since its birth in the early nineteenth century, the discipline of comparative

literature has been criticized for having no theoretical framework. What is your understanding of this?

T: We should note that the “comparative” in comparative literature is, in principle, already a theoretical (and applied) approach. However, indeed, comparative literature is a discipline that borrows theories, approaches, and ideas from other disciplines and fields of scholarship. I do not see this as a problem, but as an advantage, although comparative literature could do better when developing specific, that is, “home-grown” theoretical frameworks. And this is precisely what I am doing in comparative cultural studies, a combination of tenets of comparative literature and cultural studies: “I believe that to make the study of literature and culture a socially relevant activity of scholarship we ought to do contextual work parallel with regard to professional concerns such as the job market, the matter of academic publishing, and digital humanities and, put more broadly, with regard to the role of social, political, and economic aspects of humanities scholarship. Hence my proposal that with the comparative and contextual approach—practiced in interdisciplinarity and employing new media technology—comparative cultural studies could achieve in-depth scholarship and the social relevance of the humanities” (Tötösy de Zepetnek 2017: 191).

Z: What is in your opinion the biggest problem in comparative literature studies today?

T: Your question is difficult to reply to in a brief manner because it depends on “where.” In the so-called centers of the discipline (Europe and the U.S.) I think one of the problems is that the knowledge of foreign languages is diminishing. In the U.S. comparative literature is mostly done in translation, i.e., texts are read and analyzed not in their original, but in English translation. While it is better to read and study literatures of the world in translation than not at all, when it comes to scholarship, in my opinion, it would be necessary to be able to read texts in the original, and of course it is also necessary to be able to read scholarship in foreign languages and not only in English. Another problem is what you asked about—namely the question of theory: because since the 1970s theoretical frameworks have been developed not in comparative literature, but (mostly) in departments of English and this—despite my contention that “borrowing” should not be a problem—not only devaluates comparative literature, but most importantly diminishes the number of graduate students who then would further the discipline in faculty positions. Yet a further problem is that in the U.S. comparative literature is undergoing a constriction meaning that faculty positions are less and less available. At the same time, said constriction is much less occurring in China, Latin America, and in several European countries including Spain (but there is constriction in other European countries including

France and Germany).

Z: For years scholars in China have been talking about the formation of the Chinese School of Comparative Literature. As to whether or not there exists such a school, there are different views from both at home and abroad. Cao Shunqing, Professor at Sichuan University, China, concludes: “The development of comparative literature has experienced three stages, that is, the first stage (European stage) with the French School as its representative, the second stage (American stage) with the American School as its representative, and the third stage after the rise of comparative literature in Asia (Asian stage). One of the discipline theory systems of the third stage is the formation of the Chinese School.” (Cao Shunqing 128) While Gayatri Hakravorty Spivak, Professor at Columbia University, the U. S., asserts: “I don’t know yet anything about the French School or the American School, not to say the Chinese School.” (Zhang Cha, Huang Weiliang 60) What do you think about it?

T: My reply would have to be tentative, as I do not read Chinese. What I can say is that in the last several years scholars in China published work with the objective to develop theoretical frameworks which are not based on Western thought only, but also on Chinese thought. In the open-access (and Thomson Reuters indexed) quarterly I founded and edited 1999-2016—*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*⁴—we are paying attention to these developments and there are a good number of studies available on this topic in the journal.

Z: In literature as well as comparative literature studies, we usually need to probe into politics, economy, society, history, religion, etc. The “American Dream”, for instance, is an important theme in American literature. It may be traced back to the early North American colonists. It is rooted in *the Declaration of Independence*, issued on July 4, 1776, and it is a national ethos and a set of ideals of the United States. In in a visit to the National Museum of China on November 29, 2012, Xi Jinping, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, put forward the concept of “Chinese Dream”, and likewise it is a national ethos and a set of ideals of China. What from your viewpoint would be basic points concerning the “American Dream” and the “Chinese Dream”?

T: In general, the “American Dream” refers to the possibility of finding freedom and opportunities in the U.S. However, while this was and still is true in many instances, the “American Dream” is also a construct of mythology because it does not always offer a new start away from poverty and persecution. We cannot forget the situation of African Americans and immigrants from Latin America for whom

4 <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>

the “American Dream” often did not and does not materialize. As for the “Chinese Dream,” I am not sure what to think about this although it remains a fact that China today is an economic world power. It is another question whether the “West” (I mean not only the U.S., but also Europe and Latin America, India, Africa, the Middle East, etc., thus the metaphorical all Other outside of China) would become interested in the richness Chinese culture offers. In other words, if the “Chinese Dream” refers to matters material only, it will not achieve excellence; but if it is a construct based on matters material (financial, industrial, technological) AND cultural including education in a global context, it will advance China and the Chinese. If the “Chinese Dream” means that the humanities are relegated to a second-class status and science and technology receive exclusive preference, while it may achieve much in the short term, it will fail in the long term (and this is the case also with regard to the U.S. and the discussion about the advancing of STEM subjects in education to the detriment of the humanities).

Z: Such a productive scholar as you deserves popularity and respect. However, “there are still some differences between this kind of pursuit of the intellectual elite and the stars in the entertainment circles, such as music, television, film, etc. It can be said that the popularity of stars in academia is dwarfed by that of the stars in the entertainment circles.” (Zhang Cha, Yue Daiyun 178-179) What do you make of this phenomenon?

T: I think your question is directed at the U.S. where scholars do not figure as “public intellectuals” similar to European cultures. Although there have been and are attempts to engage scholars in U.S. public discourse, I think the responsibility and function of scholars is first and foremost scholarship and if in the U.S. the function of “public intellectuals” does not develop, as I assume, so be it. I should like to add that while as said there is limited recognition of scholars in public discourse or in the media in the U.S. or Canada, in European countries this is different. It is in this context that I am an elected member of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts / *Academia Scientiarum et Artium Europaea*.

Z: In closing, I have a specific question: would you be able to offer suggestions to young Chinese scholars in comparative literature with regard to how to conduct research in our discipline?

T: One important matter in my opinion would be that Chinese scholars of literature in general and of comparative literature in particular should have knowledge of several foreign languages and not English only. While English would have to be one of the languages, another one or two (whether another Western language or Hindi or any other foreign language) would raise the quality and impact of Chinese schol-

arship. In my opinion, the current focus in the humanities on English (thus meaning the U.S. in most instances) is restricting knowledge. Another important matter would be that when Chinese scholars analyze Western or other texts, they ought to refer to not only Western sources, but analyze texts based on Chinese theoretical thought. This implies that Chinese students and scholars ought to have substantial knowledge of Chinese literature and literary history no matter what discipline or field they are working in or studying.

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Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek's research, teaching, and publications are in comparative literature, comparative cultural studies, and media and communication studies including postcolonial studies, (im)migration & ethnic minority studies, feminist & gender studies, film & literature, digital humanities & data science, education & cultural policy, readership & audience studies, Holocaust studies, online course design in the humanities, editing & publishing in print & digital, conflict management & diversity training, history (genealogy and heraldry). Education: Ph.D. 1989 Comparative Literature University of Alberta; B.Ed. 1984 History and English as a Second Language University of Ottawa; M.A. 1983 Comparative Literature Carleton University; B.A. 1980 History and German Studies University of

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