

Perspectives from the East in Comparative Literature: An Interview with Professor Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta

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Abstract:

This is an interview on Comparative Literature with Professor Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta in the Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, conducted by Professor Zhang Cha in the College of Foreign Languages, Sichuan Normal University. In this interview, Professor Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta overviews Comparative Literature in India, outlines the Chinese studies in the context of Indian Comparative Literature, explores the Sino-Indian cooperation in comparative literature studies, expounds the relationship between World Literature and Comparative Literature, analyses the challenges of Comparative Literature, introduces the coping strategies of Indian Comparative Literature, discusses the Chinese School of Comparative Literature, and explores the ways in which Comparative Literature can build a harmonious world.

Key words: India, comparative literature, perspectives from the East, Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta

Zhang Cha: Professor Dasgupta, you're a distinguished Indian scholar of Comparative Literature and I'm very happy to have this chance to interview you.

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: Professor Zhang, I am also very happy to get this opportunity to exchange views with an eminent Chinese comparatist.

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I. Comparative Literature in India

Zhang Cha: Your work *Literary Studies in India: Genology* was published by Jadavpur University Press in 2004. Would you please share with us your main discoveries in genology?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: *Genology* is an edited volume. It was a preliminary effort to work out the many nuances in the idea of genre in India as different from those of the West, along with large similarities. In the case of Aristotle, for instance, the three types of differentiating factors among arts of imitation were mode, object and means of imitation. For Indian aestheticians, *kavya* or texts constituted by the unity of word and meaning as different from Aristotle's arts of imitation, could be classified with reference to the visual or aural, to the language used, that is Sanskrit, Prakrit or Apabhramsa, to attitude towards life and the world whether idealistic or realistic, and to general stylistic devices. In the context of oral texts, it was evident that systemic dimensions that constituted communicative events, kinds of audience, context, relation between audience and performer, function etc., shaped the genre. Individual genres like the testimonio were also analyzed and in the case of the testimonio it was found that in the context of struggle testimonial writing exceeds the individual self and infuses in it a collective consciousness. Since the volume was an edited one, there were several articles with varied findings.

Zhang Cha: We know that long before the establishment of Comparative Literature as a discipline, there were texts focusing on comparative aspects of literature in India. Would you please expound it to us?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: In my earlier article where I raised this issue I was referring mainly to the Bengali texts of the nineteenth century that often took up comparisons between Sanskrit or Bengali literature and European literature. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's "Sakuntala, Miranda and Desdemona" is a pertinent example. There were then numerous essays in many Indian languages comparing Shakespeare and Kalidasa. There were also comparisons between the Sanskrit epics and their renderings into regional languages. The theme of World Literature appearing in many late nineteenth and early twentieth century texts, particularly in the context of translation, is also important in the conceptualization of Comparative Literature in India.

Zhang Cha: Rabindranath Tagore's idea of "visvasahitya" was complex, marked by a sense of a community of artists as workers building together an edifice, that of world literature; whereas, Buddhadeva Bose did not fully subscribe to the idealist visions of Rabindranath Tagore, for he believed it was necessary to break

away from Rabindranath Tagore to be a part of the times, of modernity. Between the two, with whom would you like to side?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: Rabindranath Tagore tried to put his utopic ideas into practice all his life as is evident from the establishment of Visva Bharati and Santiniketan. Many of his ideas have gained new relevance today in the context of pedagogy, of ecological balance; of creative endeavors etc., hence it is impossible not to respond affirmatively to his literature that was strongly linked with his ideas on different aspects of life. At the same time, Buddhadeva Bose and others after him were trying to engage with the reality of the modern in a more mundane, down-to-earth fashion. Here again, a modern sensibility could not but respond to his formulations. So, I would say that from different perspectives both are relevant and both have a great deal to offer. I must clarify though that Bose and later modernist writers critiqued Tagore in general for his faith in a world-vision when everything around them was in chaos, they did not particularly critique his idea of “visvasahitya.” In fact there were several writers who continued to engage with the term in their own fashion.

Zhang Cha: Comparative Literature in India began at the department at Jadavpur University in the 1950s. How did it begin?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: Jadavpur University was established in 1956 and Buddhadeva Bose was invited to Chair the Department of Comparative Literature. Before that Rabindranath Tagore had delivered his lecture on World Literature at the National Council of Education, the parent body of Jadavpur University, in 1907. The National Council of Education was formed to give shape to an education policy that would be compatible with the needs of the country.

Zhang Cha: The establishment of the Department of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University in 1956, marked the beginnings of Comparative Literature in India. The same year, the department offered its first syllabus. This syllabus in your term “was quite challenging.” In what sense was it quite challenging?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: The syllabus was vast. There was classical Sanskrit literature, ancient Greek and Roman Literature, the medieval period in Indian and European literature, Bengali literature from the early to the modern period and then European literature of the medieval period, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the Romantic and the modern period. A student taking his Master’s degree had to cover all that in two years.

Zhang Cha: Though he died at the age of only 40, Satyendranath Dutta (also spelt as Satyendranath Datta or Satyendra Nath Dutta, 1882 - 1922) won high reputation. Rabindranath Tagore has immortalized him in a poem written after his

death, and a street in South Kolkata has been named after him. He is considered the wizard of rhymes, and he was an eminent poet-translator and an expert in many disciplines of intellectual enquiry including medieval Indian history, culture, and mythology. As for translations, he stated in 1904 that establishing relations with literatures of the world was “relationships of joy.” What’s your comment on his statement?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: It is very typical of the period, when people were freely translating poetry from different literatures, calling them shadow translations sometimes, in a spirit of joy. Satyendranath Dutta himself was a great translator and took pleasure in creating different kinds of rhythmic patterns, which were to him once more a source of joy. The act of translation was for him an act of establishing relations with poems from other lands purely for pleasure. In a way, it was his perspective on World Literature. Getting to know other literatures deeply was an entry point into relations and relations led to joy. There was a desire it seems at that point of time to be a part of the world community of writers.

Zhang Cha: Many Indian scholars think that India has only regional literatures, such as Tamil literature, Malayalam literature, Bengali literature and so on. No wonder that some Indian scholars questioned whether people can really talk about the term Indian literature (Amiya Dev and S. K. Das 53). What do you think of this?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: As a comparatist, I believe that no literature exists on its own, there is a constant series of interconnections, and this is more so sometimes when there is a shared heritage and history. Hence while each language in India has its own literature, it is also shaped by other Indian literatures, and a large common historical background. However, Tamil, Malayalam and Bengali are all independent literatures and at the same time also a part of the large and varied corpus of Indian literature. Sometimes scholars also speak of Indian Literatures.

Zhang Cha: Comparative Literature in India in the 21st century engaged with two other related fields of study, one was Translation Studies and the other Cultural Studies. Would you please tell us more about this?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: Several new Departments of Comparative Literature have come up that are called Comparative Literature and Translation Studies. The one at Ambedkar University, Delhi, is a recent example. Even in older Departments of Comparative Literature there are one or two courses on Translation Studies. This is inevitable as one needs to work out the nature of interliterary and intercultural engagements through Translation Studies. Some applied courses could also help in learning to approach other systems of aesthetics and cultures.

Similarly, Cultural Studies has also found its place in Comparative Literature syllabi across the country. A few primary texts from the Birmingham School are generally introduced and then each department in India has its own area of focus. The Department of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur, for instance, has a course where perspectives on nationalism, imperialism, gender, identity, multiculturalism etc. in different cultural traditions are studied. Otherwise, there is also a separate component or course on literature and intermediality, where again one engages with Cultural Studies

Zhang Cha: Some Chinese scholars hold that ancient China, India and Greece enjoyed unique poetics of their own, and these poetics are the three major sources of the world's poetics. Closepet Dasappa Narasimhaiah (1921–2005), the founder of Dhanyaloka Centre for Indian Studies and a famous expert in poetics, held that Sanskrit poetics should be a part of the world cultural heritage (Narasimhaiah 36). What roles should the Sanskrit poetics play in comparative literature studies?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: It is very essential to have a course in Comparative Aesthetics, but somehow that is not taught in many universities doing Comparative Literature, partly because of the lack of scholars having a deep and thorough knowledge of at least two systems. But in any case, Sanskrit poetics does play an important role in courses related to Ancient Literature in India, in working out concepts related to *kavya*. Approaches to literature through the *rasa* theory are also not uncommon. Then a study of both Aristotle's *Poetics* and Bharata's *Natyasastra* becomes necessary to approach early drama, Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* and Kalidas's *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, for instance. But I do feel that one needs to look at Sanskrit poetics in greater detail and move out to other ancient aesthetic systems and related poetics in the Asian context.

Zhang Cha: Rabindranath Tagore gave a talk entitled "Visvasahitya" at the National Council of Education in his hometown Calcutta in 1907. His term "Visvasahitya" is roughly identical to "comparative literature" and thus the talk is generally regarded as the mark of the start of Indian Comparative Literature. To survey Comparative Literature in India, we cannot bypass Rabindranath Tagore. What is your comment on his position in Indian Comparative Literature as well as in World Comparative Literature?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: Rabindranath Tagore was working with an ideal in his essay on Visvasahitya or World Literature and was not proposing a pedagogic structure for the study of World Literature. It would be good if both Comparative Literature in India and elsewhere looked more closely at his notions on literature that were also necessarily connected with human relationships and

the whole question of joy in such relations of reciprocity. One could read his essay, and along with it a few others, to engage with literature in a holistic fashion that would also serve humanitarian and environmental needs from a very large and open perspective. The relationship with the local and the global is also worked out in his writings. Rabindranath Tagore does have an important place in Comparative Literature courses in India, and more translations are needed of his works to study him in context in Departments of Comparative Literature outside India.

Zhang Cha: As for whether Comparative Indian Literature is Comparative Literature, different Indian scholars have different ideas. D.S. Mishra, the Dean of the Graduate Department of English, Sardar Patel University, believes that comparative Indian literature cannot be considered pure Comparative Literature, while Amiya Dev, a former professor at Comparative Literature Department, Jadavpur University, argues that Comparative Indian literature is true Comparative Literature. What is your opinion?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: I prefer the nomenclature Comparative Literature though after having worked at Delhi University, I realize that the Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies cannot but do Comparative Literature within the framework of Comparative Indian Literature. While looking at Indian Literature one necessarily has to look beyond the geopolitical region again and again because of the different cultures with which it came into contact and which always had an important role to play in the syncretic nature of the cultural formation. Hence in such a context even while doing Indian Literature, one is doing Comparative Literature. I think Amiya Dev meant that in India one has to do a kind of Indian Comparative Literature as histories of reception, as assimilation and analogy differ from country to country, and India like any other country, has its unique contexts. Comparative Literature, as it is practiced in different places, is necessarily defined by the histories of these places, both cultural and political.

Zhang Cha: The fundamental purpose of Comparative Indian Literature is to find out the “Indianness,” so as to find cultural ties for a multilingual, multi-religious and multi-racial India, and to promote the national unity and integrity. What is the main connotation of “Indianness”?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: For some scholars, the purpose of Comparative Indian Literature is to bring to the foreground the pluralistic dimensions that are constantly at work in the country with relation to diverse communities and the dynamics of pluralist epistemologies at work in literary and cultural expressions. This too is “Indianness,” the presence of many cultures and traditions. However,

this is true of other cultures too, and I would say that to look for the different origins and nuances of literary motifs, images, myths etc. operating in a particular culture is one of the goals of comparatists in the world in general. What I mean is that literary cultures continue to be inflected by many cultures and the comparatist necessarily tries to study the many in the one. However, even as we speak of particular cultures we are speaking of certain elements that entered a particular culture because of historical events and certain elements in its life-world, certain aesthetic norms and values and modes of approach to phenomenon. But these again have been modified in history, to a large extent, also because of interactions with other cultures. The study of transformations is important.

Zhang Cha: *Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature* went on to become an important journal in literary studies in India. Would you please make a brief introduction to this journal?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: The annual journal came out in 1961 edited by Naresh Guha who was then head of the department. Articles were mostly in English, but Bengali was also often used. In the first few years there were mostly articles on East-West studies and sometimes on specific Indian or Western literatures. One of the early issues had Baudelaire as theme, dealing with studies on Baudelaire in different places and from different perspectives. Eminent comparatists from different places outside India contributed to the journal and there were book reviews from time to time. Gradually Indian literature began to receive prominence along with literatures from Africa and Latin America. There were special issues on Translation Studies, Testimonial Literature, and also one on Literature as Knowledge System. *Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature* continues to have an important presence in the academic world.

Zhang Cha: After Comparative Literature in India was established, two national associations of Comparative Literature came into being, one at Jadavpur University called Indian Comparative Literature Association and the other in Delhi University named Comparative Indian Literature Association. In 1992 the two merged and the Comparative Literature Association of India was formed. What role does the association play in Comparative Literature studies in India?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: The Association holds annual conferences and has a Newsletter and an online journal. It is also associated with ICLA and disseminates news related to ICLA conferences. The papers submitted at the conferences give an insight into what the general literature scholars in the country hold as important and their perspectives on it.

Zhang Cha: In the last few years Comparative Literature in India has taken

on new perspectives, engaging with different areas of culture and knowledge, particularly those related to marginalized spaces, along with the focus on recovering new areas of non-hierarchical literary relations. What's the detailed story?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: The Department of Comparative Literature started working on oral narratives present in rural India today, on those forms that were on the verge of extinction and tried to document them from different areas. The focus was also on methodology, on how one could document and work with indigenous traditions without appropriating their knowledge systems and if possible, allow the people to build their own archives. The presence of elements from expressive traditions in rural communities in metropolitan genres was also taken up for detailed study by several Indian comparatists. The Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies in Delhi University too has a strong focus on performative traditions of tribal communities.

Zhang Cha: What are the key features of the Indian School of Comparative Literature?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: Comparative Literature is taught in different places in the country from different perspectives. In many places, the focus is on Indian Literature as Comparative Literature. The key feature in the Department of Comparative Literature in Jadavpur is a more or less structured syllabus with the focus on analogy studies in the early phase, the Western and the Indian epic or Greek and Sanskrit drama for instance, and then a few core courses on a comparative study of themes and genres and literary historiography. Reception and cross-cultural literary relations are also important components particularly in the context of the Modern, and here one looks at both Western and Asian texts. Area Studies dealing with countries in the global south is another important feature, with Canadian Studies as the only exception. Where Indian Literature is in focus as in Delhi University, one studies *The Ramayana* in a pan-Indian context, also moving outside geo-political boundaries, the Bhakti movement, perspectives on women's writings in India, performance studies and oral texts and certain themes such as Partition Literature etc. So, there are perhaps two "Schools" of Comparative Literature in India today and both focus to some extent on Asian literatures with India as the center. Performance Studies, particularly with relation to indigenous forms are also gradually becoming important in Comparative Literature Studies.

II. Chinese Studies in the Context of Indian Comparative Literature

Zhang Cha: Though it was not possible to offer the courses in the absence of specialized faculty members at Jadavpur University during the 1990s, area studies

components in Chinese and Japanese literatures were framed. This is an important reconfiguration of areas of comparison, as the focus in the past was on European literature as well as Latin American literatures and literatures from African countries, paying no attention to literatures from Asian countries. Would you please explain this in detail?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: From the turn of the century at least, the focus of research has to some extent shifted to Asian countries. Language still poses a problem, and the infrastructure is not yet available to teach area studies courses, but research in the area has been highlighted in research programs sanctioned by the Government's funding authority (Special Assistance Program under the University Grants Commission). In 2005 under the Special Assistance Program the Department of Comparative Literature introduced a special focus on Asian Literatures. We had several projects such as Travelogues to Asian Countries, studies on concepts related to "love," "death," "honor" etc. in literary texts of Asia, tracing performative traditions from one region of Asia to another and several others. Not all were completed, but one or two were and lectures were organized in some of the areas, which later helped research students to take up comparative work in the area. Professor Tansen Sen gave several lectures on Buddhism across Asia, for instance, and a student later took up the study of a comparison of Jataka stories in India and China for her dissertation. She also worked as a Research Fellow in the program and learned Chinese and spent some time in China. The focus continues. There are also now at least two students from China doing research in the department.

Zhang Cha: Could you please give us a brief introduction to the Hari Prasanna Biswas India-China Cultural Studies Centre of Jadavpur University?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: The Hari Prasanna Biswas Centre started functioning in 2010 with an endowment from Hari Prasanna Biswas, a leading scholar of Chinese studies. The Centre was housed in the Department of International Relations and for a long period of time its Coordinator was Professor Tridib Chakraborty from the department. The Centre hosted a number of national and international seminars. One of the important contributions of the Centre was the establishment of Chinese Language Studies under the School of Linguistics and Languages, Jadavpur University.

Zhang Cha: The works in *The Book of Songs* range from the early Western Zhou Dynasty (11th century B.C) to the middle Spring and Autumn Period (6th century B.C). If based on this, Chinese literature would enjoy a history of more than three thousand years, and together with Indian literature, it is an important part of the world literature. Did the Indian scholars establish relations with it?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: Yes, there are specialized programs of Chinese Studies in India, with some emphasis on literature and more on Language, Politics and International Relations. However, scholars have engaged with literature related to Buddhism over a long period of time. Several Chinese authors and texts have been very popular. Lu Xun, for instance, has been translated into Bengali, Hindi, Tamil and Urdu. His centenary was celebrated in many places with seminars and symposiums. There are a number of dissertations on his works. Some classical Chinese poems have also been translated. Then there is substantial interest in the New Literature Movement in China and there again we have some translations. The poems of Ai Ch'ing, Mao Zedong and several others are available in translation. Chinese women writers are now also being studied.

Zhang Cha: In his comparative literature studies, Rabindranath Tagore cast his eyes on not only the West but also the East. The East here includes such East Asian countries as Japan, Korea and China. He once made some comments on Li Po in Chinese literature history, which is quite impressive. Could you please outline the general situation of Indian comparative literature studies since Rabindranath Tagore's study of Chinese literature?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: At Jadavpur we had *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Journey to the West* for many years as part of a course offered to students. A former student of the Department, Rimli Bhattacharya who now teaches in Delhi University, and who had learned Chinese came as visiting faculty to give several lectures on the texts. Then in the two courses on lyric and narrative traditions early Chinese poetry and narratives were taken up as also the Japanese *haiku* and *The Tale of Genji*. Comparative Literature in China forms a part of the course on the History of Comparative Literature in both Jadavpur and Delhi University (Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies Department). The Department of Comparative Literature also interacts with Cheena Bhavana in Visva Bharati for infrastructural assistance. Courses related to Asian Studies where East Asia figures in an important manner have also been started.

Zhang Cha: How are the intercultural studies between India and China going at the department of Comparative Literature in Jadavpur?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: There was a seminar on framing intercultural studies between India and China organised with the Hari Prasanna Biswas India-China Cultural Studies Centre and the Department of International Relations, Jadavpur University. The Department of Comparative Literature held a one-day symposium entitled "Unexplored Links: A One-day Colloquium on Kolkata's Chinese Connection" in 2007.

Zhang Cha: Are there texts focusing on comparative aspects of literature in India from the point of view of its relation with literature from China?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: Prabodh Chandra Bagchi, the eminent Sinologist had written a book entitled *India and China: A Thousand Years of Cultural Relations* (1951). In 2014 *An Encyclopedia of India-China Cultural Contacts* was published under the auspices of the Ministry of External Affairs with editorial teams from China and India and written in Chinese and English. Both are important books for comparatists in India. Noted comparatists like Professor Amiya Dev and Professor Sisir Kumar Das interacted with Professor Tan Chung, the eminent scholar on Sino-Indian relations. Amiya Dev, along with Wang Bangwei and Wei Liming, co-edited a book with him entitled *Tagore and China*. Professor Sisir Kumar Das worked with Professor Tan Chung on many occasions and contributed to his volume *Across the Himalayan Gap: An Indian Quest for Understanding China*.

Zhang Cha: *A Journey to the West*, one of the great four classic novels, was inspired by the life of Xuanzang (Hsüan-tsang, 600-664). The studies by Fu Shi and Chen Yinke, two famous scholars in China, show that the prototype of the Monkey King in *A Journey to the West* is Hanuman in *Rāmāyana*. Of course, there are other scholars who do not agree. Did India have the influence study on Hanuman and the Monkey King?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: I have not come across any study of influence related to Hanuman and the Monkey King. My knowledge here is limited.

Zhang Cha: Xuanzang left by foot for India in 629 to study religion at its source and reached there in 633. After studying at the famous Nalanda monastery, he returned home in 645, bringing back hundreds of Buddhist texts, including some of the most important Mahayana scriptures, and spent the rest of his life translating. He established the Weishi school of Buddhism (*Birtannica Concise Encyclopedia* 1814). He left the world a very important historiography, *The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*, a narrative of his nineteen-year journey to India. Rabindranath Tagore paid a visit to China in 1924, giving speeches and interviews at Tsinghua University. His visit exerted far-reaching influences in China. In 1961, to mark his centennial birthday, People's Literature Publishing House in China published his 10-volume *The Collected Works of Tagore*. In the past decades Chinese versions of his *Gitanjali* and other works were published. Quite a few Chinese writers and scholars including such great literary figures as Guo Moruo, Xu Zhimo, Bing Xin and Xie Wanying were greatly inspired by him. What's your comment on this phenomenon?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: Yes, scholars often refer to Xuanzang, and also Fa Xian and Yi Jing and their detailed records that are so important for the reconstruction of the history of the period. They also provide a history of intercultural attitudes on the part of Chinese and also Indians. They are also important as they provide details of regions close to China and India as they travel.

Rabindranath's interactions are also important from various perspectives, as fostering long-lasting dialogue and relationship, as stimulating creativity in both contexts, and as giving rise to discourse on Asia and Eastern civilization in general in the region. The deep friendship between Tagore and Xu Zhimo has been described as symbolic of the cultural affinity between India and China. And then Cheena Bhavan itself stands as a testimony to the efforts made to promote Sino-Indian friendship and understanding under the guidance of Tagore and Tan Yunshan.

These interactions remind us of affinities, cultural intercourse and relationships that have existed for a very long time between the two civilizations and the need to sustain them.

III. Sino-Indian Cooperation in Comparative Literature Studies

Zhang Cha: In comparative literature studies, what advantages and disadvantages do the scholars in China and India have?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: The advantages are that the field is wide open and there are many possibilities of studying inter-literary activities as both countries have interacted with many other cultures. The other important point is that there are several points of difference with the Euro-American world in approaches to aesthetic systems in China and India. The study in differences, despite similarities, may lead to new creative perspectives in literature along with a layered understanding of literary phenomenon. The disadvantages may be the lack of archival material, the fact that one has to find and establish the pathways of connections between different cultures and literary traditions through painstaking research as much of the material may not be easily accessible or on the verge of dying out.

Zhang Cha: On April 27-28, 2018, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi successfully held an official talk with the Chinese President Xi Jinping in Wuhan, the biggest city in Middle China. This talk has opened a new chapter for the cooperation between the two countries. On June 9-10 of the same year, the leaders of the two countries met again in the coastal city of Qingdao in eastern China to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit together, and India became

a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In fact, India and China are two of the four ancient civilizations, and they are two neighboring countries. India and China enjoy a recorded communication history as long as over 2000 years. In what ways could the two countries cooperate in academic, especially comparative literature studies, in the future?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: Collaborative ventures on various issues need to be taken up. For instance, the study of Sanskrit, Tamil and Chinese poetics and early narrative traditions in both countries can be taken up. Folklore and traditions of knowledge in both cultures constitute another area that calls for collaborative work. There is then the whole sphere of Buddhist studies, the narrative traditions, images that enter literature etc. and although a considerable amount of work has been done in this area, there is scope for more. The silk route and literature around it can also be taken up involving neighboring countries. One can also take up the comparative study of reception of European literatures in both countries. Exchange programs between departments of Comparative Literature could begin with exchange of both faculty and students.

IV. World Literature in the Context of Comparative Literature

Zhang Cha: In a famous statement in 1827, Johann Wolfgang Goethe put forward his concept of *weltliteratur*, that is, world literature. Twenty-one years later Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels asserted in their *Communist Manifesto*: “And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature” (Marx & Engels 255). What’s your comment on their assertion?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: It is an important statement at a certain point in history and it is also significant that it comes quite soon after Goethe’s statement on *weltliteratur*. However, the exact nature of this world literature and its relationship with local literatures have to be worked out in detail. Certain questions such as those of reception and transformation will also remain in the context of literature.

Zhang Cha: At the end of the 19th century, as a new concept world literature aroused interest from the world. In the second half of the 20th century, as it tried to get out of Eurocentrism, again world literature aroused interest from the world. In the past several decades, as the multicultural turn and globalization emerged, world literature became a heated topic. In China alone, up to October 18, 2016, in

ReadShow Database there were 3959 Chinese books with “world literature” as the key word in their title, in China National Knowledge Infrastructure there were 73341 essays with “world literature” as their key word. Since the 1980s, the number of such essays has been on the increase year by year, and in the 21st century there are thousands of essays on world literature published yearly (Cao Shunqing 147). Also, world literature is confronted with challenges. First, the definition of “world literature” itself is ambiguous, and there are three common definitions of it (Ibid., 147-154). Second, John Pizer (1850—1897) held that Goethe’s world literature is German-nationally-centered (Cao Shunqing, *Cross-Civilization* 136). In his *Comparative Literature*, Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett (c. 1855 – 1927) discussed world literature from the British perspective (Etiemble 136). For more than 100 years since it came into being, world literature has been linked with Eurocentrism. This arouses worries from scholars around the world, and René Etiemble (1909 – 2002) from France and Cao Shunqing from China are among them. René Etiemble expressed worries for world literature in 1974, and so did Cao Shunqing in 2017. Why is world literature so attractive, and what’s your understanding of the challenges?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: To answer both your questions together, in different places and in different times world literature may be significant for different reasons. To some extent, trends of globalization and the growing space of the Internet are responsible for the attraction of the concept. It has also received an impetus from efforts made by David Damrosch and other scholars who engage with the concept, as a pedagogic practice, by holding summer schools in different places in the world. As practice, it is trying to move away from Eurocentric paradigms. But as you state, while a large number of scholars are investing in the term, there are also a few who are questioning the concept. Whose world, they ask, and why such urgency now? One has to think very carefully and more dialogue is definitely needed with scholars who are in “distant” places, to borrow a term from Franco Moretti, before it is placed in a definitive manner in our pedagogic structures.

Zhang Cha: As for world literature, Rabindranath Tagore used the word “visvasahitya,” and “stated that the word was generally termed ‘comparative literature’. His idea of ‘visvasahitya’ was complex, marked by a sense of a community of artists as workers building together an edifice, that of world literature” (Dasgupta 11). Did he mean that world literature includes comparative literature, in other words, comparative literature is the embodiment of world literature?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: Yes, since he thought of the terms as

synonymous, he did think of Comparative Literature as a kind of embodiment of world literature. But this idea of world literature was also uniquely his, based upon the work of all *littérateurs* whose endeavor to write was an attempt to share a joy, to enter into relationships with other human beings. So, at the heart of world literature was also a sense of relation among diverse people. Moreover, it was also very deeply linked with the local and with an open, ever growing process.

Zhang Cha: In India the idea of world literature gained ground towards the end of the nineteenth century. What do you think of the relationship between comparative literature and world literature?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: Comparative literature includes an approach to the study of world literature. This approach also has at its base one's own literature or the literature that one knows best, and from which one moves towards texts from other cultures, looking at interrelations, affinities and differences that add layers to one's understanding of literature. One can also begin with relations in the Tagorean sense and move over to histories of inter-literary relations, gradually looking at larger and larger areas of cross-cultural interaction, or work with several clusters of cross-cultural relations to explore the dynamics of literary and cultural processes through history. One can also take up the idea of the world or the planet as a place that has been given to one to nurture, as in the thoughts of Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, and focus on texts that may lead one closer to the task.

Zhang Cha: Cao Shunqing, a "Changjiang Distinguished Professor" at Sichuan University and the fourth chairman of Chinese Comparative Literature Association, holds that world literature is now trapped in a difficult situation of Eurocentrism. As for Eurocentrism of world literature, he suggests that cross-civilization variation study is a possible way out. Cross-civilization variation theory is based on the sameness among the literatures of heterogeneous civilizations, starting from the sameness (or homogeneity, the same kind) while ending with variability (the heterogeneity and complementarity of civilization). What's your comment on this?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: In engaging with cross-civilizational variation theory Professor Cao Shunqing gives an account of what may be achieved by focusing on the issue. Variation is not difference, although it is related to it, and opposes the constant inclination towards arriving at or uncovering similarities while it also assumes that there is a global minimum. This creates space for dialogue because difference is not erased, while extreme situations of difference where conversation seems impossible are also avoided. There are also deep and complex layers in variation pedagogy as it grapples with new horizons, extensions, contacts and collisions among various heterogeneous civilizations. A primary purpose of the

pedagogy related to cross-civilizational variation theory is to reconstruct systems of literary discourse and to arrive at laws and mechanisms of variation. Eventually it wishes to draw upon rich and diversified resources for understandings, as also newer visions and advancements related to civilizational goals. There remains now the task of working out in full a pedagogy of variation theory in comparative literature in a dialogic manner from different spaces.

Zhang Cha: As for general literature, the scholars of the world have different ideas. The French scholar Paul van Tieghem (1871-1948) held that general literature, national literature and comparative literature are in a parallel relationship, and that they are related and supplementary to each other. The American scholars René Wellek (1903-1995) and Austin Warren (1899–1986) thought that separating comparative literature from general literature was groundless and hard to succeed. Another American scholar Erich Maria Remarque (1898-1970) advocated that we should try not to use the term “general literature,” but to use instead such terms as “comparative literature,” “world literature,” “translated literature” and “literary theory” depending on different occasions. The Chinese scholar Cao Shunqing believes that “national literature is the basis of comparative literature while general literature is the ultimate goal of comparative literature” (Cao Shunqing 434). How would you understand general literature?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: I think Cao Shunqing is right when he says that national literature is the basis of comparative literature. General literature is a term that exists in its own right and comparative literature studies from a wider perspective also falls within general literature studies.

Zhang Cha: What do you think is the prospect of world literature?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: I think the prospect of world literature is to bring to the forefront many texts from different cultures, open up the frontiers of literary studies, bring a diversified understanding of aesthetic norms, look for connections among literatures and enter into new perspectives on both history and literary history, and yet all this will need careful deliberation. The question about whose world are we talking about needs to be constantly articulated and even then what about language – will world literature always be mediated through English?

V. Challenges of Comparative Literature

Zhang Cha: Susan Bassnett, a world-famous scholar of comparative literature at the University of Warwick denies comparative literature as a discipline: “However, I do not believe that comparative literature or translation studies are disciplines in their own right; they are methods of approaching literature. There is no point in

wasting time trying to argue that these huge, baggy fields of research are distinct disciplines, since they are very diverse and derive from a combination of other disciplines such as linguistics, literary study, history, politics, film, theatre, etc.” (Susan Bassnett 48). What do you think are the basic requirements for a discipline?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: Each area has its own criteria of what a discipline is. The humanities will have a set of criteria that would be different from the social sciences or science, for instance. However, a history of the subject-matter and time-tested work, its tradition, a body of distinguished scholars in the field, a set of objectives, theoretical and conceptual formulations, and the subject matter’s relevance for the future of humanities are some of the basic requirements that I can think of at the moment. An interdisciplinary subject can also be recognized as a discipline.

Zhang Cha: In 2003, Professor Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a compatriot of yours living in the United States, published an influential book *Death of a Discipline* from Columbia University Press. In this book she declared the death of comparative literature as a discipline. What is your comment on it?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: I think Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was speaking of the death of a certain kind of Comparative Literature in the United States and was arguing for the necessity of a different set of approaches to Comparative Literature in her book *Death of a Discipline*.

Zhang Cha: Since its birth as a discipline nearly two hundred years ago, Comparative Literature has been encountering doubts from scholars around the world. What is your understanding of this?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: It is probably the openness of the subject that leads scholars to question its premise. The openness is, in fact, its strength. Single literature scholars also have questions regarding the translation-based study of literature.

Zhang Cha: What are the most outstanding achievements made in comparative literature studies of the world?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: They are many and Comparative Literature, I think, stands at that point in the study of humanities that is constantly moving into spaces not included within the framework of the academia, continuously expanding horizons with critical perspectives, helping in sensitive understanding of other cultures, sometimes leading to dialogues, discovering relations and enhancing creativity by exposing students to a large diverse body of literature. It has probably been able to move towards the creation of small open spaces in different parts of the world.

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

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: Apart from material problems like institutional support for the humanities, the ground of operation is uneven as far as the situation of Comparative Literature in the world is concerned. There has to be more space for unrepresented voices to be heard in the context of Comparative Literature studies.

VI. Coping Strategies of Indian Comparative Literature

Zhang Cha: In his essay “Globalization and Culture,” the Indian scholar Koyamparambath Sachidanandan (1948—) holds that the theory of globalization is based on a single country and a single culture and attempts to monopolize the right of culture, that the greatest threat India faces in the process of globalization is the death of the national language, and that as the English language is prevalent on the Internet, English is replacing the languages of India, Indian literature is gradually losing its nationality in this context of globalization, and Indian literature is also being represented by the English literature of India, and Indian Literature will certainly not exist in the process (Cao Shunqing, *Theoretical Research* 229). Do you agree with him?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: I don’t think English language is replacing the languages of India, though it is true that English is gaining in importance as elsewhere in the world and that writers want their work to be translated into English more and more. However, writers in India continue to write excellent works in their own languages and are read and appreciated by a large number of readers as well. A considerable corpus of Indian language texts is today available on the Internet.

Zhang Cha: In the world now, the wave of globalization is higher and higher, and thus “generalization” and “homogeneity” constitutes a tight squeeze against “specialization” and “heterogeneity.” This is worthy of our vigilance (Zhang Cha 36). To my knowledge, India more or less faces such a problem. Would you please tell us briefly how India protects its national languages, literatures and cultures?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: India has two national bodies that function primarily to promote literature in Indian languages, disseminate translation in Indian languages, hold literary seminars and conferences with writers and scholars and give annual prizes recognizing merit in each Indian language. Besides, there are also folklore academies that help to preserve indigenous literary traditions. There are also local bodies of writers and scholars independently bringing out literary journals in Indian languages. Then there are separate centers for music, painting and performing arts. There is also the Indian Council for Cultural Relations that

fosters arts activities and cultural exchange.

Zhang Cha: Also, in his essay “Globalization and Culture,” Sachidanandan put forward a concept of “Internationalization.” To him, internationalization is a means of dialogue among multi-cultures, which tolerates differences among different cultures and does not attempt to standardize any culture (Cao Shunqing, *Theoretical Research* 228-229). From your point of view, is this proposal idealistic?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: One has to have ideals, goals – also for Comparative Literature. And Comparative Literature has always believed in dialogue. One has to go on trying.

VII. Chinese School of Comparative Literature

Zhang Cha: In the essay “Strengthening ‘Interpretation of Western Literature with Chinese Literary Theory’ to Construct the Discourse System of Chinese Comparative Literature — An Interview with Professor Wong Waileung” published in 2018, Professor Wong Waileung points out that “China’s literary theories today still follow closely nothing but the West” (Zhang Cha 63). And in the essays “Strategies for the Cultural Development of China in the 21st century and Reconstruction of China’s Literary Discourse” (Cao Shunqing, *Discourse* 223-237) published in 1995 and “Aphasia of Literary Theories and Morbidity of Culture” (Cao Shunqing, *Aphasia* 50-58) published in 1996, Professor Cao Shunqing discusses aphasia of literary theories and its causes. To him, the most serious problem in the field of present-day China’s literary theories is aphasia. The field of modern and contemporary literary theories has been monopolized by western literary theories, and thus China has no theories of its own. This aphasia related to literary theory stems from the cultural morbidity since the end of the 19th century. What do you think of such criticism?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: Yes, I do think we need to focus on our theories, not just the ancient ones, but also on more recent “discourses” on literature and culture from our part of the world. We too are largely preoccupied with literary theories from the Western world. *After Amnesia* by Ganesh Devy made a similar point in 1992. We also need to bring critical perspectives from our ground realities, our literary texts, histories, material conditions, literary systems etc., as we engage with Western theories.

Zhang Cha: A couple of years ago Professor Cao Shunqing finished in English an academic monograph entitled *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* and in 2013 it was published by Springer, Heidelberg, Germany. Professor Douwe Fokkema, former chairman of World Comparative Literature Association and

Director of Institute of History and Culture at Utrecht University, writes the Foreword, thinking highly of the monograph: “It would be a gross mistake not to take up the challenge of Cao’s erudite exposition” (Fokkema, v). What’s your comment on Professor Cao Shunqing’s Variation Theory of Comparative Literature?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: The idea of variation projected in Professor Cao Shunqing’s book *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* is important to all practicing comparatists today. The practice of our discipline is premised upon the existence of an equal ground of cultural communication and the book alerts us to the fact that because of historical circumstances today, the ground reality is that the ecological balance of world culture has been destroyed in the context of grids of thought and theoretical formulations. All concerned need to work together to address the issue both for the sake of the discipline and for larger civilizational goals.

Zhang Cha: In “Keeping Upright and Innovative, and Opening Up a New World for the Chinese Comparative Literature Studies — An Interview with Professor Wong Waileung” published in 2017; Professor Wong Waileung says that “nowadays the Chinese Comparative Literature studies are vigorous and fruitful” (Zhang Cha 73). For years the 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, different scholars have different views. Among them are two noticeable scholars: Professor Cao Shunqing at Sichuan University and Professor Svend Erik Larsen at Aarhus University. To Professor Cao Shunqing, Comparative Literature has experienced three stages, and “one of the theoretical systems of the third stage is the established Chinese School” (Cao Shunqing, *China School* 128), while to Professor Svend Erik Larsen, “it is completely irrelevant and against the basic idea of comparative literature, and comparative studies in general, to try to launch a national school” (Larsen 144). Do you think that there exists in a real sense the Chinese School of Comparative Literature Studies that stands alongside the French School of Comparative Literature and the American School of Comparative Literature?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: I think, from my limited experience, that China also has its own ways of doing Comparative Literature and can therefore start talking about the Chinese School of Comparative Literature. Actually though, I think the word “School” today is a misnomer as American Comparative Literature has many varieties and the French Comparatists have moved away from many of their earlier assumptions. It may be more appropriate to talk about Comparative Literature in China, Comparative Literature in France etc.

VIII. Comparative Literature to Build a Harmonious World

Zhang Cha: In his *The Future Poetry*, the Indian philosopher, poet, literary critic and national independence movement fighter Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) introduced his ideal of “the future poetry.” He held that this kind of poetry would be the integration of essences of both the Eastern and Western cultures, and it was possible for the poetry to be realized first in the Eastern countries. He believed that he himself would be the first “future poet” (Aurobindo 256-265). In your opinion, is this concept of “the future poetry” realistic, and if yes, has it been realized, and was he the first “future poet” in a real sense?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: I am sorry, I will have to read Sri Aurobindo carefully to answer your question. I think he was talking about the expansion of an inner vision to include and to correspond with outer reality. The expansive spiritual mind turned upon the self and outer realities along with the free inquiry of thought and life energy could eventually lead to his ideal of “the future poetry”. It is an idealistic vision.

Zhang Cha: Yue Daiyun, a professor at Peking University, answered the question of what characteristics Chinese comparative literature should have to become a research group with great influence in the world, “I think,” she said, “our characteristics should be built on the historical roots of our profound Chinese culture. For example, ‘conciliatory but not accommodating’ is always advocated in China, which no one in foreign countries talks about. ‘Conciliatory but not accommodating’ is of the most essential and fundamental in China” (Zhang Cha 172). What do you think of her view?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: I respect Professor Yue Daiyun’s views. If the statement implies making place for the voice of the other and at the same time retaining one’s independent ways of approach, I agree.

Zhang Cha: What parts can Comparative Literature play in building a harmonious world?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: Comparative Literature can play an important role in building a harmonious world by establishing relationships among people and cultures, opening up spaces for dialogue, promoting greater understanding of cultures and also in enabling creative processes that would lead to new visions for the future.

Zhang Cha: What are the basic requirements for a qualified scholar of Comparative Literature studies?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: A wide and diverse foundation in literary studies, a knowledge of more than one language, a thorough knowledge of

contextual details in his or her chosen area of work and an openness and sensitivity in approaching other cultures.

Zhang Cha: You are a scholar enjoying high reputation and have a rich experience. Would you please say a few words for the Comparative Literature scholars in China especially the young scholars based on your own experience?

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: To go to the roots of one's own culture as deeply as possible and then to set out to approach other literatures by giving importance to both language and history of the other literature/s with which one engages. Above all, it is important to cultivate a fine sensitivity while approaching other cultures.

Zhang Cha: Professor Dasgupta, I'm very grateful for your great patience and your insight in answering my questions related to Comparative Literature. Thank you very much.

Subha Chakraborty Dasgupta: Professor Zhang, I am grateful to you too for this extended interview that made me rethink some of the issues. Thank you very much.

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