

“A COMPARATIVE HISTORY OF EAST ASIAN LITERATURES” (ICLA PROJECT)

2015 Progress Report (June 13, 2015)

The project, approved by the Association’s executive committee at the 2014 meeting, is to consist of a history of inter-Asian literary relations beginning with the earliest forms of writing in the region and continuing, as we hope, to the present. Good national literary histories exist for many of the countries in the region (China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam), but these tend to underemphasize the relations of borrowing, influence and translation among these languages and traditions. Our history will try to avoid reproducing the material contained in those national histories, but as it were to paint around them. From the late nineteenth century on, the interrelations of all the literary traditions of Asia become immensely dense and complex, as do their relations to European traditions. As have other such projects, this one will probably undergo a “red shift,” with time slowing down, or occupying a much greater number of volumes proportionally, in the last hundred years. But one way of avoiding restating the obvious will be to try to make the most of the sparser record left behind by earlier centuries.

The first year’s progress has consisted of recruiting members for a committee that will determine the chapters and volumes of the history. This is a delicate job. So far, scholars who have agreed to take part include:

Christopher Beckwith, Indiana University
Wiebke Denecke, Boston University
Ulrich Timme Kragh, University of Leiden
Chandra Mohan, General Secretary, Comparative Literature Assn. of India.
Francesca Orsini, University of London
Sheldon Pollock, Columbia University
Karen Thornber, Harvard University
Zhang Longxi, City University of Hong Kong

As organizer, I am eager to hear about other potential contributors, and eager as well to balance away from the tendency of recruiting from among the people I already know, who are often located in US or Western European institutions and of a certain age.

In the coming year, I anticipate calling a meeting of the committee and getting down to the work of determining what topics to cover and who will cover them. Perhaps the upcoming ICLA Congress in Vienna will be an occasion to give a public presentation and invite contributions from the membership. Organizing has been slow in 2014-15 because I have been on research leave and away from my home institution. But everyone on the list has expressed enthusiasm about the project, and I do not doubt that this enthusiasm will see us through to the end.

Respectfully submitted,
Haun Saussy