

Interim Report on the ICLA Project “For a Comparative History of East Asian Literatures”

ICLA Executive Council meeting, Kunming, July 2018

I’m grateful to earlier input from members of the Executive Council which have helped to clarify the scope of the project. In addition, planning was greatly advanced by the holding of a workshop at the Neubauer Collegium, University of Chicago, over four days in early February 2018.

Previous gatherings of the organizing committee for the project had been held at ICLA congresses and board meetings, but not all those involved in the project are members of the ICLA. This was our first opportunity to concentrate on the material to be covered and ways of covering it. Participants discussed the broad outlines of the project, specified thematic foci and chapter contents, and made plans to draft sections of the multi-volume series or to recruit specialists who would be able to do so.

The aim of the project is to write a connected, long-term, international and intercultural history of literature in the languages of East Asia, initially emphasizing the period from the invention of writing to 1800. In that period, Asia forms a closely interrelated bundle of cultures, tied together by various bonds of belief, organization and infrastructure. Our aim is to attempt to represent the interrelationships among the many centers of activity, showing how trade, translation and struggle produced cultural complexities that may be read off literary texts.

The discussions included specialists in Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, Korean, Vietnamese, Sanskrit, Tangut, Telugu, Khotanese, Malaysian, Arabic, and other languages relevant to the project. We quickly came to agreement on several points.

First, the importance of China in this long history can never be overstated: it is simply the biggest importer, exporter and transformer of cultural goods through this three-thousand-year sequence, and the other cultures mentioned here are all in relation with China though they may not be in direct relation with one another.

But, second, China is not the only cultural center deserving pride of place in this history. China itself has always been a tapestry of different cultures and contains the memory of cultures, languages and peoples subordinated or integrated to its erstwhile empire. An accurate history of China’s cultural development will need to recover the diversity of the past and represent it in an open-ended way (that is, not as if centralization were fated).

Third, Chinese culture spreads beyond China to countries where systems of writing derived from Chinese were long dominant: the “sinographic cultural sphere” of Japan, Vietnam, Korea, and the Xixia (Tangut) kingdom. The “Sinosphere” is represented in many recent literary and cultural histories, but usually as an expansion of Chineseness to the margins. In the spirit of counterpoint we should ask, additionally, how Chinese precedents combined with others to produce new types of communication.

Fourth, writings in scripts other than the Chinese or Chinese-derived are not typically integrated into literary histories of China (or, in some cases, into any literary histories at all). Thus Indian scripts, Aramaic and its derivatives (including Manchu and Mongol writing), Sogdian, Khotanese, Tibetan, and Turkic writing are usually excluded from consideration. The historical narrative will have to account for the development of these scripts as well as for historical, religious and artistic composition in them, and show

their place in the circulation of ideas around Asia. Often we may find that differences of script put obstacles in the way of circulation. By integrating non-Chinese scripts into the history of Asian literature, we will be breaking new ground.

Fifth, the aspect of the proposed new history most attractive to those in attendance was the opportunity to write thematic essays about features either singular to one cultural formation or shared by several. In our conversations we found a few dozen themes emerging, with authors ready to begin preparing material on many of them. The less glamorous task of writing up the chronology of political and cultural events will need to be provided for, perhaps by seeking the help of historians. We asked ourselves if we were not tending in the direction of an encyclopedia, but determined that the organization by periods and events was still valuable, if only as a reminder that things do change.

Sixth, composition of the multi-volume work may best be advanced by beginning with a volume on the material preconditions of literature: archaeological data; patterns of settlement and language-group distribution; main channels of transport; writing systems; the institutions of literature and culture. Thereafter, volumes on distinct periods would follow, articulated by historical changes in the communication networks: roughly, the formation of the China-centered state system; the “Silk Road” (Central Asian commercial pathways); the Buddhist cosmopolis; the steppe empires; the maritime trade system enabled by Islamic conquest; competition among Asians, Middle Easterners and Europeans for influence along the Pacific littoral.

Seventh, a better general title for the book series would be “A Comparative Literary History of East Asia.”

There is a great deal left to do. We hope to meet again in a year’s time, perhaps in Dunhuang, the West China oasis town where the most valuable store of Silk Road manuscripts was discovered in 1900. I plan to seek further funding from the NEH, the ACLS, the Mellon Foundation, the Japan Foundation, the Korea Foundation, and other organizations likely to take an interest in forming a new understanding of Asian and world literature.

I am deeply grateful to the ICLA and the Collegium for helping us take these early steps.

Respectfully submitted,

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Literary History of East Asia