

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

2016 Progress Report (June 30, 2016)

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. At the 2015 meeting I presented a first list of scholars who had agreed to join me in an organizing committee, the first task of which will be to determine the project’s coverage: the areas and periods to be covered in the history’s chapters and volumes. I here provide an enlarged but still incomplete list.

The most exciting thing about this project is that it is virtually unprecedented. The vast cultural region of Asia has generally been chronicled on a nation-by-nation basis. Unlike Europeanists, Asianists do not have a ready-made, generally agreed-upon set of supranational periods to work with such as “the Renaissance” or “the Enlightenment.” Periods are nation-specific: the habit is to speak of Heian Japan, Song China, etc. Coordination is not self-evident. Thus, merely working out the geography and chronology will require discussion with specialists. For example, what is an appropriate way to segment the first few centuries of the topic “Chinese-Vietnamese Literary Relations”? Chinese history has its own segmentation into dynasties, which do not correspond to Vietnamese periods or dynasties (or any other nation’s), and the determining events in culture and letters of each country may follow a calendar different from the political or public one. Decisions about periods, languages and areas may determine many facets of the content. As a result, much will depend on the good will of the organizing committee members.

At the 2015 Lisbon meeting (which I was regretfully unable to attend because of family obligations) several members of the ICLA Executive Board volunteered to join the organizing committee and recommended colleagues known to them as specialists in the relevant literary relations. Their commitment means a great deal to me and fires my own enthusiasm for getting the project underway. Following on the generous suggestions of our colleagues, I have written to a number of specialists, some of whom have (understandably) been reluctant to involve themselves in such a complex enterprise. So far, scholars who have agreed to take part include:

Christopher Beckwith, Indiana University  
Wiebke Denecke, Boston University  
Yorimitsu Hashimoto, Osaka University  
Ge Zhaoguang, Fudan University  
Kenichi Kamigaito, Otsuma Women’s University  
Khor Boon Eng, Tunku Abdul Rahman University  
Ulrich Timme Kragh, University of Poznań  
Chandra Mohan, Comparative Literature Association of India  
Francesca Orsini, University of London  
Hitoshi Oshima, Fukuoka University  
Sowon Park, Oxford University  
Sheldon Pollock, Columbia University  
Haun Saussy, University of Chicago  
Karen Thornber, Harvard University  
Yang Huilin, Renmin University

Zhang Longxi, City University of Hong Kong  
Zhou Xiaoyi, Peking University

(I can provide to anyone curious the names of scholars who have declined—somehow it seems inappropriate to include them here.)

As organizer, let me say again that 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. It is, in fact, often the scholars who do not publish in any Western language who have the most to tell us about this project.

I hope to meet with a number of committee members in Vienna to discuss the broad outlines of the work: contents of a methodological introduction, the chapters to be assigned first, and so forth. For the next steps, it would be ideal to hold a workshop—perhaps in Chicago, if everyone finds that a good meeting place. We would spend a day or two there in extended conversations. Meanwhile, the insights of the Executive Committee will always be welcome.

Respectfully submitted,  
Haun Saussy