

26. 2018-19 Report of the Research Committee on Comparative History of East Asian Literatures

(AILC-ICLA EC Meeting, Shenzhen, July 2019)

As previous reports from this committee have stated, “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 represent the interrelationships among the many centers of activity.” Progress toward this aim continues, though gradually.

2018-19 has been a year of planning and preparation. The February 2018 meeting of some thirty potential contributors gave us much to think about. Over four days of discussion, a great many themes emerged as nodes of influence, appropriation, translation and imitation across borders of language and country within Asia. For example: travel, women at court, the drinking ritual, the border lament, forms of tribute, exile, religious panegyric... It became clear that the majority of contributors were strongly motivated to write a comparative essay on one of these specialized topics, and the decision was made to build them into the individual volumes’ tables of contents. Other sections, for example those dealing with the history of writing technologies and their relation to literary forms, will be more synthetic and historical, and of course there must be chronological and geographical surveys to provide context for the topical essays.

The chair has spent a year of sabbatical leave in Berlin preparing an introduction to the series, which is planned to circulate as a short volume on its own. Meanwhile, he has been seeking support for this long-term project involving many hands. Together with Yanxiao He (graduate student, Chicago) and Yang Qu (graduate student, Harvard), he was successful in obtaining funding from the American Council of Learned Societies for a workshop in October 2019, and another is planned for spring 2020. Future efforts will be directed at the European Research Council, the Japan Foundation, the Korea Foundation, and similar bodies capable of offering support over 5 to 10 years. Ideally, a funding package would permit bi-annual workshops, salaries for one or more post-docs, and a publishing subsidy. Suggestions for seeking such ambitious funding will be most heartily welcomed.

Haun Saussy, Chair