

“Comparative History of East Asian Literatures”

Research Committee Report, 2019-2020

The Research Committee continues its work despite the pandemic’s obstacles to travel (in-person meetings having been vital to the development of the project since its inception). A meeting in October 2019, funded by the American Council of Learned Societies and the University of Chicago, brought together fifteen scholars around the topic of “Literary Culture Across Eurasia: China and Beyond.” A second session, deferred from 2020, is expected to take place in remote form in spring 2021. Entitled “Global China and Global Greece,” it will concentrate on the role of the Central Asian corridor (the “Silk Road”) in mediating among Chinese, Persian, Indian, and Mediterranean cultures, a topic to which much archaeological and literary attention has been given in recent years.

The October 2019 workshop was dedicated to sketching out lines of analysis of the huge multilingual corpus that our Committee is charged with researching. First, taking advantage of Chicago’s tradition of Humanities Day, when professors give lectures on current research to members of the general public, Haun Saussy spoke in broad terms about China as the center of a literary economy running the length and breadth of the Asian continent, differentiated, to be sure, into zones of variable circulation and subject to changes over time. Next, taking up the best-known case of inter-Asian intellectual exchange, Daniel Boucher brought new materials to the understanding of the import of Buddhism from India to China. The earliest sutras to be translated, it appears, were not Pali or Sanskrit texts but Gandhari, which suggests an overland route transiting through several mediating cultures.

Korean and Japanese literary cultures are deeply indebted to Chinese prototypes, but each branches off in particular directions, while often harking back to integrate new interpretations of Chinese materials. The material, operational processes through which it happened need to be understood at close range. Examples illuminatingly presented by Gian-Piero Persiani, Suyoung Sun, and Peter Kornicki brought forth ideological, gender-related, and technical issues underpinning this relationship.

Though China and India are the main reservoirs from which other areas in the region draw their religious, political, and literary models, these models are appropriated diversely and idiomatically extended in each case. Andrew Ollett and Yang Qu speaking on Javanese-Sanskrit hybridity and Francesca Orsini addressing the image of China in pre-Raj India helped us understand the degrees of freedom in each appropriation.

Central Asia has long been a zone of competition for great and lesser powers, in cultural no less than in military or political terms. Three papers permitted us insights into these relationships. Ulrich Timme Kragh demonstrated, through the successive versions of a basic Buddhist topos, the deliberate ways that Tibetan and Chinese literary cultures depart from one another (it has largely to do with decisions taken by Tibetan clergy to derive doctrinal and poetic models directly from India rather than participate in the Chinese Mahayana Buddhism that spread to Korea and Japan). With close examination of Buddhist translations, Zhouyang Ma underscored the singularity and the commonality of Tangut literary culture. Ling-wei Kung

outlined a secret channel of communication that kept the Qing emperors informed about developments as far away as Afghanistan and Russia, through Ladakh intermediaries.

The papers presented detailed and focused regional studies sited within a vast envelope of space, time, and language. Pulling back to broader perspectives, a roundtable including Whitney Cox, Paul Copp, and Sangjin Park gave us the benefit of their perspectives as Sanskritist, Buddhologist and medievalist.

The organization of the workshop is emblematic of the developing contents of the Research Committee's publication project. As we learned from a gathering in February 2018, it is becoming clear that that the History under construction should consist of chapters on specialized topics written by researchers who know those areas intimately, connected by a chronological and contextualizing tissue of remarks written by the project's editors. We will seek to integrate rewritten versions of papers like those presented at this workshop into the larger work. A draft of a general introduction, written by the research committee chair, is now under consideration at an American university press.

We continue to search for funding that will support a series of gatherings to explore specific aspects of East Asian multinational literary history and that will provide the subventions necessary to publishing such an extensive work. We are grateful for the ICLA's many contributions to our effort and morale.

Respectfully submitted,

Haun Saussy, research committee chair