

East Asian Studies in the Era of Global Humanities: Why We Need the Region and Regional Literary Histories Now

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This paper examines the evolution of literary historiography in East Asia, focusing on how early textual traditions shaped historical narratives. By analyzing key works from Chinese, Japanese, and Korean traditions, it explores how these cultures adapted historiographical models over time, influenced by indigenous practices and external forces, particularly from China. The article calls for a regionally comparative and globally aware approach to East Asian Studies, arguing that traditional European Sinology/Japanology and North American area studies remain constrained by nation-centered methodologies. These limitations obscure East Asia's shared cultural history and its relevance today. Through a comparative lens, this study highlights the processes of cultural exchange and adaptation that shaped literary historiography. Ultimately, it contends that revisiting these historiographical traditions offers deeper insights into the intellectual history of the region.

Keywords: Literary historiography, East Asian studies, cultural exchange, comparative methodology, Sinographic textual traditions

From Area Studies and Disciplines to Global Humanities

It is exciting times for the study of East Asia. Both the older European model and the US model of East Asian studies have been waning in the new millennium. European-style Sinology and Japanology emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries as national philologies under the umbrella of “Oriental Studies,” a colonial, baggy descriptor that had encompassed the study of the huge “rest” of Eurasia, the landmass to the East of Western Europe; its original focus on the premodern, philological, and humanistic has in the 21st century shifted to the modern, theoretical, and social scientific. In contrast, North American-style area studies—Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Studies respectively—emerged out of military intelligence operations and diplomatic needs during the Second World War; the struggle between “area studies” and “disciplines” has in the 21st century led to critiques of area studies as being narrowly positivistic and lacking conceptual goals, scalable results, and theoretical

sophistication. The struggle and arguments on both sides seem to have petered out without any clear alternatives forward.¹

Without repeating the repertoire of arguments, it is undeniable that area studies require and train for a much higher degree of philological, historical, and cultural knowledge and competency. These are precisely the skills we need to hone in new generations of students if we want to preserve access to the human experience of our own or other human communities' past periods and places on the planet. Those past human experiences are historical laboratories and repertoires for imagining and shaping a shared future for the human species in the midst of fraternal wars, nationalistic one-upmanship, migrant crises and natural disasters that are currently making smaller parts of the globe safely habitable. But the still mainstream narrow focus on area study of singular nation states and niche topics, which are serving the expectations for promotion for "individual original research" rather than a deeper advancement of the fields, precludes us to see the particular histories of China, Japan, or Korea as part of the human experience that is shaped by our species' cognitive functions, social brain-wiring, institution-building instinct, and agonistic mindset. Do dissertations on Manchego cheese in Cervantes' *Don Quijote* serve our historical moment? Looking at the industry of niche-topic monographs, we need to seriously rethink the value of our output and the ways we educate the next generations in meaningful, productive research design.

But here is the opportunity for East Asian Studies to reengage big questions that matter for both the East Asian humanities and the transformation of the humanities at large in this historical moment: to grow East Asian Studies into an academic field in a newly global and comparative key, as part of the emerging globe-spanning Humanities. There are intellectual and moral arguments for studying historical phenomena in a comparative and global key. If we want to understand the history of the human experience, we need to study the archives of all cultures around the globe—without that we cannot claim to do an academically responsible study of the humanities. Ethically, if we want to achieve social equality in the present, we need to grant equality to each other's pasts, and advocate for the in-depth study of non-European cultures. The MIT Comparative Global Humanities Initiative (GHI) aims to create an MIT-based worldwide community that works globally towards reinvigorating humanistic learning and education by radically expanding the geographical scope and temporal depth of humanistic disciplines, thereby reimagining their critical relevance to the grand challenges of today's world. GHI supports the study of the world's cultures and their diverse histories in all their historical, linguistic, cultural, scientific, and technological manifestations; promotes the creation of new cross-disciplinary methodologies and theories based on the world's cultural archives and conceptual

¹ For a recent summary see Morten Valbjørn Busse, Asel Doolotkeldieva, Stefanie Ortmann, Karen Smith, Seteney Shami, Sérgio Costa, Irene Weipert-Fenner, Jonas Wolff, Saskia Schäfer, and Norma Osterberg-Kaufmann, "Contextualizing the Contextualizers: How the Area Studies Controversy Is Different in Different Places," *International Studies Review* 26, no. 1 (March 2024): 1-28.

vocabularies; advances the critical study of the social, political, and creative functions of cultural heritage in today's world; and powers the building of new infrastructures of research, collective reflection and action that allow us to leverage systemic change in our communities and homes, educational institutions, political systems, and transnational diplomacy and collaborations.

However, intellectual and moral arguments for reinventing our humanities disciplines in a global and comparative key will not suffice to turn the field of East Asian Studies in this direction. Rather, various world historical forces currently drive the by now inevitable emergence of comparative East Asian Studies in a global framework: demography, new nationalisms, and, relatedly, the upsurge of new regionalisms. Inter-marriage between Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese people at home and in the diaspora has sharply increased, just as students in diverse US classrooms now typically know or learn more than one East Asian language—students are far ahead of their often still very mono-lingual and nation-state-oriented mentoring faculty. The current US administration's repudiation of its customary role as a world leader through alliances will for at least the next four years powerfully fuel new regionalisms. In the absence of the customary unilateral protection by America, as seen in US-Japan, US-South Korea relations, now multilateral, more fragile alliances in the region will need to provide the political, military, economic, and psychological protection the US world leadership had provided over the past 80 years. This is a delicate, but serious opportunity to create regional convergence and cooperation in a region that has thrived on memorializing and perpetuating traumas from the time of Japanese imperialism during the first half of the 20th century.

East Asian Studies in a new comparative and global key should get ready for this opportunity to serve our historical moment. How can we make the absence of America's overpowering presence into a chance for the region to heal, even with teeth and fists still clenched under cover, for now?

We need to enhance the comparative study and deeper understanding of what the region has for many centuries connected: Confucian-style bureaucracies, systems of rule and institutionalized belief, scholarly, literary, artistic, and medical, and scientific cultures. First and foremost, this shared cultural heritage needs to be brought into textbooks, lecture halls, and research publications as a regional heritage—neither divided by modern nation states nor disappearing into the diversity of the globe. Such a regionalist turn is necessary and timely. The critique of the nation state has made scholars jump too quickly to the globe, neglecting the regional dynamic of the world's macro-regents, adjacent nation states. Regions—whether sub-national regions such as the twenty-three provinces of Mainland China, or of supra-national, macro-regions such as “East Asia”—have an intriguing ambiguity. Nations are nations, the globe is the globe, but “regions” have a relative value: they can be sub-national or supra-national; they are both current and deeply historical, often including a host of conflicting old metageographies from conflicting border demarcations of previous empires and influence spheres; if sub-national, regions typically play up their “folkloristic” heritage in an age of global attention and UN heritage politics; if supra-

national, they often occupy ambiguous status in the macro-regional status hierarchy (is the PRC or Japan the economic leader in East Asia? Has Korea the greatest cultural soft power of all East Asian states? Well, yes and no and no and yes...); up until the “World Wars” of the 20th century, regions were the principal sites of power ambiguities and shared histories of violence and unhealed generational trauma. Add to this the cultural parent and sibling anxiety and rivalry that we can understand as the regional equivalent of the fight over world-order leadership: many scholars of Japan and Korea are more afraid of neighboring Sinocentrism than of global Eurocentrism, a clear expression of fear of Chinese civilization, today’s regional Big brother, looming over East Asia’s history.

Our chance to push for a new regionalism in East Asian Studies, in the overall frame of our shared global condition, is to empower the concept of the “region” as a unit of human experience and state-building, transcultural encounters and knowledge exchanges, and a zone of proximity and close difference that provides an alternative to essentializing notions of “cultures” or “civilizations” that could be academically incommensurable and incomparable or militarily and socially “clashing.”

Since 2009 European politicians have done well to adopt “macro-regional strategies” for four supra-state regions of the European Union: the Baltic Sea Region, the Danube Region, the Adriatic and Ionian Region and the Alpine Region. “A European Union (EU) macro-regional strategy is a policy framework which allows countries located in the same region to jointly tackle and find solutions to problems or to better use the potential they have in common.”² The earliest EU macro-region, the Baltic Sea Region, comprises Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden. With the goals to “save the sea, connect the region, and increase prosperity,” the region strengthens economic and ecological synergies and echoes historical alliances—and fierce conflicts—under Norse and Hanseatic merchant empires, Swedish and German empires and settlements, and Russian and Prussian influence spheres, to name a few from the last millennium. This brings opportunity to prosper and heal based on historical ties.

For scholars, regions bring opportunities to develop more nuanced methodologies. Their study helps model the spread of ideas, ruling ideologies, and social practices and offers an alternative paradigm to reductionism and the overgeneralizing, simplifying, and essentializing of the world’s “great civilizations,” showcasing the rich diversity and often unique patterns of appropriating, adapting, or neglecting dominant ideas and cultural practices. In the new millennium scholars started paying keen attention to the processes of Hellenization, Romanization, and Sinicization on the ground, thereby showing that the Hellenistic, Roman, and Chinese empires were mainly grand thanks to their provinces and remote influence spheres, showcasing the adaptability of their cultural strategies.

² European Union, *What Is an EU Macro-Regional Strategy?* (Brussels: European Commission, 2017), https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/information/publications/factsheets/2017/what-is-an-eu-macro-regional-strategy.

Pushing for the Regional Turn:
A New Literary Historiography for East Asia?

A regional turn for area studies will sorely require and hopefully produce a whole new set of reference works and pedagogical tools. For traditional East Asia we urgently need, first, textbooks for learning East Asia's lingua franca of Literary Chinese or Sinitic (to date no textbook exists that includes Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese texts alongside Chinese texts, although Paul Rouzer's *A New Practical Primer of Literary Chinese* of 2007 was prescient in including Japanese readings and Korean pronunciations for its all-Chinese line-up of primary texts); second regional thematic handbooks of history, literature, religions, the arts, philosophy and intellectual history, science and technology, and diplomacy; and third, new historiographies of all these cultural fields, including: literary histories.

To reimagine what regional literary histories for East Asia could look like, let us take inspiration from current best practices by first surveying the newest trends in anglophone literary historiography, which remains the most voluminous and globally available, as well as most diversified archive of the practice. We will then examine the origins and nature of literary historiography for East Asia—which has largely been misrepresented due to its almost exclusively national perspective at expense of the region and a failure to critically filter for the nationality and purposes of the authors of these literary histories. This will then allow us to imagine a new, regional literary historiography of East Asia in the age of Global Humanities.

New Models of Literary Historiography

Modern literary historiography is a product of the nation state, and its universities and scholars, in 19th century Europe. Focused on the “history” of a “literature” in a “national language” that expresses the “spirit” of the relevant “nation,” it peaked in the 20th century, but came under severe critique in the 21st century. Politically, literary histories typically served the ideological goals or even colonial agendas of the relevant nation state. Academically, it typically sidelined minorities and their languages and literatures, and enshrined a contemporary, vernacular national language that suppressed the historical existence of older, cosmopolitan languages connecting cultural macro-regions like French for Europe's Latin, or modern Japanese for East Asia's Literary Sinitic.

A New Logics: From Mono- to Multilingual Histories

By now we are fully aware of the flaws of 19th-century, colonial-era national literary historiography. National literary historiography is strongest at telling the story of modern literatures, the period of its own genesis. When projected back beyond the nineteenth century, lingering modernist biases unduly prioritize the vernacular and “nationalizable” over the historically far more important cosmopolitan, macro-

regional dynamics of premodern literary cultures. Literary studies has recently uncovered the complex multilingual settings under which literatures operated, as a rule rather than an exception. For example, “How to Do Multilingual Literary History? Lessons from Fifteenth and Sixteenth-Century North India,” Francesca Orsini speaks out against the distorting effect of monolingual histories and urges us to take the multilingual reality of literary cultures seriously. She criticizes Sheldon Pollock’s model of the gradual vernacularization during the second millennium CE of the “Sanskrit cosmopolis” that had thrived throughout South Asia in the first millennium. According to Pollock, during that time “vernacular cosmopolitan” languages emerged that took the transregional role of the old venerable language of Sanskrit. Orsini finds that for North India’s highly multilingual and multilocal literary cultures, “diglossia,” a hierarchical symbiosis between a “higher” cosmopolitan and “lower” local idioms, is not fitting, since a hierarchical relationship only really existed vis-à-vis the elevated Sanskrit, but not quite so between for example Persian and Hindavi. Orsini therefore prefers non-hierarchical terms like “bilingualism,” “multilingualism,” or “heteroglossia.”³ Overall she underscores the importance of uncovering “emic” categories that were used by historical actors during the period under discussion, asking how fifteenth- and sixteenth-century writers from various areas in North India talked about and conceptualized their language repertoire. Particularly interesting are national literary histories of those of “minor” literatures of newly established nation-states in the post-1989 world. Consider the formerly Soviet Baltic state of Latvia, home to about 1.9 million speakers of Latvian, of the Indo-European Baltic language family. Pauls Daija’s *Literary History and Popular Enlightenment in Latvian Culture* traces the emergence of Latvian literary culture in the eighteenth century under tsarist Russia. He shows how Baltic German elites launched an enlightenment movement geared toward educating the peasant population. Pastors such as Gotthard Friedrich Stender wrote didactic secular “edification” literature (Erbauungsliteratur).⁴ Here, the Latvian “national enlightenment” narrative is intertwined with the German-language writing of German elites, complicating this new Latvian literary history. But even Western European nation states have discovered their much more diverse literary heritage. With *Multiliterate Ireland: Literary Manifestations of a Multilingual History*, Tina Bennett-Kastor writes a postcolonial multilingual literary history of sorts, giving attention to Celtic and Gaelic languages, Latin, and Anglo-Norman French. Intriguingly, there are even new, multilingual and multicultural literary histories of hegemonic languages, like French. *French Global: A New Approach to Literary History*, edited by Christie McDonald and Susan Suleiman rewrites French literary history from the Middle Ages to the present as a history of the literary interactions in Francophone communities across the world, most of them created in the process of colonization and

³ Francesca Orsini, “How to Do Multilingual Literary History? Lessons from Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century North India,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 49, no. 2 (2012): 231.

⁴ Pauls Daija, *Literary History and Popular Enlightenment in Latvian Culture* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), pp. 59–73.

migration. Here we have a history based on a national language that implicitly celebrates its unifying power alongside the ethnic and cultural diversity of its colonial and postcolonial locales.

A New Ethics of Literary Historiography: from *ancilla nationis* to *ancilla reconciliationis*

One of the earliest and most strident voices against national literary historiography in the late nineteenth century was Hugó Meltzl (1846–1908), a scholar born to a German-speaking family in the multiethnic world of Transylvania under the Habsburg monarchy. In 1877, in the inaugural issue of the first journal of the emerging discipline of comparative literature, he saw literary history as “deplorable” and “useless” and castigates it as an *ancilla nationis* or *ancilla philologiae*, a handmaiden of the nation-state and positivistic philology.⁵ Reflecting the diverse world of its origins, the journal had the cosmopolitan Latin name of *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, along with titles in Hungarian, German, and French. For Meltzl and his colleagues, who functioned in a multiethnic and multilingual environment of German, Hungarian, Romanian, Latin and more, it was natural that national literary historiography felt particularly untrue and uncomfortable. Recently scholars have retooled literary historiography for this region, plagued by an unresolved aftermath of a shared history of violence and wars, into an ethical instrument: an *ancilla reconciliationis*, as I will call it here, a handmaiden to reconciliation and renegotiation of collective memory. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, the editors of the multivolume *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*, proclaim an “ethical imperative” at the heart of their task: “The primary inspiration for our project is thus an ethical imperative rather than an epistemological longing. For us, pace Perkins, the crucial question is not whether literary histories based on consensus are possible, but whether a history can be instrumental in moving a transnational public towards morally and politically desirable consensus.”⁶ Eastern Europe was once covered under the umbrella of grand multiethnic empires such as the Ottoman and the Austro-Hungarian empires. They fell apart in the twentieth century and have further partitioned into strong-willed, even belligerent nation-states, making the region rife with ethnic tensions and unresolved territorial conflicts. Here we indeed need an *ancilla reconciliationis*, dramatically more so than in Western Europe where the EU might be struggling but the postwar reconciliation processes among previously embittered war enemies has created a shared transnational identity of sorts.

⁵ Hugo Meltzl, “Vorläufige Aufgaben der vergleichenden Litteratur,” *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 1, no. 9 (1877): 179–182; 2, no. 15 (1877): 307–315; 3, no. 24 (1878): 494–501.

⁶ Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, eds., *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctions and Disjunctions in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, 4 vols. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004–2010), p. 15.

New Epistemologies of Literary Historiography: Cultural Chronologies and Conceptual Histories

Other types of recent literary histories have developed innovative approaches to their epistemological problems, problems about how we can understand and study the history of the cultural phenomenon of literature. The greatest distorting effect of the modern historiography of literatures is that they construe literary histories from the perspective of today, as if ancient, medieval, or early modern literatures inevitably had to develop towards monolingual literatures of a particular nation state. But this particular modern Western political condition was not inevitable for non-Western cultures, until the intrusion of European colonial powers with their armies in the 19th and 20th centuries profoundly disrupted and transformed political and educational systems, along with literary production.

“Cultural chronologies” dissolve the linearity of literary histories driven by a presentist dominant master narrative into a more complex rhizomatic structure and open the literary to its cultural historical context. Over the past few decades, Harvard University Press has published “new” literary histories, encyclopedic cultural chronologies of sorts. Denis Hollier’s *A New History of French Literature*, David E. Wellbery and Judith Ryan’s *A New History of German Literature*, Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors’s *A New Literary History of America*, and David Der-wei Wang’s *A New Literary History of Modern China* sidestep the dominant master narratives focused on periodization and great authors, works, and genres. These cultural chronologies dissolve the conventional clear structure of chronologically arranged chapters on periods and contexts, authors, works, and genres into several dozens of vignettes of cultural moments, events, places, ideas related to literary culture. They are a meaningful step forward in the way they highlight connections between literature and culture, showcasing the great, often contradictory diversity of cultural phenomena, and stimulating the reader’s wonder about what “literature” has been and could be is as a distinctive skill of the human species. The new cultural chronologies precisely answer the question of “what and how can I know?”, the basic inquiry of epistemology, by exponentially diversifying the answers. The problem with these snapshots, that often randomly follow one another is that they are a mosaic of precious stones of cultural and literary history without narrative and explanatory power. They cease to serve as a literary history that gives the reader a basic orientation in history over the periods, authors, and genres, which, even if not alone sufficient, are necessary for developing a solid grasp of literature. In short, they add cultural context, nuance, and color to the baseline of literary history and therefore aid the reader who already knows that baseline. The novice who needs basic orientation to get started will feel lost; and opportunities to take new nuances and discoveries about the co-evolution of culture and literature to a higher conceptual level are lost.

An intellectually more effective approach is to not just diversify, but conceptually re-orient literary history: “conceptual histories” historicize the human phenomenon of literature and thus dissolve false teleologies by taking into account the changing

definition of “what literature has been” through the ages, thereby reducing the dangers of imposing Western modernist, anachronistic concepts and frameworks. Conceptual literary histories invert the vector of the narrative. Instead of projecting “literature” back in history based on the teleology of today’s nation states, they trace the concept of the “literary” and its practice from the past to today—looking at what role literature, the creative use of patterned or narrative language, has played in earlier periods of history, who its practitioners were, and in which institutional or devotional contexts they operated with what kind of goals and purposes.

A conceptual historical approach that starts from history and points its vector forward to our times is particularly needed for the historiography of non-Western literary traditions. Due to the past two centuries of accelerating Westernization today virtually any place on earth has adopted the Western concept of “literature” as a neologism into their language, even if most of the speakers might not realize it and consider it an indigenous commonsensical notion. *Nihon “bun” gakushi* 日本「文」学史: *A New History of Japanese “Letterature.”* Volume 3: The Path from “Letters” to “Literature”: A Comparative History of East Asian Literatures] is the first regional, comparative literary history of East Asian literatures and radically shifts away from the guiding concept of all current literary histories of China, Japan, or Korea: the notion of *bungaku* 文学 “literature.” This concept was coined in the late 19th century in the attempt to translate the European concept of “literature,” which at the time was conceived as “nation state literature” and particularly associated with the flourishing genre of the realist novel—a real misfit for the traditional literatures of East Asia where short lyric poetry topped the genre hierarchy, fiction had low, popular status, and highbrow literature (“belles lettres”) was written in Literary Chinese, not in any vernacular form of premodern Chinese, Korean, or Japanese. This radically reorienting conceptual literary history uses the traditional East Asian concept of 文 (“pattern,” “civilization,” “writing,” “letters,” “literature”) to comparatively trace the literary histories of China, Korea, and Japan over the past millennium, in particular as they transformed from the Confucian-scholar-bureaucrat-based literary cultures of traditional East Asia to the professional-intellectual-and-fiction writer-based literary cultures of 19th century Europe. The first systematic comparative literary history of East Asia in any language, it sketches the changing contours of the traditional world of *bun* 文 (“letters”) from its beginnings through its transformational reshaping as Western-inspired “literature” in the late 19th and 20th centuries. The conceptual and practical move from a broader world of “Letters” and scholarship to a realm of pure “literature” of fiction, drama, poetry occurred similarly in Europe from pre-18th century “Letters” to 19th century “literature.” I therefore created the concept of “letterature” to make us aware of the invisible radically different earlier world of what we now call “literature”; in Japanese the hybridity of early modern and modern worlds of literature is marked through parentheses: “letterature” = 「文」学.

The three-volume *New History of Japanese Letterature*, whose third volume constitutes the comparative history of East Asian literatures, is inspired by German forms of conceptual history (Begriffsgeschichte), in particular by Hans Blumenberg’s

metaphorology.⁷ Conceptual history typically traces the change in meaning of important concepts of human societies and their cultures. This history does not aim to supply an exhaustive chronological analysis of the successive usages of the word “letterature” 文学, as practiced by the more positivistic philological varieties of Begriffsgeschichte. Rather, to summarily sketch the larger arch of the structure and argument of the three (actually rather different) volumes, the three-volume project probes the conceptualizations and practical incarnations of “letterature” in political life, court culture, material culture, knowledge transmission and education, devotional practices and beliefs; in interactions between various social classes and the sexes; and in the diverse spectrum of inscription ranging from orthodox literary Sinitic to vernacular Japanese practices and genres.

Our task as literary historians becomes much more complicated when we write conceptual literary histories that are self-reflexive, namely, histories that historicize their subject—“literature”—in their own longer tradition of evolving concepts and practices of “literature” and “literary historiography.” But it is particularly vital to write self-reflexive histories of non-Western literatures with rich century- or millennia-old textual archives, which predate the colonial, and also conceptual, onslaught of Western colonization and imperialism and can only be appropriately captured when liberated from the anachronistic straitjacket of the 19th European national literature model. The attention to historical change and cultural difference that such self-reflexive literary histories can produce makes them more truthful to history. Because they write the history of literature as a moving target, mindful of the changing definitions and practices of literature along the trajectory of their narrative, they manage to reduce anachronistic distortions and give us a more realistic picture of literature in the periods and places they describe.

The Origins of the Modern Literary Historiography of China, Japan, and Korea in Heterographic, Idiographic, and Xenographic Keys

Where do we come from? Although literary historiography has a long history in traditional East Asian culture, our current literary histories all originate from the adoption of Western models in East Asia starting in the last decades of the 19th century. The national literature paradigm pervasive at the time inspired the composition of separate national histories for China, Japan, and Korea and, equally, discouraged regional, multiliterate literary historiography. There is no scarcity of research on the

⁷ Ernst Müller and Falko Schmieder, *Begriffsgeschichte und historische Semantik: Ein kritisches Kompendium* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2016); Wiebke Denecke, “Bun no gainenshi o tōshite Nihon bungakushi o hiraku” 文学の概念史を通して日本「文」学史をひらく in Wiebke Denecke, Shinkawa Tokio, and Jinno Hidenori, eds., *Nihon bungakushi* 日本「文」学史, vol. 1 (Tokyo: Bensei Shuppan, 2015), pp. 1–40.

origins of modern literary historiography in East Asia.⁸ But it lacks critical perspective on the ideological underpinnings and specific goals of the early literary historiographers of East Asia's national literatures, buying uncritically into the ideology of the nation state as it arose in the Japanese empire, inspired by Western colonial powers.

While there is much valuable research on single authors and literary histories and on the history of literary historiography of single national literatures in East Asia, hardly anybody has contextualized them within the East Asian region. Instead, questions of national pride seem to intuitively set the scope for research. Consider for example the great attention scholars have paid to the question of *who* was the *first* to write a modern literary history of China. China scholars have paid an inordinate amount of attention to Lin Chuanjia's 林傳甲 (1877–1922) *Literary History of China* (*Zhongguo wenxue shi* 中國文學史) of 1904/1910, giving short thrift to almost two decades worth of previous literary histories of China written by Japanese authors – just *because he is Chinese*? Although since the 1980s Huang Ren's 黃人 (1866–1913) literary history of 1905/1926 has gotten pride of first place because his work has “more in common with modern readers' conceptions of literature”⁹, a great focus remains on Lin Chuanjia, now as a failed earlier progenitor supposedly caught in conventional clichés and lacking innovation.¹⁰ It is great that there is more focus now on the original pedagogical, seemingly pedestrian, purpose of these works – rather than considering them to as reference works aiming for scholarly excellence by today's standards. But the fallacy of looking for the *first* literary history that looks *similar enough* to our contemporary ones is deeply anachronistic and flawed – and the focus on the first *Chinese* writer, rather than on an integrated study with the Japanese models some of the Chinese writers used, is unproductively nationalistic and risks missing out on the remarkably complex regional, East Asian dynamic of this phenomenon.

This is just one example of the competition over national “firsts” among others that showcases the biases that still hamper our research. It might be time to recognize that it is a fetish of modernist ideology we still hold dear in some way; to let it go; and to replace it with a much more nuanced tracing of developments beyond our belated teleologies in a regional East Asian context. This would be a historically empathic approach that can give us a taste of how very strange and exciting it must have been

⁸ To name just some central works, for state-of-the-field articles and relevant literature on the Chinese case see Doleželová-Velingerová (2001), Chen (2016), and Chan (2017); for Japan see Lozerand (2005) and Mizobe (2017). Research on the history of Korean literary historiography is still largely preliminary, but Cho (2010) is a rich resource.

⁹ Kwok Kou Leonard Chan, “Wen and the ‘First History(-ies) of Chinese Literature’” in David Der-wei Wang, ed., *A New Literary History of Modern China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 194.

¹⁰ Ibid. and also Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, “Literary Historiography in Early Twentieth-Century China (1904–1928): Constructions of Cultural Memory” in Milena Doleželová-Velingerová, Oldřich Král, and Graham Sanders, eds., *The Appropriation of Cultural Capital: China's May Fourth Project* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2001), pp. 123–166..

for the earliest writers in East Asia to devise a “history” of a “literature” of a “nation,” own or other, in chronological fashion. To my knowledge there is to date only one major study of the literary historiography of East Asia in regional perspective. Not surprisingly, it is by a South Korean scholar, who by birth is deeply rooted in the study of Chinese literature, fluent in Japanese matters, and has of course native familiarity with the Korean case. Hardly any Chinese, Japanese, or Western scholar could easily bring these skills and deeper understanding of the regional dynamics to the table. It is Cho Tong-il’s *Comparative Study of East Asian Literary Histories* (*Higashi Ajia bungakushi hikakuron* 東アジア文学史比較論).¹¹ Cho is a literary historian with much hands-on experience, having published a multi-volume Korean literary history in Korean and co-authored a one-volume version in French with Daniel Bouchez. Cho’s comparative study is beyond ambitious: in the first part he guides us through the chronology of major literary histories, in 18th through 20th century Europe, and in Japan, China, Korea, and Vietnam. In the second part he works through his wealth of observations on European and East Asian samples of the genre through comparisons of the structure and formats, the language politics, the relation between literary, and intellectual and social historiography, and issues of periodization. In the third part Cho calls for a comparative history of East Asian literature and gives samples of potential themes for comparison from the ancient period to modernity.

Cho’s comparative tour-de-force is a remarkable achievement. As a postcolonial Korean scholar he is keenly aware of the cultural politics behind the earliest literary histories, noting in particular the pioneering position of Japanese scholars in absorbing European models of the genre most quickly. He repeatedly castigates them for using it as a tool of strident cultural politics against the formerly hegemonic reference culture of China, a colonial dynamic he contrasts with the more conciliatory and fraternal literary historiography of European nations, such as François Guizot’s «Histoire générale de la civilisation en Europe» (1828), which was very influential in Japan and East Asia. While Cho’s “Comparative Study” will hopefully prove to be the grand overture to a new era of studying literature and literary historiography in East Asia comparatively, Cho strangely perpetuates this cultural politics by claiming for example that, just as scholars in Meiji Japan pioneered modern literary historiography around the turn of the twentieth century, Korean literary historians will be the innovators for our times.¹² The specifics of this prophecy are intriguingly global and timely. Harking back to the first literary history of Korea, An Hwak’s 安廓 (1886–1946) *Chosŏn munhaksa* 朝鮮文學史 of 1922 and its triadic scheme of “oral,” “cosmopolitan/Sinitic,” and “local/vernacular” literary traditions in Korea, Cho highlights the prominence of oral literature as a distinctive characteristic of Korean literature and draws parallels to Tamil and Swahili literary culture (with the triad of

¹¹ I am quoting here the Japanese translation of 2010, which will be more accessible to most readers than the Korean original, which was published in 1993.

¹² Cho Tong-il, trans. by Toyofuku Kenji 豊福健二, *Higashi Ajia bungakushi hikakuron* 東アジア文学史比較論 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2010), p. 33.

oral, Arabic cosmopolitan, and local Swahili). He then concludes that the Korean case can help develop a literary history model for other more strongly oral “third world” literatures and allow us to rewrite world literature studies.¹³ While the push for global comparativism is timely and productive, some lingering sentiment of a century-old one-upmanship with the previous colonizer is an unfortunate perpetuation of the aggressive cultural politics of literary historiography that we are about to analyze and that should have no place in today’s best academic practices.

Such pursuit of linear national(istic) origin stories obscures the nature and function of this genre and the historical forces behind its meteoric rise in East Asia. Instead, the emergence of modern Western-style literary historiography in China, Japan, and Korea is an East Asian story embedded in the intense cultural competition that unfolded alongside Japan’s political grasp for military and economic supremacy in East Asia at the time. Below I will sketch the complex emergence of modern Western-style literary historiography of East Asia, drawing attention to the nationality of the historiographers, their motivations, and the diverging timeframes during which this practice emerged in China, Japan, and Korea. To pinpoint the frameworks and motivations of the historiographers, I propose to typologize literary histories into “idiographic,” “heterographic,” and “xenographic” ones, written, respectively, on the historiographer’s own, a culturally related, or completely foreign literary tradition. Once we do so, powerful regional patterns emerge that reveal systemic biases that we need to take into account when evaluating these early literary histories. We tend to read these histories too much at face value, proceeding intuitively from the anachronistic question of how modern their content looks by today’s standards. This triadic scheme forces us to historicize early literary histories and ask how the cultural background, agenda, and mindset of their authors systematically affected the content. We need to understand this to write better literary histories today.

Literary Histories of China: From Heterographic, to Xenographic, to Idiographic

East Asia’s modern Western-style national “literary historiography” (*bungakushi* 文學史) emerged in Japan in the 1880s, quickly resulting in dozens of works with that label in Japan and China, often textbooks for the newly established Western-style schools and universities. Educational reforms in response to the encroachment of Western imperialist powers and Japan’s rise to a Western-style imperialist power were the most central catalysts of this genre, which came to flourish particularly after the startling reversal of the traditional East Asian power balance that came with Japan’s victory over China in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). Professors—a novel social class of modern “intellectuals”—needed textbooks fitted to newly developed academic programs and curricula on both Western and native knowledge. There is an interesting paradox here: for traditional literati and emerging intellectuals in East Asia the newly coined Western-style concept of “literature” was hard to grasp, because

¹³ Cho, *Higashi Ajia bungakushi hikakuron*, pp. 223–226.

Europe's late nineteenth-century national literature paradigm did not map well onto the traditional East Asian world of letters and literary composition. Many of these early literary histories start off with attempts to attach a "definition" to this new concept of literature. In contrast, the concept of literary history seemed less problematic. At least it was enthusiastically reiterated and reproduced on book covers, with little explicit struggle to comprehend its meaning. Part of the problem of reading this large and varied corpus of early literary histories from the tumultuous and formative two decades around the turn of the twentieth century is that the popularity of that generic label covered up vast differences in what the writers of such literary histories actually understood as "literature" in their moment and place.

It comes as no surprise that the earliest literary histories were devoted to China—a natural consequence of China's traditional status as venerable reference culture in the region—although they were written by Japanese reformist politicians and sinologists, and are thus heterographic.¹⁴ The Japanese elites were hardly foreigners to Chinese literature, but stood in a Japanese Sinological tradition that reached back a dozen centuries, while also looking keenly toward a future of Japanese hegemonic ascent in the region. Many of them looked at Chinese literature with ambivalent eyes. These heterographic histories start with Suematsu Kenchō's 末松謙澄 (1855-1920) *A Short History of China's Ancient Literature* (*Shina kobungaku ryakushi* 支那古文学略史). Written by Suematsu while he was studying law at Cambridge University and published in 1882, this seems to be the earliest work published under the label of "literary history" in East Asia. It offers a vivid picture of what devising a literary history for a Japanese student in 1880s England entailed. Born in the 1850s, Viscount Suematsu, eventually a highly decorated politician, diplomat, and writer, was trained in a private academy of Classical (Chinese) studies. After earning his law degree at Cambridge, he went on to become a member of Japan's first Diet in 1890 and held several ministerial posts. It is remarkable that he embraced the new label of literary history, a genre he must have encountered during his studies in Cambridge. Second, Suematsu's work is a macrohistorical analogy, a cross-application to East Asian civilization of "classical (Greco-Roman) studies," whose curricular and cultural centrality he also witnessed at Cambridge.

The canon of texts he discusses is still part of the traditional world of letters: he presents a line-up of titles broadly organized by the four bibliographical categories, starting with the Classic of Documents and quickly moving to the "Masters," and later to "Literary Collections" and "Histories." But the frame and some of his choices belie a man from a new era: in the opening he justifies the study of China's ancient literature (*Shina kobungaku* 支那古文学) by saying that it is just as important for the study of "Oriental literatures" (*Tōyō bungaku* 東洋文学) as the study of Greek and Latin

¹⁴ Wiebke Denecke, *Classical World Literatures: Sino-Japanese and Greco-Roman Comparisons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 1–10..

literatures for “Occidental literatures” (Seiyō bungaku 西洋文学).¹⁵ Even the title and opening phrase of his work are sparkling with fresh words and concepts: an (abridged) “history” of the ancient “literature” of “Shina” (China) as part of “Oriental literatures” that is a new comparandum to the variety of national “Occidental literatures.” That Suematsu cared about political power, economic wealth, and military strength of his country is evident from the fact that he gives much space and prime place in the first volume to the Masters Text *Guanzi* 管子.¹⁶ He gets into issues of “economic theory” (*keizairon* 經濟論) and praises Guanzi’s “secret art” of enriching the people. Shang Yang 商鞅 (390–338 BCE), the legalist architect of Qin’s military power, gets special attention for his role of “enriching” and “strengthening” the state of Qin, terms that resonate with Suematsu’s time.¹⁷

While colonialist undertones vis-à-vis China only enter Japanese literary historiographies of China in the later 1990s, Suematsu set an important example for retrojecting China into antiquity, his focus on China as a “classical civilization” with an “ancient literature” implying its contemporary decline. In strong contrast to literary histories of Japan, which emerged as comprehensive surveys from the earliest to the contemporary period and from canonical works to popular genres previously not considered serious literature, many Japanese authors of literary histories of China into the 1900s focused heavily on the canonical works of China’s ancient and medieval period—up to the Song dynasty (960–1279). For them China was stuck in the earlier period as an ancient “high civilization” with a problematic (or at least silent) present and future. They refrained from associating China with modernity and the European notion of literature as epitomized by the novel, instead emphasizing how Japan measured up to this standard in the eleventh century with Murasaki Shikibu’s 紫式部 (d. ca. 1014) *Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari* 源氏物語).

From here we will only briefly survey inflection points.¹⁸ Kojō Teikichi’s 古城真吉 (1866–1949) *Literary History of China* (*Shina bungakushi* 支那文学史) of 1897 was the first chronologically comprehensive history. He orders the material by dynastic periods and treats a broad swath of textual (not just narrowly “literary”) genres. Although Kōjo’s literary history has been considered a turning point in Japanese Sinology—its continuing value confirmed for example by Yoshikawa Kōjiro

¹⁵ Suematsu Kenchō, *Shina kobungaku ryakushi* 支那古文學略史 (Tokyo: Bungakusha, 1887), 1.1A.

¹⁶ Suematsu, *Shina kobungaku ryakushi*, 1.8A–12B.

¹⁷ Suematsu, *Shina kobungaku ryakushi*, 2.5B–6B.

¹⁸ For a more detailed account of the early literary historiography of Japan, China, and Korea see Wiebke Denecke, “The Politics of (Dis)similarity: New Tools to Understand the Emergence of Modern Literary Historiography in East Asia” in Nikolas Immer, Frank Kraushaar, and Henrieke Stahl, eds., *Ähnlichkeit in Lyrik und Poetik der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2023), pp.203–235 and Wiebke Denecke, “Tuning Literary Histories to World Time” in Sarah M. Allen, Jack W. Chen, and Xiaofei Tian, eds., *Literary History in and beyond China: Reading Text and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2023), pp.205–231.

in the 1960s¹⁹—in one point it looks radically different from today’s Chinese literary histories or even those that were published shortly thereafter. Kōjo’s still very Confucian conception of “letterature” made him highlight Confucian studies through various periods and virtually exclude popular literature, namely, the novel and drama.

It was Sasagawa Rinpū 笹川臨風 (1870–1949), a practicing haiku poet inclined toward popular literature, who took that final step towards the table of content of our current literary histories of China in 1897, when he published a history of Chinese novels and drama. But even Sasagawa felt compelled, in his *Literary History of China* (*Shina bungakushi* 支那文学史) published the following year, to self-consciously justify the inclusion of drama and novels by claiming a distinguished lineage for these genres in China’s “southern” culture and parables of the philosophical Masters Text *Zhuangzi* 莊子. He attributes China’s reticence in producing fiction instead to the strong influence of “northern” Confucian culture and the political function of literature (*bunshō keikoku* 文章経国), putting Japan on the right (Western) side of history and emphasizing that unlike in China, novels and drama flourished in Europe and Japan.²⁰

In a next step, two decades after Suematsu’s history, xenographic histories in European languages appear: Herbert Giles’s (1845–1933) *A History of Chinese Literature* of 1901, followed in 1902 by Wilhelm Grube’s (1855–1908) *Geschichte der chinesischen Litteratur* in German.²¹ The first idiographic literary histories of China appear only after the heterographic and xenographic histories. Chen Pingyuan has shown how the newly appointed instructor Lin Chuanjia, mentioned above as a supposedly imperfect “first” Chinese author of a Chinese literary history, perfectly fitted his hastily compiled lecture manual for the new “Literature” program at Jingshi University (later Beijing University), to the new university regulations of 1903. The sixteen chapters in Lin’s “Literary History of China” exactly match the first 16 clauses of the regulations on “research and the substance of literature,” while dispensing of

¹⁹ Mizobe Yoshie, “Meijiki no Nihon ni okeru Chūgoku shōsetsu kenkyū ni tsuite: bungakushi ni okeru kijutsu o chūshin ni” 明治期の日本における中国小説史研究について: 文学史における記述を中心に, *Chūgoku kenkyū* 10 (2017): 116.

²⁰ Sasagawa Rinpū, *Shina bungakushi* 支那文学史 (Tokyo: Hakubunkan, 1898), pp. 259–261. The question of the rapidly changing status of fiction and its effect on literary historiography is particularly important, because Japanese intellectuals picked up on the high reputation novels had in Europe at the time. William Hedberg has shown how the Meiji and Taishō period reception of Chinese premodern vernacular novels, such as *Water Margin*, influenced the earliest histories of Chinese literature written by Japanese scholars. See William C. Hedberg, *The Japanese Discovery of Chinese Fiction: The Water Margin and the Making of a National Canon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), pp. 95–144.

²¹ Let us leave aside here Vasily Vasilyev’s (1818–1900) *Ocherk istorii kitaiskoi literaturi* (*Abridged History of Chinese Literature*) of 1880, which preceded Suematsu’s work. Written in Russian, it had little impact on xenographic literary historiography of China.

the last 25.²² Lin's lectures were very popular, reprinted in many forms until 2005.²³ And although he explicitly mentions Sasagawa Rinpū's *Shina bungakushi*, Lin's work is clearly a Chinese approach to China's literary heritage and served very different purposes. Lin explains that he selected classical texts to practice the art of literary composition. First, Lin's is a textbook for learning the tools of traditional philology (including script and calligraphic styles, rhyme books, and etymology) and forms of textual analysis (such as rhetorical devices and argumentation). Second, it introduces novices to the arts of literary composition (chapter 6). Third, even when Lin goes into a seemingly chronological mode (chapters 7–14), he does so through the screen of traditional bibliographical categories and genres, starting with Classics, Histories, and Masters. Fourth, he not only omits novels and drama but rails about how base and despicable these genres are—not to be considered a part of venerable “letterature” but at best a part of a history of popular manners. Lin's notes appeared just as Liang Qichao was launching his call for reform of the national novel and proclaiming its great future.²⁴ However much criticized by post-May Fourth scholars as messy or not even a “real literary history,” Lin's work presents a unified vision. We see a glimpse of a waning world in which students were equipped with a mixture of traditional philology, textual composition, and training in the historical lineages of various major genres. Rather different from Japan, “Chinese literary history” in China had not yet turned into a modern academic subject, a form of idiographic Sinology, but was in part still a tool to enable students to participate in China's living late Qing textual culture. Classical literature, especially poetry, continued to play a prominent role in literary education and culture in twentieth-century China. Lin's history helps us get under the cultural and social skin of our authors and the tremendous challenges they faced with little preparation in their rapidly, radically changing world.

Literary Histories of Japan: From Idiographic, to Xenographic, to—much later—Heterographic

Literary histories of Japan appear about a decade after the earliest Japanese histories of Chinese literature, but they are, in strong contrast to those of China, off to an idiographic start, written by Japanese. Recent graduates of the new literature curriculum at what was later Tokyo University, Mikami Sanji 三上参次 (1865–1939) and Takatsu Kenzaburo 高津鍬三郎 (1864–1921), published their *Literary History of Japan* (*Nihon bungakushi* 日本文学史) in 1890. They undertook a systematic full-scale application of European models to their own literary heritage, making this the

²² Chen Pingyuan, “The Story of Literary History” in Carlos Rojas and Andrea Bachner, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Chinese Literatures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 92–111.

²³ Fu Xiangxi 付祥喜, *20 shiji qianqi Zhongguo wenxueshi xiezuo biannian yanjiu* 20 世纪前期中国文学史写作编年研究 (Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 2013), pp. 118–119.

²⁴ On this, see further comments in Fu Xiangxi, *Ershi shiji qianqi Zhongguo wenxueshi*, pp. 120–121.

earliest literary history on any East Asian tradition to basically bear all features of the “national literature paradigm,” as it later emerged in China since the 1920s and, much later, in Korea since the 1950s and 1960s. The young graduates programmatically excluded Japan’s literature in Literary Sinitic and upgraded the development of vernacular, popular literature to the master narrative of their history, promoting premodern tales as the equivalent of the European “novel.” Thus, unlike China, which Japanese literary historians initially arrested in the timeframe of venerable antiquity, Japan emerges proudly as a modern nation in this first literary history, with a fully-fledged vernacular literary tradition that desires to be put on par with Europe’s great literary traditions. This was certainly not a disinterested move, but a strategy to assert Japan’s legitimate claim to modernity—and China’s backwardness and loss of authority in the present.

Not surprisingly, xenographic literary histories of Japan by avid European observers of Japan’s rise on the global stage appear, in relative chronology, a decade earlier than those of China: William George Aston’s (1841–1911) *A History of Japanese Literature* of 1899 and Karl Florenz’s (1865–1939) German *Geschichte der japanischen Literatur* (*History of Japanese Literature*) of 1906. Unlike for China, heterographic literary histories for Japan trailed far behind. The Japanese literary history by Chinese scholar and translator Xie Liuyi 謝六逸 (1898–1945) was published in 1927/1929 in Shanghai—almost forty years into the history of Japanese literary historiography in Japanese. So the order of the triadic scheme for Japan is diametrically opposed to the Chinese case: a paradigmatic idiographic beginning, with a quick appearance of xenographic literary histories, and few, much later heterographic samples.

Literary Histories of Korea: From Late Little Idiographic, to Not Much Xenographic or Heterographic

Literary histories of Korea first appear forty years—two generations—after the genre made its appearance in Japan for Chinese literature: An Hwak’s 安廓 (1886–1946) *Literary History of Chosŏn* (*Chosŏn munhaksa* 朝鮮文學史) of 1922. Not only do we have to wait for the liberation from Japanese colonialism in 1945 to see idiographic literary historiography of Korea properly emerge—soon to be divided into those written in the North and the South. Revealingly, even xenographic Korean literary histories only appear in the second half of the twentieth century, such as Andre Eckardt’s (1884–1974) German *Geschichte der koreanischen Literatur* (*History of Korean Literature*) in 1968. Thus, for Korea the triadic scheme is different still, starting with a single work of idiographic literary history and only coming into its own after the colonial period, when heterographic and xenographic literary histories slowly start appearing, mostly written by Koreans and Korean diaspora scholars or Westerners who happened to have lived in Korea for a long time. The Korean case almost explodes

the triadic scheme, making most enterprises of Korean literary historiography “idiographic” of sorts.²⁵

To put it simply, the new notion of a “national literature” and its study took root in modernizing Meiji Japan in the 1880s. In China they were propagated and eventually canonized by the New Culture movement from the late 1910s to 1920s. In Korea literary historiography emerged as anti-colonial discourse in the 1920s, but could only unfold after the end of the Japanese colonial period starting in the 1950s, when scholars started to pin “national literature” on the vernacular rather than also Sinitic literature, which resulted in the formation of separate disciplines of “national literature” (*kungmun* 國文) and “Sino-Korean/Sinitic literature” (*hanmun* 漢文) programs. As the authoritative reference culture in the region, China became the first subject for new Western-style literary historiography. Japanese Sinologists performed that service for their venerable reference culture, with an ambivalent mixture of age-old admiration and increasingly imperialist pride in the successes of Japan’s speedy modernization and Westernization. This pride also fueled the first idiographic literary histories that the Japanese started writing about their own tradition. Westerners could ignore neither the past greatness of China nor the ascending power of the new Japanese empire and thus set quickly to writing literary histories of China and Japan for their respective Western audiences. In the region, the Chinese were still traditionally disdainful of their little neighbor Japan; for Koreans, writing Japanese literary histories became a highly ambivalent task at best. This regional disinterest (even distaste) toward Japan stands in stark contrast to the ascent of Japanese literature studies in the West, especially with its economic success since the 1980s, which fueled the establishment of Japanese studies programs worldwide. So far almost no one, regionally or internationally, has had interest in chronicling the literary legacy of Korea.²⁶ Koreans took this task upon themselves with the stirrings of anticolonial activism in the 1920s and after liberation with the establishment of Korean literary studies in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, South Korea’s unrivaled soft power in shaping global popular culture through K-drama, K-pop, and K-everything is making it more likely that more serious, critical and comprehensive histories of Korean literature will appear in the nearer future. With the Korean Wave and Han Kang as the first Korean writer and first Asian female to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, the absence of good literary histories of Korea becomes a drastic lost opportunity that should not go unaddressed for any long any more. The clock is ticking, as every day we are losing out on thousands of potential enthusiasts of Korean literature who find their way from K drama or K pop to the globally still untrodden shores of the Korean literary tradition.

²⁵ For a more extensive comparative treatment of early East Asian literary historiography and in particular also xenographic literary histories, see Denecke, “The Politics of (Dis)similarity.”

²⁶ Note that in 1927, Canadian missionary James Scarth Gale (1863–1937) published a *History of the Korean People* that contained references to and translations of songs, poems, and other literary works, but it is not framed as a literary history. See Richard Rutt, *James Scarth Gale and his History of Korean People* (Seoul: Seoul Computer Press, 1982).

The Task Ahead: Towards Literary Historiographies of the East Asian Region

The future for literary historiographies of East Asia is ahead. Today, we have new, variously blended versions of the originally quite separate “idiographic,” “heterographic,” and “xenographic” literary histories of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Human mobility and the East Asian diaspora make for a radically different historical moment, where e.g. literary histories written in East Asian languages might be “idiographic,” but take a “xenographic” Western-style perspective on their own literary traditions.

Where are our current opportunities? First and foremost, in the embracing of the region, the macro-region of East Asia, as the core focus of East Asian Studies, from a perspective of Global Humanities. Specifically for literary historiography, we need both the renovation of national literary historiographies of China, Japan, and Korea, which boldly transcend the national literature paradigm, and the innovation of doing regional literary histories of East Asia. Current new methods of literary historiography—multilingual, ethically-oriented, and epistemologically and conceptually new and closer to the historical truth—should guide us in creating cutting-edge literary historiography that is in tune with our historical moment.

First, new literary histories of East Asia need to be multilingual—most importantly they need to properly account in the case of Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, for the high-status, voluminous literary corpus written in the cosmopolitan language of Literary Sinitic.

Second, East Asia is a historical macro-region that in the 21st century is in sore need of an *ancilla reconciliationis*, a handmaiden to regional reconciliation. The “history wars” over the aftermath of Japanese imperialism have become ever more heated around the comfort women issue, territorial disputes, and clashes over proper ways to honor the war dead and the representation in schoolbooks of the history of twentieth-century conflict, colonization, and war. The national movements of the early twentieth century, which divided the formerly shared literary world of East Asia’s Sinitic world into modern nation-states and national, vernacular languages and literatures, certainly did not encourage the development of a regional identity with a shared “East Asian” cultural heritage. The unresolved and divisive aftermath of Japanese imperialism in the second half of the twentieth century, when neither acceptable apologies and productive dialogue nor strategies for reconciliation were achieved, has led to escalating political alienation and economic competition in the region. These are some of the reasons, despite the existence of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean literary historiography for more than a century, that regional literary historiography of East Asia is only recently emerging, with a new generation of scholars pushing for regional approaches to East Asian cultural heritage in East Asian Studies as a whole.

Third, we need conceptual histories of East Asian literatures that are mindful of the particular nature and constant shifts in the concepts and practices of literary culture

that literary histories need to capture, not essentialize into some universal notion of “literature.”

Fourth, we should make the best of the ambivalent reference of the “region.” Yes, supra-national regional literary histories of the macro-region of East Asia are urgently needed, but so are sub-national regional histories of literature. Literary histories of Hansŏng, Chosŏn-period Seoul, of the rich literary heritage of China’s Jiangnan region, or of Kyushu, Kansai Japan, or Okinawa can supply nuancing micro-glimpses that in the higher-order, conceptually driven supra-national regional histories disappear in the smaller resolution of the narrative.

Fifth, we should promote the research and writing of heterographic literary histories in today’s East Asia. How do Japanese scholars write the history of Korean literature? How about Chinese scholars writing Japanese literary histories? This is a particular duty of East Asian Scholars working and living outside East Asia. We can support our colleagues in the region in co-creating literary histories that are both an act of more truthful historiography, as well as an act of academic diplomacy and an opportunity for reconciliation and catharsis of trauma. They should feel confidence, even comfort to turn toward regional symbiosis in challenging world political times, which will, hopefully, strengthen regions as units of human experience, research, and political and transnational action.

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