

Series Editors' Foreword
East Asian Comparative Literature and Culture

In the midst of debates over their value and transformation, the humanities are today more than ever called upon to address fundamental problems of our world. From justice in dysfunctional democracies, unequal globalization, and human existence in the Anthropocene, from human rights in an age of artificial intelligence and genome-editing, to history in the face of the threats of a new Cold War and cyber wars—these are global problems that no single state, culture or ideology can tackle. Only academic initiatives premised on and immersed in the diversity of cultures and societies can legitimately aim to tackle today's challenges. The humanities, therefore, have the responsibility of becoming fully global in scope, comparative in method, and intellectually critical in their mission to help us open ourselves and each other to new horizons and create strategies together to address the pressing problems of today's world.

The study of East Asia has much to offer in the current transformation of the humanities. Not only is East Asia home to several of the world's leading economic, political, and technological powers, but the region's millennia-old cultural traditions and diverse experiences of modernity offer indispensable resources for creating global, comparative, and critical humanities. The field of East Asian Studies, while remaining true to its renowned tradition of philological rigor, is undergoing a generational change. Much of the most exciting research today crosses languages, cultures, histories, disciplines, and institutions. *East Asian Comparative Literature and Culture* aims to offer a timely and much-needed venue to publish this kind of innovative research.

“East Asia” is a modern concept referring to a region with intimate cultural connections, but also with a long history of violence and war, which still lingers in paralyzing political tensions over the traumas of Japanese colonization, the representation of history in national education, and territorial disputes. “East Asia” includes the “Sinographic Sphere” of China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam—cultures that adopted the Chinese script and literary language. For almost two millennia this written idiom, “Literary Sinitic,” was the language of government, scholarship, Buddhism, and belles-lettres. The region's “bi-literacy”—textual production in forms of Literary Sinitic and local vernaculars—functioned quite differently from alphabetic *lingua francas*. Europe's bilingualism during the Middle Ages, for example, was rooted in the transregional power of Latin, both spoken and read. In contrast, the logographic writing system of Chinese (recording meaning of “words” rather than “sounds” as “phonographic” alphabets do) allowed the region's literati, including speakers of Chinese dialects, to read and voice any given text in Literary Sinitic in their local vernacular language. Thus, East Asia shared a “grapholect,” or *scripta franca*, as we might call it more appropriately. During the second millennium, phonographic scripts came to flourish in Japan, Vietnam, and Korea, resulting in the blossoming of vernacular literatures and leading eventually to the gradual abandonment of Chinese characters in Korea and Vietnam.

But until the early twentieth century, elites in East Asia communicated through Literary Sinitic and understood themselves as parts of a shared world of transnational education in the Chinese Classics, which brought literati in Hanoi and Seoul closer to each other than they both were to their fellow peasant countrymen living in a village just outside the capital. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reformers inspired by Western ideas of “nation states” and “national languages” spearheaded vernacular movements that heavily criticized and eventually swept Literary Sinitic and its intellectual and literary culture aside. The last Chinese-style civil service examinations were held in Vietnam in 1919 under the French colonial government, fourteen years after the abolishment of the examination system in China. The death of Literary Sinitic as the region’s shared language over the course of the twentieth century meant, therefore, the disappearance of the world’s last cultural sphere where a logographic script had enabled distinctive literary cultures to thrive for almost two millennia.

In the early twenty-first century, despite ever increasing political tensions, the purchase of Western-style education and appeal of popular culture connects East Asian cultures to each other and to the world. The number of Chinese students and scholars at foreign universities has never been greater, the “Korean wave” washes K-dramas and K-pop ashore on all continents, and Japanese manga and anime garner millions of young fans from New Delhi, Cape Town, and Oslo to Vladivostok, Hanoi and Bogotá. From today’s perspective, the national movements and Westernization at the turn of the twentieth century is not any more interpreted as desired “progress” towards “modernity” on a western-world historical scale, but an inflection point whose significance has yet to be fully assessed in hindsight—both for the region and the world. This epochal moment opens up intriguing possibilities for more diverse, transnational approaches to East Asian cultures and other macroregions of the world with colonial or semi-colonial histories. Rather than seeing the cultural histories of East Asian countries reduced to usable pasts for nation-branding in nationalist politics or to sample materials for academic analysis by theorists working implicitly through Euro-American models, we are interested in better understanding the dynamic tensions between modern and premodern practices and values, transnational routes of textual and human movements, and changing conceptions and functions of East Asian knowledge cultures throughout history. We promote both intra-regional and trans-regional comparisons as an academic method with real-life impact on public opinion: it can help free East Asian cultures and traditions from nationalist agendas and unproductive disciplinary ownership and open them up towards broader humanistic questions of global concern.

East Asian Comparative Literature and Culture responds to the urgent need for a more complex understanding and appreciation of this region by publishing substantial comparative research on the literary and cultural traditions of East Asia and their relation to the world. We showcase original research on the methodology and practice of comparison, including intra- and trans-regional comparisons of China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam; explorations of entanglements

and mutual representations of Western and East Asian traditions; examinations of the relationship between the East Asian Sinographic Sphere and non-Sinographic textual cultures such as Manchu, Uyghur, and Tibetan; and multipolar comparisons that examine East Asian literatures and cultures in the light of their relations with South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.

The series focuses on the interpretive sciences, namely core humanities disciplines such as literature, history, religion, philosophy and thought, art history, musicology, performance and media studies. It also welcomes contributions adopting culturally-informed approaches in archeology, historical geography, anthropology, political science, sociology, or linguistics. Our historical moment demands that we as scholars combine comparative analysis with the depth of area-study-expertise and philology, theoretical acumen, and a courageous orientation towards the exploration of fundamental questions that matter to us today. This is the tall order that this book series and the authors we feature are taking on. We are confident, however, that *East Asian Comparative Literature and Culture* will enable a deeper mutual understanding, and successfully integrate knowledge about and approaches to different literary and cultural traditions through critical comparative examination. We see clearly the relevance of the humanities to the world we are living in now, and aim to make significant contributions to humanistic scholarship and, ultimately, to the creation of a less divisive, more equal, and better world for all.

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