

The Classical Chinese Cosmopolis

Organized by Benjamin Ridgway, Swarthmore College

Short Version (32 words)

This panel proposes to explicitly theorize the cosmopolitan nature of classical Chinese. Papers will consider the role of classical Chinese in the formation of trans-regional communities within and beyond the Chinese ecumene.

Long Version (337 words)

This panel proposes to explicitly theorize the cosmopolitan nature of classical Chinese. While it has long been recognized that beginning in the Western Han (206 BCE- 48 CE) Classical Chinese (also referred to as Literary Sinitic) developed into a normative written language that increasingly departed from different spoken vernaculars, the historical potentialities of Classical Chinese as a shared literary medium of expression for courts and political elites across the pre-20th century period, within and beyond the Chinese ecumene, has yet to be fully explored. Our goal, on the one hand, is to better understand how the cosmopolitan nature of Classical Chinese created new textual spaces for different processes of trans-regional elite identity formation. The aesthetic power of classical Chinese linked writers both horizontally across disparate geographic regions and vertically over time as literary communities looked back to established works. At the same time, given that through a long process of diffusion and circulation, canonical texts in Classical Chinese became globalized cultural commodities throughout pre-modern East Asia, we also are interested how texts crossed cultural boundaries and in the specific strategies of adaptation and exchange that expanded the scope of the Classical Chinese Cosmopolis. Finally, within the larger academy we also see this panel as a first necessary step to bringing classical East Asian literatures into a larger comparative conversation on pre-modern cosmopolitan languages (such as Persian, Latin, and Sanskrit) and their connections with the creation of larger socio-textual communities and polities.

Possible starting-points might include:

- The beginnings of classical Chinese as a literary language in the Han dynasty
- The formation of trans-regional sociotextual communities based on new spaces of literary style, such as courts and literary salons of the Six Dynasties or Tang and Song dynasty literati gatherings or banquets.
- The ways that vernacular or hybrid vernacular-classical texts challenged or resisted the trans-regional and elite pull of classical Chinese.
- The circulation of standardized texts or anthologies in the literary language as globalized cultural commodities.
- The diffusion and adaptation of classical Chinese by other regions within East Asia.

Please send abstracts to Benjamin Ridgway (bridgwa1@swarthmore.edu) by no later than March 15. Scholars accepted to the panel will need to have MLA membership current by April 7.