

Zukunftsp hilologie

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FRIEDRICH SCHLEGEL
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für literaturwissenschaftliche Studien

Lecture cum Seminar

Thursday, May 3, 2012, 4 – 7 pm

Freie Universität Berlin, Habelschwerdter Allee 45, Room J 24/122d

Saeko Shibayama

(Zukunftspilologie-Fellow 2011-2012)

Metaphors for Heaven:

Ōe Masafusa's (1041-1111) Buddhist Prayers for the Japanese Aristocracy

Chair: Lejla Demiri

(Zukunftspilologie-Fellow 2011-2012)

Abstract

Today we live in a world in which a vernacular or “natural” writing is more respected than highly ornate and pompous prose, be it in journalism or academia. However, there was a time in history when writing was considered a highly specialized craft, like goldsmithing, portrait painting, or cathedral-building, rather than a mere means of verbal communication. For many centuries, writing was a full-time vocation for men – and few women – who had diligently mastered the tools of grammar and the locution of the language of their choice (or more precisely that of their fathers) through formal education. This model could be applied to any language, past and present, but craftsmanship in writing becomes an important issue especially when the writer uses a language that is not his native tongue, the complete internalization of which is a nearly unattainable task.

Throughout the European Middle Ages, religious authorities valued and institutionally supported a limited number of talented young men’s skills in composition in secondary yet “high” languages, such as Latin and Hebrew. The Heian court (794-1185) in Japan similarly nurtured an elite cadre of academy-trained scholar-officials who could draft public and private documents in Chinese, the official written language of the imperial state, as opposed to vernacular Japanese, which was both spoken and written at the time.

In this talk, I will examine a Buddhist prayer (*ganmon*, lit. “written vow”) composed by one of the last giants of Heian literature, Ōe Masafusa. With some early specimens discovered in the caves of Dunhuang in north-west China, the genre of *ganmon* (Ch. *yuanwen*) no doubt originated in China, and was imported into Japan as early as in the eighth century. A hybrid of belletristic and devotional literature, despite the level of knowledge and imaginative skill required on the part of Japanese academicians to compose emotionally powerful lines in Chinese, by the beginning of the eleventh century, *ganmon* became one of the most common prose genres in Japan, normally commissioned by imperial rulers and other people in power. What distinguishes Ōe Masafusa from the other literati active in the late Heian period is the sheer number of *ganmon* he composed. Along with many other writings in different formats, such as poetry, diaries and biographies of Buddhist worthies, Masafusa is known to have written at least 120 Buddhist prayers. I will focus on one example Masafusa composed on behalf of Emperor Shirakawa (r. 1072-86) for the deceased soul of his beloved wife Empress Kenshi in 1085. Alluding to various images evoked in both well known and obscure passages from the Chinese classics, such as the *History of the Later Han Dynasty*, *Book of Song*, the literary anthology *Wenxuan* and *Biographies of Notable Women*, this prayer, composed at the pinnacle of Masafusa’s literary career, poses immense challenges to the modern reader. In fact, some of his use of the Chinese language was so specialized that even one of his younger contemporaries expressed having difficulty in fully understanding the prayer.

However, simply pointing out examples of intertextuality between Masafusa’s prose and the Chinese writings is no longer sufficient. Employing the broader concept of *grammatica* and *habitus*, as defined in Dante’s *De vulgari eloquentia*, I explore the significance of Masafusa’s offering to his imperial patron, which perhaps can be compared to an elaborately carved statue of the Buddhas, Buddhist sutras written in exquisite gold calligraphy, as well as portrait paintings, embroideries and mandalas, some of which Masafusa mentions in the prayer in question, which were to be offered to the Buddha along with his written composition.

Saeko Shibayama received her Ph.D from Columbia University. Her dissertation, entitled “The Conversion of the ‘Ways’: The Twilight of Early Chinese Literary Studies and the Rise of Waka Studies in the Long Twelfth Century in Japan”, examined the ways in which the composition of poetry in literary Chinese and vernacular Japanese developed and diverged in the early tenth through the thirteenth centuries in Japan. In order to turn her dissertation into a book, Saeko has been spending her time in Berlin as a Zukunftsphilologie Postdoctoral Fellow 2011-2012 exploring and translating Buddhist prayers composed in Chinese by the Japanese scholar-official Ōe Masafusa (1041-1111).

Lecture-cum-Seminar

The Lecture-cum-Seminar series is a central element of the scholarly program of the Zukunftsphilologie project. It is conceived as a working seminar of 3 to 5 hours. The lecture (ca. 45-60 minutes) is meant to introduce the audience to the research problem and provide the general analytical and theoretical framework for the topic. This is followed by a practical seminar, wherein the speaker demonstrates his or her case by reference to texts in the original language and in English translation. It is hoped that this Lecture-cum-Seminar series, a combination of theory and a direct engagement with texts, will enable scholars to examine the comparative aspect of the problematic without neglect of the local and singular nature of the texts examined.

Zukunftsphilologie: Revisiting the Canons of Textual Scholarship

The project Zukunftsphilologie endeavours to promote and emphasize primary textual scholarship beyond the classical humanistic canon. In an age of advanced communication, intellectual specialization, and unprecedented migration of knowledge and people, the discipline of philology assumes new relevance. Zukunftsphilologie aspires to support research in neglected varieties of philology with the explicit aim to integrate texts and scholarly traditions from Asia, Africa, the Middle East as well as from Europe itself.

Zukunftsphilologie refers to the polemic between the classicist Ulrich von Wilamowitz and Friedrich Nietzsche around the method and meaning of classical studies. As a project it sees itself as part of a growing trend towards a more global intellectual history. It is inspired in particular by the work of Edward Said and Sheldon Pollock.

In order to promote historically-conscious philology, Zukunftsphilologie will foster research in the following areas: genealogies and transformations of philological practice, philology's place in the system of knowledge (e.g. its relation to science, theology and jurisprudence), and philology and the university. Furthermore, Zukunftsphilologie aims to support critical reviews of historical and philological practice. In revisiting important „philological wars“, the goal is not to merely evaluate the argumentative worth of these debates, but to reflect on the wider cultural and political context in which these „philological wars“ emerged and how they have shaped our knowledge of the past.

The project Zukunftsphilologie is co-directed by Angelika Neuwirth, Manan Ahmed and Islam Dayeh (all Freie Universität Berlin) and is associated with and located at the Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School of Literary Studies at Freie Universität Berlin. Zukunftsphilologie is a project at the Forum Transregionale Studien.

Information

www.zukunftsphilologie.de

www.forum-transregionale-studien.de

www.fsgs.fu-berlin.de/fsgs/kooperationen/Zukunftsphilologie

Contact: zukunftsphilologie@trafo-berlin.de