

Five Years On, One Johnny Alumni Group's Continuing Dialogue

Good morning. My name is Jacob and I'll be telling a story of one Johnny alumni group's continuing dialogue since 2008. Over the past five years and seventy

have, do you wish that the dialogue didn't end? If you are
e you thought about how to continue that dialogue once you do

t a reading group? There are Alumni groups. Join one, or start
have some reading groups from group participants about books that
affect them. And I'll talk about some administrative details and
ms that we've tried.

wenty-seven seminars. One every two months since we began

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even in dog walking – I found that it was partially through the tools I sharpened through coursework that I was able to settle on an actual career track, in translation.

I had translated some modern literature from Chinese before entering St John's, but by focusing on early Chinese texts in particular I was able to give myself more depth in a professional field mostly defined by business over cultural resources. By continuing the webinar post-Saint John's, it's not only been intellectually enriching in and of itself, but has also helped me to look at Chinese language resources in different ways. Since I translate everything from architectural descriptions to political song-and-dance routines, it's been enormously advantageous.

One example of how study has helped me professionally would be through the *Zhuangzi*, a text we read at St John's, that I have read on my own in Chinese, and that as a webinar group we have also read. When we read it at St John's I had many questions about it, and frequently turned to the Chinese language version for explication as well as a reading that I thought would be clarifying. At the time, this helped me understand the text in a classroom setting, or at least it helped me understand what I thought about the text.

Looking at it again and again, however, and I've subsequently learned more about it – as a reader but also by learning about English- and Chinese-language philological debates – many new questions have arisen, i.e.: if the *Zhuangzi* is not a unified text, and is in fact a text with sometimes competing arguments (much like *Liezi*), what does it say about not only the framing of the text as a philosophical and historical document, but about the reader who tries to find a new approach to understanding the world – to *thinking* – in the text? At present, the *Zhuangzi* has defeated most answers I have come up with. It has, instead, pleasantly given me more questions: about reading, about philosophy, and about how texts are put together.

While the *Zhuangzi* doesn't apply symmetrically to my work, in thinking about textual orientation and developing the skills to flesh out textual problems in a culturally embedded context, I have been able to come up with quick and satisfying solutions to less-demanding texts that also pay the bills."

We continued exploring with *The Record of Linji* and Hakuin's *Wild Ivy*. Then, our first Korean work, *The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyong*.

One of my favorites, it's the tragic autobiographical story of Lady Hyegyong, who writes about how her husband was killed by his father. She claims that her husband, Prince Sado, could not be held accountable for his actions (he had mental issues during which he began killing people). The king, his father, ordered his death out of "dire necessity." Prince Sado was locked into a rice chest and left to die. Lady Hyegyong's memoirs consist of four different iterations of the same event, each focusing on a different aspect of her life, the killing of Prince Sado, and other characters involved. Given the four different stories, we asked "how much can we agree with this interpretation of what happened?" Exploring Lady Hyegyong's motivations, grappling with the cultural

expectations, and trying to understand Prince Sado, we struggled to fathom how this true event could happen. How a king could order the death of his son, and as a father watch it carried out.

Following Lady Hyegyong we re-visited Confucius. Regarding his *Analects* Greer wrote that “since I graduated I’ve been working as an English as a Second Language teacher. In several content-based courses I’ve taught---a course on poetry, and others on “Reading Strategies” in an academic setting---I’ve structured class like our St. John’s webinar (and, by extension, normal St John’s seminars) - close attention to the nuances of the text, an awareness of different choices that translators might make, and a mutual questioning and conversation that leads students to make their own intellectual paths. Reflecting on our webinar, it occurs to me that it might be like one of the rituals that Confucius urges his students to keep up, not as a mechanical routine but as an activity whose meaning and value can’t be replicated in any other way.”

We embarked on a collection of *Japanese No Dramas*, austere and stylized Japanese plays. A favorite of Rick’s, he says “these plays feature unusual unitary speeches shared between several characters. This feature is structural, but it also reinforces a functional aspect of the plays: that of renewing (literally making new again) the culture and communities they rise out of.”

Then we kicked off what became a Halloween tradition of reading fantastical stories during October. This first time we read *Strange Tales From a Chinese Studio*, a collection of ghost stories, fox stories, cannibals, shapeshifters, and other tales. Penned by Pu Songling in the 17th century, these tales are a collection of extraordinary human experience. Eroticism abounds as fox spirits and ghosts seduce handsome young men. Taoist monks perform magical acts. The first story is of a homunculus looking like a yaksha demon appearing from a young man’s ear and then disappearing at the knock of a neighbor on the door.

Another Halloween reading was Hong Mai’s *Record of the Listener*. According to Greer, “this is a Song Dynasty collection of reported and transcribed supernatural stories that often reads like a set of News of the Weird bulletins. The book has a hearsay, ethnographic quality: Hong Mai records most of the stories from government officers in far-flung areas, perhaps signaling that the stories *must* be credible, as they’re being told by educated government officials steeped in the Confucian classics.”

We worked through Dogen’s chapter on Time (*Uji*) and the classic of Indian statecraft, *The Arthashastra*. Looking for a narrative thread or arc we then read *Hagakure*, trying to better understand the wisdom of the samurai. And we followed that with a brief turn away from more historical works to

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From Nagarjuna we went to a more recent work, *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China: The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun*. A contemporary and favorite of Chairman Mao's, Mao referred to him as "the saint of modern China." The stories paint a savage portrait of late imperial China and its Confucian (but was it really Confucian?) society, among Mandarins and peasants alike.

Our most recent reading and discussion, completed several weeks ago, was *The Nine Cloud Dream* by Kim Man-Jung. Our upcoming reading and discussion, in July, will be *The Peach Blossom Fan*, by K'ung Shang-Jen.

Administration – Keep it Simple

We use a simple spreadsheet for administrative items. The spreadsheet is a single shared Google Drive document, editable by all of us. It is broken out into five tabs. The first is "Suggested Works" where we keep a running list of works to potentially read, who suggested it, short comments, and a place for inserting links on where the work can be purchased. The second tab is similar, but for works that we may consider in the future that don't necessarily fall into an Eastern Classics category.

The third tab is "Read Works" where we transfer the information from the "Suggested Works" tab when the work has been read.

Tab four is "Seminars Past" where we keep the date of the discussion, the work, and notes on what we used as an opening question and sometimes a few points of discussion that we might think of re-visiting again this work or in others.

The last tab is "Other Notes for Discussion." It's here that we first documented and established the few ground rules that we have agreed upon.

Few of these are hard and fast. They often function more as guidelines that can be violated with group consensus.

application and create an account. We used this with some success. But still unsatisfied we continued searching for a group video-