

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. Some of you may have the good fortune to work every day continuing discussions with great books. Some of you may have found the corporate world and discovered morning stand-up meetings and seventy-three slide powerpoint presentations. If you have, do you wish that the dialogue didn't end? If you are preparing to leave, have you thought about how to continue that dialogue once you do leave?

Have you thought about a reading group? There are Alumni groups. Join one, or start one. But today I'll talk about our reading group. I'll talk about some of the works that we have discussed. I'll have some comments from group participants about how our continuing discussions affect them. And I'll talk about some administrative details and communications platforms that we've tried.

To date, we have held twenty-seven seminars. One every two months since we began in February of 2015. It is vivifying to continue our inquiry. And humbling. You may graduate and think that you've got it down (at least for one text or another). But re-reading and re-engaging makes it clear that there is always more to learn.

Greer wrote me that "the discipline of reading an "Eastern" philosophical, religious, or literary work every 2 months is one way of living in a wider, richer world. Beyond the intellectual stimulation and exercise, though, meeting with my comrades every 2 months is like an evenly paced infusion of fun and intellectual nourishment. Seeing your friends and discussing strange and interesting books is its own justification.

Our webinar, is a way to re-read books from the Eastern Classics curriculum and discuss new aspects we come across. We also explore works we *didn't* read at St. John's that are nonetheless vital to Indian, Chinese, Japanese, or Korean literature and philosophy."

Our group benefited from several things. Friendship, and the shared background set of texts that we read in the Eastern Classics program here at St. John's. We all share the spirit of unconstrained inquiry into the texts that is the seminar here. And we have leveraged technology that enables administrative tasks and enhanced communication. Without these enablers it's likely that we could not have continued our studies in this way through more traditional avenues, given our geographic dispersal.

It was a bright sunny day in early August, 2013. We walked across the stage over there, in the courtyard of this campus. After hugs, handshakes, and congratulations with classmates and family, each of us departed. With Chris to Alaska, Rick to San Francisco, Matt to New York City, Greer to New York City and Atlanta, and myself to Virginia and then Arizona, it was a certainty that we'd never see each other all together again. We dispersed.

For many graduates this departure is where the academic experience ends. For us, months passed. We returned to our separate lives, complete with old acquaintances and new jobs. We returned to the familiar stresses that we'd stepped away from and found new stresses to confront.

And we missed it. Having sought, attained, and lost this discussion with Eastern works and each other, each of us missed it. We emailed each other periodically. Every time someone would mention that we should read and discuss something. Rick finally threw down the gauntlet. One day he wrote:

"I wanted to write again before we let the thread get stale. I think we should make a positive effort to have an e-seminar. There seems to be something of a consensus of interest in the reissue of Burton Watson's *Chinese Rhyme-Prose*. Since it is officially available now, I suggest we go with that. And against my nature, I'm going to try to be more concrete: Let's give it a month and aim for Saturday, February 15, say noon EST."

Every group needs a catalyst. With a concrete reading identified and a scheduled time we were on the way. In the same email Rick asked Matt to ask an opening question. This helped to gain some group buy-in and ensure that it wouldn't be a one-person show. After a few emails back and forth I sent the group a Skype invite and we were off.

We greatly enjoyed that discussion of *Chinese Rhyme-Prose*. Opening with: "What is the relationship of the writer to the state, versus the writer's relationship to poetry (as an aesthetic project)?" Nothing like a softball question to kick off the reading group!

At the end of that first discussion we talked as a group to establish some basic ground rules. We agreed upon some parameters for what to read and discuss, membership, and periodicity and scheduling. And tried a first draft of how to choose what we read next. Rick developed a shared Google spreadsheet to capture information and share with the group.

Works

Next we read and discussed *The Lotus Sutra*. This was the first of a number of works that we had initially read as part of the program and several of us wanted to re-visit the text. Then another Buddhist work, *Tiantai Lotus Texts*.

After those we moved into some Daoist works. We read *Lieh Tzu*, and then another that was a return to our course work, *Zhuangzi*. Here is what Matt wrote about re-visiting *Zhuangzhi*.

"During the five years we've hosted the webinar, my only regret is that we haven't all been able to meet in person – we all live in different corners of the country, and we all have jobs that demand us to be present more often than we'd like. That said, and speaking for myself only, after I left St John's and unhappily bounced through several jobs – in financial writing, in teaching,

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 a contemporary work, *Patriotism* by Yukio Mishima, a disturbing work of a fascination with ritual suicide.

We continued on with *The Pancatantra* and *The Forest of Thieves and the Magic Garden*. Then we tackled Nagarjuna’s *Middle Way*, using a new translation that was recently published.

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. While we have solid consensus on types of works, membership, and scheduling, we re-visit how to choose works periodically. We've tried ranking a top three and we've tried voting over email. We tried to establish narrative arcs of three works. Currently we're settled on a system of Rotating Benevolent Dictatorship. Each member takes a turn and chooses a work. Their considerations can include previous works read, group wishes, and personal motivation. But they must choose so that we all have time to acquire the work and read it in the next two months.

Communications

The first platform that we used was Skype. Having the application on my work machine was nice. But those that didn't had to download the free version of the application and create an account. After connection and freezing issues during several meetings we moved to VSEE.

VSEE is an application designed for secure tele-health solutions to work in low-bandwidth environments. There is a free version, but one must still download the

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

For now we are settled on Google Hangouts. It's the platform that we use for our Virtual EC administration. Almost everyone has a Google account. There is easy access for everyone. It's stable. It works with a variety of hardware (smart phones, computers, pads / tablets, etc.). And it can be used through Google or through a downloaded application.

Chris wraps us up.

“After graduating and returning to the “real” world of work and myriad responsibilities I also became even more aware of how rare it is to actually engage in meaningful, intellectual conversation with other adults. To some degree, most who complete any program are probably already aware of this, but it really hit me after moving back to Alaska.

We've decided that the joys and intellectual stimulation did not simply have to end. Despite our geographical distribution we have endeavored to create something that is an exceptional bi-monthly, online seminar group. To date this has worked quite well. One invaluable aspect of this is I personally have gained even more insight (and additional questions) into texts we have re-examined, such as *Zhuangzhi* and Nagarjuna. We have discussed re-reading these texts again, possibly focusing on smaller sections or themes. And we have introduced readings such as *Hagakure* and newer works like *Patriotism*, which were memorable seminars.

We have successfully scheduled and conducted these online seminars for several years, and I feel that there is no end to what we can cover. At the end of each seminar we excitedly propose and narrow down a variety of titles. The format works and the discussions have been focused and fulfill my deep need for continued intellectual growth. The best part, however, is the friendship which has been fostered and strengthened with the members of our group. None knew each other prior to attending St. John's. It's important to me, personally. I have no doubt the others feel similarly.”

Speaking for the group, he's absolutely correct.