

The Columbia Global Humanities Project

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One of the most astonishing developments in the past fifty years across the globe is the endangerment of the world's humanities capacity. While the crisis is far from unknown in the United States—and has complicated variations in China—it is acute across the global south, where the loss of humanities knowledge bears striking resemblance to the loss of biological species.

The Columbia Global Humanities Project aimed to initiate a wide-ranging conversation on this problem by assembling a small group of scholars and policy makers from Africa, the Arab world, South Asia, and China and Taiwan, in Mumbai, India, in March of 2014.¹ Our goal was to discuss the state of the humanities in the different regions; share thoughts about causes and prospects; and determine whether—and if so, under what modalities—to seek to undertake a larger, sustainable initiative promising real-world outcomes in the regions concerned.

The “humanities capacity” pertains to knowledge of things made for human appreciation—things belonging to a class we might think of as *invitations to interpretation*—that we call the humanities. Centuries-old, in some cases millennia-old, competencies in languages, folklore, philosophy, history, whether that history, philosophy, folklore, or language is modern or premodern, written or oral, are disappearing at an almost measureable rate. The loss of humanities knowledge thus bears striking resemblance to the loss of biological diversity across the globe. The problem, viewed from the outside, to those designing the Columbia University project, seemed to be especially worrisome in sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab world and Iran, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. But the United States itself has by no means been immune.

The public defunding and institutional depopulation of the humanities, described as a “dangerous decline” in a Humanities Indicators summary report (prepared by Alan Brinkley of Columbia for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences),² is dramatic, but not evenly so: the imperilment is stratified by space and time. Only a tiny fraction of the 8 percent of humanities PhDs today are awarded in “global premodern language-based studies,” for example; in addition, the total of non-English language and literature PhDs in relationship to all PhDs (and this includes modern as well as premodern) dropped by two-thirds from the mid-1970s to the present.³ The humanities are not only imperiled, they are im-

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2. Brinkley, “The Landscape of Humanities Research and Funding,” 1. Recent reports of the “Humanities Indicators” (www.humanitiesin-

indicators.org) show some moderating of these trends, but the overall picture is bleak, as is the one painted in a recent study by the Modern Language Association; see Goldberg et al., “Enrollments in Languages Other Than English.”

3. Brinkley, “The Landscape of Humanities Research and Funding,” 1.

periled in highly unequal ways, leading to a striking provincialization of time as well as space. In the United States, more than half of the history PhD students currently specialize in American history of the past one hundred years, leading one observer to ask whether the discipline of history is “truly historical anymore.”⁴ In the case of comparative literature, a plausible statistic, developed on the basis of a study of appointments at major American universities and of publications in leading journals, is that 90 percent of graduate education and research in the discipline in the United States today is directed toward a mere 3 percent of human literary experience: Euro-American literature since the seventeenth century.⁵ The portion of the professoriate responsible for understanding, curating, and transmitting five thousand years of historical culture—and the multiple ways of being human this record offers—stands in exactly inverse proportion to the magnitude and importance of the object, and our ability to reproduce it into the future has gravely eroded.

Bad as this may seem, the humanities situation in the global south seemed, when the Columbia project was first being contemplated, to be dramatically worse. We had no formal assessment of the whole to rely on, and this was because good data were hard to find (our contributors helped correct this lacuna). In most cases anecdotal evidence was all we had to go on, but this indicated real trouble. Below are some snapshots we were provided with:

In sub-Saharan Africa, after the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) concluded in 1986 that university funding was a waste of money compared to support for K-12 education, steep cuts in national education budgets almost destroyed the humanities. According to the Carnegie Endowment, there is today a “serious debate about whether the humanities can thrive or even continue to exist.”⁶ History, according to well-informed observers, may be nearing its end as an academic subject. Carnegie’s new \$5 million program for the development of scholarly capacity in the humanities demonstrates just how serious this is.

Colleagues who work on the Arab world describe the situation of the humanities variously as “wilted,” “dismal,” and “wretched.” There is, according to one observer, a “nearly complete absence of the very concept of liberal [arts] education.”⁷ In many places this is the result of an authoritarian and religious politics that forbids criticism or deviation from established narratives, a trend growing even in the once liberal Gulf states. In many places whole disciplines, like comparative religion, have been proscribed. In the case of philology, a great tradition has given way to narrow sectarianization—with Shiites publishing Shiite works, Saudis Salafi works—where it is still practiced at all.

Across South Asia, aside from a few islands of achievement (especially in English studies), once great fields like philosophy have all but collapsed. For dozens of classical literary languages, it is today next to impossible to identify scholars who have deep competence. Indeed, if current trends continue, it is entirely possible that within a generation there will be no one capable of reading the historical languages of India—three thousand years of literature in a dozen languages, the longest continuous and richest multicultural literary record in world history.

The redirection of resources and prestige to science and technology in no small part responsible for this situation is known throughout Southeast Asia as the “Singapore model.” In Singapore itself, the belief that education should first and foremost serve the economic interests of the state have relegated humanistic studies to what some colleagues call university ghettos; attempts to curtail basic education in literature, philosophy, or history in high school continue to grow.⁸

Thus, in some places externalities like IMF diktats, in other places internalities like political or religious authority, and everywhere an overriding state commitment to science and technology—if economically necessary also politically safe—have left the humanities in a shambles. In addition, humanities studies are typically crushed by rote learning and entirely evacuated of critical engagement

4. Hunt, *Measuring Time, Making History*, 83.

5. Pollock, “Cosmopolitan Comparison.”

6. Walker, “Will Knowledge Survive?,” 3.

7. Fahmy, “Why I Didn’t Go to Dubai.”

8. Personal communication, Philippe Peycam, International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden, April 9, 2013.

or even analytical frameworks. Most students come without other degree options when they enter, and most go without job prospects when they leave.

The one exception to this bleak picture of the global humanities seemed at first, to the project directors, to be China and Taiwan. Here we found vast resources being directed to both modern and premodern humanities studies: an example often cited, and familiar to some of us, is the Institute for Advanced Humanistic Study at Fudan University in Shanghai. What remained unclear was whether it is a negative force, the “inertia” of classical culture, that is responsible for this positive picture; whether the definition of the humanities itself is clearly grasped at all; or, most important, whether the core of the humanities—acquiring the capacity to think critically and openly about issues surrounding one’s life—is being preserved as well, and whether the changing political climate (including the climate at Fudan), the commitment to the projection of “soft power,” and the corporatization of the university will even permit this.

Almost as astonishing as the global imperilment of a humanities research and teaching capacity is the ignorance about the global dimension of the phenomenon. So far as we knew when we proposed our pilot project, there existed no forums where scholars and policy makers in the global south who have been involved in assessing and rethinking the place of the humanities in universities and institutes in their region could share with each other current evaluations and strategies for the future. And we became increasingly convinced that people across these regions are confronting similar problems and could gain from sharing perspectives and ideas, principally in a south-south dialogue.

An additional question we naturally had to ask ourselves was why scholars from outside the global south should be concerned to participate in, and indeed to provide ways to enable, the kind of conversation we had in mind. To be sure, our capacity for humanities teaching and research in the United States is dependent on well-curated archives and healthy traditions of cultural production and transmission in the regions. But how people in Africa, the Arab world, South Asia, China—anywhere in fact—interpret their literature or philosophy or history *is part of our object of*

study. What an African statistician or Arab biologist or Indian engineer thinks about statistics or biology or software has nothing fundamentally to do with their time and place. By contrast, the very reception, understanding, and interpretation of the humanities object—the poem, the folktale, the historical narrative—by Africans, Arabs, or Indians is an intrinsic part of that object itself. If the humanities are going to matter to a global university like Columbia, then the people from the regions under study will have to be made conversation partners in conserving and enhancing the accumulated knowledge that in the first instance concerns them. “Global” from this perspective refers not to the globalization of a Western particular, the invitation, or the compulsion, to do the humanities “our way” (though globalization has these and other—especially negative—resonances, as Lydia Liu points out in her remarks); it speaks instead to the awareness that the humanities, while a global project, must include, essentially and ineluctably, local ways of knowing.

From another, crucial perspective, however—if one that is becoming increasingly unwelcome, and dangerously contested, in indigenist quarters across the south—“their literature or philosophy or history” is the world’s now too. “Global humanities” aims to make not just an anodyne reference to the humanities around the globe or the importance of local understandings to global knowledge, but a strong claim: that the humanities anywhere are the possession of people everywhere. We all have a stake in ensuring that they survive.

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The actual discussions at our workshop in Mumbai generally confirmed the hypotheses sketched out above that were developed on the basis of our anecdotal evidence. Equally important, we identified a wide number of commonalities in the humanities crisis across the global south: high enrollments, generally of female students and others shut out of other opportunities, coupled with poor instruction, poorer life chances for graduates, often rudderless scholarship, chaotic and dangerous erosion of archives, to say nothing of the slow extinction of an actual humanities capacity in such areas as classical studies, with historical language knowl-

edge disappearing by the year: consider just the sobering fact that no Egyptologists are produced in Egyptian universities. All of this, moreover, was found to contrast strongly, and strangely, with the vibrant humanities activity taking place “under the radar” in the public sphere, with which academic humanities typically has little contact. The brief essays that follow give flesh to this bare-bones summary.

We also found confirmation of our initial assessment, that south-south conversation on the crucial questions of our project had never, to the knowledge of the participants, taken place before. Our workshop was the first gathering to assess the state of the humanities in our four regions collectively. At the same time we understood that we had just scratched the surface in analyzing the problem, let alone in designing some set of actions we might take in response.

What precisely are those appropriate longer-range responses? We can certainly strive to meet more frequently and more broadly, albeit new and ever more funding will be required (and which, precisely given the humanities crisis, is not easy to identify). We can write more and more deeply, and the organizers and authors continue to discuss possibilities for a book. More timely and potentially more transformative is the establishment of a multilingual website on the humanities in the global south, where updated work can be presented in the original language and in translation and a fuller bibliography of pertinent materials can be assembled. And there are no doubt other good ideas that we have not even thought of yet. We are hoping that this *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* special section on the Columbia Global Humanities project can be a starting point for further synergies.

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Participants in the Mumbai Workshop

Ahmad Dallal (religion/intellectual history, American University of Beirut, Lebanon)

Khaled Fahmy (history, American University in Cairo, Egypt)

Okello Ogwang (literature, Makerere University, Uganda)

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Organizers

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