

## *Introduction / Re(Orientation)*

**Arum Park, Chris Waldo, and Tori Lee**

Friday, January 4, 2019, would prove to be a momentous day for the future Asian and Asian American Classical Caucus. The morning featured a panel on classical reception and national identity at the Annual Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) and the Society for Classical Studies (SCS) in San Diego, California, where Chris Waldo, one of the editors of this issue, met Kelly Nguyen and Stephanie Wong for the first time. As Wong later recalled, “Kelly Nguyen was presenting on classical reception in Vietnamese diasporic literature. I had gone to support her, the only person of color and woman speaking to a room of white faces. In an experience well known to people of color in white classrooms, I locked eyes with the only other nonwhite person in the room: UC Berkeley graduate student Chris Waldo.”<sup>1</sup> Wong’s sentiments of isolation in the field were shared by a group of Asian American graduate students and recent alumni of UC Berkeley, including Waldo, Caroline Cheung, and Elizabeth Wueste, who gathered later that evening and were eager to hear about the earlier panel. Inspired to keep the conversation going and galvanized by whispers of racist incidents at the conference, the group met again the next day to discuss their experiences as Asian Americans in the field of Classics.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, that group of graduate students and junior faculty members went on to found the Asian and Asian American Classical Caucus (AAACC) as an organization committed to resisting the colorblind orthodoxy of the discipline.<sup>3</sup>

Since 2019, AAACC has grown into a community that includes previous generations of Asian American classicists as well as the ones succeeding. Both generations are represented by the other editors of this special issue, Arum Park and Tori Lee, who aim to carry on the founders’ vision. Park has called the AAACC “the community [Asian classicists of my generation] lacked and would have loved in our own educational upbringing.”<sup>4</sup> For Lee, it was inspiring to see junior scholars a cycle ahead of her starting the AAACC at the critical moment of her entry into the professional space of Classics, and it is now a privilege to follow in their footsteps.

The AAACC’s founders believed that a crucial intervention could be made in our scholarly understanding of antiquity and its relationship to and with modernity.<sup>5</sup> In addition to investigating how the ancient world has influenced contemporary society, they were also determined to examine how the structural forces governing modern life, including race, have shaped our view of antiquity. The subfield of classical reception, itself premised on the

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<sup>1</sup> Wong 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Nguyen had to leave the conference early, but she was heavily involved in organizing the AAACC, eventually becoming the organization’s first mentorship coordinator. For more on the founding of the AAACC and its mentorship program, see Wong 2019, Lye and Cheung 2021, and Waldo 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Dan-el Padilla Peralta was accosted by Mary Frances Williams during the panel on “The Future of Classics,” and the co-founders of the Sportula, Djesika Bel Watson and Stefani Echeverría-Fenn, both women of color, were detained by security at the Marriott Marquis San Diego Marina on the suspicion that they were not registered attendees of the conference. See Poser 2021 for discussion of the exchange between Williams and Peralta and Pettit 2019 for an account of both incidents.

<sup>4</sup> Waldo 2021.

<sup>5</sup> The other founding members were Kristina Chew, who resigned due to time constraints and was replaced by JaShong King and Tessie Sakai.

reciprocity between ancient and modern cultural artifacts,<sup>6</sup> was expanding to encompass receptions by ever more diverse communities of writers and artists. There had been a noticeable surge, for instance, in publications exploring the staging of Greek tragedies by marginalized communities, while several prominent Black scholars had focused attention on the emergence in the twentieth century of dialogues between the literatures of the Black Atlantic and classical antiquity.<sup>7</sup> This expansion invited consideration of how race specifically colors reception. The AAACC hoped to broaden the discourse of classical reception by considering cultural productions emanating from east, south, and southeast Asia, as well as from the community of Asian Americans. An SCS panel at the Annual Meeting seemed to be a fitting venue for this scholarship.

The first of these panels, which Chris Waldo and Elizabeth Wueste co-organized at the 2020 Annual Meeting, was entitled “Classical Reception in Contemporary Asian and Asian American Culture.” This initial panel introduced the issues and questions that were most important to us as Asian Americans in the field of Classics. Waldo noted in his introductory remarks that “All of the participants in this panel, including two organizers and a respondent, identify as Asian American, and, in this light, we assert that our lived experiences as philologists and field archeologists constitute individual embodiments of Asian American classical reception. Whether we are scrutinizing the text of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* or excavating sherds of Roman pottery, everything that we do signifies as Asian American.” Several of those who attended the panel observed that this was the first time that the community of Asian American classical scholars had been assembled in the same room, which felt liberatory. The AAACC had been founded as an advocacy group with a dual mission of promoting scholarship on classical reception in Asian and Asian American culture and bringing together the vibrant community of Asian and Asian American classicists. The panel, which included an especially generative Q&A session, addressed both halves of the mission and demonstrated that they are entwined. Why, for instance, do so many Korean American classicists study Greek literature? Attendees cited the peninsular characters of both the Greek mainland and Korea with the tragic sensibility inherent in the Korean concept of *han*.<sup>8</sup> This first panel left attendees energized at the prospect of others to come.

Subsequent panels have explored thematic resonances between the legacies of the ancient Greeks and Romans and the cultures of both ancient and contemporary Asia.<sup>9</sup> The 2021 panel, entitled “Classics in/out of Asia,” which was organized by Kelly Nguyen and Chris Waldo, explored, broadly, how Classics has moved through Asia. Following Claudia Moatti, they understood movement to be a “structural component of human experience and the human mind...[that] influences ways of thinking, relations of [people] to space, time, tradition, and the organization of societies, like an anamorphosis, movement modifies the perception of things and of human relations.”<sup>10</sup> The 2022 panel, entitled “Orientalisms,” which Arum Park and Stephanie Wong organized, highlighted Edward Said’s contention that “Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the

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<sup>6</sup> Hardwick and Stray 2008, 4.

<sup>7</sup> See Greenwood 2010, Andújar 2015, Powers 2018, and Murray 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Bannon 2008 notes that “*Han* is frequently translated as sorrow, spite, rancor, regret, resentment or grief, among many other attempts to explain a concept that has no English equivalent.”

<sup>9</sup> We submitted the first panel at the 2020 Annual Meeting as an at-large panel, but all subsequent panels have been affiliated group panels. The AAACC received its charter as an affiliated group from the SCS in 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Moatti 2006, 110.

difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the East, ‘them’).”<sup>11</sup> Ethan Ganesh Warren and Helen Wong organized the 2023 panel, “Dreaming of the Silk Road: Narrative Conversations,” which drew on the themes of narrative and contact between East and West in the manner of the Silk Road imaginary across Eurasia. For the 2024 panel, “Taking Stock: Stereotypes in the Ancient Mediterranean,” panel organizers Katherine Lu Hsu and Tori Lee drew inspiration from the crude stereotyping that Asian Americans often experience. In Greco-Roman antiquity, as today, race-based caricatures intersect with typecasting rooted in other identities (gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, occupation, etc.), forming conventions that manifest as stock characters in Roman comedy, for example, or targets of invective. The question was raised of whether stereotyping always functioned to exclude. Can stereotyping by a dominant group be harnessed by a marginalized group for its own aims? When do stereotypes hurt the stereotyper instead of, or as well as, the stereotyped?

The AAACC’s annual SCS panel has become a vibrant space that stretches the boundaries of the discipline. A polyglot approach to philology has emerged throughout these five panels, which have showcased the careful exegeses of texts composed in classical Chinese, Korean, Sanskrit, and other languages. The diversity of presenters has also borne witness to the fascinating appeal of this material: while the initial AAACC panel was intentionally composed entirely of Asian American speakers, the organization’s confirmation as an affiliated group by the SCS has required that all subsequent panels select papers anonymously. Astounded by the innovative spirit of the many abstracts submitted to the AAACC panels, organizers strive to produce a selection each year that will help guide the field of Classics into a brilliant future.

The experimental spirit of the AAACC’s panels permeates this special issue of *Res Difficiles, The Journal*. The founding of the AAACC and its annual panel has occasioned and inspired innovative publications on Asian receptions of Classics, but this is the first publication to bring together such work in a single volume. Three of the four articles in this issue were originally presented as papers in the AAACC panels. Hardeep Dhindsa explores 18th-century British reactions to the excavations at Pompeii, which reflect the orientalism endemic to European colonialism and imperialism. As Dhindsa notes, the vibrant colors of the wall paintings, coupled with the sexual themes present in the paintings and sculptural artifacts, often provoked surprise or even disgust on the part of their British onlookers. These negative reactions reveal an exoticization of Southern Italy influenced by stereotypes of the East. Thus, Dhindsa brings to light how 18th-century British perspectives on travel, both within and outside of Europe via the Grand Tour and trips to the Pacific and beyond, reflect their expanding networks of imperial epistemologies.

Like Dhindsa, Helen Wong discusses the intertwining of Classics and power. In her examination of classicizing elements found in the architecture of Kaiping, China, Wong explores the implications for cross-cultural interaction such elements reflect and makes the astute observation that these largely decorative elements do not directly imitate anything from Greco-Roman antiquity. Rather, they echo post-antique structures that are themselves adaptations of ancient Greek and Roman architectural elements. Unpacking the many layers of reception contained in the Kaiping buildings, Wong provocatively argues that the classicizing elements of these buildings suggest an intention to evoke the West and, by extension, the colonial and imperial power encoded in the cultural products of the West.

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<sup>11</sup> Said 1978, 71.

This power is signaled by Westerners themselves through evocations of ancient Greece and Rome.

Maria Ma also explores the relationship between Western Classics and China reflected in the Chinese poet Haizi's reception of Sappho. Ma situates Haizi's poem *To Sappho* in the context of Sappho's reception in China, documenting how Chinese translations of Sappho's poems came to reflect the evolution of Chinese society during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ma demonstrates the influence of these translations on Haizi's conception of Sappho and argues that his embrace of her queer identity represents a departure from this scholarly tradition. Sappho's lyric sensibility resonated with Haizi, whose life of social isolation concluded with his suicide in 1989 at the age of 25.

While these three articles range broadly across time, space, and genre/medium, the common thread they share is reception and the dynamics of power that can emanate through reception. Receptions of Pompeii, for example, are refracted through the orientalizing lens of British colonialism, as Dhindsa notes. Western imperialism has a similarly distorting effect on the echoes of Greco-Roman architecture that appear in the Kaiping buildings Wong examines, in which accuracy of the imitation matters less than the sheer power of the West that "classical" culture exudes. In the poetry Ma's article examines, the aesthetics of power—or perhaps the power of aesthetics—is displayed. Haizi's experience of Sappho was filtered, first through the British aesthetics of the English translations available in China, then through the Chinese translators/translations of the English. Yet while both filters tended to downplay Sappho's queerness, Haizi embraced it, just as he embraced the lyric "I," thus bucking the collective "we" of the Cultural Revolution. Through the layers of classical reception that Dhindsa, Wong, and Ma explore, we can see the dynamics of state and social power at work.

By examining the interplay of classical reception, power, and Asian experience, the first three articles in this issue exemplify the intellectually expansive mission of the AAACC, which emerges from the intersection of Classics and Asia. In shifting the contours of Classics as a discipline, they also represent the spirit of *Res Difficiles*. So as a fitting finale to this collaboration between the AAACC and *Res Difficiles*, Dominic Machado's article, born as a keynote address to *Res Difficiles 5*, invites us, even calls on us, to consider Classics in an Asian way. He proposes a vision of what we can hope to achieve by approaching Classics from our unique perspectives as Asian and Asian American scholars. Pushing us towards an Asian American hermeneutics, Machado reveals the intellectual possibilities of investigating Latin texts through the lens of Asian American Studies, which itself is premised on Asian American experience(s). This experience is manifold and diverse, of course, but involves the recurrent theme of outsider identity, precipitated in various and complex ways by immigration, imperialism, and colonialism.

We hope that you will enjoy these inventive articles, which represent the fruits of our labor and the provocative spirit of our mission. We have been inspired by the imaginative spirit with which scholars from around the world have received our organization's call to reconceive the ancient world and its tangible legacy in the increasingly global society that we inhabit today. We are committed to the AAACC as a site of continued experimentation for envisioning the future of the field, and we invite you to join us in pushing against the geographic and temporal boundaries of Classics as it has traditionally been defined. Such exploration reveals an ancient world vastly richer than what can be contained in Greece, Rome, and the Mediterranean, as well as a concept of "the classical" that moves beyond antiquity, understanding the necessary continuity between past, present, and future.

Although this work, like the work of *Res Difficiles* writ large, is by definition difficult, we hope that articles and issues like this embolden other scholars to undertake their own daring intellectual exploration.

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