

# BUDDHIST LITERACY IN EARLY MODERN NORTHERN VIETNAM

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A Multidisciplinary Symposium

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Presentation Abstracts



Presented by Rutgers: The State University of New Jersey & the  
Vietnamese Nôm Preservation Foundation

With support from: the Vietnamese Nôm Preservation Foundation, the Rutgers China Research Project, Center for Chinese Studies, The School of Arts & Sciences, Center for Global Advancement & International Affairs (GAIA), and the Departments of Asian Languages & Cultures, History, and Religion. For more information, please email John Phan at [john.phan@rutgers.edu](mailto:john.phan@rutgers.edu).

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23 September – 24 September, 2016

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Recent work from a number of quarters has scrutinized the notion of “East Asia,” as a cosmopolitan zone unified by shared script, literary language, and educational traditions. Vietnam’s inclusion in modern mappings of “Southeast Asia” has often obscured its critical membership in an East Asian cultural zone, a fact that has limited potentially fruitful comparative work with Korea, China, and Japan. One of the most important features of East Asian cultural construction was the role of Buddhism in the dissemination of script, cosmopolitan language, and literate knowledge—a phenomenon particularly important to second millennium Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, each of which suffered crises in literacy at different points, due to invasion or internecine war. While comparison of Buddhist literacy in Korea and Japan has enjoyed a relatively robust tradition (especially with recent work on shared glossing techniques such as *kunten*), comparison with Vietnam has been limited by areal and disciplinary boundaries that are more artifacts of academic history, than substantive contours defining the cultures in question.

Our symposium seeks to break down these artificial barriers by examining a set of religious texts now housed at Thăng Nghiêm and Phổ Nhân, two syncretic Buddhist temples located 15 km southwest of Hanoi, in northern Vietnam. The collection was gathered from the surrounding region by the current abbot beginning in 1997, and represents a diverse library of primarily secular xylographic and epigraphic texts, composed over the latter half of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium, and written in both Literary Chinese and vernacular Vietnamese “Chữ Nôm” (an extinct character script used to represent vernacular Vietnamese, until its replacement by the Latin alphabet in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century). As one contributor points out, these texts are remarkable for their pedestrian character, providing a uniquely mundane portrait of literacy in early modern northern Vietnam. These texts were recently digitized through the groundbreaking efforts of the *Vietnamese Nom Preservation Foundation* (VNPF), making the entire collection accessible to scholarly examination for the first time.

Catalyzed by the VNPF’s work, our project seeks to break new ground by staging a multidisciplinary investigation into the phenomenon of literacy, and its dissemination through the Buddhist institution. The enclosed abstracts seek to explore the nature of print culture as maintained and conducted by early modern Buddhist temples, its relationship to the court, and its philological practices and traditions, as well as its relationship to folk and non-literate traditions of religious practice. Additionally, our symposium includes a special panel on issues of digitizing the Buddhist canon—work that is foundational to all cutting edge research into premodern East Asian textual culture. These inquiries illuminate not only a sorely understudied aspect of Vietnamese history and culture, but also promise fruitful comparison with Japan, Korea, and China, on issues of Buddhism and literacy, classical education, and the rise of the vernacular.

John Phan \* Christian Lammerts \* Chie Ikeya

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## LOCATION

All symposium presentations will take place at the Scholarly Communication Center (SCC) Lecture Hall, on the 4<sup>th</sup> Floor of Alexander Library. Alexander Library is located at 169 College Avenue (New Brunswick).

## To RSVP

If you are interested in attending, please fill out the RSVP form at following link:

<http://bit.ly/rutgers-buddhistlit-vn>

Attendance is free of charge.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you have any further questions about the event, please contact John Phan at: [john.phan@rutgers.edu](mailto:john.phan@rutgers.edu)



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