



## **COLLABORATIVE INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP SFB980**

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*Scholarship between clay and light  
Libraries, archives and documents in the Eastern world  
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### **Abstract**

The use of writing for the preservation and transmission of administrative, scientific, literary and sacred knowledge has a long history in the pre-modern Eastern cultures. From the third millennium BCE on, all forms of intellectual, social and religious progress have been increasingly materialized in the form of a variety of document types (tablets, bones, papyri, scrolls, parchments, books) collected in institutional archives or libraries that were dependent for the most part on royal palaces, state archives and temples. Private libraries housing religious and secular texts might have also existed in these cultures.

Unfortunately, the characterization of these cultures as traditional, immovable, and rigid has affected our perception of their capability of changing knowledge, their creative potential, and the manner in which their archives and libraries conditioned practices of education and transmission. Modern perceptions of ancient and medieval libraries are largely based on a problematic model of restrictive, conservative institutions whose only aim was the safeguarding of traditions, norms, and canonical forms. Seen from a long-term perspective, however, these centers of knowledge were to advance in alternating phases of habitualization and change.

Therefore, the nature of these collections and the type of scribal work executed in these locals was largely dependent on repetition and stabilization as well as on new forms of speculation, and interpretation. Derrida's supposition that the repetition of recitations, writings and actions in different settings and occasions led to the emergence of new forms of interpretation supports this idea of libraries as institutions that both reproduced existing forms of knowledge and as centers for creativity and innovation.

Under the influence of previous misconceptions and dismissive attitudes – rooted in part in classical Western interpretations of pre-modern, Eastern institutions<sup>1</sup> – the proposed SFB workshop will utilize a multidisciplinary approach to assess the history, role and function of non-Western long-lasting libraries and archives, particularly insofar as these institutions *do not* conform to archetypes such as the Library of Alexandria or the classical libraries in Hellenistic Greece or Imperial Rome. Workshop discussions will examine the Eastern forms of library and archive, including institutions and collections such as the ancient Egyptian temple library of Tebtynis, the Sumerian literary compositions from the *tablet house* (é.dub.ba.a) in second millennium Nippur, a manuscript collection from a *scroll storehouse* in Qumran, Chinese oracular bones from a royal library of the Shang period, Tibetan manuscripts from a Buddhist *library cave*, Nara-picture scrolls from Medieval Japan, and Chinese and Korean state libraries as well as a wide variety of historical records housed in Korean academic institutions in the countryside which served as libraries, archives for documents and woodblocks for printing, as well as local centers for the production and dissemination of books.

Scholars at the SFB workshop will deal with fundamental questions of the definition, nature and function of these institutions and collections. In addition, they will compare the mechanics of habitualization and reproduction that characterize scribal work in these institutions with evidence for creativity, innovation and initiative in these same centers. In other words, the participants in the workshop will challenge traditional, rigid concepts with particular examples of cultural, intellectual and technical change that were achieved within the walls of these institutions of knowledge, wisdom and belief. Likewise, this diverse group of experts will also analyze the degree of emic classifications of different types of knowledge, the ways in which library materials were organized, manipulated and stored, the amount of access that different persons had to the collections, and the self-positioning of scribes, priests, monks and other custodians of this knowledge.

With particular reference to ancient Egypt, libraries and archives have only received attention in recent years. Among other reasons, the lack of direct evidence has restrained scholars from the examination of these institutions: up to date the only large-scale temple library known to us is the Tebtynis temple-library, a center of knowledge associated with a temple dedicated to the crocodile-god Sobek in the Fayum, mainly with cultic, scientific and literary materials that span from the first to the third centuries AD. Although our knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Christian Jacob who, in his “Fragments of a history of ancient libraries” (in J. König, K. Oikonomopoulou, and G. Woolf (eds.), *Ancient Libraries*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) poses the western thought-oriented question “when did the first libraries appear in the classical world?”.

on the nature of Egyptian libraries, archives, and collections from the third and second millennia BCE is not extensive, novel research on old collections (e.g. Abusir administrative papyri, Netjerikhet's cultic collection, Pyramid Texts) offers new insights into the centers containing these documents and their priestly and scribal administration. Another case, a private collection from mid-second millennium Thebes with magical, medical and literary texts, provides further information on the boundaries between institutional and private domains of writing. In addition, the archaic/archaizing move of reclaiming old compositions and artistic models of the Late Period (first millennium BCE) brought about new ensembles in tombs and temples in Memphis and Thebes whose parallels are dated – in some cases – up to two millennia earlier. Undoubtedly, the ancient Egyptian case is a reflection of institutional iteration with adaptive mechanisms to protect tradition – transferring its forms into new contexts.

The East Asian traditions of libraries and archives have been discussed and studied already in the pre-modern period. This tradition originated in China and is documented already for the period of the Western Han-Dynasty (traditionally from 206 BCE to 9 CE). Whereas the infrastructure and books or archived materials of earlier periods have not or only partially survived, the rich historical literature contains lots of information about the institutions and collections. Due to archaeological findings of manuscripts and books along the earlier “silk road”, mostly but not only concerned with the Buddhist tradition, there is also the possibility of revisiting our understanding of libraries and archives evidence from the periphery and vice versa.

The Korean peninsula has been influenced and shaped by earlier Chinese Dynasties, but the very reason to pay attention to the smallest of the three East Asian cultures is its state of materials and infrastructure that has survived until today. Historical records survived down to archives of different institutions enable us to understand how institutions of the Chosōn-Dynasty (1392–1910) functioned. On the other hand, Korea is also interesting for its rich heritage for off the capital which will be included into this workshop in form of a case study about library and archive at an “ancestral seat” of a local clan in the Andong region of Southern Korea that was not only concerned with all sorts materials about the clan itself but also with educational, administrative, and other matters.

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