

WORKSHOP

DIGITAL SCHOLARSHIP ON OVERSEAS CHINESE HISTORICAL AND RELIGIOUS DOCUMENTS

Collecting, Categorizing, Editing, Publishing



27-28 NOVEMBER 2025

HYBRID FORMAT

NUS AS8-04-04 & Online via Zoom

For more information, visit <https://ari.nus.edu.sg/events/digital-scholarship/>

This workshop will focus on the latest discoveries of Chinese local historical materials in the Singapore and Southeast Asia region, including religious scriptures and liturgies, stone inscriptions, deeds, contracts and account books, minutes of meetings of management committees of temples, associations, ancestral halls and cemeteries, commemorative volumes, and other materials. We will discuss the value and importance of these sources, and the light they shed on the history of religious networks, commercial networks, and religion in everyday life. We will discuss new ways to employ digital humanities tools to preserve the data from these documents in sustainable digital formats.

WORKSHOP CONVENORS

Prof Kenneth DEAN

Asia Research Institute & Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore

Dr Kang YU

Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

*Singapore
Standard Time*

27 NOVEMBER 2025 • THURSDAY

09:45 – 10:00	WELCOME REMARKS KENNETH DEAN , National University of Singapore KANG YU , National University of Singapore
10:00 – 12:00	PANEL 1 • OCR AND LLM IN THE STUDY OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN CHINESE
<i>Chairperson</i>	SISI WANG , National University of Singapore
10:00	What do Little Machines in Fall 2025 Know about Chinese Buddhist History?
<i>Online</i>	MARCUS BINGENHEIMER , Temple University
10:20	New Developments in Digital Humanities Approaches to Southeast Asian Chinese Local Historical Documents KENNETH DEAN , National University of Singapore
10:40	Mapping “Po Duei”: Digital Humanities and the Urban History of Singapore KANG YU , National University of Singapore
11:00	From Digital to Humanity QIAO ZHANG , Artist and Independent Scholar, Singapore
11:20	Questions & Answers
12:00 – 13:00	LUNCH

Singapore
Standard Time

13:00 – 15:00	PANEL 2 • DIGITAL HUMANITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA
<i>Chairperson</i>	KANG YU , National University of Singapore
13:00	Digitization and Legacy: Collection and Digitization of Historical Books and Documents in the Library of Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies JANE JWU JING WONG , Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies
13:20	Trance and Divination Recipes MICHAEL STANLEY-BAKER , Nanyang Technological University ZHIJUN TAO , Nanyang Technological University
13:40	“Yam Cha” and “Jia Tok La!”: An Invitation to Tell Stories of Chinese Wayang ALVIN ENG HUI LIM , National University of Singapore HEDREN SUM , National University of Singapore
14:00	Research, Compilation, and Publication of Chinese Epigraphic Documents in Singapore and Malaysia GUAN THYE HUE , National University of Singapore
14:20	Questions & Answers
15:00 – 15:30	AFTERNOON TEA
15:30 – 18:00	PANEL 3 • COLLECTING CHINESE RELIGIOUS DOCUMENTS
<i>Chairperson</i>	KENNETH DEAN , National University of Singapore
15:30	Fieldwork and Archives: An Integrated Approach towards the Collection and Publication of Communal Festivals in Hong Kong CHI-CHEUNG CHOI , Chinese University of Hong Kong
15:50	Digital Preservation of Kolkata Chinatown TANSEN SEN , New York University Shanghai
16:10	Local Histories, Transregional Connections: Overseas Chinese Buddhist Texts in Maritime Southeast Asia JACK MENG-TAT CHIA , National University of Singapore
16:30	Digitize Singapore Hakka Cemetery Documents SISI WANG , National University of Singapore
16:50	From Dunhuang to Baxian: Recent Advances in the Automatic Transcription of Chinese Historical Documents COLIN BRISSON , École Pratique des Hautes Études
17:10	Questions & Answers
18:00	END OF DAY 1
18:15 – 20:15	WORKSHOP DINNER (For Presenters and Organisers Only)

Online

Singapore
Standard Time

28 NOVEMBER 2025 • FRIDAY

10:30 – 12:30	PANEL 4 • COLLECTING LOCAL HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS IN CHINA
<i>Chairperson</i>	KANG YU , National University of Singapore
<i>10:30</i>	Database of County-Level Population, Cultivated Land Area, Land Tax, and Corvée Labor in Northern China, 1368-1953 – With a Discussion on the Evolution of Agricultural Tax Rates SHUJI CAO , University of Hong Kong
<i>10:50</i>	Systems and Systematicity in Private Historical Records: Reflections from the Perspective of Documentary Studies YONGHUA LIU , Peking University
<i>11:10</i>	The Collection and Compilation of Historical Materials on Chinese Enterprises and the Study of Business History CHAOQUN GAO , University of Chinese Academy of Social Science
<i>11:30</i>	Fieldwork and Digital Collection of Historical Documents in Southern Zhejiang XIAOCAI FENG , East China Normal University
<i>11:50</i>	Questions & Answers
12:30 – 13:30	LUNCH
13:30 – 15:30	PANEL 5 • USING LOCAL SOURCES TO RESEARCH CHINESE DIASPORA
<i>Chairperson</i>	KENNETH DEAN , National University of Singapore
<i>13:30</i>	Sinophone Everyday: Digital Archive of Chinese Popular Cultures in Southeast Asia LANJUN XU , National University of Singapore
<i>13:50</i>	Researching Chinese Account Books from Dutch Batavia: Collections, Questions and Challenges GUO-QUAN SENG , National University of Singapore
<i>14:10</i>	Mao-era Ordinary People's Letters as Historical Documents: Significance, Curation, and Methodological Challenges YANJIE HUANG , National University of Singapore
<i>14:30</i>	Village Temples and Ritual Specialists: Re-imagining Kampong Life in Colonial Singapore through Local Materials RUO LIN , National University of Singapore
<i>14:50</i>	Questions & Answers
15:30 – 16:00	AFTERNOON TEA
16:00 – 17:00	CLOSED-DOOR GENERAL DISCUSSION
	KENNETH DEAN , National University of Singapore KANG YU , National University of Singapore
17:00	END OF WORKSHOP

What do Little Machines in Fall 2025 Know about Chinese Buddhist History?

Marcus BINGENHEIMER

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The availability of open weights Large Language Models (LLMs) has led to a profusion of “small Large Language Models” (sLLMs). These are relatively small, but increasingly powerful models that can run on consumer hardware. Because of the opaque way most models are trained—information about training data is rare—we are generally ignorant about how much knowledge about a given domain is embedded in any sLLMs.

This paper tests some representative sLLMs regarding their knowledge of Chinese Buddhist history. A test bank, subdivided by historical period, with 100+ multiple choice questions is used with different models, which can then be ranked. The winner knows most about Chinese Buddhist history. In spite of the simple setup this paper is a first attempt at probing important heuristic questions in our use of sLLMs. Which are meaningful questions when testing sLLMs? Which sLLMs are most knowledgeable about Buddhism? Are there periods about which the machines know more, or is the performance largely uniform across different periods?

Marcus Bingenheimer 馬德偉 is Associate Professor of Religion at Temple University. He taught Buddhist Studies and Digital Humanities for six years in Taiwan, and held visiting positions at universities in Korea, Japan, France, Thailand, and Singapore. Since 2001, he has supervised numerous projects concerning the digitization of Buddhist culture. His main research interests are Buddhist history and historiography, early sūtra literature, and how to apply computational approaches to research in the Humanities. He has written and edited a handful of books and some sixty-five peer-reviewed articles. As of Fall 2025, he is working on the religious geography of East and Southeast Asia, Buddhist networks, and how to use LLMs in Buddhist Studies.

New Developments in Digital Humanities Approaches to Southeast Asian Chinese Local Historical Documents

Kenneth DEAN

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The newly opened search engine of the Vietnamica project is an inspiration to scholars working on Chinese materials in the SEA context. This talk will introduce their work, as well as our own Nanyang-data.info website – a digital platform for sharing open-access materials with GIS coordinates. I will go on to discuss the scanning of texts and the use of Optical Character Recognition (OCR), Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) markup, and Natural Language Processing (NLP) approaches to the newly discovered sets of documents in this region.

Kenneth Dean is Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Professor in Yale-NUS College, Research Cluster Leader for Religion and Globalisation in Asia Research Institute at National University of Singapore (NUS), and Director of Wan Boo-Sow Centre for Chinese Culture in the Department of Chinese Studies at NUS. He is the author of several books on Taoism and popular religion in Southeast China. He has published several volumes of epigraphic sources on the history of religion in Fujian and Singapore. He directed *Bored in Heaven: A Film about Ritual Sensation* (2010) and has developed websites and digital platforms including the Singapore Historical GIS and the Singapore Biographical Databases.

Mapping “Po Duei”: Digital Humanities and the Urban History of Singapore

Kang YU

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Since 1824, Singapore has rapidly developed into the region’s largest entrepôt. During this process, its downtown area (colloquially known as po duei) expanded continuously to meet evolving commercial demands. Using GIS technology, our project aims to reconstruct the spatial evolution of Singapore’s urban landscape by mapping the locations of companies and shops across different historical periods. In the first phase of the project, we selected the 1954 map of Singapore—one of the most accurate and detailed available—as our base map. Fortunately, we also discovered the most comprehensive record of businesses in Singapore: the 1949 Business Name Registration Directory, which contains over 14,000 business names and more than 30,000 proprietors. Together, the map and the directory allowed us to build a large database of Singaporean businesses, which serves as the foundation for analyzing the city’s economic and social structures around 1950. To expand this database, our future plans include two main directions: (1) enriching existing entries with primary sources related to each business; and (2) developing several new GIS layers representing the 19th and early 20th centuries, based on newly collected historical materials.

Kang Yu is a research fellow in the Religion and Globalisation Cluster at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore (NUS). He obtained his PhD in Chinese Studies at NUS with a thesis focusing on Huizhou merchants and their transregional trade institutions. His research interests include business history and the overseas Chinese. He is currently the principal investigator of a Heritage Research Grant supported by National Heritage Board and is working on a book about importers and exporters in Singapore.

From Digital to Humanity

Qiao ZHANG

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My journey into Digital Humanities began with the study of Chinese temples and associations in Singapore. By mapping temples, associations, and shop houses from 1950s Singapore, I gained new perspectives on the daily lives and stories of the Chinese community. With my background in design and web development, I collaborated with research teams to create a digital platform that makes these histories more visible and accessible to both scholars and the wider public.

When over 600 volumes of Gong Guan records from Batavia were brought into our project, I joined the team in experimenting with ways to read and process them. Drawing on my experience in AI, I helped improve the accuracy of the digitized texts, so they could be studied more effectively. These experiences deepened my belief that digital tools should not only handle data, but also serve people—making research lighter, knowledge more shareable, and history more engaging.

The title *From Digital to Humanity* reflects this personal journey. While my past work centered on digital media, coding, and data, I now seek to bring these skills into dialogue with humanistic inquiry. As a full-time artist, I turn to printmaking—particularly eco-friendly electro-etching—to reintroduce a sense of human touch and “temperature” into my practice. This dialogue between digital scholarship and artistic creation shapes how I reflect on overseas Chinese heritage and identity, and how I find new ways to connect technology with humanity.

Qiao Zhang is an artist and independent scholar based in Singapore. He graduated in Fine Arts from LASALLE College of the Arts (2014) and later trained himself in web programming, artificial intelligence, and data science. Before becoming a full-time artist, he worked in design, development, and data engineering. In recent years, Zhang has contributed to collaborative Digital Humanities projects on overseas Chinese history, including mapping temples and associations in Singapore and working with research teams on digitizing the Gong Guan archives from Batavia. His focus is on how technology can lighten the work of researchers, enhance accessibility, and open up new ways of engaging with history. Alongside his research contributions, Zhang is developing eco-friendly electro-etching techniques to revive traditional printmaking in Singapore. His works have been exhibited in Singapore and Japan (2019), selected for the 2025 Affordable Art Fair, and will be shown in his upcoming solo exhibition in December 2025. Bridging digital scholarship with artistic practice, Zhang’s work reflects his personal journey “from digital to humanity”, where data and design meet craft, culture, and identity.

**Digitization and Legacy:
Collection and Digitization of Historical Books and Documents in the
Library of Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies**

Jane Jwu Jing WONG

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The Centre For Malaysian Chinese Studies (CMCS) was established in 1985 by 15 Malaysian Chinese associations. The library of CMCS collects books, documents, photographs, and newspapers published in Malaysia and Singapore through donation and acquisition as much as possible. The special collections include (1) Ma Tian Ying document of 14,998pages, (2) Pak Yang collection of rare books, documents and newspapers for history and Malay studies. All the historical legacy need conservation and preservation. Conserved legacy can be accessed by researchers online worldwide by using a laptop or handphone with the amazing procedures of digitization.

The David Chen Electronic Library is introduced in 2012 for free access. CMCS will develop AI system for Malaysian Chinese Studies next year with their rich digitized collection.

Wong Jwu Jing Jane is a graduate of National Taiwan University with a degree in Library Science. With the experience as an executive of the Material Room of Nan Yang Siang Pau Malaysia, she is the librarian of CMCS in 2009-2023 and the executive consultant of the library since 2024.

Trance and Divination Recipes

Michael STANLEY-BAKER

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Zhijun TAO

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In this presentation we present work-in-progress on digitising drug recipes from two different types of temple documents, divination slips from medical divination sticks (*yaoqian* 藥籤) collected from temples in Singapore and Penang, and a set of recipes revealed in trance by trance-masters (*dangki* 乩童) at Flourishing Light Temple (*Guangxi gong* 廣熙宮) in Sanchong in Taipei during the years 2009-2010. We discuss the potential of DocuSky for hosting, searching, and analysing these transcribed manuscripts, as well as the process of transcribing these manuscripts using AI recognition, coded instructions and human checking. This will provide opportunity for mutual learning and discussion of “home-grown” manuscript transcription, best practices, and advantages of various tools for different aspects of dataset creation.

Michael Stanley-Baker is a historian of Chinese medicine and religion at the Nanyang Technological University where he also teaches medical humanities in the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine. In addition to his PhD in history from University College London, he has a clinical degree in traditional Chinese medicine. He serves as the president of the International Association for the Study of Traditional Asian Medicine, a society which brings together anthropologists, historians and practitioners of medical traditions from across Asia. He also serves the MIT Institute for Global Humanities, which investigates how humanities research can contribute to current-day issues such as ecology, law, ethics and global health, as the co-chair of the Medicine & the Healing Arts pillar, and has recently begun consulting the World Health Organisation on integrative medicine. He is the co-editor of the 2022 *Routledge Handbook of Chinese Medicine*, the largest English language work on the subject, with over 50 chapters on diverse subjects. His website, Polyglot Asian Medicine, was awarded 2nd runner-up in the 2023 Digital Humanities Awards. This year his paper titled “Mapping the Bencao” was awarded the J Worth Estes Prize for Best Paper in the History of Pharmacology by the American Association for the History of Medicine. It uses historical GIS mapping of the early distribution of Chinese pharmacological sites to rethink the circulation of herbal knowledge across communities of practice.

Zhijun Tao is a PhD student in the School of Humanities at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, under the supervision of Professor Michael Stanley-Baker. Trained previously in anthropology and comparative studies at Yunnan University (China) and the London School of Economics (UK), she has developed her research interests in the religious aspect of traditional medicines, the production, transmission and commercialization of knowledge in China’s contemporary religiomedical market, and the transdisciplinary approach to healing traditions. She also participates in the “Polyglot Asian Medicine” digital humanities project directed by Professor Stanley-Baker, where she uses AI-driven tools to transcribe, build databases for, and analyze divine recipes prescribed by trance-masters in temples.

“Yam Cha” and “Jia Tok La!”: An Invitation to Tell Stories of Chinese Wayang

Alvin Eng Hui LIM

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Hedren SUM

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Performing Archipelagos (www.performingarchipelagos.com) is a performance archive that features a database tracking the historical networks of travelling and touring performance practices across the Indo-Pacific oceans, archipelagos, straits, and Asia-Oceania continents from the nineteenth century to the present. One such network is the assemblage of travelling Chinese *wayang* troupes that arrived in places with migrant communities to perform at teahouses, temple festivals, banquets (*jia tok*), and religious ceremonies. In Singapore, many of these performances clustered around the streets of Chinatown, where teahouses, theatres, and amusement parks became important socio-cultural venues. These spaces were not only sites of entertainment but also hubs of social gathering, storytelling, and community formation for Chinese migrants, mediating between the sacred spaces of temples and the secular worlds of leisure and commerce. The archive draws attention to the web interface as a site for tracing such historical networks. As evanescent and embodied practices, documentation of these performances is rare and often fragmentary. The archive must therefore consider the importance of designing and developing narrative interfaces that can represent and re-narrate the complex processes of intercultural exchange, local reception, and the use of ephemeral theatrical performance as divine and social entertainment (*choushenxi*) and devotion. By analysing the project’s archiving practice and its digital interface as entry points through which one experiences the intangible, the spiritual, and the social, the archive explores ways to present and re-present multiple perspectives on the role of theatre—from religious networks in the nineteenth century to the cultural networks of the early twentieth century.

Alvin Eng Hui Lim is a performance, religion and theatre researcher. He is Assistant Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at the National University of Singapore. His research focuses on the intersections of theatre and religion, popular religious practices, spirit mediums and rituals, with emphasis on digital media. He is also Deputy Director and Technology and Online Editor (Mandarin) of *Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive (A/S/I/A)*, (<http://a-s-i-a-web.org/>). His monograph, *Digital Spirits in Religion and Media: Possession and Performance*, was published by Routledge in 2018.

Hedren Sum is Research Fellow in Digital Humanities at the National University of Singapore. He is an interdisciplinary scholar specialising in digital methodologies, knowledge organisation systems, ontology-based frameworks, and immersive technologies for interpreting cultural heritage and historical experience. His work explores how AI and XR reshape the analysis, organisation, and engagement with cultural-historical data. His research has been presented recently at international conferences, including those of the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organisations, the Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Society, and the International Federation for Theatre Research. He has also delivered invited lectures, including at King’s College London and the Royal Asiatic Society of China. His creative scholarship has also been featured at the National Museum of Singapore, Singapore Art Week, Singapore Nights Festival, and the United Nations in Geneva. Previously, he led interdisciplinary initiatives at the Institute of Science and Technology for Humanity in Nanyang Technological University and held roles such as Principal Librarian for Digital Scholarship and Head of Content and Technology at a leading UX consultancy firm. Hedren also serves as an editor for *Southeast Asian Studies for Digital Orientalist* and on the executive council of the Singapore Computer Society’s AI & Robotics Chapter.

Research, Compilation, and Publication of Chinese Epigraphic Documents in Singapore and Malaysia

Guan Thye HUE

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Professor Kenneth Dean and I have collaborated on a ten-year project to collect Chinese stone Epigraphic, plaques, couplets, and bronze incense burners in Singapore and Malaysia. In addition to conducting comprehensive online research using geographic information systems (GIS), we also collaborate on compilation, research, and publication. We have already published “A Compilation of Chinese Epitaphs in Singapore: 1819-1911” and “A Study of Chinese Tombstones in Singapore: 1819-1911”. We are also about to publish “A Compilation of Chinese Epigraphy in Singapore: 1912-2019”, “A Compilation of Chinese Epitaphs in Singapore: United Temple”, and “A Compilation of Chinese Epitaphs in Malaysia: Johor”. This talk will briefly report on the progress, challenges, and significance of this research.

Guan Thye Hue is Senior Research Fellow at the National University of Singapore. He is the author of several monographs, including *Evolution and Model: The Propagation of Taoism and Buddhism in Singapore*, *The Buddha Lights of Lion City: The Hundred-year Development of Buddhism in Singapore*, *Chinese Epigraphy in Singapore 1819-1911* (with Prof Kenneth Dean) etc. His primary research interests include Chinese religious culture, Confucian-Buddhist-Taoist thought, Chinese folk beliefs, the migration history of Chinese communities in Singapore and Malaysia, the temple and clan association networks of Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia, and the history of Chinese education in Singapore and Malaysia. The current research projects, as well as forthcoming publications co-authored with Professor Kenneth Dean, include *A Compilation of Qing Period Tombstones in Singapore: 1819-1911*, *Chinese Epigraphy in Singapore: 1912-2019* (2 Volumes), *Chinese Epigraphy in Singapore: United Temples*, and *Chinese Epigraphy in Malaysia: State of Johor*.

Fieldwork and Archives: An Integrated Approach towards the Collection and Publication of Communal Festivals in Hong Kong

Chi-cheung CHOI

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Communal festivals are celebrated periodically. It is shared activity defining social belonging and community boundary. From the perspective of long-term development, population and geographical scope of a community will inevitably change from time to time. Therefore, if one wants to understand the structure and operation of a local community and how people understand and interpret their cultural traditions through communal festivals, it is essential to realize the dynamism of festivals. Through comparing field observations and documents as well as images and written and non-written source materials presented in the Jiao festivals celebrated in different communities in the New Territories of Hong Kong, this paper will discuss the core elements and the diversity and changeability of rituals and festivals. It will point out that integrated approach of collection and publication is the most effective way to understand rural communities and their cultural heritages. It will also demonstrate that, through holistic and comparative research methods, one can avoid partiality and erroneities arising from field observations and archival readings.

Chi-cheung Choi 蔡志祥 received his doctoral degree from the University of Tokyo. He is Adjunct Professor of the History Department at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Hong Kong Government's Museum Expert Advisor (Ethnography). His has published on Chinese festivals and popular religion, family and lineage, and business history. His major publications include *Continuity and Change: Ethnographies of the Communal Jiao Festivals in Hong Kong* (CUHK Press, 2014), *Repay the Deities and Redeem the Spirits: Traditional Chinese Festivals in Hong Kong, a Historical Anthropology Perspective* (Chung Wah, 2019); *Repay the Deities and Redeem the Spirits: A Visual Ethnography of the Jiao Festivals in the 1980s New Territories of Hong Kong* (Chung Wah, 2019) (co-ed) *Chinese and Indian Merchants in Modern Asia: Networking Businesses and Formation of Regional Economy*, (co-ed., 2019 Brill) and *Strenuous Decades: Global Challenges and Transformation of Chinese Societies in Modern Asia*, (co-ed., 2022, De Gruyter).

Digital Preservation of Kolkata Chinatown

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Kolkata, India, is home to two Chinatowns: one in the bustling Bowbazar area of central Kolkata and the other in Tangra, originally a suburban enclave but now a prime real estate district. The Bowbazar Chinatown, largely settled by Cantonese migrants, took shape in the mid-nineteenth century, while Tangra was established by Hakka migrants in the early twentieth century. The India–China war of 1962 precipitated a sharp decline in the Chinese population in Kolkata—now numbering perhaps only 2,000–3,000—alongside the deterioration of community institutions such as schools, temples, graveyards, and residential buildings. This presentation examines recent initiatives to digitally preserve the heritage and history of Kolkata’s Chinese communities, especially the one located in the Bowbazar area. These include 3-D imaging of sites, the digitization of photographs, texts, and inscriptions, and the creation of websites and data-visualization platforms. Plans are also underway to display selected materials in a gallery curated at a local native-place association. By outlining these efforts, the presentation highlights the challenges and possibilities of collecting, categorizing, digitizing, and safeguarding the cultural heritage of the Chinese in Kolkata.

Tansen Sen is Professor of History, Director of the Center for Global Asia at New York University (NYU) Shanghai, and Associated Full Professor in the Department of History at NYU. He is the author of *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600-1400* (2003; 2016) and *India, China, and the World: A Connected History* (2017; 2018). He has edited *Buddhism Across Asia* (2014), and co-edited (with Burkhard Schnepel) *Travelling Pasts: The Politics of Cultural Heritage in the Indian Ocean World* (2019) and (with Brian Tsui) *Beyond Pan-Asianism: Connecting China and India, 1840s-1960s* (2021). With Adhira Mangalagiri he has co-edited a special issue of the *International Journal of Asian Studies* (July 2022) on “methods in China-India studies”. He is currently working on a book about Zheng He’s maritime expeditions in the early fifteenth century, a monograph on Jawaharlal Nehru and China, and co-editing (with Engseng Ho) *The Cambridge History of the Indian Ocean, Volume 1*.

Local Histories, Transregional Connections: Overseas Chinese Buddhist Texts in Maritime Southeast Asia

Jack Meng-Tat CHIA

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This presentation explores the challenges and opportunities of working with overseas Chinese religious documents in the study of modern Buddhism in maritime Southeast Asia, with particular reference to my ongoing research on the Buddhayana movement in Indonesia. My project has thus far focused on collecting and analyzing primary sources such as liturgical texts, religious scriptures, stone inscriptions, and institutional records produced by Indonesian Buddhist communities during the twentieth century. Dispersed across temples, private collections, and local archives, these materials provide invaluable insights into the transnational networks, ritual practices, and evolving self-understandings of the Buddhayana movement.

While the immediate emphasis of my work has been historical and ethnographic, this presentation also reflects on the possibilities of editing and publishing these materials in ways that can serve both scholarly inquiry and community engagement. At the same time, it is neither practical nor financially feasible to digitize all sources or make them universally accessible online. Instead, my focus is on identifying priorities and proposing selective strategies that balance preservation with transregional accessibility. By highlighting the methodological challenges of collecting and categorizing materials in heterogeneous settings, I aim to suggest practical ways forward for producing digital editions of scriptures, ritual manuals, and periodicals. Ultimately, I argue that local historical sources from overseas Chinese Buddhist communities have the potential to reshape the study of Buddhism in maritime Southeast Asia, illuminating distinctive local adaptations while situating them within broader transregional histories.

Jack Meng-Tat Chia is Foo Hai Associate Professor in Buddhist Studies at the National University of Singapore, where he serves as Assistant Dean of Research at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Chair of the Buddhist Studies Group. He is the author of *Monks in Motion: Buddhism and Modernity Across the South China Sea* (Oxford, 2020), which received the 2021 EuroSEAS Humanities Book Prize. The book has been translated into Chinese and Indonesian. His second book, *Dongnanya Fayin: Xinjiapo Fojiao Yanjiu Lunji* 東南亞法音: 新加坡佛教研究論集 [Southeast Asia's Dharma: Essays on Buddhism in Singapore] (Boyang, 2025), is a collection of essays on the history and development of Buddhism in Singapore. He recently completed an edited volume, *Figures of Buddhist Diplomacy in Modern Asia* (Bloomsbury, 2026), which features twenty-two chapters examining monastic, lay, and political figures involved in Buddhist diplomacy from the early twentieth century to the present. He is currently working on a monograph titled *Buddhayana: The Making of an Indonesian Buddhist Movement*, which explores the history and evolution of the Buddhayana movement in Indonesia.

Digitize Singapore Hakka Cemetery Documents

Sisi WANG

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Cemetery organizations are integral to the history of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. Recent discoveries of Chinese historical materials in this region have shown that a large number of records have survived, partly challenging the common narrative that they were destroyed during and after the Japanese Occupation. This presentation focuses on documents related to a Hakka cemetery in Singapore. The whole collection spans the late 19th century and entire 20th century. This digitization plan encompasses paper records—such as regulations, minutes, and account books—as well as ancestral tablets, stone steles, and rubbings. Meanwhile, it attempts to reconstruct the spatial layout of the organization's ancestral hall using early documentary records, thereby providing a more direct illustration of the relationship between spatial arrangement, institutional organization, and division of power—an arrangement that has since been changed.

Sisi Wang is Research Fellow in the Department of Chinese Studies at National University of Singapore (NUS). Her research interests include Chinese Buddhism and overseas Chinese history. She received her PhD in Chinese Studies from NUS, with a dissertation examining the development of Mount Jiuhua into a pilgrimage center during late imperial and Republican China. She is the translator of *Lisan fayuan* 離散法緣 by Jack Meng-Tat Chia, and has published articles in *Asian Theatre Journal* and *New History (Xin Shixue)*. Currently, she is working on a book project about Southeast Asia's Guanyin Temples from the seventeenth century onwards.

From Dunhuang to Baxian: Recent Advances in the Automatic Transcription of Chinese Historical Documents

Colin BRISSON

École Pratique des Hautes Études
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Automatic text transcription (HTR/OCR) stands as one of the pioneering applications of artificial intelligence. With the Wenyuange Siku Quanshu Electronic Version project initiated in 1996, the People's Republic of China was the first country to leverage this technology to digitize its literary heritage. While high-quality results are now achievable for modern printed materials, existing tools struggle to produce accurate transcriptions of historical documents. Due to the vast diversity of layouts and calligraphic styles, the resulting high error rate necessitates a tedious and time-consuming post-correction process. This prohibitive cost has historically limited large-scale digitization to well-funded commercial projects (Airusheng) or collaborative initiatives (CBETA), leading to a limited and often redundant availability of digital corpora. This presentation will demonstrate how recent technological advances are surmounting these obstacles. Drawing on two ongoing projects—Read_Chinese (BnF Datalab), focusing on the Pelliot chinois collection, and CRISOLIC (ANR-24-CE27-4500-03), which explores late Qing administrative archives—we will show that it is now possible to cost-effectively produce high-quality transcriptions for historical corpora across diverse scripts and layouts.

Colin Brisson is a PhD candidate at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, specializing in the palaeography and codicology of medieval China. He has been working on the automatic transcription of historical Chinese documents since 2021. He and his team recently achieved a major milestone by completing the transcription of both the Pelliot collection (BnF) and a large corpus of late Qing dynasty legal archives.

Database of County-Level Population, Cultivated Land Area, Land Tax, and Corvée Labor in Northern China, 1368-1953 – With a Discussion on the Evolution of Agricultural Tax Rates

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The *Database of County-Level Population, Cultivated Land Area, Land Tax, and Corvée Labor in Northern China, 1368–1953*, recently completed by us, provides data on population, cultivated land area, land tax, and corvée labor for northern Chinese counties in the Hongwu 26th year (1393), Wanli 8th year (1580), Yongzheng 8th year (1730), Xuantong 2th year (1910), and 1953. The sum of land tax and corvée labor constitutes agricultural tax. A county's agricultural tax rate is calculated by dividing its total agricultural tax by its total grain output.

Data on counties from local gazetteers and tax-corrée documents of the Ming and Qing dynasties vary: some are abbreviated, others detailed; some complete, others incomplete; some normal, others anomalous. In detailed versions, land tax items are categorized with excessive complexity. Among these, “jiahao” (transportation surcharge)—a large sum recorded as the cost of transporting county-level land tax to state granaries—appears only in county accounting records, not in state-level accounts. Missing data can be rectified through collation of different versions of historical materials. “Anomalies” may either stem from data entry errors or mask unknown new systems. In 1393 (Hongwu 26th year), the agricultural tax rate in northern China stood at 10%. After the Hongwu era, despite the government introducing additional taxes such as horse fodder duties and post station silver, as well as expanding corvée categories that increased total agricultural tax, the tax rate in 1580 (Wanli 8th year) remained a mere 11%. The Qing government retained the Wanli-era tax system, with the original amount of tax levied in silver remaining largely unchanged. However, continuous rises in rice prices drove agricultural tax rates downward: they stood at 5.6% in 1730 (Yongzheng 8th year), dropped to 3.3% on average in northern China in 1910 (Xuantong 2nd year), and even fell below 1% in Shandong Province.

Starting from the late Ming Dynasty, fluctuating rice prices became key to understanding changes in agricultural tax rates. Previous scholars have noted that the commutation of corvée labor into silver payments, initiated in the mid-Ming, primarily reflected tax-increasing measures taken by prefectural and county governments to cope with rising administrative costs. In reality, the Ming rice price rose from 0.3-0.4 taels per dan of millet to 0.5-0.6 taels, an increase of 33-40%, which can be viewed as offsetting the newly added taxes. Sustained increases in provincial rice prices during the Qing Dynasty led to a continued decline in agricultural tax rates. Among the five northern provinces in 1910, Shandong had the highest rice price, resulting in the lowest agricultural tax rate.

Compared with existing historical databases, this database features a complex structure and draws on a wide range of sources. Each variable is derived from our in-depth exploration of historical materials, as well as the collation and correction of various sources. The evolution of agricultural tax and tax rates is but an inherent theme of this database; researchers can uncover many other valuable topics from it. Furthermore, we believe that over the coming decades, the *Database of County-Level Population, Cultivated Land Area, Land Tax, and Corvée Labor in China, 1368-1953*—to be built on this foundation—will serve as a new platform for quantitative historical research.

Shuji Cao is Professor at the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Hong Kong. He specializes in research on Chinese population history, contemporary Chinese history, Chinese economic history, and local documents. His publications include *A History of the Chinese Population*, *A History of Chinese Migration*, *Traditional Land Ownership Structures and Their Evolution*, and *A History of Plague Epidemics in China*. He has edited documentary collections such as *Shicang Documents* (40 volumes), *Poyang Lake Region Documents* (10 volumes), *San'inyinwan Village Contract Documents* (10 volumes), *Shanxi Merchant Documents* (50 volumes), *Jiangjin Archives of the Republic of China*

(112 volumes). Additionally, he has compiled the Chinese Contract Documents Database (approximately 80,000 pages) and the Chinese Judicial Archives Database (Jiangjin Volume), which includes around 4,000 cases.

Yi Pang is a PhD candidate at Xiamen University.

Systems and Systematicity in Private Historical Records: Reflections from the Perspective of Documentary Studies

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Over the past two to three decades, vast quantities of private records have been discovered. Effectively collecting, organizing, interpreting, and utilizing these materials not only represents one of the major challenges facing Chinese historical research in the coming decades but also constitutes a significant challenge for the field of Documentary Studies. Building on the concepts of “document clusters” and “household-based nature” proposed by earlier scholars, this paper introduces the concepts of “document systems” and “systematicity.” It elaborates on the three elements of document systems (units, hierarchy, and sequence) and the three dimensions of systematicity (completeness, originality, and diversity). This framework aims to provide a more comprehensive description of the internal and external order and fundamental attributes of documents, thereby broadening the scope of traditional documentary studies.

Yonghua Liu received his PhD from McGill University and is currently Professor in the Department of History at Peking University. He previously held professorships at Xiamen University and Fudan University, and was a visiting scholar at the Harvard-Yenching Institute (2010-2011) and the Department of History, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (2016). His long-term research interests include the social and cultural history of the Ming and Qing dynasties, socio-economic history of the same period, and folk historical documents. His major monographs include *Confucian Rituals and Chinese Villagers: Ritual Change and Social Transformation in a Southeastern Chinese Community, 1368-1949* (English edition, 2013; Chinese edition, 2019) and *Cheng Yunheng's Nineteenth Century: The Life World and Transformation of a Huizhou Villager* (2024). He is currently conducting research on popular literacy and the pathways of traditional Chinese social formation during the Ming and Qing periods.

The Collection and Compilation of Historical Materials on Chinese Enterprises and the Study of Business History

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In recent years, there has been an explosion in the excavation, organization, and publication of historical documents in mainland China. A vast number of official archives and private documents have either been edited and published or compiled into databases. This trend has greatly facilitated historical research and, to some extent, promoted its development. However, it has also brought many challenges. One of the most prominent issues is the disconnection between the compilation of historical materials and actual research. The sheer volume and diversity of historical materials often leave researchers at a loss as to where to begin. Moreover, the abundance of repetitive documents makes it difficult for researchers to identify new questions or perspectives.

From the viewpoint of a business history researcher, this article aims to offer some preliminary reflections on the collection and compilation of materials related to the history of Chinese enterprises. First, there is the question of how to deal with a large number of financial archives. Within enterprise archives, financial records often account for the largest portion, yet they are among the least utilized in research. When selecting materials for publication or compilation, priority should be given to years with complete and representative records. This approach would allow business historians to reconstruct financial accounts and better understand the financial logic and evolution of enterprises—especially those that spanned different historical periods and used varying accounting principles. Second, for certain historical terms and concepts, explanations should be provided using modern social science terminology to avoid misunderstanding and confusion. Unfortunately, most archivists and compilers of historical materials are reluctant to take this step.

Chaoqun Gao graduated from the Department of History at Peking University in 1992. He is currently Executive Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the editorial board of *Research in Chinese Economic History* (中國經濟史研究) at the Institute of Economics, University of Chinese Academy of Social Science, and Research Fellow. He also serves as Deputy Director of the Modern Economic History Committee of the Chinese Economic History Association and Executive Council Member of the Chinese Business History Association. His primary research focus is the history of Chinese enterprises. He has published dozens of academic papers in this field and was awarded third prize in the 10th Outstanding Research Achievement Awards of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. He has led major national projects, including the key project of the National Social Science Foundation, “Research on Modern Chinese Factory Systems and Labor-Capital Relations,” and served as Chief Editor of *Sub-volume on Modern Industry* under *Encyclopedia of China: Industrial Volume* (中華大典·工業典·近代工業分典), a major national cultural publishing project (Shanghai Guji Press, 2016). He has also participated in international conferences on business history in Japan and Europe, where he presented research findings.

Fieldwork and Digital Collection of Historical Documents in Southern Zhejiang

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Since 2011, the Southern Zhejiang Research Group of East China Normal University has been conducting comprehensive field investigations in Wenzhou and Lishui. The main goal of this effort is to better study the history of the area from the late Qing dynasty to the era of the People's Republic of China. Using digital photography, the team collects and preserves scattered historical documents held by local residents, interviews individuals with historical knowledge, and uncovers the region's rich and previously little-known historical narratives. The use of digital tools is crucial for improving the efficiency of their work.

Xiaocai Feng is Professor in the Department of History at East China Normal University and Director of the Center for Local History and Memory. His main research areas include 20th-century Chinese history and regional history. For over two decades, he has been leading students and colleagues in fieldwork across various parts of China, with a special focus on southern Zhejiang. He is also a founder of several academic initiatives, including advanced training programs on local history and regional history research workshops.

Sinophone Everyday: Digital Archive of Chinese Popular Cultures in Southeast Asia

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Scholarship on Chinese-language cultures in Singapore and Malaya has traditionally emphasized elite literary and intellectual traditions, leaving everyday practices underexplored. Our project, *Chinese Popular Cultures in Post-war Singapore and Malaya* (MOE AcRF Tier 2), addresses this gap by documenting and analyzing diverse forms of Sinophone popular culture—storytelling, street opera, pop music, folk artists, performance troupes, pulp fiction, entertainment magazines, mosquito papers, and tabloids. Framed as cultural history from below, the project foregrounds the lived experiences of Chinese communities in the post-war and postcolonial era. At the heart of this initiative is the first open-access online database dedicated to Chinese popular cultures in Singapore and Malaya (<https://chinesepopularcultures.sg/>), which currently contains about 93,000 metadata entries. In addition to keyword search, the platform offers curated write-ups, reference lists, and links to related resources, serving as a gateway for independent research. Through this work, we reconceptualize the Sinophone by emphasizing plurality, vernacular practices, and grassroots epistemologies.

The project contributes to digital humanities in Southeast Asia by rethinking cultural structuration, intra-Chinese agency, and inter-Asian connections through the lens of popular culture. Ultimately, it opens new avenues for understanding the everyday cultural worlds of post-war Singapore and Malaya and redefines the role of popular culture in shaping the region's histories.

Lanjun Xu is Associate Professor of Chinese Studies at the National University of Singapore. Her research focuses on modern Chinese literature and film, the cultural history of children and youth, and China-Southeast Asia cultural connections during the Cold War. She is working on a monograph on cross-regional cultural networks—spanning performing arts, tabloids, cinema, and publishing from the 1940s to the 1970s—that highlights the role of middlebrow cultural brokers in shaping exchanges between China and Southeast Asia. She is also Principal Investigator of the MOE Tier-2 project *Chinese Popular Cultures in Post-war Singapore and Malaya* (www.chinesepopularcultures.sg), which builds the first open-access digital archive of Sinophone popular culture in the region. Her publications include *Chinese Children and War: Education, Nation, and Popular Culture* (2015) and *Chineseness and the Cold War: Contested Cultures and Diaspora in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong* (co-edited with Jeremy Taylor, 2021). Her articles have appeared in *Twentieth-Century China*, *Asian Theatre Journal*, and *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*.

Researching Chinese Account Books from Dutch Batavia: Collections, Questions and Challenges

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It is by now well known that traditional Chinese accounting has proved resilient and even adaptable in modern capitalism for longer than previously thought. Studies of Rui Fu Xiang, a multi-branch wholesale and retail entity in Beijing, and of Ma Tsui Chiu's remittance and brokerage firm in Hong Kong, made extensive use of traditional account books to reconstruct the structure, managerial hierarchy, and intra-firm (familial) politics of these businesses. (Gardella 1992, Lee 2015) In Southeast Asia, historians of big Chinese businesses have had recourse to annual reports as a primary source for research because the majority of them were registered companies. (Post 2019, Koh & Goh 2023) For research on all other medium and small Chinese businesses in the region, Chinese account books remain an important but largely untapped source as the overwhelming majority of them were not registered until later in the twentieth century.

This talk presents some initial findings from the account books of three Batavia-based medium-sized Chinese companies. Two of them specialized in textiles and one in commodity trade. The complete accounts of these businesses, which operated in the 1910s and 1920s, have been preserved for on average between 5 and 6 years. They amount to about 100 account books in total. I will begin by sharing about the provenance, reliability and present condition of these sources. My talk will then highlight some of the challenges I encountered in comprehending many obscure terminologies, the use of creolized language and the specificity of the Dutch colonial legal context for Chinese kongsi's.

Guo-Quan Seng is a historian of Chinese societies in Southeast Asia, with a special interest in how racial, gender and sexuality structures in the region have been shaped through the forces of Eurasian imperialism, nationalisms and global capitalism. His first book, *Strangers in the Family: Gender, Patriline and the Chinese in Colonial Indonesia* (Cornell University Press, 2023), is a gendered history of settler Chinese community formation in Indonesia during the Dutch colonial period (1816-1942). He is currently working on a second monograph tentatively titled "A Diaspora of Shopkeepers: Empire, Race and Chinese Commercial Expansion in Southeast Asia (1870-1970s)".

Mao-era Ordinary People's Letters as Historical Documents: Significance, Curation, and Methodological Challenges

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Private letters hold an indisputable promise for historical research, as they often provide an intimate account of everyday social, economic, and family lives, often missing in other public and private documents. However, extant private letters from pre-1949 China were disproportionately the works of literati elites. The balance of sources shifted significantly in favor of ordinary people in post-1949 China, as more and more people from all walks of life became literate and left their letters to institutional curators or the scrap paper market. These letters provided valuable insights into contemporary Chinese economic, social, and family lives beyond the grand narratives of political campaigns, economic reforms, and geopolitical upheavals. However, effective use of these letters for historical and social science research is hindered by their poor condition of curation, limited accessibility, scattered organizations, poor handwriting, and the lack of historical context. In this presentation, I will briefly discuss the private letter collections at the Center for Contemporary Chinese Social Life Data and Research (CCCSLDR) at Fudan University, including their conditions of curation, cataloguing, publication, and potential value for research. I will also draw on sample letters from the CCCSLDR to demonstrate how letters might contribute to our understanding of contemporary Chinese history. Lastly, I will discuss how letters may pair with other newfound materials to create a more holistic view of contemporary Chinese history.

Yanjie Huang is Assistant Professor at the Department of Chinese Studies, National University of Singapore. His primary research interest covers socio-economic aspects of the Chinese Communist Revolution. His first book, *Market in State: Political Economy of Domination in China* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), co-authored with Zheng Yongnian, discussed the historical origins and contemporary institutions of China's state domination over the economy. His second book, *Revolution Domesticated: Austerity, Ideology, and Family Life in Urban China, 1949-1984* (Columbia University Press, forthcoming), employs family letters and archives to examine how Mao-era fiscal austerity and ideological mobilizations transformed the urban household economy and created the conditions for the post-Mao pivot to developmentalism. He is currently working on a global history of the origins of the RMB in the context of geopolitical struggles and war mobilizations in mid-twentieth-century China. From 2026, he will begin a research project on the evolution of the developmental state model in China in an inter-Asian context, under the sponsorship of Singapore Social Science and Humanities Fellowship.

Village Temples and Ritual Specialists: Re-imagining Kampong Life in Colonial Singapore through Local Materials

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This study examines the social history of Chinese rural communities in Singapore before the 1980s. Integrating temple inscriptions, tombstones, Taoist liturgical texts, lineage genealogies, and digital humanities approaches, it focuses on village temples and religious practices, which played a central role in structuring ritual life and communal organization. These materials collectively trace a historical arc linking nineteenth-century southern China to contemporary Singapore, highlighting both the *longue durée* and the transnational dimensions of rural society—an area long marginalized in existing historiography. Temples have persisted as sacred spaces despite extensive spatial reorganization and continue to offer valuable insight into the transformation of local institutions and ritual practices. This case further underscores the value of engaging local and popular sources to produce more nuanced historical accounts across temporal and regional contexts.

Lin Ruo is Postdoctoral Fellow at the National University of Singapore. Her research focuses on the social and ritual networks of overseas Chinese communities, with particular attention to lineage organization, temple institutions, and Taoist ritual specialists in Singapore and Southeast Asia.

ABOUT THE ORGANISERS & CHAIRPERSONS

Kang Yu is a research fellow in the Religion and Globalisation Cluster at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore (NUS). He obtained his PhD in Chinese Studies at NUS with a thesis focusing on Huizhou merchants and their transregional trade institutions. His research interests include business history and the overseas Chinese. He is currently the principal investigator of a Heritage Research Grant supported by National Heritage Board and is working on a book about importers and exporters in Singapore.

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Sisi Wang is Research Fellow in the Department of Chinese Studies at National University of Singapore (NUS). Her research interests include Chinese Buddhism and overseas Chinese history. She received her PhD in Chinese Studies from NUS, with a dissertation examining the development of Mount Jiuhua into a pilgrimage center during late imperial and Republican China. She is the translator of *Lisan fayuan* 離散法緣 by Jack Meng-Tat Chia, and has published articles in *Asian Theatre Journal* and *New History (Xin Shixue)*. Currently, she is working on a book project about Southeast Asia's Guanyin Temples from the seventeenth century onwards.

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