Digital Humanities Workshop at McMaster University

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On May 26th and 27th, 2018, the McMaster University Centre for Buddhist Studies held a graduate student workshop titled "Digital Humanities for Research in East Asian Religions." This workshop was sponsored by the Tianzhu Global Network in Buddhist Studies. More than twenty graduate students from nearly twenty universities in North America gathered for this event, and their projects covered pre-modern and contemporary Asian religious thought and material cultures, as well as the spread of Asian religions in the West.

The two-day workshop focused on two major techniques: digital mapping and network analysis. Three instructors, Paula R. Curtis (University of Michigan); Jonathan Pettit (University of Hawai'i); and Jason Protass (Brown University), shared their experiences and projects, and provided hands-on instruction and training with Digital Humanities tools such as QGIS, Palladio, Cytoscape, and Gephi. At the end of the workshop, participants created and presented their own diagrams, explained what they learned, and described how their new knowledge could advance their research projects.

Apart from teaching the technology related to Digital Humanities, the workshop highlighted an important but often overlooked principle: Digital Humanities can provide new research methods and tools for traditional humanistic research, but good research projects and concepts are still essential and fundamental. Without a good research question and plan, Digital Humanities projects may end up consisting of little more than visually-appealing diagrams. Jason Protass noted that he has seen many Digital Humanities projects that presented information that had already been discovered and proven in traditional text-based close readings. Protass suggested that those projects were not a good use of Digital Humanities, because the projects do not facilitate any new discoveries.

All three instructors emphasized that students must always keep in mind the purpose, scale, and limitations of their projects. To produce a good digital map or chart requires not only technical skills, but also critical thinking. One example that Jason Protass gave is a graphic project based on three volumes of a novel, which demonstrated how far the characters move from the city centre in each of the volumes. By doing so, the researcher could illustrate the "expensiveness" of a particular chapter or the "claustrophobic narrative" in a chapter. Diagrams help the researcher to rearrange the components collected from the text, and more importantly, to bring hidden patterns from the text to the surface, while provoking new questions and arguments.

Although not every project needs to employ Digital Humanities tools, all the instructors emphasized that it is very important to understand the language of Digital Humanities. Paula Curtis pointed out that learning these tools could help scholars to organize information, and can be applied in theories and practices related to teaching. Jason Protass told the participants that it is very helpful to know how to listen to people who are working with digital projects, and to be able to converse

with them about methods, and ask questions. He noted that: "Even if you are not going to use Digital Humanities in your project, learning it will help you to become a better colleague in the future."