(1) Final Report Write up (Itemization of books/works discussed, principal participants, invited speakers, financial statement of expenditures. A couple of paragraphs summarizing themes and nature of discussion. Please also refer to the quality of participation and list of books/description)

Works discussed:

(AY 2008-09)

Wardy, R., Aristotle in China (Needham Group, 2000).

(AY 2009-10)

Marshall, M., Understanding Media (Routledge, 1964)
Fairclough, N., Language and Globalization (Routledge, 2006)

Principal Participants:

(AY 2008-09)

Dr Luke O'Sullivan (PS); Ms Mary Lee (CNM); Dr Loy Hui Chieh (PH); Dr. Lee Cher Leng (CS) and Dr. Lee Gek Ling (CELC) also attended. Mr. Bjorn Gomes acted as the graduate assistant.

(AY 2009-10)

As above, plus Dr. Leigh Jenco (PS). Dr. Tania Roy (ELL) and Dr. Ingrid Hoofd (CNM) also attended. Ms Farah Cheah acted as the graduate assistant.

For (AY 2010-11) all those attending last year will be returning, apart from Dr. Hoofd, who will be replaced by Prof. J. Mattern (PS).

There have been no invited speakers to date.

The group has spent approx. $1809 on books and photocopying to date.
Summary of Themes

The initial aim of the group was a comparative exploration of the role of rhetoric in Chinese and Western culture, which occupied the session for 2008-9. We began with an unpublished manuscript by Harbsmeir selected by Dr. Loy which featured close exegesis of ancient Western and classical Chinese texts. This raised the broader issue of whether and to what extent the different possibilities of these languages affected the subjectivity of their authors; Harbsmeir’s argument was that a reflexive concept of the self visible in classical Western authors was simply absent from the pre-Buddhist Chinese tradition. We pursued this theme into the modern era in Wardy, whose Aristotle in China explored the intellectual history of the translation of Aristotle’s Logic into Chinese.

The more general philosophical issues raised by these two authors led us to read a number of essays by Burke, who added a literary and psychoanalytical dimension to the study of rhetoric. Finally, the political aspects of rhetoric in both Western and Chinese contexts were explored through the study of some recently published works by the French theorist Michel Foucault on the role of language in the formation of the early modern European state, and the historian Xing Lu on the role of rhetoric in the Chinese cultural revolution.

For 2009-10 we decided to widen our focus to include rhetoric at large. The presence of members from CNM made McLuhan, whose Understanding Media remains an important reference point for contemporary media theory, a natural point of departure for the study of rhetoric in today’s world, particularly in visual form. Though he was often wrong, he was never dull. Fairclough’s Language and Globalization aimed to be something of a quasi-textbook on the role that language is playing in shaping the emergence of a global society, and argued, probably rightly, that language can play a determining role in calling this new set of relationships into being. We finished our last session with Alter’s Biblical Narrative, an examination of the Bible from a literary perspective. This was the first time that we had considered the importance of rhetoric in religion, but it turned out to be no less significant there than elsewhere.

Quality of Participation

The membership of the group has fluctuated over time but has retained a stable core of participants. For the upcoming semester we also have a new faculty member in political science, Assoc. Prof. Janice Mattern, who definitely wishes to join, as well as an expression of interest from a visiting PhD student from Northwestern in the USA. This should help to revitalize the group and keep it fresh if we are granted an extension.

To date, the reading required has been kept at a manageable level (usually 50-100 pages a session, depending on the difficulty of the text) with the aim of ensuring that participants could keep up with the group during semester. We had fewer sessions in sem. 2 of 2009-10, chiefly as a result of illness, but still managed to have two meetings on each text. Overall, the quality of discussion has been sustained at a high level, and all participants have enjoyed the benefit of meeting colleagues from outside their own department to discuss a wide variety of texts that they would probably not have otherwise encountered. In other words, the group has been a great success for its members to date, and we would welcome the opportunity to continue.

As one of the curators of the group, however, I do have some comments, partly based on simultaneously participating in another group run by Tania Roy (ELL) and Paul Ray (TS). It is much easier to assemble a group of this sort where a like-minded group of colleagues is already in existence, as in the case of the ELL/TS group, which was generally larger and better-attended. It seems to be more difficult to generate the necessary critical mass when the group’s members do not already know one another. Although I canvassed quite widely when starting this group, a number of those who initially expressed strong interest did not sustain their participation once semester began, finding they had other commitments that prevented their attendance. Thankfully,
we attracted new members as time went on, which ensured that the sessions remained viable, and lasting intellectual relationships have been formed as a result.

Moreover, despite the injunction that the RG was not to be used a means of building a personal library, it has turned out to be very desirable that at least those members who are guaranteed to attend have a copy of the book for themselves. It has been too easy to spend significant amounts on photocopying that would have been better spent on simply purchasing the books. Also, a personally annotated copy of a book is easier to handle and provides a better record of the discussion than a photocopy, which is more easily damaged, less portable, and liable to be lost more readily. I would suggest that book-buying, so long as it is done responsibly, be positively encouraged, at least for regular partipants.

Finally, an unexpected benefit of the RG was that it helped with the socialization of graduate students into academic life. Both our graduate assistants, who were very faithful in going over the readings and attending the sessions, benefited from being able to join in with the discussions on an equal footing with members of faculty. They gained significantly in confidence from being able to join in the conversation and contribute their views to the more general debate, and indeed, they often had interesting things to say. This was the case not only in the group that I ran, but also the ELL/TS group. I would therefore also suggest that the participation of graduate students in RG sessions by their supervisors be explicitly encouraged.

2/8/2010

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Section C: To be completed by Director of Research (Humanities & Social Sciences)

Comments: Approved for Renewal

This seems to be an excellent group. The issues discussed are evolving in a productive way and producing interesting new areas of enquiry (e.g., rhetoric in globalization). They are also drawing on new faculty which is very good for them & us.

Signature: [Signature]

Date: 6 Aug 2010