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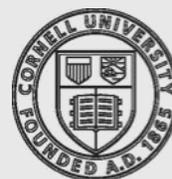
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“TEACHING SANSKRIT: A LOVE STORY”

Teaching Sanskrit at Cornell has been one of the most rare and transformative opportunities I have had in graduate school. When I came to Cornell in the Fall of 2010 from Oxford, I could not have imagined that I will be solely responsible for teaching Intermediate and, later, Elementary Sanskrit classes after only two semesters as a Ph.D. student. By the time I began to teach Sanskrit for the first time, I had already studied with some of the best Sanskrit scholars across the globe, most currently with our own Professor Larry McCrea with his encyclopedic knowledge and an ability to pick up and read a Sanskrit text virtually in any genre. I wondered what I could possibly offer my students that could make their time studying Sanskrit worthwhile. Enthusiasm and eagerness to help I had aplenty, but it was a real adjustment to find myself facing a class that counted on me to learn what I myself had the privilege to study with some of the world’s greats.

During the first two years of teaching, I introduced students at the Intermediate level to the magical world of Sanskrit Purāṇas and *kāvya* (poetry). Purāṇas are a genre of religious and philosophical texts, told in the form of stories nesting within stories. The *Devīmāhātmyam* (“The Glory of the Goddess”), is a text that has been very close to my heart. I have listened to it being chanted and used liturgically in the *homa* (fire ceremonies) in temples during Goddess festivals so many times that its words have become comforting in their familiarity. In class, we read about the adventures of the hapless king

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Suratha (his name having the literal meaning of “One Who has a Good Chariot”) and the merchant Samādhi (whose name refers to a high meditative state). After being robbed of their possessions and status by the people closest to them, the king and the merchant come across the hermitage of a sage Medhas (wisdom). Medhas tells the travelers fables of epic battles of the magnificent Goddess (Devī), aided by her retinue and her lion mount, with the demons, driven by their swollen egos and greed to displace the Gods. The king and the merchant learn from the sage how to propitiate the Goddess and practice austerities. But to find out whether our heroes were able to recover from the treachery of their loved ones and whether their fates have taken them from the ignominy of exile to the exalted positions of rulers of the Earth or possessors of supreme knowledge, you may just have to take a Sanskrit class.



Another text I have enjoyed reading with students is the *Kumārasambhava* (“The Birth of Kumāra”) by Kālidāsa, the most celebrated Sanskrit poet. Kālidāsa did not just excel in writing epic poetry – his themes, plot construction, and the use of stylistic devices have served to define the genre. The *Kumārasambhava* describes the meeting and courtship of Śiva (a powerful Hindu deity) and Parvatī (the daughter of Mount Himālaya personified). A union of this divine couple is desperately desired by the Gods, since only their son would be capable of restoring the Gods to their divine realms after vanquishing the demonic usurper Tāraka. All does not go smoothly in romance even for divine personages helped by Kāmadeva, the God of Love himself, and egged on by the forests of the Himalayas and their various inhabitants, waking up to the advent of Spring. Difficulties arise in the form of Śiva’s famed asceticism and the God of Love goes up in flames, cast by the ferocious gaze from Śiva’s third eye. Though we do not get to the happy ending in just one semester of reading, it does take place in the end, culminating in Canto VIII, which abounds in sensual and, at times, unambiguously erotic descriptions of the happy union.

Reading the *Kumārasambhava* allowed me to introduce students to the best examples of Sanskrit poetry, quite an accomplishment in their fourth semester of studying a language. Studying Sanskrit is no easy feat, as I myself know well, having come to it some years after college. Elementary Sanskrit, where students learn all the grammar, which will allow them to read texts in the original in the second year, is nothing less than grueling. But all the Cornell students, whom I have had the opportunity to teach, found themselves up to this challenge. I have taught graduate and undergraduate

students from the Departments of Asian Studies, Classics, Linguistics, and Philosophy, as well as from the fields of mathematics, biology, and physics. We even have a Sanskrit alumna who is a veterinarian-in-training. How exciting it is to be able to read some of the best of South-Asian literature, while getting ready to pursue more advanced studies in related fields, or to go on to excel in a variety of careers. And is not reading literature from other cultures and studying languages like Sanskrit, as fanciful and quixotic as it might seem at first glance, essential to what we call “education,” to becoming a well-rounded and cultured person?

Teaching Sanskrit at Cornell has made it clear to me why the challenges that all the Ph.D. students have to face (the uncertainty of the future, the rejection letters, the unrelenting pace of work done in small windowless offices, the lonely nights staring at the computer screen) have been worth it. I cannot think of anything I would rather be doing than helping students attain the research tools they need and contributing to the diversity of their educational experience. I am grateful to have been given an opportunity to do so here. ■





QILIN YANG

M.A., Asian Studies



Majoring in Philosophy as an undergraduate, Qilin Yang ventured into the study of the dialogue of humanity with itself across time in both Western and Asian traditions. Her current research focus is in Buddhist studies, especially the origin of the Mahayana and its transmission to China. During her leisure time, she always shows enthusiasm for music and Chinese tea culture. Recently, she has been collecting easy-to-cook dinner recipes. ■

LEARNING SANSKRIT

Almost all elementary-level language classes begin with dialogues like shopping, greetings with friends, ordering food in a restaurant, etc. But, it can hardly be the case for elementary Sanskrit! As a mainly liturgical language, which can be traced back to the 2nd millennium B.C.E., Sanskrit barely finds its place in any of the modern conversations. To take Sanskrit is to begin a venture into Indian classics.

I began my Sanskrit class here at Cornell with Anya. She is a great teacher. For someone like me who has no training in linguistics, Sanskrit is hard due to the complexity of its grammar. Every time I feel panicked by the translation exercise, Anya's lecture notes are extremely helpful as a reference. Her instruction makes the textbook more accessible for us first-year learners. One interesting aspect of the course is that we read simplified versions of Hindu epics as translation exercises, such as the story of Rama from Ayodhya, which is what currently we're working on. The complexity of Sanskrit grammar makes the course challenging, but Anya's instruction and her arrangement of the course material makes it enjoyable! ■