



UMR 7041
ARSCAN
ARCHÉOLOGIES ET
SCIENCES DE L'ANTIQUITÉ
CNRS - Univ. Paris I Panthéon Sorbonne
Univ. Paris Ouest Nanterre la Défense
Ministère de la Culture



Universiteit Leiden

Exploratory workshop “Mémoire volontaire”: Historical conditions of textual canonisations

In his work entitled *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, which explores the role of textual canonisation in the shaping of cultural memories, Jan Assman wrote a phrase that has incessantly been quoted since then: « Kanon ist die *mémoire volontaire* einer Gesellschaft ». ¹ While keeping the idea that the fixation of one or several texts corresponded to the shaping of a society, Assmann locates the problem of textual canonisations in the domain of political history. The origin of this workshop lies at the crossroad between the immediacy of political history and the long duration of cultural evolutions.

Contributors to this exploratory workshop will be invited to follow this idea and to question the phenomenon of textual canonisation through the combination of political and cultural history. They will thus each assess, in their own field, the pertinence of the assumption linking textual canonisation to a process of political and cultural reorganisation in a community or a state.

An extract from *Contre François Jullien* by sinologist Jean-François Billeter very well illustrates Jan Assmann's idea by inserting it in the historical reality of the appearance of the Qin Empire in the late 3rd century BC.

We must remember that the Chinese empire was founded by Ts'in Cheu-Houang, the “first emperor of Ts'in”, in 221 BC, after terrible wars, and that the violence from which this new power was born then turned against it, as it collapsed into disorder fifteen years later, in 206. The rebels that caused its fall and subsequently fought each other with enormous armies did not all have the same goals. After some hesitations, the winners of this new war took over the idea of an empire and founded in 202 the second imperial dynasty, that of the Han. Their main preoccupation was to avoid the destiny of the first dynasty, and to last longer. They succeeded beyond all expectation and their dynasty lasted for four centuries (the Hans correspond to the Roman period of China). But the Han emperors did even more than that as the empire itself lasted more than two millennia. Thanks to them, the madness and excessiveness of the First Emperor, which

¹ Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, Beck, München 1992: 18.

could had remained a short-lived aberration, became the founding moment of this whole imperial history.

This capital fact must be thought about. Historians consider the reason for this extraordinary success lies in the military, administrative, institutional and ritual order they were able to create and that persisted in its main traits until the end of the empire in the early 20th century. The real secret of this success, however, which historians do not see or sufficiently understand, is that these emperors, their advisors, and their officers instrumentalised culture to the point they reshaped it completely and put it at the base of a new order. To make people forget the violence and the arbitrary from which the empire was born, and by which it was supported, it had to appear in compliance with the natural order of things. Everything was redefined following the idea that that imperial order complied with the laws of universe since its origins and for all times. All fields of knowledge, all thoughts, language, and representations had to concur to persuade the people that this order was overall natural. This was the most efficient way to insure the durability of the imperial regime, its hierarchies, the kinds of domination it imposed, and the submission they required. This general reshaping created what the Chinese themselves have then considered, and what we still consider today as the Chinese civilisation. The pre-imperial past has been so well reinterpreted that it became an integral part of the new natural order of things.

We can admire this synthesis, which lasted more than two millennia despite the crises the imperial order weathered, the challenges it had to take up, the deep social transformations it had to adapt to. But it is important to see that it was secreted by the imperial power, in order to occult this power's nature and to make any alternative to despotism unthinkable. And we must recognise that everything that appears specifically Chinese today, especially in the field of the thought, belongs to this system.²

More generally, these remarks fall within the conceptual frame drawn by Jan Assmann, which associates the creation of canons and the necessity to reorder the world after an important historical break:

The construction of canons occurs during times of increased cultural polarization and broken traditions, when one must decide what order to follow.³

By inviting specialists of various cultural areas, we aim at enlightening the links between the fixation of religious and literary texts and the political evolutions in human societies. We chose to focus our investigation on the first millennium BC, when appeared several canonisation movements we can consider “classical”, as they have shaped numerous cultures

² Jean-François Billeter, *Contre François Jullien*, Paris, Allia publishers, 2014: 16-19.

³ Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*: 125.

in our modern world (from China to Egypt, and from Greeks to Jews). Our goal is to compare these various canonisations, but also to study how they influenced each other.

Each case study will first aim at presenting how the concept of canonisation is understood in the specific field of study in question. It will thus strive to describe as precisely as possible what “canonisation” means. Do we set a text or a corpus of texts? Does this canonisation come with the disappearance of some (specific) works or extracts? In a second phase, we will question the relevance of a political reading of canonisation, and strive to assess the relevancy of Jan Assmann’s idea. Hopefully, following this workshop, we will be able to identify common characteristics regarding the historical conditions of textual canonizations, and to consequently lay the foundations for a comparative history of textual canonisation.

Texts are a very important instrument to arrive at political and cultural canonization. Objects are another, as is illustrated by the great “masterpieces” populating museums. Those are the objects considered to express where “we” come from and who “we” are. While our investigation in this first workshop will focus on texts, in a follow up meeting in Leiden in 2019 artefacts and the role they play in political and cultural canonisations will be central. The final publication resulting from the two workshops will provide a much needed combination of both approaches and source material and will allow us to better understand how canonisation functions under what kind of historical conditions.

This first workshop will take place in the Maison de l’Archéologie et de l’Ethnologie at the Université Paris Nanterre (France), on 21th of September, 2018. We strongly incite the contributors to send a preliminary paper of about 10 pages in June 2018, to be handed-out to the workshop’s attendants.

Transportation and lodging costs will be covered by the LabEx Pasts in the Present.

The second workshop, entitled « Mémoire volontaire. The historical conditions of material canonisations » will take place at Leiden University in March 2019.

Damien Agut (Nanterre) and Miguel John Versluys (Leiden)