



— *Not for citation without permission* —

Report to the Council¹

**2019 Annual Meeting
American Council of Learned Societies
Friday, April 26, 2019
New York, NY**

**Pauline Yu
President, American Council of Learned Societies**

Good morning and welcome to the 100th annual meeting of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), which is actually—because governance at ACLS is always charmingly complicated—the 102nd meeting of the Council and the 98th of the Corporation. It is nicely fitting that we meet in New York City, where our very first meeting took place in 1920. Today, in the last of my 16 reports to the Council, I’ll be speaking about our work of the last year, but perhaps because I’ve been thinking more and more about the study of Chinese poetry into whose waters my toes have only occasionally dipped in recent decades, I want to open by quoting a passage from *The Analects*, in which Confucius describes his pedagogical philosophy:

I never enlighten anyone who has not been driven to distraction by trying to understand a difficulty or who has not got into a frenzy trying to put his ideas into words. When I have pointed out one corner of a square to anyone and he does not come back with the other three, I will not point it out to him again.²

The value of reticence as challenge to a student or reader was to characterize much of the Chinese reading tradition. Many of the sixth-century BCE collection of 305 poems known as the *Book of Songs* that Confucius exhorted his students to study, for example, provide hints as to what they’re about and the identity of the speaker—a woman being sent into a marriage that she does not want, a soldier praising the valor of his commander, a citizen complaining about the depredations of his ruler—but these are only hints. Poetry provides readers the opportunity, and the obligation, to fill in the missing corners, and it was this active work of the mind upon which Confucius

¹ A video of President Yu’s report is available in the media collection on the ACLS website, www.acls.org.

² VII.8 (Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. D.C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 86.

insisted: it meant that readers would always have something to do. I'd like to suggest that this call for an active and imaginative hermeneutics—for readers who complete the square before them—has in many ways always been the work of this council. You who are assembled here today represent a good cross section of the ACLS community on whom we depend for this engagement: my colleagues on the staff of ACLS, the more than 600 reviewers and panelists who participate in fellowship selection, institutional leaders, fellows, funders who have supported our work, executives and delegates from our member societies, board members, and many other friends. Thank you: it's great to have you here.

Much of our collective work in responding to the other three corners and “completing the square” before us is about reading the more than 3,500 fellowship applications that we receive in our 14 fellowship programs. Many of you have helped us, so you know well the iterative process of working through a tranche of proposals that may drive you to distraction, if not frenzy. Sometimes one begins with a fear that they're all just too good, and it won't be possible to differentiate among them. But soon enough, patterns and rankings become apparent—if not on the first run-through, then surely by the second or third. Weighing a scholar's proposal in some ways requires providing the missing corners of a square: Can this person finish this project? Will the project have resonance? We're making a series of bets, of investments; but more than anything, doing so is an interpretive act of imagining the completion of what one has read. And I am very happy to report that in 2019, we expect to award a record \$25 million that will enable individual scholars and other grantees to complete their work. You'll hear about this, and more, from Matthew Goldfeder.

This year my colleagues also launched two new initiatives, both designed in partnership with (and funded by) The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. The first of these, the Mellon/ACLS Community College Faculty Fellowships, led by Rachel Bernard, supports the research of individuals whose primary academic affiliation is a community college. The awardees have yet to be announced, but the applicants came to us from 117 different institutions—and as many of you know, this is the tip of a very large iceberg (as there are more than 1,100 community colleges in the United States, which teach 40 percent of those enrolled in higher education and thus the lion's share of students studying the humanities). When we launch a new program, we're ready for anything, but we are ready mostly to learn and refine what we do. We anticipated that we'd receive a variety of proposals, and we did: from traditional research topics to projects that involved students and local communities in a wide range of ways. We (and our reviewers) approached this new program without any single notion of the model of work that would “complete the square” of our program, and we were not disappointed. The list of 26 awardees will be announced soon and then we'll open the call for next year's competition—expecting, as always, to learn as we go.

Our second new program, Scholars and Society, directed by John Paul Christy, enables faculty who teach and advise PhD students to conduct research projects while in residence at cultural, media, government, policy, or community organizations of their choice. The awards encourage fellows and their colleagues at the host institutions to create mutually beneficial partnerships in which they can collaborate, interact, and learn about one another's work, motivating

questions, methods, and practices. We're postulating that as faculty complete a picture of their scholarly work off campus and bring their research into public engagement, they can then take that experience of engaging with societal issues back into their work on campus of shaping curricula and guiding graduate students. That there might be some fundamental connection between the external world and the world of humanistic expression is, by the way, a well-known assumption of a preface to *The Book of Songs*, which posits a direct correlation between the two and also tells us that "for correcting successes and failures, for arousing heaven and earth, and for moving ghosts and spirits, nothing surpasses poetry."

Now, to be sure, not all of the scholars who are embedded in organizations ranging from the Skid Row History Museum & Archive in Los Angeles to the Cambridge City Council are poets! Yet there's no question that they are engaging with issues of great human and societal import. Their work will include, for example, a study that illuminates the lived experiences of detained migrants in the United States and a partnership with the Utah AIDS Foundation to chronicle the challenges that faced the few people who were willing to treat the disease in the state in the 1980s and '90s.

In addition to coming together to review proposals in programs such as these, the communities we mobilize also undertake the worldly work of envisioning and implementing organizational change. In the past year, we have engaged with scholars who are helping to define significant institutional priorities, practices, and norms that undergird scholarship, and I'll provide just four examples.

First, we are delighted to report that, thanks to a generous grant in honor of our centennial from the Carnegie Corporation, the ACLS African Humanities Program (which, under Andrzej Tymowski's directorship, has supported the work of 400 humanists in universities in Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda for a decade) will continue for three more years. In addition to producing articles and books, these scholars are creating a trans-institutional and transnational support structure for a tapestry of humanistic scholarship. My colleagues who attended the program's January Regional Congress in Dar es Salaam report that while there was much jubilation about the \$5 million Carnegie grant, there was no resting easy at the good news. A steering committee of the African scholars supported by (and supportive of) the program is thus deeply engaged in strategic discussions about how to best maintain momentum after the of professional societies, they are considering what sort of association will be the optimal vehicle to sustain the infrastructure for African humanistic funding runs out. Having taken a page from our own experience about the value scholarship for which many years of Carnegie support have dramatically laid the foundation.

Second, the leaders of our member societies, gathering together in November 2018, spent time in collaborative work focused on how their associations can support their members during a time of increased awareness of the profound challenges associated with sexual harassment and sexual assault. As you all know, societies host meetings and honor members with prizes and awards, but in recent years they've had to give much more serious consideration to how the behavior (and misbehavior) of members can no longer be viewed as tangential to their place in

their community. As a consequence, society leaders have become deeply engaged with how their organizational policies can respond to complaints and concerns but also can create the best environment for equity and inclusion in the first place. These are down-to-earth questions to work on, but ones that obviously have central importance for all members of the societies and the scholarly community as a whole.

Third, we've been pleased to empower the fruits of research to enrich a broader public understanding through programs such as the Luce/ACLS Program in Religion, Journalism, and International Affairs, which is building durable connections between humanistic scholarship and the media through individual fellowships, institutional grants, and workshops and media training. A recent meeting at Arizona State University led by Valerie Popp convened scholars of religion, learned society leaders, and journalists from outlets such as the *Washington Post*, National Public Radio, and CBS News to consider how best to promote collaboration, mutual understanding, and more thoughtful, balanced coverage of religion's complex roles in society.

A final example of ACLS's work in the past year that aims to support institutional imperatives (and thereby foster the scholarship of tomorrow) was our reshaping of a Mellon-supported Postdoctoral Partnership Initiative. This was a legacy of our New Faculty Fellows Program, which was designed with Mellon funding in 2008 to support early-career scholars in the postrecession jobless market. Both the foundation and ACLS have been curious over the years about whether and how the humanities postdoc has been most effective—and for whom. Research on these programs presents some challenges, as neither the fellows nor the departments and centers that host them are likely to complain, but we were unsure where and when funding for these programs was having the *most* impact. So we were happy to take inspiration from successful efforts at the University of Chicago to work with departments to provide two-year postdocs to scholars from underrepresented minority groups, with the intention of converting the fellowship to a tenure-track position. We've focused the remaining postdoc funds that we were awarded by Mellon toward that end—contributing, we hope, to the broadly shared institutional priority of diversifying the professoriate.

At their meeting tomorrow, the leaders of our learned societies will be addressing topics both recent and perennial, such as professional codes of conduct and challenges to journal publication, with an optional deep dive into fund-raising. It won't surprise you to learn that a great deal of my time this past year has been spent working the “quiet phase” of the Centennial Campaign that went public yesterday. All I can say is that this has been truly exhilarating—to be engage with grateful fellows, visionary foundations, and generous friends endorsing our commitment to stewarding and championing the humanities. Under the able guidance of our new director of philanthropy, Mary Richter, we're more than halfway toward our \$125 million goal, which aims to strengthen the core of our fellowship support, extend the reach of all of our programs, and increase our organizational capacity. I'm happy to thank all of you who have been, and may choose to become, participants in that effort.

It's been a pleasure to welcome Mary to ACLS. She's one of several new members of the staff whose energy animates our work. I want to express my gratitude to two people who welcomed

me to ACLS and whose efforts have been crucially important this year: Steve Wheatley, vice president for fifteen of my sixteen years and recalled from retirement to help with all things Centennial, especially the publication, and Sandra Bradley, without whom nothing these days would ever happen. But I must also report the bittersweet news that two of our longest-serving employees will be leading my way into retirement over the next few weeks. Candace Frede, who's been with us for 33 years, will start her much-earned next adventure on May 1st. Her current title is Director of Web and Information Systems, but her responsibilities have embraced publication, communication, design, and IT—pretty much all at once. She's managed with great attentiveness the look of ACLS, from photos at these meetings (some call her Candid Candace) to our website, style sheet, and brand. And she'll be followed a month later by Cindy Mueller, who perhaps more than anyone else has literally been the voice of ACLS to our fellows since 2002—on the phone in the early years and now, of course, mostly by email. As manager of fellowships and public programs, Cindy has been chief shepherd and hand-holder to anxious applicants and referees as well as lead negotiator with institutions, ensuring that our awardees actually get paid. We lose a half century of institutional expertise and an immeasurable amount of dedication and goodwill with these two departures. Please join me in thanking them for their excellent work.

Let me move to a conclusion by recalling the two modes of activities in which ACLS has been engaged: the *reading* that enables judgments about scholarly merit and the *consideration* of worldly organizational issues that is needed to uphold or update the structures that support scholarship. Are they wildly different efforts? Is one undertaking more important than the other? To the classical Chinese, poetry—and, indeed all humanistic pursuits—did not provoke an either/or quandary about ideas versus worldly concerns. Poetic composition was a skill any bureaucrat would be expected to master and display, whatever the occasion, and writing poetry was an important currency of personal, social, and political exchange. I think that we can celebrate the fact that the work of the humanities is about the deep scholarly engagement with the evidence of a painting, a text, the structure of an idea, or a language, or a culture, without undervaluing the need to manage our bureaucratic structures and public engagements as well.

Fourteen years ago I began my report by citing not a Chinese poem, but one by Emily Dickinson:

I stepped from Plank to Plank
A slow and cautious way
The Stars about my Head I felt
About my Feet the Sea.
I knew not but the next
Would be my final inch—
This gave me that Precarious Gait
Some call Experience.

Those of you who are familiar with my various orthopedic afflictions of the recent past know that my gait is even more precarious now than it once was. But I'd like to thank all of you who have helped to keep me upright as I've stepped from "Plank to Plank" over the past 16 years. Working with this council has been an extraordinary pleasure and an honor. Your astonishing range

of passions, commitments, and approaches to scholarship and the world have made you wonderful colleagues, teachers, and friends.

I've especially appreciated your understanding that the work of ACLS and of the humanities is a job that will never be done, something that countless annual meetings before us have concluded as well. And that is why we will persist. Reporting from the 1948 ACLS annual meeting, B. J. Whiting, the delegate from the Medieval Academy, wrote, "There was a pleasantly Utopian undertone to this portion of the discussion." In the humanities we're proud to be utopian when it's called for and idealists all the time. As Pogo from the comics cheerfully proclaimed, "We are surrounded by insurmountable opportunities!" But we also know how to get things done. I'll leave at the end of June hoping to wade more deeply into other waters, confident that Joy Connolly, James Shulman, my ACLS colleagues, chair Bill Kirby, and the Board, and all of you will be eager to fill in those missing three corners of squares large and small, puzzles of theory and puzzles of practice, those we know well and others that have yet to appear. And I know that you will do so superbly. Thank you.