

Zoomcast with Menglu Gao, Waiyee Loh, Hyungji Park, Jessica Valdez, and Rae Yan

Speakers: Menglu Gao, Waiyee Loh, Hyungji Park, Jessica Valdez, and Rae Yan (guests), Sophia Hsu (host)

Date: February 10, 2023

Length: 36:02

Zoomcast Series: Collaboration

Rights: *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom*, [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Citation: “Zoomcast with Menglu Gao, Waiyee Loh, Hyungji Park, Jessica Valdez, and Rae Yan.” Hosted by Sophia-Hsu. *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom*, 2023, <https://undiscipliningvc.org/html/zoomcasts/gao-loh-park-valdez-yan.html>.

- Hello and welcome to everyone who's watching and listening. I am Sophia Hsu, one of the co-founders of Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom. And if you're new to our Zoomcast, this is one of the forms of content that we're generating for our project, and it's meant to be a space to stage conversations with one another in order for us to think together about our classroom practices and about our processes of learning and unlearning as teachers. As with all of our contents on UVC, our goal is to grow and learn together as a community of scholars, especially as we take up the challenge of moving beyond the boundaries of our field and beyond the boundaries of our training to address issues of race and racism in our field and in our classrooms. So this is the second Zoomcast in our collaboration series, which highlights successful collaborations within Victorian Studies and beyond in order to uncover strategies and models that we might employ to broaden the scope and impact of our work. As you can see, I'm joined today by five individuals. So first we have Menglu Gao, who's assistant professor of Victorian Literature at the University of Denver. Next we have Waiyee Loh, who's assistant professor of World Literature at Kanagawa University in Yokohama, Japan. Then we have Hyungji Park, who's professor of English Literature at Yonsei University in Seoul, Korea. We also have Jessica Valdez, who's a lecturer in Literature of the Long Global 19th Century at the University of East Anglia. She's also formerly assistant professor at the University of Hong Kong. And last but not least, we have Rae Yan, who is an assistant professor of British Literature from 1830 to 1900 at the University of Florida. And together today, we'll be discussing our processes in developing

the lesson plan cluster on Transimperial Networks and East Asia, published on the UVC website. As we note in our intro to the cluster, our lesson plans explore the figurative and historical centrality of East Asia to Victorian Studies. So I thought that we could get our conversation started by just kind of discussing how we all got involved in this project. So I figure maybe I can kinda take up that question first since I kinda had the initial idea for this particular lesson plan cluster. So I came up with the idea in late 2021, kinda thinking through how I might be able to respond to anti-Asian prejudice and violence during the pandemic, during COVID. The Atlantic, oh, I'm sorry, the Atlanta shootings recently occurred then we're of course still in the middle of a lot of anti-Asian violence. Just a month ago, we had the Monterey Park shootings, had the Half Moon Bay shootings. And so we're still in this very kind of anti-Asian kind of moment in history. But I was thinking back then, how might I respond to this particular moment? And my first idea is always maybe there's something that I can do with my teaching. Is there something that I can learn about that I can kind of share with my students and have these conversations with them? And so I started looking for collaborators 'cause this is certainly not my field of study. And so I came across Jessica's virtual NAVSA panels on Victorian Studies, Asia, and the Pacific, and kinda watching all the papers, all the presenters, I was just really inspired by all of their work and I reached out to Jessica just to see if there was something that we could do together.

- Yeah, I can jump in here and talk a little bit about that virtual event or series of events that I organized. So that was the year of the unconferences, I guess, because of COVID, and I had organized a three-part series of different papers to, first of all, focus on Asia and East Asia in relationship to Victorian Studies, but also to try to accommodate different time zones. Because at the time, I was based in the University of Hong Kong and a lot of the events organized online at the time were only in US or European time zones so it was quite prohibitive for my students and for other colleagues and academics in the area to get involved. So the panel series that I organized was not just to diversify the material and foreground research done in this area, but also to allow for more collaboration across time zones and to try to also decenter US academia in order to open up those of us working in other places across the world. And in fact, that's how I got to know Menglu, Rae and Waiyee who participated and gave wonderful papers at that time.

- Some of us knew each other from Jessica's round table event, but early on in our discussion, we decided we needed to have a Korean specialist on the team because Korea is such an important location when talking about history of China and Japan in the long 19th century. The problem was we didn't know anyone who would be suitable, so I asked a Korean friend of mine if she knew anyone specializing in Victorian Studies in South Korea, and that's how we got to know Hyungji.

- Yes, I'm wondering if we can now talk about, who do we imagine the audience is for these materials? We've clearly just talked about how we wanted to at least shape the people involved,

but who else might we see as being kind of part of these materials and using them?

- So I can jump in. Our goal as a group was to undiscipline and open up Victorian Studies, so we mainly targeted Victorianists, especially Victorianists in the US and in the UK. Well, undisciplining is something that Victorianists have recently started to pay attention to, but the same method of undisciplining may have become a common practice or even a tradition for East Asian studies or non-Western literary studies in the English-speaking world. For example, modern Chinese literary studies often considers Chinese literature's connection with Western literary traditions. So I just wanna highlight that what we wanted to do here is the other way around, that is by opening up Victorian Studies to East Asia, we provide materials and approaches for Victorianists to think about and to teach how East Asia or the non-West in general played an important role in shaping the Victorian world. So we really consider Victorianists our main audience here.

- Oh, I would say that even though we're targeting other Victorianists, especially in the US and the UK, some of us, many of us don't teach in those contexts. So we also did have multiple conversations about the specific student populations we wished to serve, and what our goals were for kinda meeting like a very diverse, very different institutional pedagogical needs. We shared a lot about our own teaching, our students and their needs and what we wanted. We all have very different class sizes from small seminars to large classes. All our student populations are actually quite different as we teach what are sometimes called non-traditional students, though I feel like all students are kind of non-traditional in their own way. Many of us don't teach to English majors specifically, but offer opportunities to engage Victorian literature as part of larger literature courses or in different kinds of general education courses. So with the idea of being able to scale up or down, make our materials accessible to students of very, very different backgrounds and interests, we hope that our materials can be used across most pedagogical institutions and populations.

- To add on to what Rae has just said, I teach in Japan and Hyungji teaches in South Korea. Students in non-anglophone countries generally have lower English language proficiency. So bearing this in mind, we have designed our lesson plans to be used in a very flexible way, to be used differently by different people teaching in different contexts.

- Yeah, I mean, as Rae said, we talked a lot about our teaching and just to understand where we're coming from in creating these lesson plans. So I'm wondering if we can now shift a little bit to thinking more about, once we had those conversations, how did we imagine people using the lesson plans that we created given the way that we designed them?

- I can jump in here. You may notice all our lesson plans are pretty modular, so please take and use whatever you need. We all chose shorter materials as well as nonliterary materials that you

can just kind of cut and paste into your own syllabi as needed. We all personally know how difficult it is to start working in a new field and we didn't wanna overwhelm our colleagues or students, we wanted to be able to do more with less. And that's because we have strong ethical and pedagogical philosophical ideas about how teaching Victorian Studies should work in the next few decades and years. And that comes from work from peers such as Travis Lau, who speaks a lot about how our discipline should be viewed from a disability studies perspective, as well as writers on reimagining Victorian Studies such as Erica Kanesaka Kalnay, who asks us as a field how we may pursue Victorian Studies to heal and be healed. So please view our materials as not just adding to what you're already doing, but hopefully changing the way that you work, recognizing the limits of your body, mind, your attention, and your time. And thinking about ethics in another context, we wanted to recall the position of the original Undisciplining the Victorian Studies movement to contribute, again, as Menglu has mentioned, to other fields and not just take from them. We continually had conversations about other communities of teacher-scholars who might make use of our materials. And we want these resources to be useful for teacher-scholars in empire and transimperialism, world literature, Asian literature, British Asian studies and more. And we want feedback from other scholars in other fields. So if you're watching this, please reach out to us and let us know what you think. And this may also explain why we have sometimes rather unconventional pairings of materials, such as my own suggestion in my lesson plan to try reading three formally experimental texts about mad men, Dickens' "A Madman's Manuscript" from *Pickwick Papers*, Nikolai Gogol's "Diary of A Madman", Lu Xun's "Madman's Diary." You'll see a lot of very interesting pairings in our lesson plans.

- And I'll just briefly add on to what Rae has already said. I like what Waiyee said earlier that a lot of other traditions of literary study already have to, essentially what we're calling undiscipline themselves, already have to be attentive to the traditions of Western literature. And in a sense, that's kind of how we're reorienting our approach to Victorian literature and Victorian Studies, not simply to focus on what is traditionally viewed as Victorian Studies in a silo, but rather open up to other areas of study. And in fact, we are emphasizing the need and trying to facilitate the use of resources and fields that are traditionally outside our area of study, including area studies and China studies. In fact, in my own lesson plan, I drew upon work by historians Edlie Wong and Beth Lew-Williams, who both work in, not just history, but also Black studies and Asian American studies. Also, my lesson plan encourages the use of material objects as well and the use of museums. And one possibility for a modular approach to my lesson plan is to take the idea for an assignment or assessment where students go to a museum or go to a virtual museum and look at the kind of narratives that museums are constructing around material objects. Yeah, and this is something that I've also done in collaboration with Dr. Clara Dawson at University of Manchester when I was at the University of Hong Kong.

- Yeah, we've been talking about the ways in which we imagined how people would use our resources, and I decided to actually put theory into practice and to teach the lesson plans that we

developed. So in the semester, our cluster went live in fall 2022, maybe in September or October. And in that very semester, I actually taught a graduate course where we went through my lesson plan and that was actually our entire semester. I mean, I scaffolded it with some theoretical background and encouraged, well, actually coerced my students to also look at the lesson plans of everybody else in the Zoom so that they sort of went horizontally and looked at the other lesson plans. And then we went into a deep dive into my own lesson plan. And the semester's final project for the students was for each of the students to come up with their mini version of what we did, their own mini lesson plan of picking one text or one item of interest and to do their own research and to sort of package it for future Victorianists or teachers or package it as a resource for future teaching. And so they picked a text that demonstrates Korea's relationship with the West in late 19th or early 20th century Korea, and they picked things according to their own backgrounds. So I had a French student talk about the first translation of a French novel to Korea. I had a student who's interested in astronomy go off on sort of early Korean astronomy, it was really fascinating. Another student did missionary periodicals in the time period, or sort of decorative arts and furniture, et cetera. It was really interesting to have students pursue this further. In some ways, it reminded us, it made us more aware that what we put out there is not a fixed or final thing. I don't think that any of us think this is the definitive answer. I think that we think this is a living, organically moving organism. In some ways, we're just proposing ideas that you can take away, but we're also hoping to propose these as structures to think about. And I did this in my graduate class because I thought that since I teach in Seoul, I thought it would be really useful for my students to have, for the next generation of scholars, Victorianists to have this kind of experience that connecting their location, their lives in Korea, Korean history to Victorian Studies is actually something meaningful and what we think of as the future of academic work. And we expect that these student projects will probably be added to UVC in the next month or so. So maybe you can look them up soon.

- No, I love that, thanks for sharing that. I love this idea of, yeah, I mean, of course, our lesson plans are kind of like breadcrumbs that we just laid out there to see what else might happen once these are out there, and it's really great to hear about how your students are taking them, expanding them. And it's also just great to think about how pedagogical materials could also be a way for graduate students to think about how they might intervene into the field beyond the kind of more traditional academic essays that you tend to do in seminars. These other forms of writing, thinking, can be ways to kind of expand how we think about graduate education too. Yeah, so I'm wondering, so we kind of talked about maybe future directions already, I'm thinking about how your students are taking these lesson plans, or maybe we can reflect back and think about the challenges that we faced in producing these materials.

- Yeah, so I can first jump in by saying that we had to keep reflecting on our goal throughout this process of collaboration. Since we were exploring East Asia's importance to the self-making of the anglophone world or maybe to today's Victorian Studies, we as a group were keenly aware

that this may risk falling into some kind of academic imperialism. And we know that even the bilateral, or maybe the multilateral transimperial networks or transimperiality might just incorporate the East Asian outliers in Victorian Studies expansion, or it might instead just keep undisciplining East Asian studies rather than Victorian Studies itself. So we also need to deal with the challenges brought up by the framework of undisciplining. And I know that Jessica and Hyungji can talk more about how we deal with the historical framework, terminology and periodization, as well as the accessibility of materials. So I will just stop here.

- As Menglu mentioned, we had to grapple with connecting different disciplines and fields. And that also made us keenly aware of the need to broaden our historical knowledge beyond the conventional Eurocentric focus on so-called Victorian Britain. But at the same time, we could not assume that many Victorianists have this knowledge. So in order to help instructors who might not be familiar with the history of the region, we have provided a timeline of major historical events that interconnected China, Japan, and Korea in the long 19th century. Furthermore, in proposing this timeline, we are also proposing a kind of reformulation of the long 19th century. So for the purposes of our project, the long 19th century actually begins with the opium trade in the early 19th century, and it stretches all the way to the end of the Japanese Empire in 1945, and the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949.

- Yeah, and I'll jump in here quickly. And again, that is not to say that that is a firm sense of periodization, but rather just kind of a framework we're using for this series of lesson plans. Again, it's all sort of open and sort of something that is meant to be kind of worked through and taken on experimentally perhaps by the users. One other thing that we were really concerned about, we kept coming back to throughout the whole process was this problem of terminology in addition to periodization, of course they're interlinked. Of course we sort of were preoccupied with the term Victorian, what do we do with that? Is that the right word? And also importantly the term East Asia, how do we describe the region that we were talking about, writing about? We still have qualms, I think, about East Asia, we're using it with a sense of distance and self-awareness. And I think that's important to do with a lot of the terms that we're using, we're sort of inviting and opening up that discussion. But what's very important to us, I think is not to silo off or suggest that East Asia is in isolation because of course that is the tradition that, in some older writings, a means in which it's been treated. Instead we're emphasizing its interconnections, and that's why we chose the title of Transimperial Networks, to emphasize the deep interconnection in which these countries and places in East Asia are interlinked with the world, and with the very narrow concept that we usually have for Victorian studies. Interconnections not just between London and say China for example, but also with other regions, including, of course, South Asia. And interconnected too with that issue of the opium trade as Menglu works on in her lesson plan.

- Yeah, to take you behind the scenes a little bit in terms of the kinds of challenges we faced, I

mean, in many ways we started this project because we wanted to redress the problem of the general absence of Asia in Victorian Studies, but of course, in putting together the lesson plan, we faced that same problem. And I guess I would like to sort of highlight that we ran into problems of sort of language, translation, access, and our team kind of shows in small scale the general challenges of this field. All of us on this team have some ability in an Asian language, which was really necessary to do a lot of these projects, but we faced additional kinds of problems. Like in some of our projects, we felt that one Asian language was not really enough because there was so much happening inter-culturally. Or in my case, I'm fluent in Korean, but I have a lot of difficulty reading materials before, say, the early 20th century because at that point, Korea was using a lot of Hanja Chinese characters, et cetera. We also faced issues of translation. We were trying to provide materials in English, of course, that could be used in Victorian classrooms so we wanted to be sure that everything we suggested was available in translation, but sometimes we really couldn't find the materials in English. And so I think some people on our team offered really brief translations that we ourselves did, or we also sometimes had to resort to referring our readers to secondary sources on these materials. So if we found a source that was really important but not available in English, we at least made available articles about those materials so at least you could have, people could have access to that. And then, of course, we also faced limitations of institutional access and budgets. Often these fields may not be a high priority for librarians, we're all facing budget cuts everywhere. And so we did have a lot of those kinds of issues. But I think everybody, we would all absolutely agree that we probably couldn't have done this project even 10 years ago. It was just the online, the absolute recent explosion of online availability of archives and materials. I think even just going through this myself, I learned about all these additional corners of the internet and sources for really interesting material that we can use. So we're all thankful to online availability that helped our project. In my own lesson plan, to sort of take this limitation more personally, Korea, my lesson plan turned out to be sort of making virtue out of a necessity. I mean, Korea is more or less entirely absent in Victorian literature. I haven't found any poetry or novels, fiction that actually makes explicit references to Korea. So for this project, I ended up focusing on visual materials, visual culture. I used things like maps or travel narratives with photographs, et cetera, of Korea in the 19th century. And even though I did that because I didn't really have a choice, there was no other material, I think in some ways it really turned out to help this idea that Rae and Waiyee were talking about, about modularity or about the ability to import our lesson ideas into other people's classrooms or in different settings. Because it's so much easier to put a map of Korea from the 17th century and to sort of use that as a touchstone or a discussion point, or to look at photographs or I have one section on possible connections between Queen Victoria and Queen Min. These become, I sort of out of necessity had to create these visual and other points of contact that bring alive this relationship. And so my own lesson plan is an example of how to try to navigate the limitations of availability, language, access to produce modules that may be very usable across different classrooms.

- Yeah, I love that idea. It's through these limitations that we really had to innovate. And I'll say like just this conversation about all the challenges that we face and all the discussions that we had to really create these lesson plans in this very intentional way is just kind of reminding me of how much I learned through this process. I didn't create a lesson plan myself, I was kind of, I guess, the UVC organizer on the team. And yes I had the initial idea but it was really just an idea, and I just had no idea what could come out of that just because my own research has traditionally been on very canonical literature. And so it's really been just such an eye-opening process kind of to learn from you guys and just to have these conversations. So I'd love to hear from you all, what did you gain from this collaboration? How might our collaboration maybe even provide a different kind of intellectual model than the other kind of collaborative models that are available to us?

- Yeah, I can speak to this because I think we all agreed, this is one of the most rewarding, easiest collaborations I think most of us have actually been a part of. And that's just because a lot of our work is kind of rooted in who we specifically are, our specific scholarly identities, where we teach from, what our backgrounds include. At the time when we were beginning this collaboration, three of us, Waiyee, Hyungji, Jessica, were teaching in East Asia. Waiyee is in Japan, Hyungji is in Korea, Jessica was at Hong Kong at the time, and this is a multi-year project, so she's since moved too as well. So we had a really good opportunity to kind of be comfortable with each other, be flexible with each other because of just practical needs that we all had. From a matter of practicality, we had to work across international deadlines. We all have very different academic schedules. So while some of us might be just beginning a semester, some of us are in the middle of exam period and furiously grading, some of our borders were closed. We all had very limited energy and funding, and time, time, time was always on our mind. It would've been great to be able to meet at a conference and sit down and work through some of these ideas together in person. But how can you do that when your country isn't allowing people easy ways to fly out, or your university isn't funding international conferences, or your school semester dates don't line up so you can travel or do projects at the same time? So I think this really taught us, we can work together easily through Zoom, even, in this way and just give each other this space and the grace that we kind of need sometimes when there's just a pandemic and everything else in the world's kind of challenging our attentions and our time. So it was really rewarding to work together against and outside our usual academic timelines and mindsets. And it's rare to be able to work with so many brilliant women who have the same shared background. So I said we did a panel about our work together too for NAVSA, for the North American Victorian Studies Association, and I said it was kind of like meeting up with a childhood friend that you had grown up, you had like parallel lives or something, and it really did feel like that.

- Yeah, and I guess on that note, maybe we can end on, where do we go from here as a group, as a field? If anyone wants to pick up on that.

- Yeah, so I can jump in to say something about where we can go from here as a field. I think what is clear is that we are not using East Asia to save Victorian Studies. What we are really interested in here is how talking about or teaching East Asia in Victorian Studies can create a space for other scholarly fields to intersect. In the lesson plans, we feel that Victorian Studies is a conduit for us to explore the intimacies, for example, between Asian diaspora studies and Black studies in Jessica's lesson plan, between transnational studies and visual culture in Hyungji's lesson plan. And my own lesson plan touches on the intersection of empire studies, medical humanities and environmental humanities. And apart from that, we are not only looking at how the East Asian others were represented, but also asking how they wrote back and how their narratives or literary theories provincialize the anglophone world and even problematized Eurocentrism. So the lesson plan cluster includes concrete case studies for us to think about how to undiscipline Victorian Studies. And we also hope that our discussions of multilingualism, transimperial affect forms and East Asian literary critical interventions in the lesson plans can help with Victorian Studies as a field to rethink the hegemony of Western theory and scholarship.

- Yeah, I'd like to sort of jump in on and sort of talk more personally about maybe where we as this group might be able to go. I mean, I wanna sort of go back to what Rae was saying about how we really just interacted so well. I guess probably in this group, I've been teaching in Asia the longest of any of us. And for a really long time, I've been really struggling with this question. I've always felt that my location should inform my scholarship, that I should be writing articles on Dickens that reflect the fact that I live in Seoul and not New York or London or Chicago or something. And honestly, it hasn't always been possible. I mean, sometimes that can be done and sometimes it just can't. And I think in part I've been doing, I mean, I'm completely trained as a Victorianist, but I've been doing some work in Asian American or contemporary Korean culture as a way to sort of approach this question of location and how to make available, sort of how to produce a body of scholarship for myself that reflects the fact that I'm a Korea-based scholar. And in some ways, in Victorian studies, I've been thinking about this for a while, but it has sometimes been kind of frustrating or unclear where I could go. And I feel like this group was a catalyst that made, all these thoughts that had been scattered for a while, just really came together with this group, and I'm really, really excited and really thankful and happy that we were able to come together or that sort of Waiyee was able to find me. I feel found in a very happy and included way. And I wanna emphasize the kind of comradery that we really felt. I mean, we worked together for what? A span of about two years, pretty much exactly through the pandemic, and I think these were the most happy and familiar rectangles that I met. I mean, we spent a lot of time on Zoom, not all of it so happy, but we were really happy to see each other. And I think especially as this project was winding down, at the end, I mean, I think when we met a couple weeks ago to put together, I think in some ways we're doing this Zoomcast because we don't wanna let go of each other. And when we met a couple weeks ago to talk about how we're

gonna do this Zoomcast, we were like, oh my gosh, we were so excited to see each other after we hadn't seen each other for a couple months. And I think what's been really great is that we've supported each other on a personal level and we've seen each other grow and develop. Menglu moved jobs across the country. Jessica moved continents. And we're able to cheer, and Waiyee just got her book accepted, and we're able to cheer each other on as we move forward in our careers. 'Cause none of us are standing still, we're all moving ahead and it's just been really, really exciting. We're hoping to do some more collaborative work, we still need to talk about this. We might get started at a journal issue, maybe we'll put together a book collection, or maybe we'll move into a more public or less academic forum. We do think that issues of Asian hate, et cetera, a lot of the motivation that Sophia started with, that she mentioned to circle back to the beginning of our Zoomcast, I mean, we've done our little part, but we haven't solved the world, things are still ongoing, these issues continue. And so we would, I don't know, I feel like we found this space of friendly collaboration and hopefully we can find more ways to continue that going forward.

- Yeah, I mean, I think that's a great place to end, right? We loved working together, we would love to continue working together. Whoever's listening, if you have any thoughts and want to send your ideas our way, we're happy to chat. And so yeah, I think that's our time. Thank you to those who are listening, who are watching, and we'll catch you on another Zoomcast.