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FELLOWS FORUM

Conversations with ARCE fellows past and present

In Conversation with Li Guo

A former fellow and current committee member, Professor Li Guo recalls his field-work in Egypt with ARCE

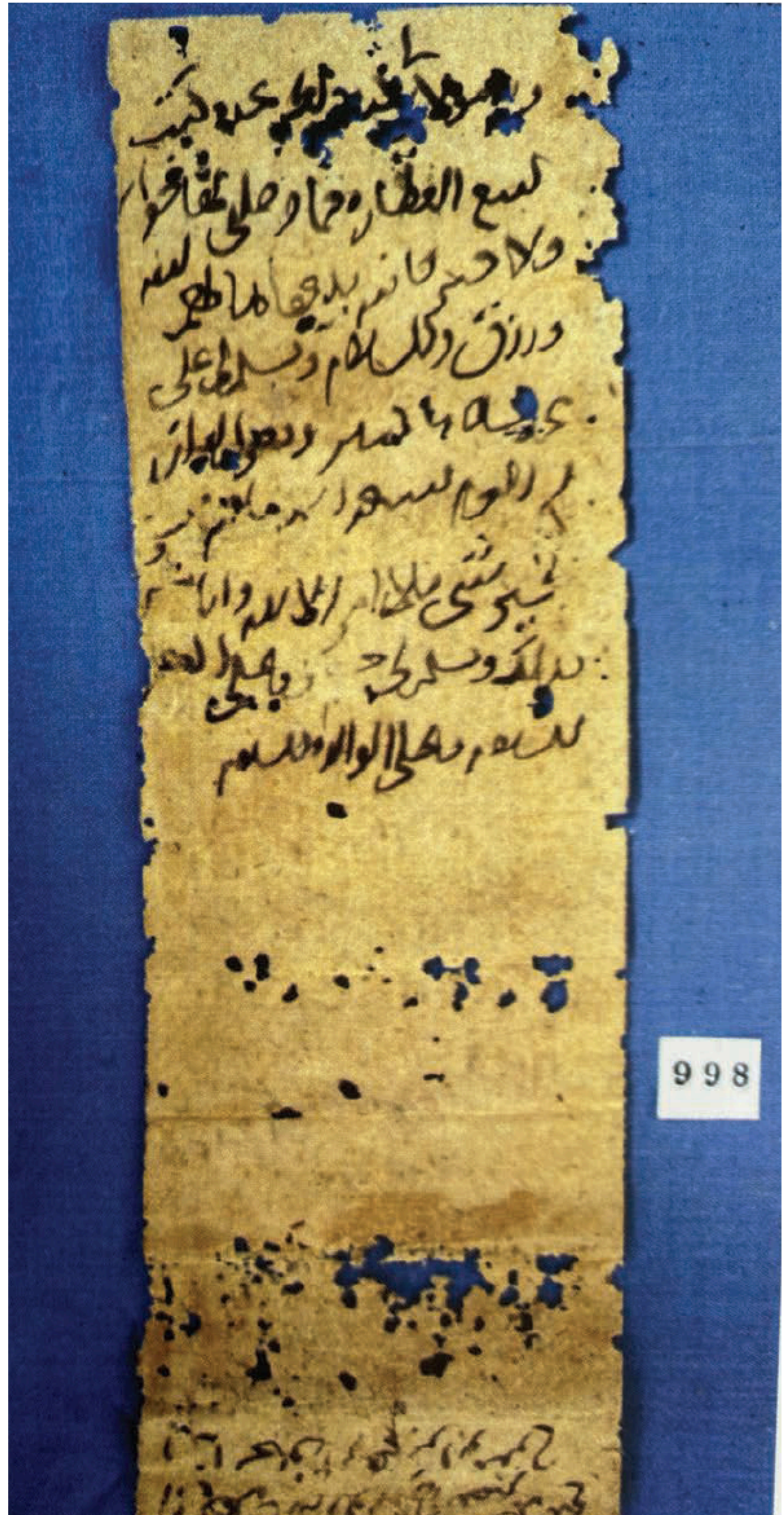
Scribe: Li, it's so nice to meet you. Tell us a bit more about you before we delve into your research and time as an ARCE fellow.

LG: I am a Professor in the Arabic Studies Program at the University of Notre Dame, and I received my PhD from Yale University in 1994. I actually did two fellowships with ARCE, from 1998-1999 and from 2014-2015, and have had the honor to sit on several ARCE committees from the time of my first fellowship until today. I am currently on ARCE's Academic Oversight Committee. I like to say that ARCE is stuck with me, I'll never leave [laughs]! I am also the only Chinese American in the group and I often joke and say that I may be Chinese but actually I'm really from Shubra! I've been going to Egypt to study for a long time; I was a Chinese exchange student in Alexandria in the 80s before I moved to the U.S. to begin my graduate studies at Yale.

Scribe: What was your first fellowship with ARCE?

LG: I started studying the Arabic fragments from the Red Sea port of Quseir in 1995 when I was hired to teach at the University of Chicago, then I began to publish about them in 1998 and people became very interested by this. The fragments were in Egypt though and it was important that I see the real thing, which is why I applied to be an ARCE fellow that same year. I spent some time, about four to five months, examining all these paper fragments, which are dated to the 13th century during the Ayyubid and early Mamluk period. Eventually, the result was a book published by Brill in 2004, titled *Commerce, Culture, and Community in a Red Sea Port in the Thirteenth Century: The Arabic documents of Quseir*.

The importance of this project comes from the fact that in pre-Ottoman times the Islamic world was not good at keeping paper records. I felt incredibly



Fragments discovered at the Sheikh's House, Quseir al-Qadim; business letters; ca. 13th century

lucky to have had the opportunity to work with these original documents from Quseir and, thanks to the support of ARCE, to be able to see the real thing. These text fragments are so rare and they're also on poor quality paper and written in bad Arabic – linguistically speaking – they are in non-classic Arabic and there are a lot of ungrammatical phenomena. The content of the texts has to do with trade and seafaring in the Red Sea, which was the Hajj route between Egypt and Mecca – so there is a lot of interesting things about them. My study was really focused on a combination of both the context and the text itself. This was my first project and was when I started working with ARCE.

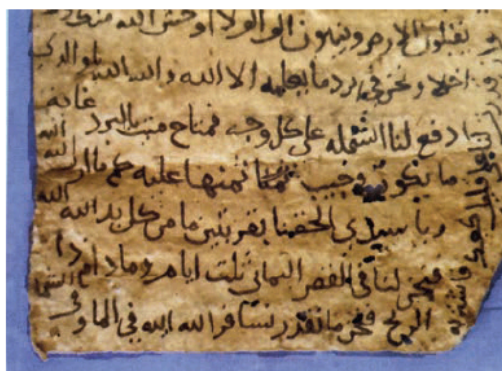
Scribe: How about your second research project with ARCE?

LG: My second fellowship with ARCE was more recent, from 2014-2015. My stay in Cairo was during the summer of 2015. That was a really interesting project, which focused on the history of Arabic shadow play. It is medieval drama and the only surviving pre-Ottoman Arabic drama. Egypt was only part of my project because my book was a comprehensive survey of the history of Arab performing arts in the form of shadow play, but Egypt is the most important because it is the only Arabic-speaking country that has a nonstop tradition of shadow play that began in the 14th century. With my fellowship from ARCE I focused mainly on fieldwork at the Dar al-Kutub (the Egyptian National Library and Archives) studying Mamluk and Ottoman-era manuscripts. I wanted to examine the continuation of this tradition, which died down with the eventual introduction of movie theaters and the prohibition of some popular folk arts.

During my stay in Cairo I stumbled upon some manuscripts from the Ottoman era, which were collections of shadow play that were also serving as Sufi song books. The lyrics of the shadow play were sung or performed in Sufi rituals because shadow play is often a reflection of real-life scenarios, so Sufis would use the songs for their own didactic. In this way, life is a play and the play is life, and everybody has their role. These manuscripts gave a new insight into the cultural significance of shadow play, which has been downplayed for quite some time. It was really previously been perceived as just funny folk stuff.



ABOVE: Members of the Wamda Troupe in action; at the corner was Sabir al-Masri, who performed the Araguz puppetry skits as interlude



LEFT: Fragments discovered at the Sheikh's House, Quseir al-Qadim; business letters; ca. 13th century

In addition to studying in the manuscripts and periodicals sections at Dar al-Kutub, I also did some theater field research at the Bayt al-Suhaymi in Historic Cairo. Every Thursday, the Ministry of Culture would host a shadow play performance by a group called 'el womda,' a beam of light. I would watch their performances and I realized that one of their plays, called 'The Crocodile,' could be traced to the 17th century. This really shows the longevity of

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these plays. My book on this, *Arabic Shadow Theatre, 1300-1900*, was published by Brill in 2020.

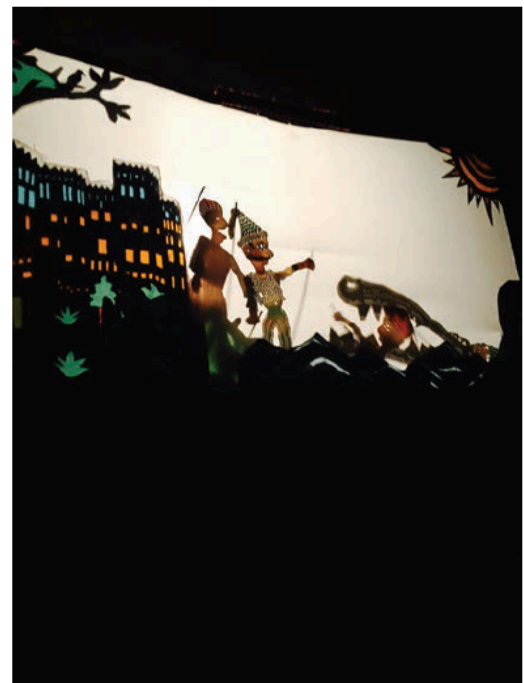
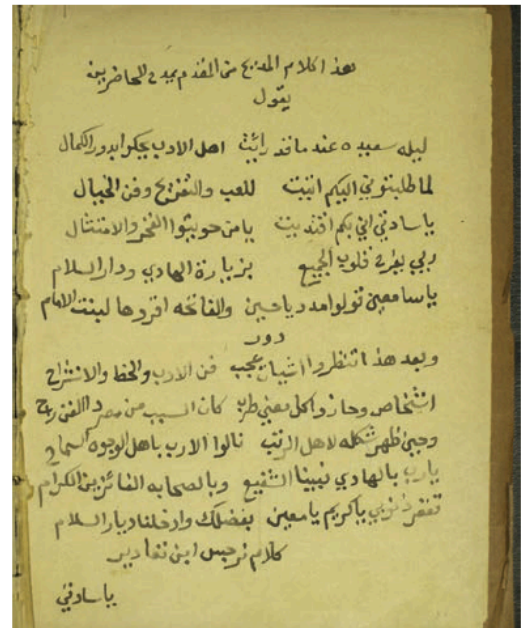
Scribe: How did you come to learn of ARCE and its fellowship opportunities?

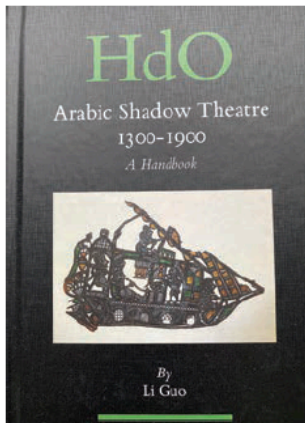
LG: After I finished my PhD at Yale, I began teaching at the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. There I met many Egyptologists and archaeologists at the Oriental Institute – which is an independent unit within the department – including Janet Johnson and Donald Whitcomb, who made me aware of ARCE and its annual meetings. Donald is specialized in Islamic archaeology and he and Janet actually are the ones

ABOVE: Li Guo with Maestro Sabir al-Masri (d. 2019) and members of the Wamda Troupe, Cairo, summer 2015

RIGHT: Scene of a shadow play performance, “The Crocodile,” the long running play could trace its history to the 17th century

BELOW: Manuscript page of a shadow play script (the anthology also serves as a Sufi songbook), ca. 17th century, Dar al-Kutub





Publication on Arabic shadow theatre, Brill 2020

who invited me to study the Quseir fragments. I am really grateful to ARCE because my fellowships in Egypt resulted in two books, one of which, the Quseir book, secured my tenure [laughs]! I have other projects of course, but these two books were very special for me.

Scribe: Would you consider your fellowships with ARCE to have benefited you as a scholar?

LG: Absolutely! ARCE played a very important role in the success of my research in Egypt. Especially when it came to dealing with bureaucratic issues, like going to the mogamaa in Tahrir Square to do paperwork. That's a challenging experience for everybody! It was also the little things though, and here is an example: when I was doing my research on shadow play, I needed one manuscript that was at the Dar al-Kutub. Researchers usually are only allowed to examine the microfilms, not the

originals. I went to the microfilm branch of Dar al-Kutub in Bab al-Khalq, which is in the same building of the Museum of Islamic Art, only to find out that due to the damages of the 2014 bombing outside the Museum, some of the microfilms were not accounted for, including the one I needed. This was one of the most important manuscripts to my work, so I went to the manuscript department of Dar al-Kutub at the Cornish headquarters and asked to see the original and was told I couldn't unless I had a special permission. I rushed to ARCE and explained and within two hours they had prepared a letter for me that I took to Dar al-Kutub that helped get me access to that manuscript. This shows how wonderful and effective ARCE is – it really saved me! 🙌

Learn more about Li Guo and his body of research: arabic.nd.edu/faculty/li-guo



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ARCE offers short and long-term funded fellowships opportunities for pre-dissertation and PhD research scholars studying the history, culture, and archaeology of Egypt in all its chronological phases. Previous fellows have represented the fields of anthropology, archaeology, architecture, fine art, art history, Coptic studies, Egyptology, ethnomusicology, history, humanistic social sciences, Islamic studies, comparative and Arabic literature, and religious studies. Research must take place in Egypt and most, but not all offerings, require U.S. citizenship.

Applications go live October 1, 2021 on: orc.fellowships.smapply.org

Applications due January 16, 2022

Fellowships begin October 1, 2022

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