“The Other Illegal Commodity: The Haichuang Temple, the Buddhist Cult of the Book, and the Sino-European Traffic in Books, 1807-1831”

a lecture by

Patricia Sieber
Associate Professor
East Asian Languages and Literatures
The Ohio State University

Friday, April 12, 2013
2:00 pm
Jennings Hall, Room 060
(1735 Neil Avenue)

Bio
Patricia Sieber is interested in how colloquial Chinese literary genres mediate cultural relations in China and in the world at large. She is the author of Theaters of Desire: Authors, Readers, and the Reproduction of Early Chinese Song-Drama (2003). It is out of the introduction to that book that her current book projects on Sino-European cultural relations between 1697 and 1870 have grown.

During the era of the Canton Trade (1756-1842), Europeans were prohibited from acquiring books in China, yet they did so anyway. This paper will focus on one particular Chinese institution that played an important but hitherto largely neglected role in the dissemination of Chinese titles to Europeans, that is, the Haichuang Temple (Sea Screen Temple, 海幢寺), one of the major Buddhist establishments in South China located on the outskirts of old Guangzhou across from the European quarters on the waterfront. On the one hand, the talk will examine what reasons the Haichuang Temple clergy may have had for defying the imperial ban. On the other hand, the discussion will explore how the previously ignored Haichuang-based translations by two European visitors, Peter Perring Thoms (1790-1855) and Karl Friedrich Neumann (1793-1870), alter our view of the early history of Buddhist Studies in Europe. The paper argues that the Chinese and English-speaking communities on the South China coast brokered the creation of cultural knowledge that selectively contested the respective metropolitan discourses of Qing China and the European states. As such, the cultural production of the Canton Trade era cannot simply be read as an encounter of “China” and “Europe,” but also needs to be refracted through the lens of region and oppositional politics both within China and Europe.