Chinese Studies Meets the British Laboring Classes
Peter Perring Thoms (1755-1855) and the Radical Opposition to The Opium War (1839-1842)

Dr Patricia Sieber (Ohio State University)

1pm, Nov 2, 2016 (Wednesday)  Room 1.02 in the Faculty of Classics
(please note the change from the usual venue)
Abstract This paper examines a neglected chapter in the Sino-British relations of the nineteenth century. In particular, it explores how the printer Peter Perring Thoms (1790-1855) mounted a public campaign against the opium conglomerates in advance of the first Anglo-British war (1839-1842). Using tactics honed in his print-based involvement in the abolitionist fight in the early 1830s, he published reviews, essays, and translations in progressive journals, drafted letters to key officials, and made in person visits to the Foreign Office in an effort to counter the propaganda campaign of the opium lobby for war against Qing China in the name of “British honor.” Having worked as a printer in Macau and acquired fluency in spoken and competence in literary Chinese against the will of his superiors at the British East India Company (1814-1825), Thoms was uniquely positioned to contest the imperialist rhetoric through his own first-hand knowledge of the Chinese worlds of letters. Self-taught and deeply invested in the persuasive power of writing, Thoms became the first European to turn to translations from the Chinese corpus of texts—belles lettres, official edicts, statistics among others—to make a case against the corporate hijacking of Sino-British relations. While he—together with the Chartists, temperance proponents, and other vocal opponents of the war—lost the battle to shape national policy vis-à-vis the Qing empire in the short term, the antiwar coalition prevailed in the long run through the renaming of these armed hostilities as an “Opium War.”

Speaker Dr Patricia Sieber received her MA and PhD in Chinese literature from the University of California, Berkeley and is an Associate Professor of Chinese Literature in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures at the Ohio State University. Her primary area of interest is the reception history of genres written in plain Chinese—most notably, drama, songs, and fiction—in China and abroad from the Yuan period on through the modern era. She is the author of Theaters of Desire: Authors, Readers, and the Reproduction of Early Chinese Song-Drama, 1300-2000 (Palgrave, 2003) and is currently co-editing How To Read Chinese Drama: A Guided Anthology (together with Regina Llamas, commissioned by Columbia University Press). She has also published on the history of early modern European translations of Chinese vernacular literature in East Asian Publishing and Society (Brill, 2013), Towards a History of Translating (Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2013), Representations (2015), Sinologists as Translators in the Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries (Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2015) and is about to complete a book manuscript tentatively entitled Waging Peace: Peter Perring Thoms (1790-1855), Print Culture, and the Oppositional Public Sphere in Sino-British Relations.