Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

THE FACULTY OF ARTS,
HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
INAUGURAL LECTURE

**CHINESE HISTORICAL
PHONOLOGY WITH MARXIST
CHARACTERISTICS**

Professor
Nathan Hill

Head of School of Linguistic,
Speech and Communication Sciences

2026

FEBRUARY 11TH

Welcome

It is the tradition in Trinity College Dublin that newly appointed Professors are invited to give an inaugural lecture.
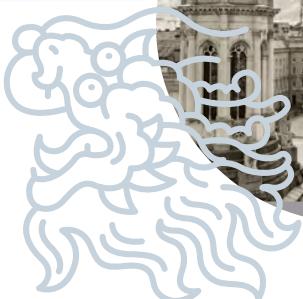
The lecture provides an opportunity to showcase their achievements in research, innovation, engagement and teaching activities before members of the University community, invited stakeholders and the general public. An inaugural lecture is a significant event in an academic staff member's career.

The Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences is proud to present the inaugural lecture of Professor Nathan Hill.

About Nathan Hill

Before receiving this chair, Nathan W. Hill was Sam Lam Professor in Chinese Studies at Trinity College Dublin and Director of the Trinity Centre for Asian Studies. He is a historical linguist specialising in the Sino-Tibetan language family, with a particular focus on Tibetan and on Chinese historical phonology. Before joining TCD in 2021, he taught at SOAS University of London (2008–2022), including as Reader in Tibetan and Historical Linguistics, and he has held visiting and research appointments in Europe, North America, and East Asia. He received his Ph.D. from Harvard University (2009). His research combines philology, comparative reconstruction, and (increasingly) digital approaches to historical linguistic evidence, and has been supported by major funders including the AHRC and the ERC.

Professor

Nathan Hill

Head of School of Linguistic, Speech and Communication Sciences
A.B. (HARV.), A.M. (HARV.), PH.D (HARV.), F.T.C.D (2025)

Abstract

Chinese Historical Phonology with Marxist Characteristics

When did *knight* come to be pronounced the same as *night*? This is the kind of problem historical linguists investigate and can often answer using familiar evidence such as alliteration and variant spellings. With Chinese things are trickier, because the writing system is much less transparent. In particular, linguists working on Chinese disagree about how much we can learn from what doesn't happen in the sources: if a large corpus shows no spelling variation of an expected kind, is that a meaningful constraint on reconstruction, or simply an accident of survival and scribal practice? The lecture uses a concrete problem in Old Chinese reconstruction to bring this methodological question into focus and then steps back to ask what kind of "science" Chinese historical phonology can, and should, be.

It sets a "facts first" empiricism against a more prediction-driven, hypothetico-deductive stance, and argues that the dispute about negative evidence is methodological rather than merely philological. I argue that the current impasse should be overcome by applying two aspects of Marxist philosophy of science, (i) a "double movement" between empiricism and deductivism (going back to Aristotle), and (ii) that the right approach to a problem will itself account for the approaches it supersedes.

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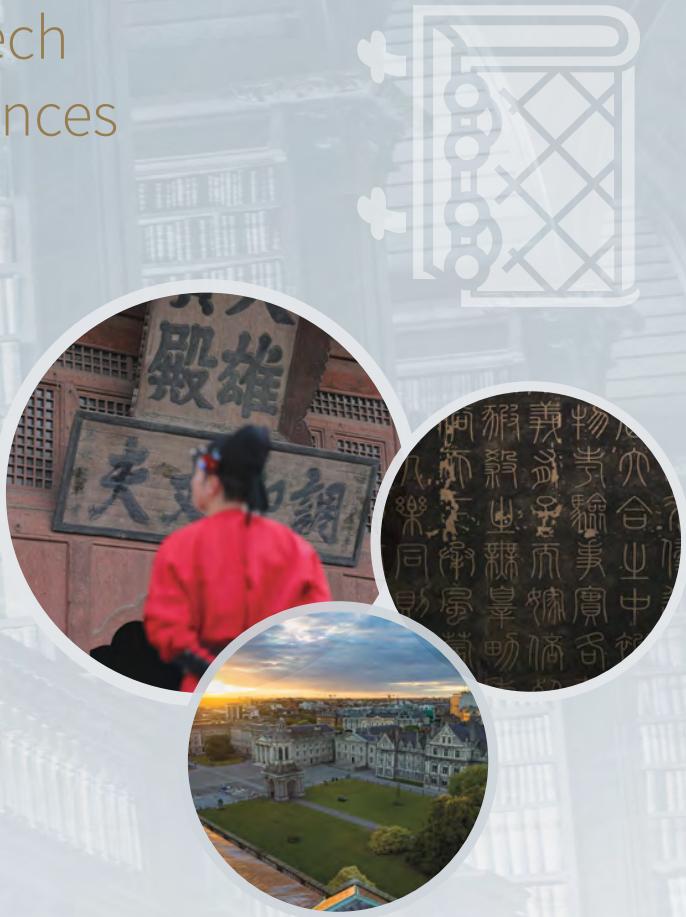
School of Linguistic, Speech and Communication Sciences

The School of Linguistic, Speech and Communication Sciences (SLSCS) brings together research and teaching across linguistics (including applied and computational linguistics), speech science and phonetics, clinical speech and language studies, deaf studies and Irish Sign Language, English language teaching, Irish language technology, and Asian Studies.

The School's stated aim is to be an internationally recognised reference point for the scientific study of language, communication, speech and swallowing, with a particular focus on communication diversity and inclusion, and on informing social, educational and health policy in these areas.

Trinity College Dublin Founded in

1592

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