

The PHI BETA KAPPA Society

VISITING



SCHOLAR

PROGRAM

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PUBLIC LECTURE
OFFERINGS

RETHINKING AUTHORSHIP IN EARLY CHINA

Unlike in ancient Greece and Rome, individual authorship was not emphasized in pre-imperial China. Instead, textual agency and authority were distributed across different roles. What mattered was not the original moment of a text's creation but its reception and performance (as with poetry), commentarial transformation (as with Confucius and the *Springs and Autumns Annals*), or compilation in form of anthologies (as with philosophy). Remarkably, this situation in early China dovetails well with how authorship is conceptualized by modern theorists like Barthes, Foucault, Nehamas, and Stillinger. Reflecting on specific examples from early China in light of modern theoretical approaches, the lecture advances an epistemological framework in which agency and authority, and in particular the creation of the historical, philosophical, and literary canon, are not sought in textual stability and authorial control. To the contrary, we look at the fluidity of texts that were fundamentally composite, and for which compilers, editors, commentators and performers mattered more than original authors.

THE VOICE OF THE HISTORIAN IN EARLY CHINA

Early Chinese historical writing does not foreground the historian's voice. Within its narratives, it prefers to render the historian silent and invisible while letting the historical actors and speakers utter moral and political judgment seemingly from within history itself. The historian's voice, meanwhile, is relegated to layers of paratextual commentary, such as statements by the "noble man" or Confucius in China's earliest great historiography, *Zuo Tradition (Zuozhuan)*, and those of the "grand lord archivist" in Sima Qian's

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Records of the Historian. The lecture examines the diversity of highly formulaic features of these statements that present the ancient Chinese historians above all as perceptive readers of both history and historical sources. As readers, compilers, and authors, the historians are constituted as perspicacious interpreters of history as a system of signs, and they are staged as exemplary models understanding to be emulated by all future readers.

MATERIAL HISTORY: ANCIENT MANUSCRIPTS AND THE REWRITING OF THE ANCIENT CHINESE PAST

Over the past fifty years, an ever-increasing number of ancient Chinese manuscripts on bamboo, wood and (rarely) silk have been discovered. Found in waterlogged tombs and wells in south central China as well as in above-ground ruins in the arid Central Asian northwest, these manuscripts date from the fourth century BCE through the third century CE, when paper finally became the dominant stationery for Chinese writing. Their contents cover virtually all areas of knowledge: historical, philosophical, and literary writings that can be compared to the received tradition; technical works on medicine, divination, mathematics, and other disciplines; and an enormous and still growing body of administrative and legal writings that give us unprecedented insights into the sociopolitical and economic structures of ancient China. The richly illustrated lecture shows the range of these newly discovered writings, reflects on the very nature and materiality of early Chinese texts, and discusses problems of ideological bias in their historical interpretation.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION TOPICS



1. THE BEGINNINGS OF CHINESE LITERATURE

During his class visit, Professor Kern invites students to think about how ancient Chinese literature came into being. What are our earliest texts and “first books”? What are their social, intellectual, and material contexts? Who are their authors and other actors involved in the writing, circulation, performance, and interpretation of texts? What is the place of this early literature in society, in particular in religious and political rituals? And how does all this compare to other ancient civilizations?

2. POLITICS, DESIRE, MEMORY: THE ANCIENT CHINESE CLASSIC OF POETRY

The *Classic of Poetry* is China's most ancient anthology of poetry, comprising some three hundred poems of several different genres. As the foundational text of ancient Chinese cultural identity, the *Classic of Poetry* fulfills functions similar to those of the Homeric epics across the pan-hellenic world. In this class discussion, we want to ask: what is this text of the *Classic of Poetry*? Why did it matter so much? And what did "poetry" as a concept and a practice mean in the first place? What actually is "poetry" and what is it good for?

3. CHINA'S FIRST POET—A FIGURE OF CULTURAL MEMORY

Qu Yuan (ca. 300 BCE) is celebrated as China's first and greatest poet of antiquity: a statesman and moral paragon who was slandered and banished and out of despair created a body of highly imaginative poetry before finally drowning himself in a river. And yet, not a single record of his existence, or even a single line of his poetry, is known from any historical source until a century later. This class discussion leads students toward the following questions: Did Qu Yuan actually exist? And if so, did he compose the poetry attributed to him? Why did he suddenly become so important for ancient Chinese intellectuals a century later, and only under the conditions of the newly created imperial state? What is real about Qu Yuan, and what is entirely a creation of the later cultural memory?

4. BEYOND NATIVISM: THE METHODS AND ETHICS OF STUDYING ANCIENT CHINA

With this highly controversial topic (that set off a little firestorm when Professor Kern first raised it in a widely read Chinese publication), we face critical questions about how to study Ancient China today. It is no secret that the "rise of China" over the past decades has brought with it a new desire for an ideal past. In response, newly excavated materials—which continue to appear in astonishing numbers—are often made to meet the political purposes of the new global power. How did this happen? How did the ancient past become so political? And how can and should we actually study an ancient civilization that—unlike ancient Mesopotamia or Egypt or even Greece or Rome—is seen as the foundation of an interrupted historical continuity ever since?

5. HOW TO READ AN ANCIENT CHINESE MANUSCRIPT

In this class discussion, we take a closer look at the Chinese writing system and its relation to the spoken language—not today but in antiquity. Very few people outside of Chinese academia have an idea of the fascinating difficulties in reading texts from an ancient place and time where the writing system was highly fluid and, furthermore, could not represent language—the spoken word—in the direct way an alphabet does. Thus, in this class discussion, Professor Kern invites students to look at some examples of newly discovered ancient manuscripts, think about questions of materiality and visuality, and experience first-hand what it takes to read such texts. No prior knowledge of Chinese expected.