



EARLY CHINA SEMINAR LECTURE SERIES

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The Tang Center for Early China, Columbia University;
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“Excavated Legal Cases from Ancient China and Egypt”

Anthony Barbieri-Low
University of California, Santa Barbara

Time and Location:

4:30-6:30pm
October 16th, 2015 (Friday)

1754 Boardroom, Third Floor
Faculty House, Columbia University
64 Morningside Drive, New York, NY 10027

Abstract: Though it has become fashionable in recent years to compare early imperial China with the Roman Empire, since they were contemporaneous empires on opposite ends of Eurasia, comparison between early China and ancient Egypt is probably more appropriate. New Kingdom Egypt (ca. 1550-1069 BCE) and early imperial China (221 BCE-220 CE) were hardly concurrent on an absolute chronological scale, nor is there any evidence that they were ever in direct contact. However, in terms of political, legal, and social structure, they form an almost ideal pair for comparison. Both had newly-acquired imperial lands, authoritarian leaders legitimated through divine sanction and succeeded through the dynastic principle, irrigation-based agriculture, clearly-defined social classes, and a complex administration orchestrated by highly-trained scribes. As part of an ongoing research project comparing the social, legal, and economic structures of New Kingdom Egypt and Qin and Han period China, this presentation looks at a selection of legal cases excavated or recovered from sites in both countries. After a brief exploration of the legal principles and legal infrastructure of each culture, the paper then looks at a series of comparable case records to explore the ramifications of those principles. The case records involve such issues as the infringement of royal prerogative through the violation of royal tombs, the application of private law and criminal law at the local level, the use of torture in the judicial process, the prosecution of fornication, and the enactment and enforcement of wills.

Speaker: Anthony Barbieri-Low is Professor at the Department of History, the University of California, Santa Barbara. He has wide-ranging interests in many aspects of Early China including technology, organization of production, labor history, gender and social relations, legal process, material culture, and state formation.

Seminar Co-Chairs:

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