



EARLY CHINA SEMINAR LECTURE SERIES

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The Tang Center for Early China, Columbia University;
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Rethinking Ritual and the Excavation of Archaeological Deposits at Shang Sites

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Time and Location:

4:30-6:30pm
December 11th, 2015 (Friday)

Seminar Room 2, Second Floor
Faculty House
Columbia University
64 Morningside Drive
New York, NY 10027



Abstract:

Studies on ritual in the early Chinese Bronze Age have focused primarily on practices surrounding divination, feasting, and sacrifice. These traditions are supported historically with divination inscriptions that mention offerings of animals and humans to ancestors and otherworldly beings; they are supported archaeologically with the divination bones themselves, material remains of feasting, and pit deposits known as “sacrificial pits” that contain remains of animal and human bodies. Mortuary ritual is another topic of inquiry as burials are often well preserved at archaeological sites. In this paper, I analyze archaeological materials linked with these rituals in their contexts of deposition at the early Bronze Age site of Yanshi Shangcheng. I argue that the materials indicate a linkage or blending of ritual and daily life at Yanshi. “Ritual”, as a separate concept, likely did not exist in this historic context. The dichotomy between “ritual” and “mundane” (daily life), often upheld in archaeological practice through the use of classification conventions that juxtapose domestic refuse with ritual deposits, is problematic. It leads to selective recording (such as privileging of more interesting ritual remains and not recording mundane remains in as much detail), difficulties of interpretation, and confirmation bias.

Seminar Co-Chairs:

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