



EARLY CHINA SEMINAR LECTURE SERIES

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The Tang Center for Early China, Columbia University;
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Urban Neighborhoods: Social and Spatial Organization of the Great Shang Settlement

Zhichun Jing, University of British Columbia

Time and Location:

4:30-6:30pm
January 29th, 2016 (Friday)

403 Kent Hall, Columbia University
1140 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, NY 10027

Abstract:

The talk presents a brief discussion of the neighborhoods and urban organization at Yinxu (Great Shang Settlement), the “ruins of Yin” that was the capital of last nine Shang kings. Yinxu was a vast urban settlement, with a concentrated population, over area of about 25 square kilometers. With the palace-temple compounds and royal cemeteries of lineages of zi-princes at Xiaotun in the center and the cemetery of the kingly lineage in the northwest, the landscape is dotted with scores of lineage-based neighborhoods composed of residential buildings and associated cemeteries, and workshops for manufacturing bronzes, jades, bones, and ceramics. Many roads and moats (or canals) connect these neighborhoods as well as the palace-temple district. This talk also discusses the archaeological and inscriptional evidence concerning the evolution of simplicity as part of material and social processes in the development of Great Shang Settlement. The early phases of the occupation at Yinxu show much more variability and diversity in forms and styles of artifacts and architectures than the later phases, possibly suggesting a high degree of heterogeneity of material culture and population in the beginning of urbanization at Yinxu, and a tendency of becoming more and more simplified, standardized, and legible toward the end of the dynasty. The process of simplification was the most striking in ceramics that were becoming less diverse in form, style, and manufacturing technology from the beginning to the end of the dynasty. The evolution of simplicity in material culture and social practice also has the support from some divinatory practices as recorded in oracle bone inscriptions. We argue that the Shang city at Yinxu was intentionally and actively created to serve the needs and interests of socially and culturally differentiated groups that may have originally come from local communities and/or distant territories and spoken different dialects or even languages, particularly during the beginning phase of urbanization, with a more standardized dialect and writing toward the end of the dynasty.

Seminar Co-Chairs:

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