



EARLY CHINA SEMINAR
LECTURE SERIES

**Beyond the Five Colors:
Reconsidering Purple and its Sources in Ancient China**

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In the ancient near East and the Mediterranean, no color embodied kingship like purple. However, in China, purple is often thought to have been relatively unimportant because it was not one of the five colors and was famously reviled by Confucius. Purple's eventual popularity with Emperor Wu (r. 141-87 BCE) of the Han dynasty has often been attributed to the color's association with Daoism. This presentation will re-examine the status of purple in ancient China and propose that by the Qin dynasty (221-206 BCE) if not earlier, purple had assumed the same status that it had in other parts of the ancient world—as the ultimate sign of royal or imperial authority. Employing textual and archaeological evidence, I will analyze the sources of purple dye in ancient China, presenting new evidence that the Chinese may have used dyes extracted from shellfish (often loosely referred to as “murex purple”) rather than *zicao* (gromwell) as has been previously assumed. I will also show that purple textiles had a longstanding relationship with Shandong province, particularly the ancient city of Linzi. The popularity of purple fabrics produced in this region fueled demand for the color in other media, catalyzing the development of paints colored with synthetic purple pigments.

February 17th, 2017 (Friday) 4:30-6:30pm

**403 Kent Hall, 1140 Amsterdam Avenue
Columbia University**

Seminar Co-Chairs:

Jue Guo, Barnard College, Columbia University

Roderick Campbell, Institute for the Study of Ancient World, New York University

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