



EARLY CHINA SEMINAR
LECTURE SERIES

What is Early Chinese Religion?

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Material and textual sources suggest that members of early Chinese societies engaged in practices that fit our modern definition of religion such as prayer, the offering of sacrifices, pilgrimage, and participating in a wide variety of ritual activities. However, unlike the post-Han religious traditions of Buddhism and Daoism, early Chinese religion lacked an ecclesiastical system, a canonical set of sacred scriptures, a fixed pantheon of gods, or any type of conversion and ordination rituals. The latter is of particular significance, as it affirms that “early Chinese religion” is merely a heuristic device coined by modern scholars to refer to a diverse set of beliefs and practices that did not exist as a coherent self-identifiable institution.



In this talk, I will propose a set of strategies designed to overcome the inherent challenges in studying early Chinese religion. First, I will demonstrate that

early Chinese religion featured an implicit theology that was never fully explicated or canonized but still served as a common epistemological lens through which people negotiated with the sacred. I will then argue that while this theology featured two completing modes of religiosity that differed in their understanding of ritual and its function, it had one common denominator that eventually became the seminal building block of Chinese religious culture: a belief in an interconnectedness between the human body and the moral universe that surrounds it and the conviction that ritual plays a central role in ensuring a state of harmony between the two. I will conclude by showing how we can utilize examples from the explicit theologies featured in medieval Buddhist and Daoist texts to better understand early Chinese religion and its role in creating a common religious culture shared by all subsequent traditions.

March 11, 2022, 4:30–6:30pm EST (virtual)

For attendance information, please visit www.tangcenter-columbia.org

Seminar Co-Chairs:

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