



EARLY CHINA SEMINAR
LECTURE SERIES

Fall of the Scribes and the Rise of Han Literati

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In the early Western Han, hereditary scribal families enjoyed a privileged status that provided them access to bureaucratic office. This status was guarded through a government-sanctioned examination system, outlined in the Han legal code, which tested knowledge of primers like the *Cang Jie pian*. Yet over the course of the Han, informal education networks, such as those fostered in the military, spread scribal primers and the unique literacy they taught extralegally to unintended audiences, even conscripted peasant soldiers. This presentation examines how the loss of control over “scribal literacy” undermined the status of scribes and incited competition over mastery of the written word in specific, as a criterion for judging who was best suited to run the empire. With the fall of the scribes, a space opened for a new form of classicism to arise during the Han, one championing the “moral literacy” of the literati, demonstrated through exegesis of classics now anchored in the authority of Confucius.

March 31, 2023, 4:30–6:30pm

Faculty House, 64 Morningside Drive, Columbia University

*Please check the announcement board in the first-floor lobby for room information

Seminar Co-Chairs:

Glenda Chao, Ursinus College

Ethan Harkness, New York University