EARLY CHINA SEMINAR
LECTURE SERIES

Master, State and Patron: Three Models of Literati Engagement During the Warring States Period (481 B.C.E.-221 B.C.E.)

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Among the many contests evinced by the written record of the Warring States Period, one has received relatively little attention among modern scholars: the debate over the normative social forms that should structure literati's life and work. In this essay I will unpack three different models of literati engagement that were advocated in early sources. These models were in tension with one another and were variously advocated for by groups competing for the allegiance of literati throughout the Zhou domain. The most familiar model was that of "Master and disciples," first promoted by the fellowship that formed around the figure of Confucius (551 B.C.E.-479 B.C.E.). Much scholarship assumes that this was the norm governing all literati activity during the Warring States, but such was not the case. By the late fourth century B.C.E. many courts were promoting a "state patronage" model of literati engagement first developed and aggressively advocated by the rulers of Qi. In the third century B.C.E., following a strategy first pioneered by Tian Wen (Lord Mengchang, fl. ca. 280 B.C.E.), a new class of great "private patrons" emerged. The patronage retinues that formed around these figures were not formed exclusively of literati but made vital use of literati talents in pursuit of political agendas and mimicked some of the social functions of "Master-disciple" fellowships like those of the Confucians and Mohists. In this essay I will examine the evidence for the nature and history of these three models of literati engagement, and the negotiations that transpired between their respective advocates.

October 17th, 2025, 4:30–6:30 pm
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

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