



EARLY CHINA SEMINAR
LECTURE SERIES

Unified Variations: Reproducing Qin Imperial Edicts on Weights and Measures

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This talk focuses on variations in Qin emperors' edicts on weights and measures, which were installed and reinstalled on these objects to commemorate unification, mandate standardization, eulogize the dynastic progenitor, and affirm his successor's authority. It argues that subtle differences among surviving examples expose a tension between the imperial center's ideal of uniformity and local implementation. Although models of standardization originated at the center, their reproduction depended on officials and artisans in particular sites; the very objects that proclaimed uniformity therefore preserve traces of variation.

Rather than treating these differences as irregularities, it asks what they reveal about the transmission and copying of imperial documents, artisanal production, and the literacy required to reproduce imperial commands. These objects thus offer a material gauge of how the "unified" empire performed on the ground: imperial models were replicated across localities, but divergences among their copies reveal the processes—and limits—through which central commands were translated into local practice.



December 11th, 2026, 4:30–6:30 pm EST

403 Kent Hall, 1140 Amsterdam Ave, Columbia University and online via Zoom

Seminar Co-Chairs:

Glenda Chao, Ursinus College

Ethan Harkness, New York University

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