



EARLY CHINA SEMINAR LECTURE SERIES

Why Did Sima Qian Rank Confucius among the “Hereditary Houses”? A New Interpretation

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Why is the biography of Confucius, an alleged ‘sans culottes’ (*buyi* 布衣), included in the section in *Shiji* 史記 on aristocratic lineages, the “Hereditary Houses” (*shijia* 世家)? In this talk, I suggest that this century-old question can potentially unlock an overarching agenda behind Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 (?145 - ?86 BCE) universal history. I will first provide extensive textual support for Liao Ping’s 廖平 (1852-1932) hypothesis, namely that Sima Qian defines the “hereditary house” not by lineage or status alone, but by its persistence across time. Building on this thesis, I demonstrate the centrality of Confucius’ placement to Sima Qian’s historiographical agenda, namely his conjuring of a new form of nobility from the ashes of Bronze Age aristocracy, whose systematic destruction, especially during the rise of the bureaucratic empires, is a central thread of the “Hereditary Houses.” Confucius’ three forms of immortality, encompassing lineages not only biological but also intellectual and textual, gesture toward a new form of temporal perdurance in the realm of *wen* 文 (civilization; writing). By reconceptualizing historiography, Sima Qian provided the necessary infrastructure for this new form of nobility and immortalization.

February 19th, 2027, 4:30–6:30 pm EST

Faculty House, 64 Morningside Drive, Columbia University and online via Zoom

*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