



EARLY CHINA SEMINAR
LECTURE SERIES

Convict Politics: From Utopia to Serfdom in Early China (221 BCE—23 CE)

Liang Cai · University of Notre Dame

Convict Politics

From Utopia to Serfdom in
Early China (221 BCE – 23 CE)



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This talk, based on newly mined data from newly unearthed manuscripts and traditional sources, explores convict politics in the early Chinese empires. Whereas a substantial number of bureaucratic personnel were convict laborers, assisting local officials, the central court reemployed numerous previously convicted individuals as high officials. The talk argues that convict politics emerged because the mutual responsibility system and high-performance-oriented law extensively criminalized people, including the innocent. Via a framework of legal regulations, structured institutional mechanisms, and systematic administrative processes, convict laborers were integrated as essential aides to officials in the realm of local governance. While being used as objects and instruments to sustain the political economy, convicts at the same time occupied crucial positions in operating the local governmental apparatus, regularly assisting technical bureaucrats in administering the populace. Former convicts were entrusted with power, serving as important officials or even chancellors. At the same time, officials easily fell into the law and became convicts themselves. Severe tension emerged between the nature of the law and the status of convicts, between the lawful and the guilty, and between the philosophical elaboration on the treatment of criminals and the actual practice.

September 11th, 2026, 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

Co-sponsored by The Tang Center for Early China, Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures, and The Columbia University Seminars, Columbia University