

Panel: Popular Religion and Artisanal Practice in Late Imperial China

Panel Participants: Caroline Bodolec, Philip S. Cho (organizer), Jacob Eyferth, Andreas Janousch

This panel will examine the manifold influence of popular religion on artisanal practice in late imperial China. In nearly all the technical arts in pre-modern China, people framed the ways of knowing and doing things as a spiritual process worshipping local gods. This is because they saw their lives as lived at the intersection of the material, social, and spiritual worlds. Popular religious culture cut across all levels of society serving as the nexus of social and spiritual interaction for maintaining community bonds, expressing authority, and reproducing technical knowledge. As today, local and imperial governments were continuously watchful of these developments because of their significance to vital industries of the economy and to social stability.

Yet, historians of Chinese science and technology have seldom explored the rich and varied sources of popular culture and religion important to crafts. The view we have is still largely from horseback, of great men and great books for whom technical knowledge was part of an ideal expression of social order and virtue.

Each panelist will present work on the role of religion and ritual in a particular craft. In discussion, we will draw comparisons among the different fields to better elucidate the complex dynamics between religion and technology.

Abstracts

Caroline Bodolec

Chargée de recherche (Permanent researcher) CNRS

Beseeking *tudi gong* 土地公 approbation : rituals in construction of vernacular houses in Shaanxi province

As in nearly all the technical arts, the handicraft of construction generates rituals. The quest of peaceful relations with spiritual world is permanent, from the choice of the ideal site to the ceremony of *helong kou* (end of the shell). Moreover, each trade (carpentry, joinery, masonry...) have developed internal rituals like particular devotion to a protective god or the codification of technical skills.

From the experience of my own fieldwork observations on construction processes of *yaodong* 窑洞 houses in contemporary Shaanbei (north part of Shaanxi province), I plan to present the rituals involved in the building. They concern the technical practices but as well as the craftsmen relations with their clients (house owners). I will

focus particularly on the magical powers of joiners who are scared by the population.

This communication aims at presenting the little we know about the construction craft relations with religion in pre-modern and in contemporary China.

Panelist: Philip S. Cho

Partner Group of the Max Planck Institute and the Institute for the History of Natural Sciences, Chinese Academy of Sciences

Title: Sericulture songs and the urbanization of silkworm temples in 18th century Jiangnan

Silkworm temples and festivals bound communities in the lower Jiangnan region into trans-local networks through which the culture and technology of sericulture circulated. An oral tradition of popular religious songs and rituals performed at these celebrations encoded not just the experience of raising silkworms but also much of the technical knowledge. Prior to the mid-18th century, these activities were mostly rural, worshipping a variety of silkworm deities such as the Horse-Head Goddess. Taking advantage of an imperial mandate during the Qianlong reign, powerful local elites and low-level officials sought to gain control over the religious centers of sericulture production by moving them to urban areas and establishing officially sanctioned sericulture temples and rites. This urbanization process involved both appropriating the lands of Buddhist and Daoist temples and subjugating popular silkworm deities under the local official pantheon. A close examination of these temple initiatives reveals that they were not funded by the imperial government nor followed a standard imperial rite. Instead, they often incorporated rituals from rural festivals. At the same time, literati began to record and adapt many of the vernacular sericulture songs as a means of disseminating technical knowledge.

Panelist: Jacob Eyferth

Assistant Professor, University of Chicago

Title: The property of skill: knowledge, community, and spiritual obligation among rural paper makers in Sichuan

Paper makers in Jiajiang (Sichuan) conceived of their craft as a “gift” that had been handed down to them by a patron saint (Cai Lun) and by the ancestors who “opened up the source” of their livelihood when they first settled in the area. This view allowed Jiajiang papermakers to construe craft skill as a communal property: something that properly belonged to all the disciples and descendents of patron saint and ancestors, rather than to specific families or workshops. Using interviews and stele inscriptions from the 1860s to the 1990s, I will examine how notions of spiritual

obligation affected the reproduction and circulation of skill.

Panelist: Andreas Janousch

Centro de Estudios de Asia Oriental, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain

Title: Salt production methods and Salt Cults at Xiechi Salt Lake in Southern Shanxi

Based on the investigation of a substantial number of inscriptions on stone steles, this paper analyses a complex of religious cults related to the production of salt which evolved around the Xiechi Salt Lake in southern Shanxi province from the 8th century onwards.

Due to the importance of salt revenues to the state's fiscal income after the An Lushan rebellion, mid-Tang government established an elaborate administrative supervisory system to keep up salt monopoly structures. Central part of this system was an officially maintained Salt temple dedicated to the cult of God of the Salt Lake. Success or failure of the unstable salt production at the Xiechi Salt Lake was perceived as reflecting political achievements or mistakes. During Late Imperial Period, local salt merchants set up their own religious cults which entered in complex relationships with the official state cult, giving, thus, expression to a gradually increasing role in the salt production processes and methods around the Lake.

The proposed paper will present and analyse the different types of discourses and explanatory theories which, in the inscriptions, successive authors developed about the origins of the vital salt resource in Shanxi as well as about the specificities of local salt production methods. Two competing discourses can be identified, which are associated to the official and popular (merchant) cults respectively. This will give rise to theoretical reflections about the varying types of interrelationships between salt production methods and religious pursuits, on the one hand, and between a hegemonic, official, discourse, and a competing, religious, one, on the other.