An Inauspicious Year: Confronting Crisis in Chinese Literature, History, and Culture

A Graduate Student Virtual Conference

February 12–13, 2021

Hosted online by Arizona State University and with support from The School of International Letters and Cultures (SILC).

To attend the conference via Zoom, first register at the following link:
Placeholder link (Zoom registration link)

Conference sessions will be held consecutively February 12 (Friday) to February 13 (Saturday), from 9:00 AM - 4:00 PM MST (Mountain Standard Time). This is equivalent to 5:00 PM - 12:00 AM Berlin time and 6:00 AM – 1:00PM Honolulu time. To ensure the correct time, feel free to utilize a time zone converter such as https://www.timeanddate.com/worldclock/converter.html.

There will also be two special keynote lectures during the conference (specific details will be forthcoming):

- Prof. Michael Berry, UCLA (Friday, February 12, 4:30 - 5:30 PM)
- Prof. Katherine Alexander, UC Boulder (Saturday, February 13, 4:30 - 5:30 PM)

If you have any questions, please contact the conference organizers Jiangnan Li (jiangnan@asu.edu), Lucas Wolf (lawolf2@asu.edu), and Tyler Feezell (tfeezell@asu.edu).
The following dates and times are given in Mountain Standard Time (MST)

**FEBRUARY 12 (FRIDAY) DAY 1**

9:00–11:00 AM (MST) -- PANEL 1: MODERN PERIOD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eileen Wu, University of British Columbia</th>
<th>When the Non-Corporeal Becomes the Real – Navigating China’s Apocalypse and Biopolitics through <em>Blueprints</em> by Cao Fei</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent: Mila Zuo, University of British Columbia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jinhui Wang, UC Boulder</td>
<td>Dealing with Narrative Ethics: Post-Trauma Narrative in 21st Century Chinese Cinema and its Narrative Crisis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent: Michael Berry, UCLA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yingchuan Yang, Columbia University</td>
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<td>Respondent: Martin Fromm, Worcester State University</td>
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2:00–4:00 PM (MST) -- PANEL 2: SONG DYNASTY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jiangnan Li, Arizona State University, Respondent: Albert Welter, University of Arizona</th>
<th>Reshaping Memories: Zanning’s Prescription for Harmony between the Three Teachings</th>
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<td>Respondent: Edward Davis, University of Hawai’i, Manoa</td>
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<td>Remembrance and Identity Crisis in a Vernacular Story: <em>Yanshan Feng Guren</em></td>
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4:30–5:30 PM (MST) – KEYNOTE 1:

**TOPIC:** Translation and the Virus: COVID-19, Cyber Politics, and Fang Fang's Wuhan Diary

Michael Berry, Professor of Contemporary Chinese Cultural Studies, UCLA

**FEBRUARY 13 (SATURDAY) DAY 2**

9:00–11:00 AM (MST) – PANEL 3: LATE IMPERIAL/EARLY REPUBLIC PERIOD
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Topic</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Binghamton University</td>
<td>Anxiety, Culture and Death: The Suicides of Three Chinese Royalists 1870s-1920s</td>
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<td>Fei Hsien-Wang, Indiana University, Bloomington</td>
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<tr>
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<td>UCLA</td>
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<td>Catherine Yeh, Boston University</td>
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**2:00–4:00 PM (MST) – PANEL 4: EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIOD**

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<td>Gil Raz, Dartmouth</td>
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<td>Michael Stanley-Baker, Nanyang Technological University</td>
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**4:30–5:30 PM (MST) – KEYNOTE 2:**

**TOPIC: TBD**

Katherine Alexander
Assistant Professor of Chinese, University of Colorado, Boulder
Eileen Wu, MA Candidate, University of British Columbia
When the Non-Corporeal becomes the real – Navigating China’s Apocalypse and Biopolitics through Blueprints by Cao Fei

This body of research began a few years ago using contemporary Chinese artist Cao Fei’s *RMB City* as a grounding point to discuss ideas of augmented reality, physical vs. digital worlds, and corporeality that seem moot in today’s pandemic climate. So instead, I shift this research towards Cao’s recent exhibition at Serpentine Gallery in London curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Joseph Constable entitled *Blueprints*, which contains the original *RMB City* work. Using the exhibition as primary material, I discuss issues of the dystopian now, a term entering the vernacular today after finding its roots with indigenous thinkers and ontologies. This paper explores the ways Cao’s virtual landscapes, mediated through Obrist and Constable’s curation, discuss the idea of the dystopian now in China and by extension the rest of our postmodern world as we teeter towards a life that more intimately augments reality with the virtual. *Blueprints* gives us a way to navigate the on-going apocalypse of our everyday lives in works by Cao that began as early as 2006. Living under the spectre of capitalism, this paper explores ideas of apocalypse (Molly Swain, Jason Moore, Zoe Todd) and biopolitics (Donna Haraway, Achille Mbembe, Michel Foucault) in a time of non-corporeal reality, centered in the Chinese experience of the artist.

Jinghui Wang, CU Boulder
Dealing with narrative ethics: post-trauma narrative in 21st century Chinese cinema and its narrative crisis

Contemporary Chinese cinema has witnessed a resurgence of post-trauma narratives since the boom of the genre in the 1980s. From the accusatory outcry in Liu Xinwu’s “The Class Teacher” (1977), the anarchistic nostalgia in Jiang Wen’s *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994), to the ambivalent pastiche in Feng Xiaogang’s *Youth* (2017), we seem to observe distinctive narrative shifts in these attempts dealing with collective memories of national trauma. Turning away from direct confrontations of individual experience and the master narrative of national history, Chinese post-trauma films in the recent past reimagine and reframe the turbulent period from the 1970s to the 1990s in sentimental, universal stories. However, as these films and their directors edge into mainstream Chinese cinema, problems of narrative ethics (i.e. the *raison d’etre* of the narrative, the narrative approach, the authorial control) also appear alongside the narrative shift. This narrative crisis is exemplified in the recent cinema “comebacks” of the fifth-and-sixth-generation directors: Zhang Yimou’s *Coming Home* (2014), Jia Zhangke’s *Mountains May Depart* (2015) and *Ash Is Purest White* (2018), Feng Xiaogang’s *Youth* (2017), and Wang Xiaoshuai’s *So Long, My Son* (2019). This paper proposes to examine the problematic narratives in these films that represent post-traumatic national memories, what contributes to their narratorial inconsistencies and ambivalence that seem to escape critical confrontations of the specific historical periods, and
finally asks the ultimate question about narrative ethics: how should we approach such collective traumatic experience that is caught between individual memory and the lens of national allegory?

**Yingchuan Yang, Columbia University**

**Look at the Stars: Astrology and the Crisis of Uncertainty in Reform China**

In the 1990s, the Chinese publishing market witnessed a proliferation of publications on astrology. Instead of dismissing them as a new, imported form of superstition, this essay takes seriously the craze for astrology as an integral part of the cultural politics of reform China. I argue that the popularity of astrology was a response to a crisis of uncertainty in the early 1990s, a decade that was economically (neo)liberal and politically conservative. After the Tiananmen Incident in 1989, the revival of Maoism loomed large. By providing guidance on the future, astrology claimed a sense of certainty of everyday life without challenging the Communist Party’s ideological authority. A crisis of political reform, however, could be an opportunity for material prosperity. Deng Xiaoping’s 1992 Southern Tour reaffirmed the primacy of economic liberalization and, as a result, drastically deregulated the publishing industry. Publishers got to translate, pirate, or simply fabricate astrology books and magazines at will. While the appeal of astrology in part owed to its Western roots, the reason behind its rapid spread was distinctively Chinese, thanks to the unprecedented depoliticization and commercialization of the cultural sphere. Unlike the extant literature that exclusively focuses on avant-garde literature and arthouse cinema, this essay recalibrates our perspective on reform-era Chinese culture by excavating this equally influential trend and locating its origins in one of the most recent yet most neglected crises in modern China. In doing so, it further expands the frontier of Chinese history by pushing historical inquiry into the 1990s.

**PANEL 2:**

**Jiangnan Li, Arizona State University**

**Reshaping Memories: Zanning’s Prescription for Harmony between the Three Teachings**

This paper focuses on the *Topical Compendium of the Buddhist Clergy Compiled in the Great Song Dynasty (Da Song seng shilüe 大宋僧史略)* by Buddhist monk Zanning 贊寧 (909-1001 CE). Under an imperial order in late 970s, Zanning undertook the compilation in which he recounted the religious persecutions that Buddhism historically experienced. To avoid similar crises in the future, Zanning aligned his prescriptions with the deeds from two renowned Buddhist masters in the past, highlighting a harmonious coexistence between the Three Teachings of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism that they once were willing to support. However, the stories of the two masters appear to be contradictory with their earlier versions where competitions between the Three Teachings are in the spotlight. I argue that the reconfiguration of memories was realized through an inversion of narrative, borrowing Robert Campany’s terms, from exclusive to associative. Not only did the remembrance establish an amicable connection between the Three Teachings, but it also projected an obedient image of Buddhism in front of Emperor Taizong (r. 976-997) and Zhenzong (r. 997-1022) of the Song. Embracing the associative narrative while simultaneously remembering the previous oppressions of Buddhism, therefore, served as a preemptive action against potential havoc inflicted by imperial power and the two possible rivals. The submissiveness, in turn, granted the Song
emperors with the leeway to tighten control over Buddhism. The submissiveness in turn granted the Song emperors with the leeway to tighten control over Buddhism.

Yiwen Wang, Zhejiang University
Destiny and Redemption: The Entanglements between the Tao, the Gods and the Human Beings in the Stories of the Chaos in Yijian Zhi
天命与救赎: 《夷坚志》世乱故事中的常道、神明与人事的纠葛

The ancient Chinese recognized the law of the rise and fall of dynasties and interpreted this inevitability as destiny. The destiny shows the resemblance to the Eschatology of Christianity. However, Hong Mai added his own unique solicitude in the chaotic stories in Yijian Zhi, which provided a feasible way to redeem the individual from the injuries caused by war.

In the stories of the war in Yijian Zhi, Hong Mai used the destiny as the main melody, however, there is less causality. Hong Mai mainly used the belief of gods and buddhas in the stories so as to correspond to the destiny because of the war, and there was the exchange of pure interests between human beings and gods. The cruelty and urgency of reality led to the imperfection of faith. By comparing "chanting Buddha" with the excessive religious worship which could give the quick profit, Hong Mai highlighted the latter wouldn’t deserve a good end. On the other hand, the closeness between human beings and gods is the expression of the agony of war.

Hong Mai attached importance to the mandate of heaven, played down the causation, emphasized people's pure faith to obtain salvation, and pointed out what people could do in the war. But in this troubled times, human beings could only rely on faith to be saved, incisively and vividly demonstrated the despair of the people, but also implied the irony of the government.

Daphne Sze, Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg
Remembrance and Identity Crisis in a Vernacular Story: Yanshan Feng Guren
燕山逢故人鄭意娘傳 (A Story of an Encounter with Zheng Yi’niang in Yanshan)

The Jingkang Incident was a major event marked the end of the era known as the Northern Song dynasty in Chinese history, and many Chinese literary works involved this disorder. The Huaben or vernacular story, in which numerous texts have Lin’an and Dongjing as their backdrop, forming a sizable body of “Liang-Song Huaben”, is one of those provide rich historical materials for analyzing the mentality of everyday life in the period. A vernacular story, Yanshan Feng Guren Zheng Yi’niang Zhuan 燕山逢故人鄭意娘傳 (A Story of an Encounter with Zheng Yi’niang in Yanshan) is taken as a door to alternative responses to such crisis in this genre. The present article offers a close reading and a detailed study of the structure and development of the story itself and then links it to historical-societal backgrounds in order to work on the dating of texts. It also discusses how the genre of Huaben gives an alternative to the ordinary people to share their memory of the incident. The story does not describe the war directly, but focus on the fate of ordinary people, and show the
joys and sorrows of them in the war era, especially the moral pressure and mental torture that resulted. It concludes that this is not only the story of a love traitor but also of survival plight of ordinary people at a micro perspective.

**PANEL 3:**

**Yirui Ma, UCLA**  
*Adopting the Future by Searching the Old Days: Local Literati Responses to the Late Qing Academy Reform*

This paper examines how traditional Chinese literati found their positions in a drastically changing world by tracing their responses to the nationwide wave of academy reforms since the 1860s. It treats the academies, where traditional literati received their education, as a site of circulation of literati’s understanding of both China’s future and the new fate of themselves. Instead of studying the innovations in this educational reform, I focus on literati’s seemingly anachronistic choices, arguing that by rationalizing their nostalgia, these literati reconﬁrmed their distinctive identity as professional elites in a time of turbulence. The paper ﬁrst explores the Qing ofﬁcials’ design and practice of the academy reforms, as well as the responses and opinions of local gentry and academy teachers. Those who viewed the academies as adaptable to new demands incorporated Confucian classics, imperial examinations, and indigenous rhetoric into the new educational concepts and policies. At the same time, literati who acted against the academy reforms, tried to ﬁnd a space for the past by preserving the old categories they were familiar with in the new education system. It then contextualizes the social and academic interactions of literati in local academies. Through the compiling and printing works of academy publications, local literati constituted their communities where an exclusive discourse was shared, and thus produced and reproduced their status as local elites. Avoiding the tradition–modernity dichotomy, the paper also gives a broader deﬁnition of Chinese modernity, which includes the cultural restoration and conservatism as a way of thinking and feeling.

**Zhixin Luo, Binghamton University**  
*Anxiety, Culture and Death: The Suicides of Three Chinese Royalists 1870s-1920s*

This paper examines a radical form of political expression: suicide. In the early twentieth century, the Qing empire collapsed and a new nation, the Republic of China emerged in its place. The radical shift of the political and cultural systems created an identity crisis in China. Two generations of Chinese intellectuals attempted to solve the crisis in different and sometimes contradicting ways, such as constitutional reform versus violent revolution, or monarchy versus republicanism. The intensiﬁed competition of ideologies radicalized the form of expression, and suicide is the most radical and powerful one. Plus, regardless of the political justiﬁcations for suicides, the morality of them became a heated public debate.

This paper will study the suicides of three well-regarded scholars that received wide public attention: Wu Kedu, Liang Juchuan and Wang Guowei. As a form of political expression, the timing for their suicides was carefully chosen. Wu committed suicide when the legitimate succession of the imperial throne was endangered; Liang did it when he despaired over the disintegration of morality after the revolution; and Wang when the last emperor was expelled from the Forbidden Palace. All of them chose to raise public attention by committing suicide...
when they felt the valued tradition was seriously threatened. Yet despite their specific reasons, the three suicides demonstrated Chinese intellectuals’ continued endeavor to grasp what they believed to be the unchanging principles, namely loyalty and morality, in a rapidly changing world.

Mindi Zhang, UCLA
“The Eroticized Citizens: Courtesans’ response to social and political crises in Republican China”

The courtesan has long been a celebrated personality in historical and literary writings throughout Chinese history. By the early twentieth century, however, courtesan culture was under vehement attacks by reformists and revolutionaries alike, whose blueprint for a strong China left no room for a decadent residue of a discredited literati tradition. At the socio-economic level, rampant prostitution in urban centers like Shanghai withered the glory of the courtesans, who were becoming increasingly undifferentiated from sellers of sex. This paper focuses on courtesans’ political and social activism at a time when both their own fate and the survival of the nation were in deep crisis. Much like other urban activists at the time, courtesans joined in nationalistic demonstrations, made personal donations, participated in fundraising drives, and built schools to educate themselves. The paper argues that while courtesans could claim a new public identity as patriotic citizens of an endangered nation, their activism and its popular reception were ultimately rested upon the erotic charge of their public presence. Whereas political and social turmoil offered them the opportunity to establish new and positive public image, such image could not be separated from the sexualization of their bodies. By exploring the activism of courtesans in response to personal and national crises, this paper not only contributes to our understanding of Republican-era gender history but also provides a unique lens to consider agency and its limitation during an “inauspicious” period.

PANEL 4:

Yue Wu, Arizona State University
Renegotiating ‘Otherness’: Yan Zhitui’s Struggles of Self-refashioning in the Northern Dynasties

This paper looks into southern émigrés’ struggles in the northern dynasties after the notorious Hou Jing rebellion (548–552), which entails endless of war in the south that harshly struck the southern society, caused a massive number of people being taken away from their homeland to the north, and significantly changed the political landscape between the north and the south. Meanwhile, the burgeoning cultural confidence of northerners gradually changed their attitude towards the south from merely looking up and admiring to that from a relatively equal perspective. Under such conditions, southern literati who were forced to be detained in the north had to renegotiate their relations with the northern community. In this paper, we will first look at how the detainees strived to return to their homeland by pleading with the northern power, and then take Yan Zhitui 颜之推 (531–591) as a case to study the struggles of those who failed to return to the south, to see how this state crisis triggered a series of misfortunes on individuals. I will attempt to answer a few questions: How did they deal with their identity as southerners in the northern society? How did they reshape their perception of the north that once to be alien and
the south that is now “alien”? What are the motives behind their choice makings when negotiating with the northern community and refashioning their own roles? And finally, what are the messages we can decipher from their validations of their change of loyalty?

Lucas Wolf, Arizona State University
Crime and Punishment: Divine Retribution and Restitution in Medieval Daoist Accounts

In medieval religious Daoist works, the Heavens (tian 天) served as the primordial source for esoteric scripture as well as the paradisiacal abode of transcendent officials, among whose serried ranks practitioners aimed to be placed. The reception of the former and eventual ascension as the latter represented two fundamental stages of one’s attainment of the Dao. Yet while Heaven could grant such boons, it could also strip them away. Daoist texts are filled with repeated exhortations against misusing rituals or incorrectly “leaking” (xielou 洩露) scriptures lest the practitioner, his clan, and his ancestors pay a catastrophic price. This paper examines several such accounts of Daoist practice gone awry, as collected within a Tang-era (618-907) ritual manual, the Guide to the Golden Lock and Flowing Gems (Jinsuo liuzhu yin 金鎖流珠引). Therein, such accounts are employed didactically to demonstrate how the misuse of Daoist practices or the bestowal of scriptures on the unworthy can lead to disaster. However, this text also provides accounts in which such practitioners are spared the wrath of celestial authorities by virtue of bureaucratic loopholes or family connections. Such tales grant us a glimpse into the potentially fraught relationship between divine authorities and practitioners as well as demonstrate the ways in which contemporary social conventions bled into depictions of the celestial realm. By examining such accounts, this paper aims to address contemporary concerns about the authenticity of ritual, the preservation of lineage, and ultimately the relationship between master and disciple.

Wei Wu, Arizona State University
Terrifying Ghosts: A Recognized Treatment in the Tang Dynasty

Epidemics were a constant threat to the well-being of people in medieval China. To combat the catastrophic threat of disease, medical practitioners used a variety of treatments, including incantations and healing rituals. Such methods have a long history in China evidenced by the “magical recipes” that have been uncovered among the early Mawangdui 馬王堆 medical manuscripts. In the Sui and Tang dynasties, an official position named Erudite for Exorcism (zhoujin boshi 咒禁博士) was established under the Imperial Medical Office (Taiyi shu 太醫署). Although it was a minor position, the zhoujin boshi demonstrated practical knowledge, served as a master teacher of incantations and spells, and was responsible for training prospective students (zhoujin sheng 咒禁生). According to historical records, a number of basic medical texts were required for medical students, such as the Suwen 素問 and Jiayi maijing 甲乙脈經. However, due to a dearth of source material, we know very little about what specialist subjects zhoujin sheng learned and what incantations zhoujin boshi transmitted to students. Fortunately, some medical texts, such as Sun Simiao’s 孫思邈 (581–682) Classic of Incantation (Jin jing 禁經) includes popular incantations employed during the Tang dynasty that allow a glimpse into this world. This paper will focus on incantations found in the Jin jing used to treat malaria (nüe bing 瘧病), one of most common diseases during the Tang dynasty, especially in the South. By examining such
healing incantations, we may gain a better idea of the circumstances that required a “Master of Exorcism,” how such incantations were thought to treat disease, and how they differed from those found in earlier excavated manuscripts.