CAMBRIDGE CHINESE STUDIES NEWSLETTER

劍橋中國研究簡報



FACULTY OF ASIAN AND MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

DECEMBER 2025
VOLUME 7
ISSUE 1

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear friends,

Hello and welcome to another issue of the Cambridge Chinese Studies Newsletter. I have inherited the editorial mantle from John but, rest assured, he will be available to advise from the shadows like a Retired Emperor… and of course you'll see his updates on happenings in his new home, the Needham Institute, later in these pages!

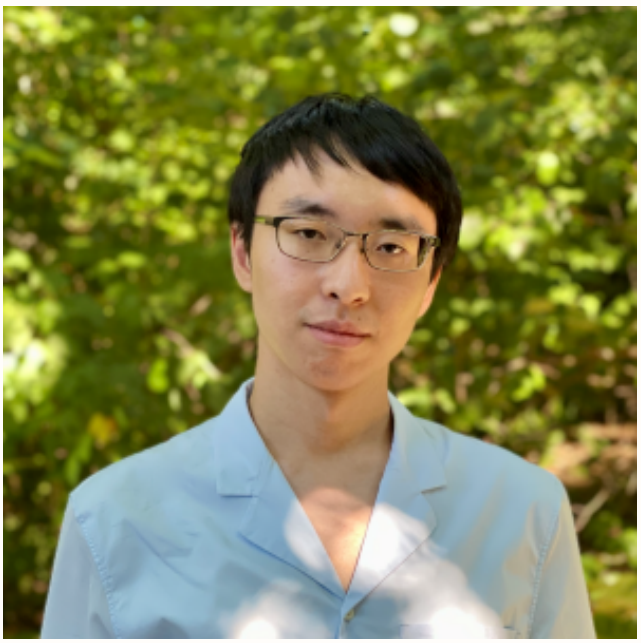
As this is a winter issue, it falls to me to bemoan the weather in fine British tradition. It is indeed cold, dark, and damp right now, though mercifully heating has been restored to the Faculty after some boiler trouble, a trial which everyone bore with good humour. Eagle-eyed readers may therefore notice that the subjects of our photographs are wrapped up rather warmer than usual. As Michaelmas draws to a close, Cambridge finds itself once more in the midst of interview season. Wherever you look you are sure to see nervous interviewees and their student chaperones scurrying about the colleges, which is sure to be a nostalgic sight for many of us.

As the winter chill descends, I hope that reading about our undergraduate students' exploits in sunny Taiwan, talks about Buddhism in Singapore, and accounts of delicious meals of all kinds will be useful when weathering the cold.

Gratitude is due to all of the students, staff, and alumni who contributed to this issue, as well as the visiting scholars and speakers who have participated in the various lecture series. Many thanks in particular to the staff members who were able to send me updates and photographs despite being in the middle of a busy admissions period.

I've enjoyed collating everyone's contributions to the newsletter and am always impressed at how much is going on in our little corner of the university. I hope that it will be as enjoyable to read as it was to edit.

Shannon Gilbert



Dr. Yingchuan Yang, the faculty's newly-arrived Teaching Associate in Modern Chinese History, kindly agreed to an interview via email on 5th December 2025.

For further information about his work, read about recent talk for the China Research Seminar Series!

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR YINGCHUAN YANG

Thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed! Can you tell us what your academic pathway has been like up to now? How did you become interested in your current area of study?

I wrote my undergraduate honors thesis at UCLA on the cultural and urban history of Beijing in the 1950s. Once I entered the Ph.D. program at Columbia, I extended my interest to the history of science and technology, back then one of the most dynamic subfields of Chinese history. I also happened to have encountered some primary sources on broadcasting in a seminar on Chinese media cultures. I soon found out that, while there already existed many studies on the content of broadcasting, little has been written on the technology aspect, so I started to work on a history of radio in socialist China with an emphasis on technology and infrastructure. I am now tapping into the nascent and exciting field of infrastructural studies to encompass all the different political mechanisms, gadgets, and historical actors in my research.

In your recent talk you mentioned upcoming book manuscript. Could you tell us a bit about the process and when we might expect to see it?

By investigating the state-sponsored led construction of radio infrastructure and its unexpected consequences from the 1950s to the 1970s, my book manuscript, Revolution on the Air: Radio and the Mass Infrastructure of Chinese Socialism, offers a new understanding of Chinese socialism as a mass infrastructural project. One of the central agendas of this book is to advance a more expansive understanding of infrastructure, not limited to transmission towers and utility poles, as traditionally perceived, but encompassing technical magazines, factory shop floors, vocational schools, and black markets, where radio equipment and expertise were produced, disseminated, traded,

and repurposed. Disrupting the established divide between material systems and cultural practices in infrastructural studies, this book shifts attention to the everyday sites and actors that were continually reshaped by dispersed and often improvised forms of labor, learning, and exchange under state socialism. The writing process is both challenging, as it involves reworking or even rejecting some of the ideas and arguments about which I was happy earlier, and rewarding, as it pushes me to clarify many important conceptual and theoretical issues. I hope to finish a first draft of the full manuscript by the next summer and get the book published in a few years. Stay tuned!

I look forward to it! In the meantime, you're here in Cambridge. How are you settling in? It must be a change being in such a small town...

This is actually my first time in Cambridge! It has the perfect combination of quiet parts and vibrant shops, restaurants, and businesses. Cambridge is certainly different from New York but is a perfect setting to do research and write books!



A Mudan 8402 radio, one of the makes Dr. Yang examines in his work.

I can see that you're teaching a few undergrad modules, including "C.18: Roads, Toilets, Dams, and Cassettes: Infrastructures and their Uses in Modern China". This seems to be a new course we didn't have when I was last here. How is it designed?

The course grows out of the process of preparing the book manuscript and thinking about infrastructural studies as well as Chinese studies, with the goal of revisiting modern Chinese history from an infrastructural perspective. By placing the construction and destruction of infrastructures at the centre of modern Chinese history, this course explores China's encounters with infrastructures across different historical periods and investigate the myriad forces behind each infrastructural project, both for and against it.

And how has the teaching been going?

I have found the students (in both C18 and other papers) meticulous, attentive, and very intelligent, and they have stimulated many new ideas for my own work.

That's good to hear! My last question is a bit self-indulgent: I saw listed among your side lines of research "a little-known campaign to annotate ancient Chinese texts during the late Cultural Revolution"; I was unaware of this campaign and find the idea so interesting! Would you mind giving a quick introduction?

Toward the end of the Cultural Revolution, the intense ideological and political conflicts within the Party leadership were often expressed through competing interpretations of traditional Chinese literature and philosophy. In 1974, Cultural Revolution radicals who controlled the cultural sphere launched a project that tasked workers, peasants, and soldiers with annotating Legalist philosophical texts in order, first, to demonstrate that people without formal academic training were fully capable of comprehending arcane texts (in line with Mao Zedong's personal disdain for the intellectual establishment) and, second, to bend these philosophical works to serve their own political agendas. The project eventually went nowhere, with Mao's death two years later resulting in the implosion of the Cultural Revolution, but I argue that despite its failure, it was suggestive of a fundamental reconfiguration of knowledge, politics, and their relationship that underpinned the basic logic of the Cultural Revolution.

Thanks again for your time!

CHINA RESEARCH SEMINAR SERIES UPDATES

We enjoyed a wide and varied programme of lectures in the China Research Seminar Series this Michaelmas term, hosting six speakers whose research took us through a number of different disciplines. Week to week we might find ourselves hurled backwards in time from the Maoist period to the Warring States, in topics as sombre as infrastructure-building or as ribald as pornographic literature.

We began with an examination of popular music in China in the earliest days of the People's Republic through the lecture given by **Prof. Henrietta Harrison** of Oxford entitled "Popular Songs of the 1949 Revolution". Using data on the number of times in which particular songs appeared in printed songbooks and supplementary information from memoirs of the period, Prof. Harrison identified several key types of song popular at the time: propaganda songs, songs influenced by the folk music and exoticised images of the western frontier, songs of parting and abandonment (especially from a female perspective), and cheerful and complex dance numbers.



Prof. Harrison's (very well-attended!) talk

Exploring the music one would have heard in 1949 invites us to look beyond the Cold War binaries when envisioning that year. In particular, Prof. Harrison emphasised that these songs often did several things simultaneously. Songs that demonstrated political commitment also provided a social outlet when sung together (and could provide a way for young men and women to mix); songs of longing for the exotic, romantic life imagined on the western frontier could also express a nationalist incorporation of these regions into the new China. The talk was followed by a lively Q&A touching on how "popular" music is to be defined, the technologies of radio and recording that facilitated the spread of these songs, and lyrical variations that appeared as the songs travelled.

The following week, **Dr. Shirley Chan**, a visiting scholar from Macquarie University, presented her talk "Crisis and Disorder in Early China: From the Great Yu to the Lüshi Chunqiu", detailing the vocabulary used to describe crises in early texts. From Yu's taming of the flood to accounts of patients in a critical medical condition, Dr. Chan highlighted a tendency in these texts to see the resolution of crises more in terms of redirection and early intervention than dramatic confrontation.

Yu's victory over the deluge emphasised his understanding of terrain and management of people through virtue, as well as his redirection and channeling of the floodwaters. Accounts of his subsequent exhaustion exemplify the notion of the ruler's body as a microcosm of the state and the medical analogies used resemble accounts of the Warring States physician Bian Que in their emphasis on early diagnosis and timely intervention. The ideal healer, we learn, is invisible - acting so skilfully that the patient may be cured before they even realise anything is amiss. Dr. Chan's presentation concluded with a question illuminating the relevance of this research to our current day: How would we treat crisis differently if we see society as a living body rather than a broken machine to be fixed?

Next, we heard from **Prof. Giovanni Vitiello**, who came to us from the Universita di Napoli L'orientale to bring us into the world of late imperial pornographic fiction. "Tales of Faulty Retribution: Rhetorical Conventions and Their Transgression in Seventeenth-Century Pornographic Fiction" examined how, although some fiction of this kind ends with its libertine characters' karmic punishment (as in the demise of Ximen Qing), in many cases the mechanisms of retribution seem to jam. In several stories Prof. Vitello introduced characters may in fact get away with their debauchery scot-free: evading legal accusations, outsmarting those who would punish them, and sometimes even ascending to the ranks of the immortals.

These narrative twists would appear to speak to cynicism regarding moral and legal systems at the time and are, arguably, destabilising and disorienting to the reader (except perhaps for the aspiring libertine). Lively examples drawn from 《歡喜冤家》*Enamoured Enemies*, 《一片情》*All This Passion* and 《肉蒲團》*The Carnal Prayer Mat*, among others showed the varied ways in which retribution could fail. Subsequent questions on the nature of 'popular' literature and these texts' relationship to centres of print provided additional ways of thinking about these texts and their audiences.

The fourth talk, "Wired for Revolution: How Workers, Amateurs, and Blackmarketeers Built China's Sonic Infrastructure" was given by our own **Dr. Yingchuan Yang** (an interview with whom can be found in this very newsletter!) Dr. Yang focused on three 'spaces' and the people who interacted with them to trace how these actors helped build a nationwide radio infrastructure between 1955 and 1974. The first of these, a Beijing-based factory, worked to develop the Mudan 8402, an affordable and high-quality radio based on existing Japanese models. 'Old masters' (skilled senior workers) produced the first prototypes that other employees, many of them young women, would learn to produce at scale. The second space, the technical magazine 《无线电》*Wireless*, gave tips on how to repair and tinker with these devices. Amateur enthusiasts engaged with and contributed to the magazine, which spread technical knowledge to non-specialists. Finally, the black

market became a site of trade and adjustment for radio technology, especially when parts were scarce. Across this period, disparate groups - old masters, factory girls, magazine contributors, DIY enthusiasts, and black-market dealers - who participated in these spaces became the 'infrastructural masses' crucial for the spread of radio technology within socialist China. A physical example - a Mudan 8402 with amateur modifications made to the battery pack - was passed around the room to great acclaim. Audience questions on continuity and rupture in the history of radio and the other areas in which alternative 'masses' (environmental, linguistic) might emerge gave a sense of how this approach could be extended.



Dr. Chan presents some Cambridge-inspired calligraphy

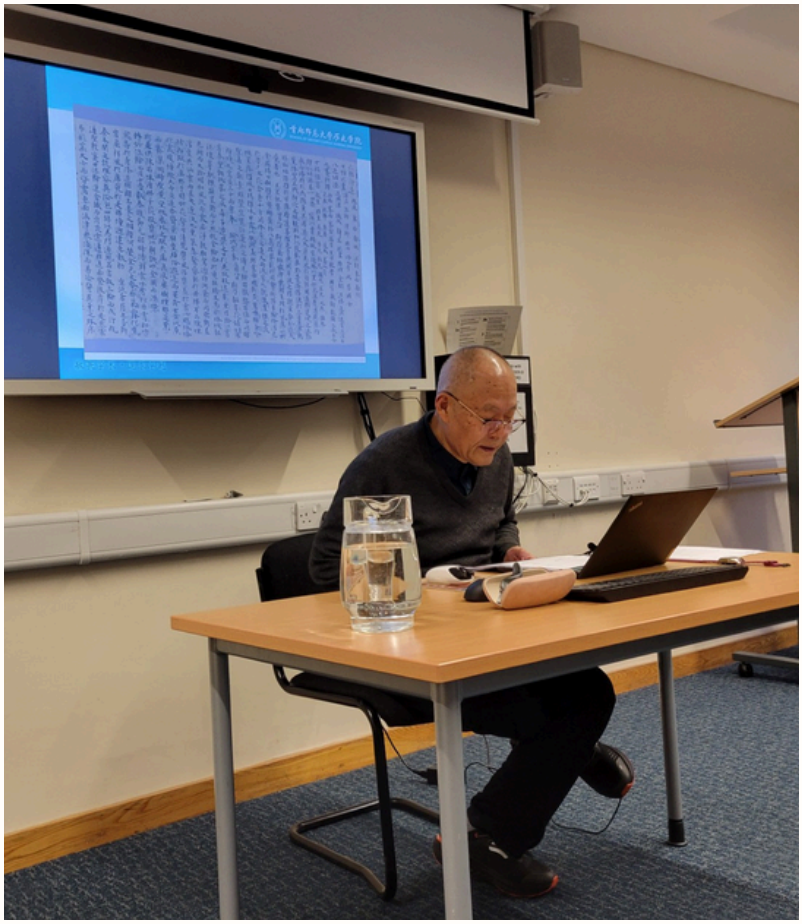
Two weeks later, we were pleased to welcome **Dr. Julia Keblinska**, a new arrival in the Film and Screen Studies department, to give a presentation based on her forthcoming book. Her talk "Garden Cinema and New Media in China's 1980s" examined how the 1980 film *Romance on Mt. Lu* 《庐山恋》, despite its pastoral setting, reflected the sensibilities of urban leisure spaces in the post-Mao New Era and the place of the cinema within this newly consumerist environment. The luxuriant vistas in the film, presented in all their cinemascopic glory, find their counterpart in the idealised vision of the cinema as a beautiful built environment. The film's capacity to transport the audience would be complemented by a cinema that cocoons them in a lush sensory environment. Dr. Keblinska explained how the film invokes the other trappings of urban leisure - fashion, music, tourism - to incorporate the very consumer commodities with which film was competing for attention in the New Era.

The interactive multimedia logic anticipated by *Romance on Mt. Lu* is also visible in the daily screenings of the film held in a cinema on the real Mt. Lu in Jiangxi province. Visitors can follow the same tour the film's heroine takes before completing their cinematic pilgrimage by watching the film in

its dedicated cinema (fittingly located in a converted church building). This talk prompted audience questions about the transition from cinemas as standalone buildings to their presence in multipurpose shopping centres, 'behind the scenes' magazine features, and how the desire generated by films centres on new technologies of media.

In the final talk of term, we welcomed back Trinity alumnus **Prof. Romain Graziani**, of the École normale supérieure de Lyon, for his lecture "Ruling By Numbers: Calculation and Cosmology, from Early China to Mao's slogans". Focusing primarily on the period from the late Shang to the age of Legalist thought, Prof. Graziani traced the trajectory of two "regimes of number": numbers as cosmologically resonant entities and numbers as instruments of measurement and governance. In doing so, he drew on the work of Marcel Granet, whose study of Chinese numerology posits that "the very notion of quantity did not interest the Chinese": numbers as qualitative groupings with an emblematic, rather than enumerative, function. However, Prof. Graziani notes that Granet's account is incomplete in that it ignores the quantitative precision already seen in Shang and Zhou statecraft, as well as the turning point represented by the Legalists, for whom numbers become a means of imposing disciplinary norms.

The Qin dynasty represented a break with the ancient imaginary, but retained the association between control over numbers and mastery of the world. Qin "rule by numbers" was embodied in arithmetic calculation of rewards and punishment, efforts to enumerate population and resources, and quota-setting. At the same time, numbers retained a rhetorical function drawing on their old emblematic value in phrases centred on enumeration. In this regard, Prof. Graziani argues, one can draw parallels with the use of number in modern China, particularly the use of numerical groupings ("the Five Black Categories", "the Four Olds") in Maoist rhetoric and the transformation of numbers into simulacra during the Great Leap Forward. Although the correspondence between numbers and objects existing in reality remains an important concern, the lecture concluded with the observation that "numbers do not merely reflect the world but they produce its governable form." Audience questions extended this idea in several directions, from questions of how the Qin government dealt with data fabrication, to the emblematic significance of "the One" in Daoism, to the mnemonic use of numerical rhetoric.



Prof. Hao discusses Buddhist liturgies

BOOK CULTURE IN BUDDHISM AND BEYOND UPDATES

The Book Culture in Buddhism and Beyond lecture series began with a presentation from visiting scholar **Dr. Yunou Liu** from Southwest University of Political Science and Law, who introduced us to her project "Folk Religions and Digital Humanities: Focusing on the Case of the Block-Printing and Dissemination of Baojuan Literature in Ming China". Dr. Liu's multimodal approach to tracing the journey of baojuan 宝卷 ('precious scrolls' of Chinese folk religion) places them in their material context, considering their physical form, textual variations, and transmission pathways. Dr. Liu used charts to visualise the interplay between any given baojuan's number of versions, structure (accordion fold or binding), and patron information, as well as mapping key printing sites and transmission routes to better understand the life of these texts. In particular, the data visualisation gave an immediate sense of the importance of elite support, not grassroots enthusiasm alone, in spreading these works.

Dr. Liu also explained how proximity to major waterways and economic development of particular cities allowed for the production and circulation of these texts - indeed, places along the routes between these sites still have traditions of baojuan recitation today. The discussion continued with audience questions about the relationship between elite and state patronage, the relationship (or lack thereof) between baojuan printing and commercial publishing, and the appropriateness of the 'silk road' as a descriptor for transmission routes.

The second talk in the series, and our last of Michaelmas term, came from **Prof. Hao Chunwen** of Capital Normal University. A leading scholar of Dunhuang studies and Chinese Buddhism, Prof. Hao lead the audience through a key distinction in distinguishing two related but distinct types of manuscript: the liturgical protocol (zhaiyi 齋儀) and

the liturgy proper (zhaiwen 齋文). Protocols, unlike liturgies, were not written for use during religious functions but rather provided a template for practitioners when drafting liturgies for particular ceremonies. Unlike liturgies proper, protocols frequently feature prefaces and textual elements such as the use of the filler phrase 云云 to indicate that the drafter should fill in that section in a suitable manner.

Prof. Hao next outlined the five-part structure of a typical liturgy: the opening identifier, exaltation of virtues, liturgical purpose, ritual area, and 'adornment' prayers to the Buddha (also known as the closing identifier). A fuller understanding of these structural elements is particularly helpful for Dunhuang researchers when trying to determine whether a text that has not retained its title is a liturgy. Audience questions (with kind translation assistance from members of the audience!) touched on the characteristics of liturgies Prof. Hao had encountered, the notion of generic fluidity and the challenges that arise with creating typologies, and modes of liturgical recitation.



Dr. Liu's presentation on baojuan

YIN-CHENG DISTINGUISHED LECTURE ON BUDDHISM

The fifth annual Yin-Cheng Distinguished lecture on Buddhism, held with the generous support of the Tzu Chi Foundation, took place on the 4th of December 2025 in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies.

This year, we were pleased to hear from **Prof. Jack Meng-Tat Chia**, whose lecture, "Lion City's Dharma: Tracing Buddhism in Singapore", introduced research from his recent book 《東南亞法音：新加坡佛教研究論集》*Southeast Asia's Dharma: Essays on Buddhism in Singapore*. The lecture was hosted by **Dr. Noga Ganany**, a member of the faculty, and with **Dr. Rachel Leow**, a historian of Southeast Asia from the Faculty of History, serving as the discussant. Prof. Chia addressed a full room of in-person attendees (his presentation was one of the best-attended of the Faculty's Thursday afternoon public lectures), in addition to virtual attendees tuning in via Zoom. The talk was recorded, and will be made available online in due course.

A fundamental organising concept in Dr. Chia's talk is the notion of "South China Sea Buddhism", developed in his previous book *Monks in Motion: Buddhism and Modernity Across the South China Sea*. The term, in contrast to conventional categories that divide "Chinese" from "Southeast Asian" Buddhism, refers to Buddhist communities emerging from the relationship between China and maritime Southeast Asia. Prof. Chia argues that, although studies of religion in maritime Southeast Asia are more commonly associated with the Malay Archipelago and the study of Muslim and Catholic communities, an appreciation of how Buddhism shaped Chinese-diasporic communities across the South China Sea is crucial for understanding the region. In this respect, Singapore becomes not an anomaly in the region but a valuable case study with its large number of Mahayana practitioners alongside vibrant Therevada and, more recently, Vajrayana communities.

The talk began with a consideration of the role of transnational Buddhist networks in shaping Buddhist communities in Singapore. The initial arrival for migrants from China, as well as Burma, Thailand, and Sri Lanka, brought with them a broad "folk Buddhist" practice that took root in Singapore. The arrival of reforming monks in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, led to a renowned focus on orthodox and institutional Buddhism and stronger transnational networks. Later, members of the sangha continued to represent vital links between Buddhist communities across the South China Sea region. The work of Yen Pei, a promoter of humanistic Buddhism whose work took him from mainland China to Hong Kong to Taiwan to Singapore (in addition to journeys in Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam), illustrates how the transnational quality of Buddhism in Singapore was carried forward into the late twentieth century and beyond.

Vital to the formation of such networks were the diplomatic relations established between Buddhist communities in the region. Hong Choon's visits to mainland China between 1982 and 1990, before the establishment of formal relations between Singapore and the PRC and the exhibition of Buddhist relics helped to strengthen international ties between Buddhist communities. Activism from monastic and lay communities also demonstrated the role of these communities in shaping the relationship between the faith and Singaporean governance. The Singapore Buddhist Federation's efforts to have Vesak declared a national holiday, to have films containing elements that profaned or misrepresented Buddhism censored, and the attempt to draw clear distinctions between orthodox Buddhism and new movements such as Yiguandao and Falun Gong are typical examples.

Finally, Prof. Chia turned to Singaporean Buddhism's capacity to adapt to a modern context through education, religious activities, and technology. The opening of the Buddhist College of Singapore in 2006 exemplifies an attempt to modernise the training of members of the monastic community. The college not only promotes research in Buddhist Studies but also develops skills for managing monasteries and temples, as well as propagating the Dharma. Outside the sangha, in a context in which censuses record that the fastest-growing religion in Singapore is "none" (i.e. no religious affiliation), attempts to "rebrand" the faith for the contemporary era have seen the incorporation of modern devotional music and cooperation with organisations abroad to promote the dharma. Finally, the lecture discussed the emergence of "cyber dharma" as the COVID pandemic necessitated increased incorporation of technology into religious practice: livestreaming religious rituals and the formation of online communities such as the Facebook group Buddhist United provide fertile ground for further research.



Prof. Chia, Dr. Leow, and Dr. Ganany pose for a photo after a job well-done!

Following the lecture Dr. Rachel Leow, drawing on her own expertise in Southeast Asia, invited Prof. Chia to discuss some aspects of his lecture in greater detail. Their conversation ranged from consideration of violence, in addition to the lecture's focus on diplomacy, as a political tool in South China Sea Buddhism; elaboration on whether a consideration of laywomen's role in the account of Buddhism of the region could be analytically transformative rather than merely additive or auxiliary (Prof. Chia gave the example of Parwati Soepangat, the subject of one of his recent articles); and the grounds for comparisons between Buddhism in Singapore and Malaysia. Dr. Leow concluded with a reflection on the use of South China Sea Buddhism as an approach that demonstrates "productive disrespect… for the territorial logics of the nation state" and a valuable reminder that "agents make geography".

The remainder of the time set aside for the lecture was reserved for questions from the audience, ranging from the internet's capacity to bring non-Chinese influences - such as influential figures from France and Australia - into Singapore, the role of language in shaping religious identity in multilingual Singapore, and the limits of census data in distinguishing non-religious from those who simply lack a specific affiliation.



Some denizens of FAMES after a festive meal

NEEDHAM RESEARCH INSTITUTE SEMINAR SERIES UPDATES

This season at the Needham institute we had an excellent series of events, mostly put together by Jenny, who is currently doing very well with her 'smiley and chunky' baby Summer!

New arrival **Oliver Hargrave** set the bar with some serious philology on the subject of 'Plant Names and Botanical Objects in Pre-Modern Chinese Texts'. He traced the tangled interpretations of the qiliu 杞柳 tree, unpicking the places in which commentators had tripped over one another, and how over time it becomes completely impossible to offer identifications in amongst all the mess.

We remained in the gardens the following week for **Katherine Enright's** (of Cambridge University) discussion of 'Producing Imperial Science at the Singapore Botanic Gardens under Japanese Occupation', about botanists and their work at times of extreme duress and with curious relations of captive, prisoner, imperialist and subject.

Ji Chen, our Ho Peng Yoke Fellow in the History of Science and Technology in China then proved very worthy of her title in her talk on Kangxi's 'Astronomical Realia', Verbiest's 'Simplified Planar Instrument' 簡平儀, in which she showed us all about the instrument – how it was used, why it was used – and also how it appeared in history and in anecdote.

The following week, we learned about the many approaches that one can take to rabies in **Chu Zhilin's** (of Cambridge University) account of the friction between the Japanese (dog vaccination) British (human vaccination) approaches to the problem in the Shanghai concessions. The research was very new and interesting from a scientific perspective, and the relationship between disease, science, and power felt very relevant to the news during the covid pandemic.

On the 7th of November, **Michael Stanley-Baker** visited us from Nanyang Technological University and delivered an excellent and very well attended talk on how the study of Daoism and medicine can inform the history of Science in China. He questioned such fundamental terms as 'science' and 'religion', 'daojia' and 'daojiao', all these words that influence the way that we approach history and science, trying to reconstruct them and to notice their unnoticed and misunderstood elements.

Afterwards, our own **Chun Xus's** lecture was entitled 'The Big Data of Early China and its Decline'. Why is it useful in this case to speak of data? He asked. But data was power to early rulers, and the production of data was the production of authority. The more data that once could obtain and employ, the better their statecraft.

A very handy talk (ha ha!) the following week was delivered by **Marta Hansen** of the Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-

Nürnberg. Hansen is working on a very exciting project 'Knowing Hands', and showed us how our very own hands could be used as mnemonic aids, calculating devices, and even medical instruments. She showed us how we can count the heavenly stems and earthly branches, map the constellations, understand bodily medicine, and much more on our fingers and their creases. She wanted us to get away from the idea of knowledge situated in the brain, and to think of it coming from all over the body – embodied.

The following week, **Vimalin Rujivacharakul** visited us from the University of Delaware to explain to us the concept, or three different concepts of 'architectural evolution', taking us back into the mind of three case studies who saw different human societies as being at different stages of human development, and how they managed to explain the world in light of these beliefs.

Lydia Liu, visiting us from Columbia University, then showed us her research on Margaret Masterman, language philosophy, and the beginnings of AI. Her thesis is that the language philosophy proposed by Wittgenstein and developed by Masterman (the Cambridge school), was key to the development of AI as we know it today (using vast quantities of data in order to train models), stolen (or inspired) from Cambridge by the rival MIT school who were more interested in developing AI along concepts of universal grammar. Yet more interesting, some of the concepts that Masterman developed from Wittgenstein were inspired by her understanding of how Classical Chinese worked, and therefore indirectly, Classical Chinese, via Cambridge, was the inspiration for AI.

Last but not least, we were treated to 'The Rise of Printing Reconsidered' by **Tim Barrett**, delivered completely extempore and replete with anecdote, detail, historical background, and not a few jokes. Barrett's previous research on the subject, he thought, didn't quite take enough into account the historical background of printing in Sichuan in the Tang, and would be very well served to do so, there is plenty more to be said on the matter. It was very refreshing to hear new life breathed into this subject, and to feel so engaged by a speaker – if only we had the confidence to throw away the PowerPoints more often!

We are looking forward to next term and already have a good looking programme shaping up, but do let us know if you have something to present!

John Donegan-Cross

WHO'S NEW AT THE NEEDHAM INSTITUTE?





Yumi Suzuki has been working on Sino-Hellenic comparative history of philosophy and science for many years. She completed an MA degree in Ancient Greek Philosophy and an MA research degree in Classics at Durham, then a PhD degree in Chinese and Comparative Philosophy at the University of Hong Kong. She has previously worked as a lecturer and postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Hong Kong, East China Normal University, and the University of Bern. Her main research interests lie in scientific methods and reasoning including definition, logic, deduction and induction, as well as human cognition and understanding of nonhuman living beings. Her current project addresses nomenclature and classification of animals and plants in early Chinese and ancient Greek "zoological" and "botanical" sources. She is also completing a co-edited volume, *Green Antiquity: Comparing Environmental Thought in Early China and Ancient Greece*.

Jia Yu 余佳, first arrived at the NRI as a PhD student and has remained there since gaining her doctorate in the History of Science. Specialising in cross-cultural analysis of science, technology, and medicine in the 19th and 20th centuries, she is interested in questions exploring the nature of knowledge and expertise as operative sources of cultural, material, and linguistic conventions. She is developing a book project based on her doctoral research titled *Nature and Its Scholars: A History of Bowu in Chinese Learned Culture*. This illuminates how interpretations of *bowu* — a Chinese term often translated as 'natural science' — inhabited and contributed different conceptions and studies of nature in China over time. She is also finalising her research papers, including Stanley Gerr's wartime translation cabinets (one of NRI's own collections) and an analysis of the 'experience of nature' and field trips in Republican China.

WHO'S NEW AT THE NEEDHAM INSTITUTE?



Wang Yao 王耀 holds a PhD in History and is a Professor at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. His main research areas are the history of cartography and the historical geography of Xinjiang in the Qing dynasty (mainly urban history). Starting with the history of cartography, he has extended his work to the history of cultural exchanges between China and Europe, with a particular focus on the world maps by Jesuit missionaries during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, and on the ancient maps of Central Asia. While at the NRI he will research Chinese globes from the 16th to 19th centuries and their scientific and cultural significance.



Xu Chun 徐淳 received his doctorate from Heidelberg University, before taking up a Research Scholar post at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin. At the NRI he is developing a monograph, tentatively titled *Imperial China: A History of Data and Algorithms*. The project asks how the skilled and material practices of making and managing data—civil registration, fiscal administration, surveying and measurement among them—worked not merely as neutral instruments of statecraft but as generative processes that shaped the state's capacities and constraints, structured its rationalities of rule, and informed its political imaginaries.

WHO'S NEW AT THE NEEDHAM INSTITUTE?



Tang Zihua 唐自华 earned his Ph.D. from the Institute of Geology and Geophysics, Chinese Academy of Sciences in 2010. Initially entering archaeological research as a global change scholar, he has dedicated recent years to tracing the origins of unearthed artifacts using geochemical methods, primarily focusing on biological artifacts and carnelians. By applying geological perspectives to understand past exchange and trade networks, he aims to comprehend how migration behaviours influenced the evolution of civilizations. At the NRI, his research project is "Tracing the Origins of Sanxingdui Ivory: An Integrated Isotopic and Ecological Modelling Approach."



Lydia H. Liu is the Wun Tsun Tam Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University. She has published extensively on Chinese and comparative literature, digital media, political thought, critical translation theory, and the philosophy of language. Amongst her many honours and awards, she was a Guggenheim Fellow and more recently a Member of the Institute for Advance Study in Princeton. While at the NRI her research project called “The Machine Interlingua” explores the work of AI pioneers at the Cambridge Language Research Unit (CLRU), one of the earliest AI research centres founded by Margaret Masterman.

WHO'S NEW AT THE NEEDHAM INSTITUTE?

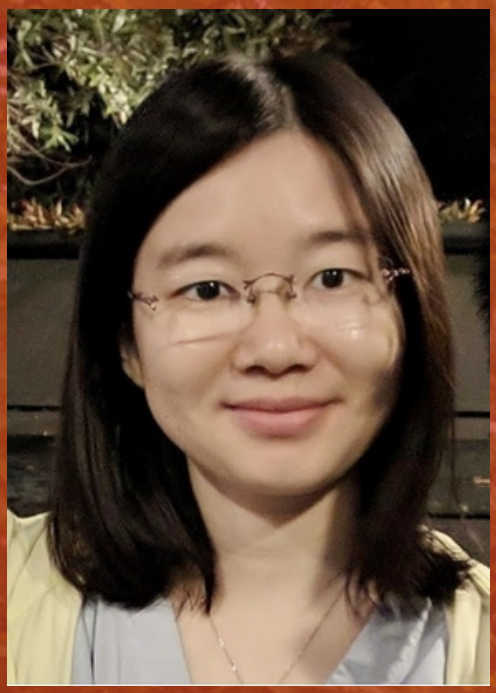


John Donegan-Cross completed his BA in Chinese at the University of Edinburgh, his MPhil in Traditional East Asia at the University of Oxford, and his PhD at the University of Cambridge. For his thesis he focused on the significance of birds in Early Chinese Poetry. His second project explores the relationships between astronomical knowledge and poetic image in poetry of Late Imperial China.



Chen Qian 陈倩 earned her Ph.D. in History of Science and Technology from Nanjing University of Information Science and Technology in 2024. She is currently a Postdoctoral Researcher and Lecturer at the Academy of Chinese Medical Literature and Culture. Her research focuses on the history of meteorological science and technology and the interaction between climate, environment and human health. During her tenure at the NRI, she plans to analyze Chang-wang Tu's meteorological scientific practices and their impact during his studies in the UK from the perspective of transnational circulation of climate knowledge.

WHO'S NEW AT THE NEEDHAM INSTITUTE?





Cai Yin 蔡吟 is a recent PhD from the University of Chicago. She is interested in nature, craft, and empire as three intertwined themes in the history of late imperial China. Her dissertation examines how textile craft and knowledge of the natural world were interwoven, and their historical significance to the Qing Empire's material governance in an increasingly connected early modern world. At the NRI, she is developing her first book manuscript, tentatively titled Weaving Nature into Fabrics of Power: Craft, Empire, and Entangled Knowledge in Qing China.

Zhang Jianwei 张建伟 received her Ph.D. in the History of Science and Technology from Inner Mongolia Normal University in 2015. She is currently an Associate Professor at Tianjin Normal University and is also a member of the Tianjin Basic Education Decision-Making and Strategic Research Center. Her research focuses on studies by Japanese scholars on traditional Chinese mathematics, the history and pedagogy of mathematics, and issues in basic education and educational policy. During her residency at the NRI, she will carry out a project entitled The Influence of Japanese-Translated British Textbooks on the Modernization of Mathematics Education in Late Qing China (1902-1911).

WHO'S NEW AT THE NEEDHAM INSTITUTE?



Oliver Hargrave is a Research Associate at the University of Oxford and is currently researching the intellectual history of rainbows in pre-modern China at the NRI. He is interested in the intersection of Chinese conceptions of the natural world with intellectual history, including philosophy and religion. His DPhil research was on textual representations of trees in Early and Medieval China, with a particular focus on strange or unusual trees and how they were understood.

FIRST YEAR UPDATES

When I arrived at Room 8 for my first class with 吴老师, I was armed with little more than '你好' and '对不起', and within 8 (incredibly fast) weeks, I found myself having conversations in Mandarin with the Chinese international students at my college about their hometowns, or speaking secretly in Chinese with classmates when I don't want others to understand. And I still, rather smugly, enjoy the amazed look on the faces of Chinese tourists around town when they hear me and my classmates practice our speaking with each another.

The endless lists of characters may have seemed pretty daunting when I first flipped through my textbook, but due to the wonderful teaching (and dreaded tingxies) I soon found myself able to write more characters (or buddies as 吴老师 refers to them) than I thought possible. The small class sizes and perhaps rather intense contact hours have helped my language skills progress at a quite impressive rate, leaving me excited to see how much more progress I can make during the rest of my four years here.

As monotonous as my evenings spent trying to work my way through piles of vocab flashcards or the seemingly endless functions of '就' can seem, it feels incredibly rewarding. Finally writing a character from memory can be very satisfying, especially if it comes up in next week's *tingxie*.

As there are only eight of us, we've had no choice but to become close friends, necessary so we don't revel in the disappointment of our tingxie scores completely alone. Although this does sometimes lead to class conversations which completely distract us from our work and for which I should probably take a disproportionate amount of the blame (sorry 吴老师), it makes lessons feel far more like conversations than lectures. The staff are supportive and caring, 吴老师 would bring us sweets when the miserable weather would get to us and 汪老师 would shield us from the cold in her office.

A supposed 'rite of passage' for all first-year Chinese students, I spent many weeks fearing the end-of-term poetry recital. I could think of nothing worse than having to present my rusty tones to a room of fluent speakers. However, after some words of encouragement by 汪老师, I decided to take the afternoon as a light-hearted time to showcase how much I had learnt over the past term (and of course win some prizes), rather than any kind of test designed to trip me up.

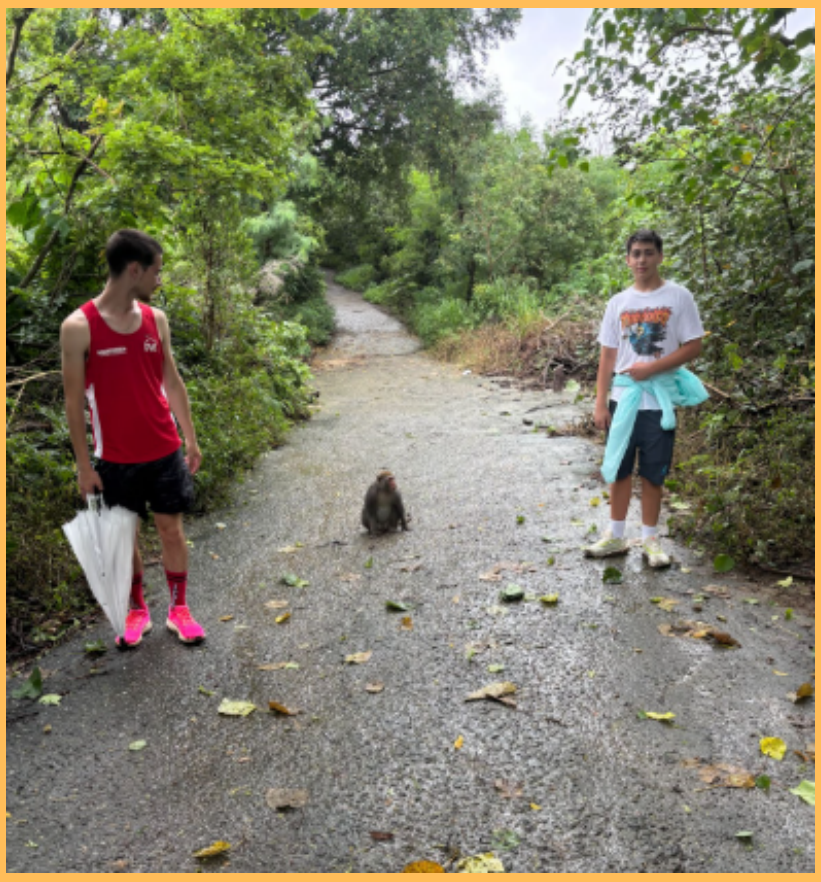
However, the embarrassment of reciting my poem was little compared to the dreaded first-year performance of '对不起，我的中文不好', sung (and danced) from the front of the room. An initiation unheard of in other faculties, I think its eccentricity perfectly sums up everything I've come to love about the Chinese department.

Unfortunately, I don't think I'll ever be able to forget '对不起，我的中文不好', its annoyingly catchy melody will forever be stuck in my head, but at least with it come fond memories of my first term studying Chinese.





SECOND YEAR UPDATES



Climbing Monkey Mountain!

I was halfway up 壽山 (Monkey Mountain, Gaoxiong) when I finally began to feel like all the hard work done in first year had paid off. After many thousands of steps, gathering storm clouds threatening rain, and a near miss with an inquisitive monkey, we had finally reached the summit of the mountain to enjoy the view and the free tea. As we sat gazing out at the sea and photographing the daring monkeys, a fellow climber struck up a conversation with us. He began talking about the value of telling stories, illustrated by both the myths surrounding 壽山's monkeys, and (bear with me) J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter. From there, he moved on to discuss a religious figure who had made money by solving other people's problems. The link between the two seemed somewhat tenuous to me, but I think his point was that 講故事 (telling stories) and 解決問題 (solving problems) are two good ways to become successful and make money, because they both help other people. If you're feeling confused at this point, so was I! But the fact that we could understand this somewhat rambling dialogue was exciting to me – finally, I could communicate with people in Mandarin, even when the topic of conversation wasn't something that had previously come up in a textbook (shockingly!).

It would be impossible to put down in writing all the adventures we were lucky enough to embark on in Taiwan, from withstanding typhoons in our leaking apartment, to tea-picking in 阿里山 (Alishan), to cycling around 日月潭 (Sun and Moon Lake), to shopping trips in Taipei. As well as travelling to as many places as we could fit into our ten-week sojourn, we of course attended classes at our language schools in Tainan and Taipei, which allowed us to both consolidate the knowledge we had gained in first-year, and build up a new repertoire of vocabulary to help us in second year. A particular highlight for those of us in Tainan was certainly the 'tones competition' and song recital. I know I speak for all of us when I say that, by the time the end-of-term 火鍋 (hotpot) dinner came around, it was difficult to part with the many friends we had made.

If I was worried that our return to Cambridge might feel slightly anti-climactic after our Taiwan

adventures, it proved to be the opposite. If anything, living in Taiwan for ten weeks provided a glimpse of what our year abroad holds in store for us, giving new motivation for another year of language learning. In second year, our courses range from core language classes to Classical Chinese, dynastic history, contemporary politics, media and popular culture, and an 8000-word mini-dissertation. I have especially enjoyed our Classical Chinese classes, where we have moved on from the philosophical texts of first year to works that offer more room for interpretation: poetry and 志怪 ('Literature of the Strange' – which are certainly very 奇怪).



Packaging up the tea we had picked during our homestay in Alishan

It has also been nice to feel our class growing closer this term, from group formals to our recent Chinese takeout feast. Eagerly anticipated, the annual poetry recital was certainly a highlight. We had probably been over-ambitious in our choice of 小蘋果 for our class song, but it was definitely a lot of fun, and another song to add to the karaoke roster for our year abroad!

We are so grateful to all our 老師 and 教授, especially to 汪老師 for helping many of us with the Taiwan applications that made for such an unforgettable summer!

Class formal at Pembroke this term





YEAR ABROAD UPDATES



A communist cat on the Great Wall

We arrived in Beijing as weary travellers, stepping off the plane into a city that felt immediately overwhelming in scale, pace, and noise. If Cambridge had been defined by quiet bike lanes, familiar spires, and a reassuring sense of proportion, Beijing was something else entirely: 截然不同 did not begin to cover it. We had traded quaint country paths for eight-lane inner-city motorways, and the suddenness of that exchange was felt viscerally. The first taxi ride from the airport remains etched into our memories: jet-lagged, wide-eyed, and immediately immersed in a rapid-fire stream of thick Beijing 儿化 that made it very clear we were no longer operating in the carefully articulated audio files of Cambridge listening exams.

The first weeks were chaotic. Administrative tasks came thick and fast, and days were filled with queues, forms, and logistical hurdles that left hardly a moment to catch our breath, let alone reflect on our Chinese. Yet this was a year we had been waiting for for so long that there was little room for hesitation. We arrived ready to take it with both hands, even if we did not yet quite know how. Gradually, things began to settle. Classes found a rhythm, campus became familiar, and after the initial flood of admin subsided, there came a quiet yet decisive realisation that we were no longer just visitors passing through, but students actually living our lives in Chinese.

One personal early delight was the frequency with which I was addressed as 帅哥, a flattering surprise, until it became clear that the term was applied with generous equality. More meaningful, however, was the moment we first heard 成语 we had painstakingly committed to memory back in Cambridge suddenly appear in the wild. Hearing them used naturally, not as textbook artefacts but as living language, was quietly thrilling. It offered a satisfying validation that the hours spent in libraries had not been in vain.

Life outside the classroom quickly became as formative as the teaching within it. Meals were often shared, noisy, and unplanned; friends sliding the lazy Susan around a crowded table in





On the steppes of Inner Mongolia

some unassuming Beijing restaurant, discovering yet another dish we had never tried before. With over a dozen canteens on campus, each offering remarkable variety at prices that encouraged experimentation, it was easy to fall into daily routines. Some of us took early morning walks around the campus lake, especially during those brief but striking weeks of Beijing autumn, when the leaves flared into colour and the city softened just enough to invite romanticisation. In those moments it was hard not to feel that this was a truly special time in our degree.

Though public transport here is impressively efficient, many of us developed a fondness for taxis. Not least because of how affordable they are, but because each ride offered an opportunity for conversation. Beijing taxi drivers, more often than not, are eager interlocutors: opinionated, curious, and usually keen to talk about anything from local history to national policy. These conversations, informal and unpredictable, became an unexpected extension of the classroom, pushing our listening and speaking in ways no textbook exercise ever could.

Immersion took many forms. Some of us built routines around sport: gym sessions, tennis, football, finding that shared physical activity provided an easy bridge into Chinese social circles. Others gravitated towards poetry, climbing, or creative pursuits, sometimes paired with trips beyond Beijing. These different paths reflected a shared instinct: to seek connection through doing, rather than simply observing.

Department-organised trips punctuated the term, offering both levity and learning. From an almost comically practical excursion to IKEA, to the Great Wall, to a particularly memorable journey to Guizhou, these experiences broadened our sense of China beyond our corner of the capital. The Guizhou trip, we quickly realised, bore the unmistakable imprint of sponsorship by Maotai, a fact that did little to diminish our enjoyment. We learned about local history and culture, stayed in a hotel with personal hot springs in each room, and spent time in a Miao town making silver jewellery.

A communal meal there involved a drinking game that left little room for refusal, and the shared endurance of it only strengthened group bonds. We danced, explored nearby towns, visited museums, and watched live performances, all while learning about Miao culture in ways that felt immersive rather than extractive.

October brought National Day, and with it the chance to travel further afield. Some of us used the break to explore Inner Mongolia, travelling with classmates and friends who called the region home. The scale and variety were striking: riding horses across open steppe, riding camels through the Gobi Desert, and clambering up volcanic formations — experiences that would have felt almost implausible only weeks earlier. Others went elsewhere: Hainan, Chongqing, Sichuan. Taken together, these journeys reinforced a growing understanding that studying Chinese is never confined to classrooms. Language is bound up with memory and emotion; it lodges itself more deeply through shared experience than through isolated drills.

This realisation began to reshape how many of us approached learning. Textbook exercises gradually ceded ground to podcasts, shadowing, and sustained conversation. Our Chinese became quicker, sharper, and more responsive, and perhaps most noticeably, our listening improved across the board. One evening, a long dinner conversation stretched late into the night as a friend worked through a recent breakup. What began as a private discussion widened unexpectedly to include a waiter, who joined us in debating the meaning of true love. The exchange was earnest, awkward, and deeply human — and it unfolded entirely in Chinese. Moments like that made it clear how far we had already come.

There were also moments of cultural immersion that were less eloquent but no less instructive. For a few of us, a first experience of a northern Chinese bathhouse, for example, brought the principle of 入乡随俗 into sharp focus. These were reminders that learning a language also means learning to navigate unfamiliar norms with humility and a sense of humour.

As the term progressed, Beijing itself became more familiar. We visited sites that had once existed only as names in textbooks: the Summer Palace, Tiananmen, museums that traced long and complex histories. Many of us travelled together to Chongli in Hebei for skiing, discovering yet another facet of life here. Looking back now, the progress feels tangible. Our Chinese has developed in both accuracy and confidence. At the same time, there is a growing awareness of the next plateau ahead: that familiar tension between satisfaction and ambition that accompanies serious language study.

Now, as winter sets in, Beijing is transformed once again. Snow falls thickly, and as I write this, the view from the window is one of festive frost and quiet accumulation. Some of us will return home in January; others are planning longer journeys across China. Christmas approaches, bringing with it a sense of bittersweet distance from family traditions. Yet there is also warmth in knowing that we will



spend it together as classmates, our improvised family away from home.

If there is one thing this year has already taught us, it is that progress rarely arrives all at once. It emerges instead through accumulation: conversations, missteps, shared meals, unexpected friendships. We are no longer merely students of Chinese, but participants in lives lived through the language. And while much of the year still lies ahead, we move into it with a deeper confidence and a growing sense that this experience will continue to shape how we listen, speak, and understand long after we leave Beijing.



Hugo and I posing with some people in traditional dress in the Summer Palace (this was actually in September)

FOURTH YEAR UPDATES

Michaelmas has been a busy but happy time for the Fourth years as they have come back from a year in China and Taiwan. It was very exciting for me (Jeanne, a poor Combined studies student who spent the past year all alone in Cambridge) to be reunited with my classmates and get to know them better. What wonderful stories they have brought back for me from their travels!

Everyone is focusing now on completing their research for their dissertations, and it has been a pleasure to learn what each student is focusing on; from bar culture to politics, we are working hard at building the future of Chinese Studies academia…

The fourth-year comrades did begin the year in respect of traditions, however, and bravely lead the Long March, our Chinese Studies bar crawl that entails a grand total of **two** stops about five minutes away from each other. Luckily, the conversations were much better than the route planning and group retention hit at an all-time high for this annual tradition.

In between writing essays on very *very* cool bronze spoons and funerary cicadas for History of Art and discussing the filial piety of Monk Mulian in Cultural History, we had time to make one stop at the renowned Noodles+ on Hill Road for a few rounds of soup dumplings and various newly opened restaurants of Cambridge. This was done, of course, solely for the purpose of getting extra language practice...

We have also been studying and translating a wide variety of literature and newspapers from China, starting slow with Hong Kong short stories and somehow ending at Sci-fi Horror Web serials by the end of term (a transition somewhat on theme with my workload…). But let's not dwell on that and think of all the impressive things our fourth-year comrades have accomplished in these short eight weeks.

Our very own Molly has been elected Undergraduate Representative for the Department and has done a remarkable job helping students from all years and coordinating with the faculty to make life at AMES enjoyable. She took time to listen to every student and learn about their needs before conveying it all to the department in our student-staff meeting.

The fourth-year comrades have also been manning Cambridge University China Forum and organized some truly engaging events this term. Notably, a panel inviting our esteemed Prof Hurst to discuss whether the UK should consider China as a threat. We also had a fascinating Fireside chat with Paul French, author of *Midnight in Beijing*.

As a class, we would like to warmly thank our wonderful professors for feeding us with snacks all term. A special mentioned to Prof Sterckx's pistachio and white chocolate cookies that carried us through the translation of an entire chapter of the *Zhuangzi*. Their light, nutty crunch allowed all of us to grasp the meanings behind the

somewhat enigmatic Daoist classic. I would even go as far as to say it really helped us embrace the Great Way (of snacking).

All in all, it has been a wonderful term for us all at AMES, and though we are looking forward the end of year celebrations, and going home to see our families, we cannot wait to see what Lent 2026 will have in stock for us!

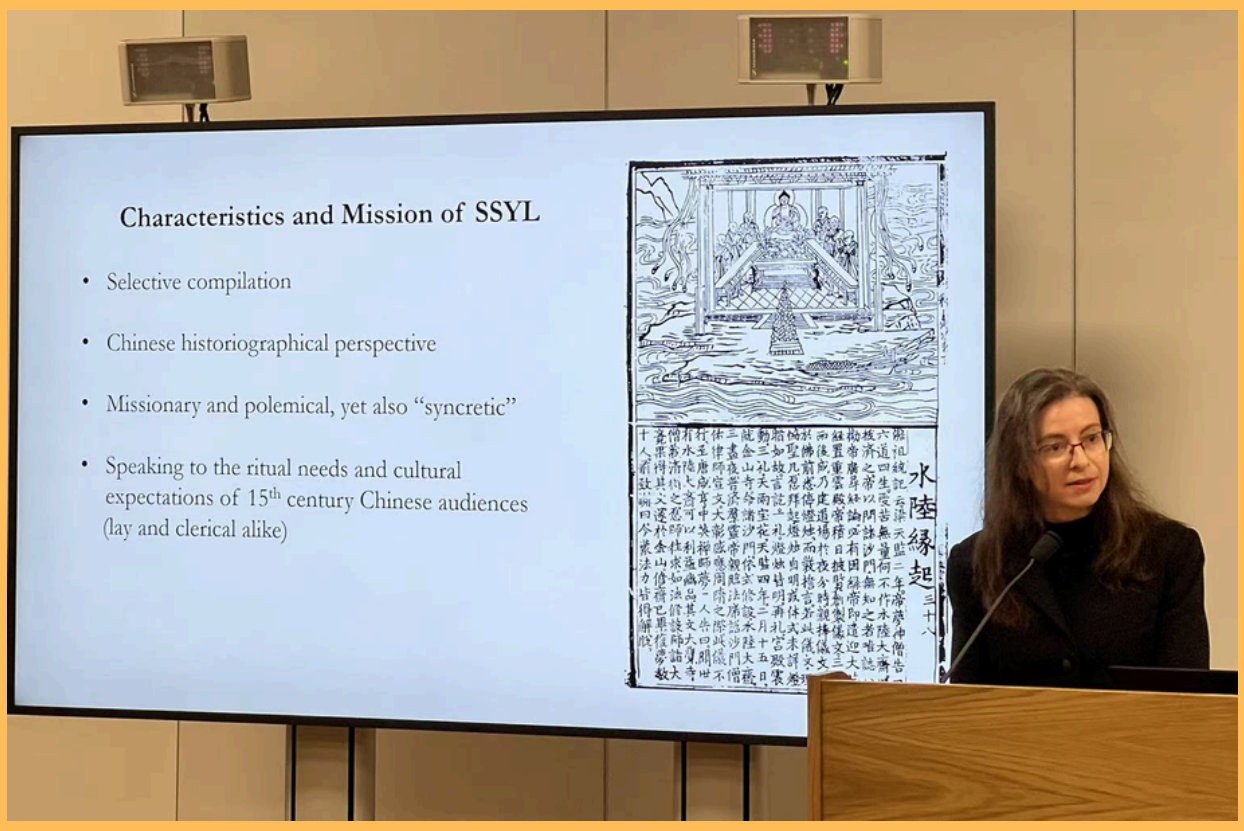


A few pictures of our "language practice" you may enjoy!

STAFF UPDATES

This Michaelmas, **Dr. Noga Ganany's** most recent study, titled "The Origins of Buddhism (Shishi yuanliu) and Illustrated Hagiographic Narratives in Ming China," was published in the December 2025 issue of the Journal of Chinese Religions (vol. 53, no. 2). In October, she gave a lecture in the "China Studies Seminar Series" at the University of Oxford's China Centre. Noga is currently in the early stages of writing a chapter on Buddhist illustrated literature for The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Literature (edited by Natasha Heller and Vanessa R. Sasson). This term, Noga continued organizing the "Book Culture in Buddhism and Beyond" lecture series and coordinating the China Research Seminar. On December 4th, Noga hosted the annual Yin-Cheng Distinguished Lecture on Buddhism, sponsored by the Tzu Chi Foundation, which featured Prof Jack Chia (National University of Singapore).

Professor Roel Sterckx was a visiting professor at Wuhan Textile University in September and gave papers at a conference on "Philosophies of Water and Water Management" (University of Bern, Switzerland), and the European Association for Chinese Studies 50th Anniversary Event at the Collège de France, Paris. He published "Fish Farming in Pre-modern China: A study and translation of two texts," in T'oung Pao 111.3-4 (2025): 353-396; and "Penser l'agriculture dans la Chine ancienne," in the Annuaire de l'EPHE, Section des Sciences Religieuses 132 (2025) : 93-100.



Dr. Hajni Elias taught the first half of C15: The Chinese Tradition: Chinese Art and Visual Culture, a course that traces the development of Chinese material culture from the Neolithic and Bronze Ages to the art of the Yuan dynasty. The course introduced students to a broad chronological and material spectrum, with lectures and discussions on archaic jades and ritual bronze vessels, Qin Shihuang's terracotta army and necropolis complex, Han dynasty tomb art, and ceramic traditions ranging from the Majiayao culture to the celebrated blue-and-white guan jars of the Yuan period.

In her spare time, Dr. Elias completed a chapter for a conference volume edited by **Dr. Avital Rom** and **Prof. Andy Meyer**, titled *A Very Lively Death*. The chapter supplements established scholarship on the visibility and status of children in early Imperial China through the examination of illustrations of children in tomb art and a close reading of a group of stelae inscriptions commemorating the death of a child from the Eastern Han dynasty (25 - 220 CE).



Horse-drawn carriage with mother, child and attendants. Eastern Han dynasty (25-220 CE). Ink on paper rubbing from ceramic brick. 37.5 x 47 cm. Excavated from a tomb at Qionglai, Sichuan province.

Images of children playing or accompanying an adult at the market, and expressions of the deep mourning on the death of a child recorded on stelae, represent the wishes and intentions to memorialise certain figures or events that were important to those who commissioned their making. As well as the increased visibility of children and the desire to preserve them in society's memory, the chapter highlights how these images and texts reflect a degree of concern about the future of the family that had just lost a potential heir. Funerals served the needs of the family who, with the passing away of an important member, looked for affirmation of life's order and continuance. This wish naturally considered the safety of the child's spirit in the afterlife, as well as seeking reassurance of the preservation of the family in this life.



Young Xu Aqu's memorial stele. Eastern Han dynasty (25-220 CE). Ink on paper rubbing from stone carving. Nanyang, Henan province.

In March 2025, **Dr. Avital Rom** hosted an international conference titled *A Very Lively Death: Death Culture and the Culture of the Living in Early China* in Columbia University, New York. Co-organised with **Professor Andrew Meyer** (Brooklyn College, CUNY), the conference was enabled thanks to a generous grant by the Tang Center for Early China. Eleven scholars from around the world (including AMES's own **Dr. Hajni Elias**, as well as Dr Rom) met to explore the curious, creative, and unexpected aspects of early Chinese approaches to death, and the close ties between the worlds of the living and the dead. Dr. Rom and Professor Meyer are currently editing the proceedings of the conference into a volume, which is due to be published with Columbia University Press. Dr Rom's talk-turned-chapter investigates communications between the dead and the living through sounds such as laments (sung by the living) or ghostly tunes (heard by the living and said to be sung by the dead), all within the context of early Chinese thought.

Also in March 2025, Dr. Rom published her edited volume titled *Disability and Impairment in Early China: Other Bodies* (Routledge). *Other Bodies* is the first collection of works fully dedicated to the study of disability in early Chinese history. Exploring the wide range of approaches towards physical and mental variations found in early Chinese texts and material sources, the volume sees disability and impairment as inseparable components within early Chinese notions of embodiment. Dr. Rom was invited to discuss the volume at a one-day colloquium at Tsinghua University (and online) titled *The Waves that Follow: New Books in Chinese Philosophy*. In June 2025, she also delivered a lecture at the biennial conference of the European Association for Chinese Philosophy (EACP) in Reykjavik, Iceland, which was linked to the topic of the volume. The theme of the conference was "Selfhood and Exteriority", and her talk was titled "A Sense of Self: Bodily Experience and Selfhood in Early China."

As the term of her Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship draws to a close, Avital is hoping to wrap up several ongoing projects, including the editing of *A Very Lively Death* and writing up several papers. She is planned to present her ongoing research in March 2026 at the Oxford China Seminar and the annual conference of the Association for Asian Studies (AAS), and continues to serve as Vice-Secretary General on the European Association for Chinese Studies (EACS).



Dr. Rom in Iceland



AN INTERVIEW WITH LI YUTONG, A SECOND YEAR PHD STUDENT

Thanks for meeting with me today! Let's start by talking about your research: how would you explain your project?

I study animal exhibitions and zoos in socialist China. What I'm specifically interested in is animal exhibitions rather than, for example, the breeding or husbandry of animals, so I'd specify that I'm interested in the zoo as a site of display and exhibition.

You say in 'socialist China' – are there any particular characteristics of how animals are exhibited at that time?

Yes, I actually get asked this question quite a lot. People will ask how socialist China differs from, for example, the UK or America in the '60s. I don't really have a very good answer to that. Of course, socialist China, as a society, was very different from other places at the time, but with regard to zoos specifically, I think they followed very similar principles when exhibiting animals.

So when you say 'socialist China' you're talking about chronology more than ideology?

Yes, people will say 'high socialist' or 'Maoist' China, but I just mean the 1950s to 1970s generally.

And do you see anything change over the decades you're looking at?

Of course! My main case study is Beijing Zoo, which in the early '50s was still not very established. The site itself had been displaying animals since 1906, so it had been some kind of zoo for a very long time, but after 1949 it was in a bad state and there weren't many animals left.

Because of the war?

Yes, mostly. Different regimes were ruling Beijing before 1949 and ownership of the zoo – actually it wasn't a zoo back then, but an experimental farm with a zoological garden – changed a lot. It became a natural history museum, then went back to the municipal government. Ownership changed hands quite a bit, so management before 1949 was very chaotic. During the war, many of the animals were killed or died due to lack of care; some also got distributed to other places in China. The origin story of Beijing Zoo is that after the war it only had a few monkeys and a blind parrot!



I'm not sure if it's true, but that's the story told in introductions to the zoo in that period.

Throughout the 1950s, Beijing Zoo was introducing new animals and a lot of new enclosures were being built, so it changed a lot from the late 1950s to the early '60s. I'm still working on it, but I think the source of their animals was also changing, as they gradually established animal collection system stations across the country. So the proportion of domestic zoo animals vs. those from the Soviet Union or other parts of the world was changing at this time.

However, in terms of exhibition principles, there wasn't a sense that 'before 1960 we display animals this way, and afterwards we display them that way'. I don't really see that from the materials that I have. Mostly they're trying to follow a principle that you'll see in a lot of zoos across the world: get rid of cages where possible, use moats and open spaces, and introduce plans like urban greening initiatives into zoos.

Are these ideas coming from dialogues they're having with zookeepers elsewhere?

There was some level of dialogue with other zookeepers. I've seen materials about Soviet experts lecturing to zookeepers in Beijing, Beijing was visited by biologists and zoologists from neighbouring countries like Indonesia, and occasionally western zoo experts or scientists visited in the '50s and '60s. Beijing Zoo was a responder to the International Zoo Yearbook (published by the London Zoological Society) for several years in the 1960s, so they must have some idea of what zoos around the world were doing.

But I also think there was a general flow of ideas across the world that they get less from someone telling them to do something and more because zoos tend to imitate other zoos. One example is the lion enclosure in Beijing Zoo, which is still in use now. Lion and Tiger Mountain is a centrepiece of fake rock that the designers created according to a photo of Budapest Zoo. Of course, they imitated it because Budapest was in the Eastern Bloc, but Budapest Zoo's centrepiece was built in the first decade of the twentieth century, following a broader European trend for rocky enclosures first established in a German zoo. Beijing Zoo also maintained a translation team that translates yearbooks, booklets and other foreign materials, so we can see how the flow of ideas influenced the development of zoos around the world.

Maybe this is a good time to ask about your methodology and materials. What do you use to conduct your research?

At this stage I'm mostly doing archival research. I've been trying to find materials mostly in the Beijing Municipal Archives and other provincial city level archives in China. I've also tried to do a sort of "Sinological garbology" by ordering secondhand books and old materials from online marketplaces like Kongfuzi.

It's really interesting to see how things that people discard can be quite useful to researchers! What else will you use?

Before the next stage of my research I'd like to do some oral history or interviews with people who visited the zoo in the period that I study, or people who worked there, but I'm still trying to find interviewees… Because I'm in the UK I'm also trying to work with materials that I can find here, so I've looked at articles by a British woman visiting zoos in China who wrote about it for UK magazines. I found a similar accounts by a Canadian game park entrepreneur. I'd like to keep working with these foreign materials as I'm doing my research outside China.

So, what are you looking to find out through these materials?

At the start, my central question was how ideas of nature and the environment were represented in animal exhibitions and this is still part of my central question. But as my studies go on, there's another question I'm really interested in. Zoos were immensely popular in China during this period, so popular that even foreign

newspapers wrote about how Chinese people were far more interested in zoos than people in other parts of the world. So there is this larger question of why people are so interested in looking at animals and how the zoo became such a popular institution during that time.

This is very interesting, as a layperson who's also fond of animals and zoos!

I think my main interest is in exhibition and display, but as I read more and more about zoos and animals I've kind of become more interested in them too!

So you might yet find your way into the thriving field of animal studies?

Yes!

Outside your research, you've also been our East Asian Studies PhD Representative. What has that been like? Has the burden weighed heavy upon your shoulders?

It is not much of a burden, to be fair – I nominated myself and I got the position because it was uncontested! As representatives, we're invited to some of the faculty meetings. We get to sit in and listen to what is happening and raise any concerns students may have raised.

Beyond that we're trying to do student activities because the MPhil representative, Karma, and I have found that although our department is called an East Asian Studies department, actually the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean studies people don't always know or talk to each other. We're trying to host more informal gatherings and coffee hours to get people talking to each other.



Scenes from the most recent EAS postgrad gathering

The end of term event you both organised was good for that, I got to meet lots of people I previously only knew by sight.

Yes, we're hoping to do it more regularly.

And then when you're not doing your research or your work as a representative, what do you like to do?

Oh, I spend a lot of time watching TV series and films.

What's your latest recommendation?

Let me see… I watched the new *Knives Out* movie, because I'm a fan of murder mysteries and detective fiction.

You're in a good country for that!

Yes, yes! I'm still trying to get to know the traditional lineage of British detective fiction. I think in China a lot of people are interested in Japanese murder mysteries. But I think those have developed a very distinct style that is quite different from the English language detective fiction… but yes, the new *Knives Out* movie is quite good.

I'll have to give it a watch. Thank you for your time, and all the best with your research!







THOMAS WADE SOCIETY UPDATES

On Friday 17th October, the Thomas Wade Society hosted a social in Beijing, bringing together six alumni living in China, five of the current year abroad students, Professor Hans and Susie van de Ven, and friends of the society.

The group enjoyed a lovely dinner together at The Orchard (果园), a beautiful farm site with restaurants and a hotel on the outskirts of Beijing, kindly organized by Thomas Kirkwood (1987), who generously sponsored much of the evening. Our resident wine master Fongyee (1999) also supplied some incredible bottles from vineyards across China.

It was delightful to hear stories, perspectives and advice exchanged throughout the evening between current students, young professionals, academics and established businesspeople. One highlight was Professor van de Ven towards the end of the dinner sharing heartfelt reflections on a life spent researching China, from what it was like as a young student buried in a combination of Chinese, Dutch and English dictionaries to the current state of Chinese Studies.

Our Cambridge Chinese Studies alumni society will continue to operate in line with the spirit of its remarkable members, like Professor van de Ven, keeping our group of regrettably scarce Chinese Studies students – past and present – connected.

While the study of China and the Chinese language continues to be neglected in the UK, including on the recent national curriculum review, it is great to see the activity of our community on both sides of the world.

We are planning to hold our next annual TWS Careers Event early in the new year which I hope will provide an opportunity for available alumni to gather in Cambridge.

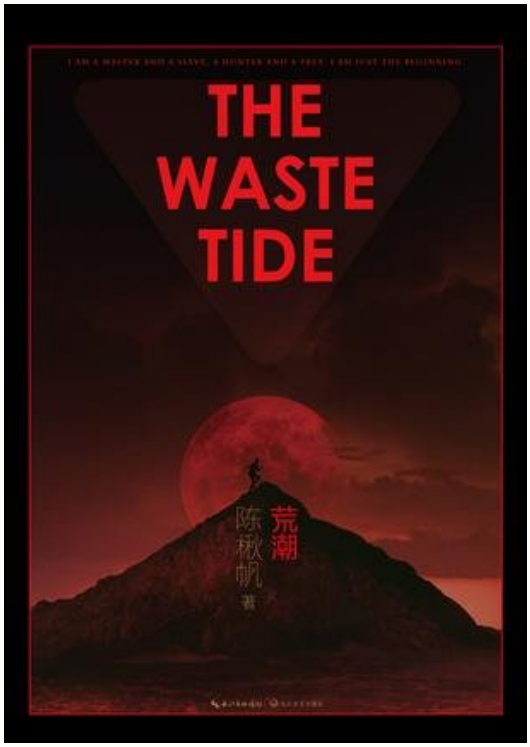
Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!
Morrison Cleaver, TWS Committee

Note: If you would like to join TWS, please see the information on the following page of this newsletter.

Book Club

The TWS Book Club will be meeting online on Sunday 21st January at 11:00 (UK) 19:00 (CN) to read Chen Qiufan's 陈秋帆 ecological dystopia, *The Waste Tide* 《荒潮》Don't worry if you don't get a chance to read the whole book – we'll be delighted to see you regardless.

Contact Sarah to join (thewadesociety@gmail.com).



UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
ALUMNI
THOMAS WADE SOCIETY

The **Thomas Wade Society** is the official alumni association of Chinese Studies at the University of Cambridge. We work to keep our special community connected through facilitating communication and organising a variety of events.

We have a mailing list, a WhatsApp group and a WeChat group through which we keep members connected. We also have a directory only for use by fellow alumni where you can find contact details for old 同学 with whom you may have lost contact. Please email **morrison.a.cleaver@gmail.com** to receive details on how to join these groups or to ask any questions.

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY
CHINA FORUM
劍 橋 大 學 中 國 論 壇

Founded by former second-year students, the **Cambridge University China Forum (CUCF)** hosts a range of exciting events relating to China. To find out more, please join their Facebook page **@camchina**, or visit their website **www.camchina.org** to join their mailing list.

Looking to join our seminar series mailing lists? Please email **ayc25@cam.ac.uk (Prof. Adam Chau)** to be added to the China Research Seminar series mailing list, and **ng462@cam.ac.uk (Dr Noga Ganany)** to join the Book Culture in Buddhism and Beyond mailing list.

The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology have recently launched a new project, the MAA Digital Lab which is now live at https://maadigitallab.org/

Over the coming years the Digital Lab platform will be a space that gathers together stories, research and reflection from across the Museum and beyond, and produces and commissions new content from diverse voices that take objects in the collections as a starting point for asking new questions and brings new insights.

In our first few posts, we're unravelling stories of the tea trade and tea consumption in Russia and China, the archaeology of maize alcohol in South America, and a Chinese deity's 180 year and 9000 kilometre journey through wars, museums, and mistaken identities.

We are looking for people interested in contributing research based on collections of East Asian archaeological and anthropological objects at MAA. If you are interested, or know someone who might be interested, then please contact **Aayushi Gupta** at **ag2151@cam.ac.uk** to discuss your ideas.

Daniel Crouch Rare Books (4 Bury Street, St James's, London SW1Y 6AB) is a specialist dealer in antique atlases, maps, plans, sea charts and voyages dating from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. Please scan the QR code to access our WeChat account where we post articles on our pieces in Chinese, or contact **Miss Qi Sun** at **qi@crouchrarebooks.com**

DECEMBER 2025 | VOLUME 7 ISSUE 1

**FACULTY OF ASIAN AND MIDDLE EASTERN STUDIES,
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For more information and updates, check out the Cambridge Chinese Studies twitter account: **https://twitter.com/ChinaCambridge**

Also, check out our library's twitter account for events and information: **https://twitter.com/ ames_library**

