CONFERENCE
Nature, espace et pouvoir dans la Chine ancienne

Prof. Paul R. Goldin, University of Pennsylvania
"Mimesis and Rulership in *Lüshi chunqiu*呂氏春秋"

Prof. Liang Cai, University of Notre Dame
"Emperor's Law and the Bureaucratic Empire:
Administrative Space as an Open Prison
in Early China (221 BCE - 23 CE)"

12 novembre 2025 à 9h30
Collège de France - Site Ulm
3 rue d'Ulm, Paris 5e
Entrée libre et retransmission sur Zoom

Sociétés et Humanités
Université de Paris

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Lien Zoom :

Conférence

Nature, espace et pouvoir dans la Chine ancienne

Prof. Liang CAI, Department of History, University of Notre Dame

Prof. Paul R. GOLDIN, Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Pennsylvania

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Collège de France – Site Ulm
3, rue d'Ulm, 75005 Paris

La conférence, qui se tiendra en anglais, sera retransmise sur Zoom :

https://cnrs.zoom.us/j/92334567567?pwd=F0sdG8DmadWsUbJaKwTFfqwjhQiUtb.1

ID de réunion : 923 3456 7567 (code secret : 6XRTsA)

Programme

9h30-10h30 Prof. Paul R. Goldin : "Mimesis and Rulership in *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋"

10h30-10h45 : discussion

11h-12h Prof. Liang Cai : "Emperor's Law and the Bureaucratic Empire: Administrative Space as an Open Prison in Early China (221 BCE - 23 CE)"

12h-12h15 : discussion

Conférence organisée par Laetitia Chhiv (UPC/CRCAO), avec le soutien du Centre de Recherche sur les civilisations d'Asie orientale, la Faculté Sociétés et Humanités de l'Université Paris Cité, et le GIS Asie.

Paul R. Goldin, "Mimesis and Rulership in *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋"

"Music of the Ancients" ("Guyue" 古樂), a chapter of *Lüshi chunqiu*, contains several passages describing the invention of music by imitating sounds emanating from nature (such as the wind and calls of birds). Is this mimesis? As with most pseudo-problems, the answer depends entirely on one's definitions. If mimesis means no more than "creating art that imitates nature," then obviously this is mimesis, but some authorities have insisted on restricting mimesis in such a way that only Western art could ever have it: mimesis presupposes a Platonic theory of Forms, a divine creator, and so on.

This paper will show that the examples of mimesis in "Music of the Ancients" not only are matched by similar statements in contemporaneous sources, but also figure rationally in the overall philosophy of *Lüshi chunqiu*. The first half will discuss iconicity in the form of sound symbolism, as well as examples of somatic mimesis, such as the song-and-dance suite called "Martial" ("Wu" 武), and conclude with the most famous example of mimesis of all: the invention of the writing system by the Cangjie 倉頡.

The second half addresses the question of why *Lüshi chunqiu* looks to nature for musical models. The answer is not difficult when we expand the focus and examine other chapters in the book. When the First Kings "fixed music" (*ding yue* 定樂), they were showing posterity how to reproduce the harmonies that accompanied the generation of the universe, lest we broadcast deviant songs of our own devising, which could cause both social and cosmic harm. These are not new ideas so much as skillful configurations of numbers and correspondences that everyone alive in that culture would have inhaled with the air. How could it be an accident that there are twelve pitch-standards and twelve months? Proceeding through the year is analogous to playing a chromatic scale. How could it be an accident that there are five tones in the pentatonic scale and Five Phases of *qi* 氣? And since the dynastic cycle is correlated with the progression of the Five Phases—perhaps the *only* new idea in *Lüshi chunqiu*—a lord with any parcel of sense will take care to regulate music in his realm.

How is a ruler supposed to proceed? The chapters on music do offer some suggestions beyond merely commanding musicians to listen to nature, which are reviewed in the final section.

Liang Cai, "Emperor's Law and the Bureaucratic Empire: Administrative Space as an Open Prison in Early China (221 BCE - 23 CE)"

This talk, based on newly mined data from newly unearthed manuscripts and traditional sources, explores convict politics in the early Chinese empires. Whereas a substantial number of bureaucratic personnel were convict laborers, assisting local officials, the central court reemployed numerous previously convicted individuals as high officials. The talk argues that convict politics emerged because the mutual responsibility system and high-performance-oriented law extensively criminalized people, including the innocent.

Scholars of Chinese history are well-acquainted with the use of convict labor for various state projects. This labor was pivotal in constructing vital infrastructure, serving expeditionary army, erecting grand monuments, and helping to establish settlements in newly acquired territories. By cross-examining excavated manuscripts and traditional transmitted records, this talk will focus on convict labor in local government. I argue that via a framework of legal regulations, structured institutional mechanisms, and systematic administrative processes, convict laborers were integrated as essential aides to officials in the realm of local governance. While being used as objects and instruments to sustain the political economy, convicts at the same time occupied crucial positions in operating the local governmental apparatus, regularly assisting technical bureaucrats in administering the populace. The administrative space in local government was an open prison. Contemporary historians have vividly depicted the brutality inherent in the exploitation of convict labor. In stark contrast, the statistical and succinct nature of administrative documents unearthed masked the grim reality faced by these laborers but projecting a veneer of civilized order over this group. Legal statutes and administrative records granted bureaucrats and scribe-functionaries the authority to control convicts; paradoxically, these documents also subjected the bureaucrats and scribe-functionaries to scrutiny. Failure to meet expected job performance standards could lead to criminalization, turning these officials into convicts themselves.