Exploring Textual Dating and Its Implications

A LECTURE BY
DR. HENG DU (THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA)

By addressing the meanings and implications of textual dating, this talk resumes an earlier conversation on the question of textual identity from the lecture series “On Altars of Soil.” As Christopher Foster has insightfully articulated, encounters with archaeological and manuscript evidence challenge scholars to reimagine the nature of texts. By synthesizing scholarship from different fields produced in the aftermath of “manuscript turns,” I propose a more descriptive and generalizable approach to the dating of texts, which is predicated on an alternative approach to the mapping of relationships between the dating of an individual witness (e.g., a manuscript) and what is conventionally thought of as the dating of a text (e.g., the publication date of *Mrs. Dalloway* or the dating of the *Analects*). The latter, I suggest, usually does not indicate the timing of a text’s origination, but that of its finalization—in other words, a moment of transformation in how a text is disseminated, transmitted, and interpreted within a specific social context. I will turn to the early histories of texts such as the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* as test cases.

Heng Du, Assistant Professor in the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Arizona, is a book historian specializing in the study of Early China. Her current book project, *Paratext and the Transformation of Early Chinese Writings*, expands the concept of “paratext” to locate the redactional intentions of the nameless thinkers and compilers involved in manuscript production. She is also interested in the comparative study of book cultures in the ancient world. Of her existing publications, the article that holds particular relevance to this talk is “The Author’s Two Bodies: The Death of Qu Yuan and the Birth of *Chuci Zhangju*.” *T’oung Pao* 105 (2019): 259–314.