

China Research Seminar Series (Michaelmas 2020)

A Multitude of Objects

Re-Materialising the Study of Chinese Religious Life



Dr Adam Yuet Chau

(University of Cambridge)

5pm, 11 Nov, 2020 (Wednesday) via Zoom (pre-registration required)

Please register in advance for this seminar:

<https://zoom.us/meeting/register/tJ0pdO6vrj4tHdclxGH85dANe8Lv8pamHlpg>

After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about joining the meeting.

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Abstract

Religious life everywhere is impossible without objects, yet the study of religious life in China as well as elsewhere often proceeds as if they took place in a material vacuum. In this paper I propose a re-materialisation of the study of Chinese religious life, arguing that focusing on how people make and use objects in religious life is the best avenue in understanding how people *do* religion on the ground. I will illustrate with examples from my ethnographic fieldwork in Shaanbei (northern Shaanxi Province) and Taiwan (deity palanquins, exorcist towers, trucks displaying giant pig offerings, etc.). I will also introduce a book project entitled *Chinese Religious Life in 100 Objects*, under the auspices of the Society for the Study of Chinese Religions (<https://chinesereligions.org/>), which I am coordinating (with 100 scholars each contributing an entry on a particular object).

Speaker

Adam Yuet Chau received his PhD in sociocultural anthropology from Stanford University in 2001 and is currently Reader in the Anthropology of China in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Cambridge (<https://www.ames.cam.ac.uk/people/dr-adam-yuet-chau>). Chau specialises in the study of Chinese religious life, especially practices belonging to what is often called ‘popular religion’ (i.e., religious life amongst the common people). He is the author of *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China* (2006) and *Religion in China: Ties That Bind* (2019). He also edited *Religion in Contemporary China: Revitalization and Innovation* (2011) and co-edited ‘Cumulus: Hoarding, Hosting and Hospitality’ (special issue of *L’Homme*, 2019). He is also interested in developing conceptual models that help us better understand religious life in comparative frameworks (e.g., ‘modalities of doing religion’). One of his outreach ambitions is to stop people from asking ‘How many religions are there in China?’.