

Smelly Ghosts and Mutton-Reeking Barbarians

The Olfactory Imagination of the Other in Medieval China



Dr Flavia Xi FANG

(Needham Research Institute/University of Cambridge)

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Room LG18 (Faculty of Law, Sidgwick Site)

Abstract

This talk will follow one of our most visceral and evocative senses and discuss how people in medieval China conceived and made use of smells. Specifically, I will focus on olfactory perceptions of the other in medieval China and discuss how the frontier peoples began to be consistently associated with the odour of mutton from the mid-eighth century. I further argue that this olfactory imagination of the ethno-cultural other paralleled with that of the extra-human other – ghosts, shapeshifters, and pests. Both signalled alterity and alerted the audience to a potential threat to the established social, political, as well as moral order. From the *zhiguai* stories to Du Fu's poems and beyond, smell's perceived invasive and transformative trait made it a uniquely apt means to delineate hierarchies of power and negotiate cultural identities. By drawing attention to the views around odours in the past, this talk also aims to show the ways in which a sensory approach helps us come close to the “mentalities” and experiences of people who lived in a past time and place.

Speaker

Flavia Xi Fang (方希) is currently a Ho Peng Yoke Research Fellow at Needham Research Institute and Robinson College, University of Cambridge. She recently completed her PhD at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Cambridge, with a thesis titled “Navigating the Smellscape in Medieval China”. She is the author of a monograph in Italian, *La luna nell'acqua: metafore oniriche tra la letteratura cinese ed europea* (2020), and several upcoming articles on ritual, gender, and Silk Road exchanges in pre-modern China.