

In Melon Time

Rethinking Cultural History with the Humble Gua 瓜



Professor Christopher Rea

(University of British Columbia)

2pm, 27 April (Thursday), 2023 (in-person seminar)

Room LG18 (Faculty of Law, Sidgwick Site)

Abstract

What is a researcher to do with the obvious? What latent potential might we find in all those ubiquitous things that we see but don't notice, those self-evident things that we take for granted? Conversely, what do we do when we identify a supersign—China, say—a category of thought or analysis that is so broad that it seemingly defies unitary explanation or theorization? This talk will map out the cultural associations accrued by *gua* 瓜 (cucurbit), a vast genus that is as diverse in its metaphorical usages as in its species. The humble *gua* has been used to represent ideas of consequence, both physical—human anatomy, China, the earth—and conceptual—moral peril, wealth, glory days. *Gua* are a vehicle for rethinking the taxonomies that drive cultural historiography, the distinctions scholars make between here and there, this and that. In particular, this talk will focus on how Chinese (and non-Chinese) sources have used melons, pumpkins, and squash to represent time itself.

Speaker



[Christopher Rea](#) is Professor of Chinese and former Director of the Centre for Chinese Research at the University of British Columbia. He is the creator of the Chinese Film Classics Project, whose website [ChineseFilmClassics.org](#) hosts the world's largest online collection of early Chinese films with English subtitles, as well as film clips, essays, links, and an online course on early Chinese films. The website and the course are companions to his book [Chinese Film Classics, 1922-1949](#) (Columbia, 2021), which covers fourteen films, and has a Chinese edition forthcoming. Rea is also the author of [The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China](#) (California, 2015) and the co-author of [Where Research Begins: Choosing a Research Project That Matters to You \(and the World\)](#) (with Thomas Mullaney; Chicago, 2022), which has multiple foreign language editions forthcoming. He is currently working on a second volume of [The Book of Swindles](#) (Columbia, 2017) and on a cultural history of *gua* 瓜.

* Propaganda poster image: "The vegetables are green, the *gua* turgid, the yield abundant" (Jin Meisheng 金梅生, 1959 [1963 reprint]). IISH Collection BG E11/992.