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Dissertation Abstracts*

Nicholas Constantino. Ph.D. University of California, Berkeley, 2025.
Navigating Precedents: Law and Ritual in Early Imperial China.

Navigating Precedents constructs an account of the force and functions of legal, ritual, and classical precedents, through close analysis of court debates during which Han officials invoked them to champion policies, to reform rites, or to assess crimes. Each chapter considers the extent of the force of Han precedents in Han policy debates, the strategies through which policymakers challenged this force, and the roles that the Classics reportedly played in arguments. Chapter 1 examines a series of arguments that Han emperors should abandon their commitments to following the precedents set by an honored forebear, Emperor Wu (r. 141–86 BCE). This chapter shows that, throughout the Western Han, it was far from settled as to whether many of Emperor Wu's precedents should be deemed binding or problematic. Chapter 2 challenges the common assumption that Han law was an extension of the ruler's will. As it shows, Han legal thinkers were keenly aware that legal precedents could easily be inappropriately manipulated, often to the detriment of the ruler's authority. For this reason, fair legal administration often required adherence to principles that transcended both obligations to the ruler and to following the letter of the written laws. Turning then to ritual, Chapter 3 examines the changing uses of the posthumous title of "Honored Ancestor" (*zong* 宗) and the Han and pre-Han precedents that policymakers invoked in debates over its meaning. While most scholars have assumed that these debates were settled by recourse to citations from an orthodox classical tradition, this chapter instead considers how court members constructed the meanings to be attached to this ritual honor through successive reforms, and how the political concerns that guided these reforms likely shaped court members' interpretations of the Classics, rather than the reverse.

Robert Allan Jones. Ph.D. University of Louisville, 2023.
The Conceptual Compression of Space and Time as Intimated in the Depiction of the Horse in China, Circa 1250 BCE–CE 400.

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The Conceptual Compression of Space and Time as Intimated in the Depiction of the Horse in China examines the horse in ancient China, from before its domestication in the thirteenth century BCE to the fourth century CE. The revolutionary utilization of the mounted horse influenced contemporary concepts of time and space, which can be observed in both language and art, especially from the fourth century BCE on.

The Introduction reviews the history of equid domestication in Eurasia, horse-drawn vehicles and riding, then explores the introduction of horse-drawn chariots from Shang China to their decline in Eastern Zhou. Chapter 1 examines the rise of cavalry in China in the fourth century BCE, and looks at the administrative, martial, symbolic and religious roles given to the horse up to the Han dynasty. Chapter 2 examines the early Chinese worldview as dictated by space and geography, and how the horse came to help to expand that world. Chapter 3 looks at early concepts of time and how they evolved up to the Han, and how the "language of the horse" supports this. Chapter 4 examines in depth the evolution in the rendition of the horse from the Late Shang to the post-Han periods, an evolution which reflected and echoed changes in perceptions of time, speed and duration. The concluding Chapter 5 summarizes the material and argues that the utilization of the horse was a force that helped bring about contemporary changes in spatio-temporal conceptions in the early imperial age.

In sum, the evidence provided by this research into the art, language, historical sources and philosophical writings supports the writer's conclusion that the horse, as a revolutionary technological mechanism (albeit of flesh and blood) of communication and war, was instrumental in the formation of empire, and that the horse, due to its inherent characteristics of speed and power, came to be expressed, through its artistic renderings, in writing and language, as embodying a vector for change, in bringing distant provinces and new conquests closer together, in the temporal sense, by breaking down barriers of time and space, and that the horse became the ideal vehicle by which the deceased could travel to the world beyond death.

Kirie Stromberg. Ph.D. University of California, Los Angeles, 2023.
Music and Political Authority in Early China and Japan: Pre- and Protohistory

Music and Political Authority in Early China and Japan traces the foundations of East Asian music in the archaeological record, presenting a macroscopic survey of excavated musical instruments from Jiahu through the Taosi cultures in China (ca. 7000–1800 BC) and from the second half of the Late Jōmon through the Kofun period in Japan (ca. 1500 BC–600 AD). Primary sources of knowledge are the instruments themselves, as well as some depictions of musicians in the Japanese case. The musical material culture of such early periods tends to reflect the music of the elite, often preserved under special circumstances (such as tombs or intentional burials) or made from materials (such as bone, then bronze) likely prized in part for their durability. I organize chapters based on the materials from which instruments were made, a choice that evokes the organological framework of the *ba yin* ("eight sonorous substances") from Late Warring States and early imperial texts (Chapter 1). Curiously bone, not one of the sonorous substances, is central to the musical mortuary assemblages of the Chinese Neolithic across cultures of both the Yellow and Yangzi

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river valleys but was no longer used to make instruments thereafter (Chapter 2). This is likely because by the Longshan period (ca. 2300–1800 BC) ensembles consisting of stone chimes as well as alligator-skin and pottery drums had already become closely associated with authority at the major proto-urban center of Taosi (Chapter 3). Similarly, bronze *dōtaku* bells enabled social cohesion across groups during the middle Yayoi of Western Japan (ca. 200 BC, Chapter 4), although *dōtaku* production ended after the Yayoi. Zithers became definitive of elite culture by the beginning of the Kofun period (ca. 300 AD, Chapter 5). Juxtaposing the musical material culture of China and Japan at parallel stages of social development allows for the preliminary observation of three flexible phases in the relationship between music and the formation of East Asian society: I. Physio-musical phase, II. Visio-musical/spectacle phase, and III. Performer-audience phase (Chapter 6, Conclusions). This framework suggests that anthropological questions fundamental to the archaeology of human prehistory can be integrated productively with the study of ancient music.

Liu Xuan. Ph.D. Columbia University, 2025.
Strategizing Kinship: Elites, Lineage Practices, and the Political Changes in Early China (c. 1045–453 BCE).

Strategizing Kinship examines how elite lineage organizations varied in response to political changes from the Western Zhou to the Spring and Autumn period (c. 1045–453 BCE). It challenges the traditional "familistic state" model, which assumes that Chinese kinship organizations were autonomous, stagnant, and entirely isolated from the political sphere. Drawing on the theory of "practical kinship," it argues that lineage practices functioned as a significant strategy for the elite stratum to maintain status within a changing political structure. Incorporating paleographic, received, and archaeological sources, *Strategizing Kinship* focuses on three types of lineage practices in Zhou society: the construction of internal relations, genealogical compilation, and marriage. Chapter One discusses the fundamental organizational and personnel features of the Zhou elite lineage, showing that it typically consisted of the household of the lineage head and those of junior members. It also divides a variety of dependent laborers into two categories in terms of the degree of dependency on the elite lineages. Chapter Two traces the evolution of the internal relations within the elite lineage, suggesting that the Western Zhou lineage was internally differentiated, with the head exercising supreme authority, while such hierarchy gradually dissolved in the Spring and Autumn due to frequent interstate and intra-state conflicts. Chapter Three investigates a variety of genealogical practices. Despite varying styles due to different political settings, these genealogies served as social capital through which elites gained political leverage. Chapter Four discusses the elite lineages' marriage patterns and their different political motivations. Through these case studies, this dissertation shows that Zhou lineage organizations were deeply embedded in the contemporary political world and exhibited a remarkable political adaptability. Moreover, this dissertation offers methodological insights into the study of the state formation in ancient societies.

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Christopher Yang. Ph.D. Brown University, 2025.
A Vital Matter: Essence 精, Spirit 神, and Self-Cultivation in Early China.

A Vital Matter examines the concepts of essence (*jing* 精) and spirit (*shen* 神), two forms of refined *qi* 氣, in the self-cultivational discourse of late Warring States and early imperial China. Already by the fourth century BCE, some authors understood the human being and its relationship to the world in these terms. They would remain central in the subsequent history of Chinese medicine and religion. A concern with essence and spirit—especially for reasons of "nourishing life" (*yang sheng* 養生) and gaining extraordinary powers—is visible across the early literature. Drawing on a range of texts that date between the fourth century BCE and first century CE, with particular attention to the Mawangdui 馬王堆 medical manuscripts and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and *Huainanzi* 淮南子, *A Vital Matter* discusses the cultural sources and social pressures that shaped these two keywords. In doing so, it brings into view different conceptions and practices of the self from this formative period and sheds light on the identities and relationships of practitioners within the crowded field of early self-cultivation.

The Introduction lays out the project and its salient methodological issues. In particular, it discusses the relationship between text and practice and the dissertation's reading of "Masters texts" against the grain of their common reception as "philosophical texts." Chapter One fleshes out key associations and images that structured early conceptions of *qi*, essence, spirit, and their "biospiritual" cultivation. Chapter Two shows how biospiritual cultivation of various kinds—described in medical texts like the *Shiwen* 十問 and *He yinyang* 合陰陽 as well as Masters texts like the *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi*—reprised the practical idiom of sacrificial religion, trading on a parallel between the spirit that flows within the human form and those spirits propitiated in ritual spaces. Chapter Three turns to the "Nei ye" 內業, *Zhuangzi*, and *Huainanzi* and their recurring imagery of adepts who range to the limits of the cosmos and whose influence extends far beyond their bodies. It demonstrates how the material workings of essence and spirit were central to their authors' understanding of the relationship between body, mind, and cosmos, and underwrote claims in those texts about extraordinary powers. Chapter Four examines the denigration of those who merely "nourish the body" (*yang xing* 養形) in the *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi*. Both elevate instead those who nourish essence and spirit to attain extraordinary powers and a connection to the cosmos and the Way (*dao* 道). It argues that the authors of this polemic, the "spirit cultivators," saw themselves as being in competition with physicians—authors of medical texts like those from Mawangdui, which draw on the same biospiritual idiom—for elite patronage. The rhetoric of these spirit-cultivators (e.g., both the *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi* feature adepts who tend to their vital matter and resemble withered wood and corpses in their physical aspect) challenges the physical ideal and hygienic aims of the physician. Chapter Five takes a similar approach in order to situate these spirit cultivators alongside the masters of esoterica (*fang shi* 方士). It interprets their claims and rhetoric against what can be gathered, chiefly from the *Shi ji* 史記 and *Han shu* 漢書, about those shadowy figures.

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