



How to Avoid Wars: Diplomatic Strategies in Early China

16:15-18:00, Thursday, June 01, 2023

University of Zurich, Room ZUB 416, Zürichbergstrasse 4, 8032 Zürich

Guest Lecture by Prof. Dr. Armin Selbitschka, LMU Munich

Premodern Chinese diplomacy often is equated with the notion of the so-called “tributary system.” In a nutshell, this means that China’s foreign partners only were interested in being handsomely rewarded with heaps of silk and gold for offering tribute, but actually had no interest in bending to the will of the Chinese court. Chinese emperors, in turn, were content with receiving exotic curiosities from all corners of the known world as tangible confirmation of their divinely sanctioned mandate to rule “All Under Heaven.”

Yet, that’s not the whole story. Transmitted sources roughly dating from the 4th c. BCE through the 5th c. CE paint a considerably more complex picture of early Chinese foreign relations. Indeed, the purported tributary system of early imperial China (starting from 221 BCE) did not significantly differ from previous diplomatic practices. Tribute and (counter)gifts continued to play vital (real)political

roles rather than having been mere charades. Diplomacy was not at all an empty exercise in pretense by all parties involved. On the contrary, more often than not it accomplished exactly what diplomacy is supposed to accomplish: it prevented wars and secured peace, at least for the time being.

Prof. Dr. Armin Selbitschka has taught at LMU Munich, Stanford University, and New York University (NYU) Shanghai prior to becoming Professor (Chair) of Ancient Chinese History and Archaeology at LMU Munich. He is currently finishing a book manuscript on the social and religious implications of early Chinese mortuary practices. He is also writing a volume on the social significance of food and foodways in Early China for the Cambridge Elements series at Cambridge University Press.

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