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Imagining the Divine Presence

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Time: 16:30-18:00

Venue: 2/F, Art Museum East Wing,
 Institute of Chinese Studies , CUHK



Using the example of the cult for Lord (or Emperor) Guan 關公/帝 and some additional materials, I look at the many ways in which people in traditional China made the presence of their deity tangible. Historians of religious culture usually analyse written stories about the deity from a narrative perspective, as information on why people worshipped. We leave it to art historians to study material culture, who tend to concentrate on the more prestigious examples, but do increasingly take the religious context of such materials into account. In this talk, I wish to take both texts and material culture as evidence on the same thing, namely the way in which people imagined the actual presence of their deity. As is well-known, though equally often overlooked in research practice, images were living manifestations of the deity, but at the same time they will also have served as aids for the worshipper in imagining what the deity should look like. In addition, the deity might make himself manifest through sounds, smell, touch and otherwise. Once we start paying attention, there is a recurrent focus in accounts of meetings with the deity on the very concrete nature of his manifestation, observable to the outside world, rather than some internal imagination. The lecture presents materials from a larger study of the cult of Lord Guan that I hope to finish this summer.



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