

Seminar SAW History of Science, History of Text, 2011-2016

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Workshop “On a tomb sealed around 186 BCE in China and containing a “math book”

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What can you do with a Calendar? Extracting Facts, Stories, and Information otherwise pertinent to your own Field from a Table of Dates

Abstract – The ‘calendar’ is one of the most common genres of manuscript extant from the Qin-Han era, and it is also one of the least studied. This is for good reason: even in the rare cases where they provide support for noting matters of public/private business and taboos, calendars barely have any story to tell except indirectly, in aggregate, via mathematical analysis. Rather than delve ourselves into questions as foreboding as the nature and workings of time, most of us rely upon the analyses of others to make use of these documents, particularly as relates to dating the excavated corpora to which they belong. In this talk, I shall provide a layman’s summary of what has been done with such sources to date and what use I think that any scholar of early China might derive from them. To begin, I will provide a typology of ‘calendars’ recovered from this period and discuss where the untitled lunation table from Zhangjiashan tomb 247 fits into the broader scheme of civil timekeeping. From there, we will narrow our focus to Zhangjiashan and examine how this specific ‘calendar’ relates to the rest of the tomb contents in terms of textual production, date, and function. Importantly, we will ask, for example, how the date of excavated ‘calendars’ are determined and what relationship we should expect them to bear with adjacent materials; we will also ask what handwriting analysis might reveal about the copying of the more evidently ‘personal’ texts in a given tomb. Above all, the question will be ‘How do I, as a scholar of administrative, medical, philosophical, or literary text, make simple use of calendars, and what rules of thumb should I bear in mind when assessing.