A Shift of Values: How Did a Virtuous Minister of 7th Century BCE Become a Licentious Man in 11th Century China?

This talk examines the historical trajectories of moral and political thought, particularly of the notion of loyalty, from pre-imperial to Middle Period China, by way of a review of commentaries and literary writings on an individual Xun Xi (d. 651 BCE). The early narratives and comments (from the 4th century BCE to the 1st century BCE) on Xun Xi all highly praised him, celebrating him as an ideal model of a loyal minister. However, as ancient times give way to Middle Period, scholars started to challenge this consensus. According to them, Xun Xi, with blind trustworthiness, lacked true loyalty or integrity. His fatal flaw came from his devotion to an indulgent ruler and the ruler’s sexual favorite, rather than to the interests of the institution and the whole state. Thus, this talk will analyze the impetus and implications behind the penchant for the re-evaluation of Xun Xi, through which to explore a shift of intellectual and political values beginning from the 9th century and especially in the Song dynasty (960–1279).

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