

UCSC Classical Studies presents



Professor Yiqun Zhou
Stanford University

“Helen and the Chinese Femmes Fatales”

Monday, May 19 at 5 p.m.
Humanities 1, Room 210

Refreshments at 4:30 and reception to follow the lecture
Free parking for lecture in the lower Cowell-Stevenson parking lot

Helen, the Spartan queen whose abduction by Paris the prince of Troy ignited the ten-year-long Trojan War, may be regarded as the femme fatale par excellence. The prominence of Helen's images in the Greek tradition is as notable as their complexity and ambiguity. Alongside commonplace condemnations of Helen as the cause of a devastating war, there are also enduring efforts to exonerate, to redeem, and even to exalt her act. Ancient China had its own lore of femmes fatales. The fall of each of the three earliest Chinese dynasties is blamed on a woman, the evil consort of the last monarch. The judgment passed on the three women in the sources is invariably negative, and their stories are routinely invoked as cautionary lessons for later rulers and noble houses about the potential dangers of female beauty. Whereas the indeterminacy of Helen's images perpetuated over time and became ever more elusive with the proliferation of representations, the portrayals of the three classical Chinese femmes fatales conformed to one broad pattern that was only clarified and reinforced with the multiplication of texts. In this talk, I shall illustrate the contrast just laid out and attempt to explain how it came into being, thereby illuminating some important differences between the conceptions of beauty and the contexts and functions of literary and historical writings in the two ancient societies.



Yiqun Zhou is Associate Professor in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures (and, by courtesy, of Classics) at Stanford University. Her research interests include comparative studies of China and Greece as well as Chinese and comparative women's history, early Chinese literature and history, and Chinese and English fiction (1600-1900). Her recent publications include *Festivals, Feasts, and Gender Relations in Ancient China and Greece*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) and “Spatial Metaphors and Women's Religious Activities in Ancient China and Greece,” in Shubha Pathak, ed., *Figuring Religions: Comparing Ideas, Images, and Activities*. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013).

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