Reforming the Calendar:  
The Ming Empire’s Stairway to Heaven Through the Jesuits

Dr. Dongfeng Xu (Visiting Assistant Professor, EALL)  
Friday, December 6, 2013, 3:00-4:00 PM  
Center for Korean Studies Auditorium

Taking to be its focal point the Jesuit participation in the calendar reform during the Chongzhen’s 崇禎 reign (1628-1644), this paper purports to argue how the foreign missionaries’ work and presence in China reveal certain instability and breach in Confucian ideology of cultural supremacy. Because the traditional Chinese society was by and large agricultural, calendar, to use the words by Joseph Needham, “was of prime importance.” Furthermore, the centrality of calendar in the political and religious life in China determined that the making of calendar as well as its reform in traditional China was a highly controlled enterprise or, as it was often the case, a complete government monopoly. In Ming dynasty, for instance, to assure that calendar making remains to be a carefully guarded skill and knowledge exclusively preserved in and utilized by the Imperial Astronomical Bureau, the state law determined that the Bureau’s professional staff were hereditary.

From this perspective, the Jesuit involvement in the late Ming calendar reform indicates first of all the Chinese empire’s dependence on the missionaries for their advanced science and technology, specifically, their modern mathematics. This dependence of the empire on some foreign missionaries of course represents a reversal of attitude—switching from hostility, with which the Confucians had been seeking to deport the Jesuits from the country, to hospitality, with which the Confucian officials, despite their resentment of the foreign missionaries, opened up the empire’s most sensitive institution to the foreigners and made it their workplace.

To further interpret this act of hospitality, though still partial and reluctant, the paper will argue that this opening to the foreigners—the dependence on the foreigners’ help to reform the calendar—can be taken to mean that it was the foreigners’ work that will keep open the channel of communication between the Chinese court and its deity or deities. It means that the Chinese ruler, the so-called son of Heaven, would receive his mandate from Heaven only when there was assistance from the missionaries.

Dongfeng Xu is visiting assistant professor at EALL for 2013-2014. He earned his PhD in comparative literature with specialization of literature and religion from the University of Chicago in 2011. His dissertation discusses the China-West encounter that began with the Jesuit missionaries’ arrival in China in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. His research interest includes pre-modern Chinese fiction, traditional Chinese poetry, Confucian thought and comparative studies of cross-cultural exchanges between China and the West. He has taught at the different universities in North America including University of Alberta, Canada and at Emory University in Atlanta, GA. Before coming to UHM, he did research for a year as a post-doctoral fellow at the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, Academia Sinica, Taiwan.

The talk is open to the public, and light refreshments will be served.  
For further information, please contact Sang Yee Cheon (scheon@hawaii.edu) or Saeko Shibayama (sshiba@hawaii.edu).