

Posthumanism and Premodern China

By its simple non-hyphenation, “posthumanism” tends to suture two sets of theoretical concerns which ought to be separable. *Post-humanism* (understood as the critique of the “human” as a privileged category pretending to absolute difference from the animalistic, while erasing gendered and cultural difference) is often easily conflated with *posthuman-ism* (attempts to theorize technological interventions in the human, such as cyborgs or genetically-engineered beings). While specialist discourse on the subject is very clear about the distinction between these topics, the imaginative prominence of the latter (conventionally distinguished as “transhuman”) has tended to attract scholars of science fiction, and of the philosophy of science, to these ongoing debates, while marking off the topic as not of much concern to those trained in premodern fields. There is an implied teleology to the structure of debate: only as we evolve beyond a set of traditional genetic limitations can we properly focus on how the “human” is a questionable category.

This panel proposes to open a discussion on how posthumanist critique, in any guise, might be relevant to scholars of premodern Chinese literatures. Although distinct from the post-Renaissance humanisms of Europe, construction of the category of the human (as well as imagination of its alternatives) was just as important to premodern China as to the West. Without any ideological presuppositions, we wish to ask: in what ways has that category functioned to structure premodern Chinese literary and social discourse, and whether the pre-technological imagination of transhuman figures served to deconstruct the category of the “human”, or perhaps to reinforce it?

Possible starting-points might include:

- Animal-spirit seductresses in the *zhiguai* genre, and non-human gender
- Liezi’s “robot” and other golem-like figures in philosophical discourse
- Religious Daoist imagination of the body and its cosmological correspondences
- Sun Wukong as beast/demigod in narrative and performance
- Theorization of humanity in political discourse on non-Chinese ethnic groups
- Ge Hong’s *Lie Xian Zhuan* and hagiographical representations of transcendence
- Buddhist theological debate about the possibility of plant-based mind
- *Peony Pavilion* and the humanistic sublimation of necrophilia
- Human/natural parallelism as anthropocentrism in classical poetics
- Rereading *Story of a Stone* as the story of a stone
- Deformed/amputated bodies and the Confucian family order
- Li Zhi’s revision of *xinxue*, and late-imperial construction of the passionate human

Please send abstracts to Daniel Fried (dfried@ualberta.ca) no later than March 15. Scholars accepted to the panel will need to have MLA membership current by April 7.