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“Misinterpreting Fossil Evidence: On the Discovery of ‘Dragon Fossils’ in China (1915-1930)”

Abstract:

In 1915, stalagmites in a cave in Hubei, China, were mistaken for dinosaur and dragon fossils. Soon, news spread throughout the Western world, attracting attention from Western scientists. As the Chinese warlord Yuan Shikai learned of the incident through translations and photographs in journal articles, he saw the timely appearance of the “relics” as an auspicious sign for him to step up as an emperor. Involved in this incident as geological investigator, Zhang Hongzhao was inspired to write the book *The Interpretation of Three Spirits* (三靈解) (1919), in which he reconstructed the zoological characteristics of the mythological dragon, phoenix, and Qilin through their etymologies and references in Chinese classics. This presentation shows how Zhang appropriates dragon etymologies to affirm Sino-Babylonian theories of Chinese origins. Rather than a myth or a political symbol, Zhang’s dragon is an etymological fossil open to imaginative exploitation and exegesis.

Bio:

Born and raised in Hong Kong, Joy is a fifth-year PhD student in architecture history. Her research explores geology as antiquity from early nineteenth- and twentieth-century British colonial Hong Kong and China. She received a B.A. in Comparative Literature (with a focus in German) from Middlebury College in 2017, and is a graduate of The New Normal program at Strelka Institute, Moscow (2018). Previously, she has taught in the Department of Architecture at the University of Hong Kong, as well as in the Department of Design at Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

After working as a curatorial assistant at Tai Kwun Contemporary in 2019, she has continued the practice of art writing and translation, collaborating with many local Hong Kong artists as well as international curators such as Raimundas Malašauskas. In her spare time, she practices long-distance open-water swimming. In 2022, she completed a 30km course at the South of Lantau Island, Hong Kong.