



University
of Exeter

Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences
Global China Research Centre & Centre for Political Thought
Spring 2025 Guest Lecture

The Social and Cultural History of Sound in China

Speaker (In-person):
Professor Barend ter Haar

Time: Thursday 6 February,
2 – 3 PM

Venue: Seminar Room 1,
Digital Humanities Lab,
Queen's Building, Streatham
Campus

A sound sample: [蒹葭 – 上古汉语读诗经](#)
"Jian Jia" from *Shijing* in Old Chinese

Professor Barend ter Haar taught Chinese Studies at the University of Hamburg, with a strong focus on cultural and religious history. Among his many publications are: *Practicing Scripture: A Lay Buddhist Movement in Late Imperial China* (Hawai'i University Press, 2014), *Guan Yu: The Religious Afterlife of a Failed Hero* (OUP, 2017), *Religious Culture and Violence in Traditional China* (CUP, 2019), and *The fear of witchcraft and witches in imperial China: Figurines, familiars and demons* (Brill, forthcoming). For full information, please visit his website:

<https://bjterhaa.home.xs4all.nl/index.html>

Abstract: During my ongoing work on the topic of oral traditions in the historical past, I recently realized that the phenomenon of sound alone actually has a cultural and social history of its own. This kind of analysis is more common for anthropological and Western historical approaches, but for the China case historical research in this vein is quite rare, though not entirely absent. Recently, interesting studies have appeared and especially in the United States some graduate students are working on new projects, usually covering a more recent period in time. A substantial field of China related musicology exists, but it has remained isolated from mainstream Chinese studies and self-evidently focuses on music rather than sound in general. As it turns out, sound is ascribed moral qualities as well as an intrinsic power, such as the sound of thunder (which kills the unfilial and demonic beings), recitation which attracts and tames wild animals, the voice of the Buddha which is like an (Asian) lion, or the use of human and instrumental sound (not necessarily “music”) to drive out demons. Similarly, there is such a thing as the social force of sound (*renao* 熱鬧, *naogong* 鬧宮, *naofang* 鬧房), which is an important part of religious and social celebrations. The importance of pronunciation and other aspects of speech in creating gender, social, age, regional and political identities hardly needs mentioning, and also applies to China. In the process of starting up this project, I also came across references to silence and became aware of the otherwise obvious fact that sound presupposes silence to make sense. Nonetheless, this silence does not pertain to religious ritual and sacrifice, which is notoriously noisy. So one part of the project will be to establish when and why silence eventually did become more important in socio-religious terms.