

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Making China
Knowable: Sir
William Jones and the
Production of China
in 18th-Century
British Orientalist
Thought*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker:
Diki Sherpa

3 December 2025

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Speaker: Dr. Diki Sherpa, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Department of History, Ashoka University

Chair: Prof. Sreemati Chakrabarti, Chairperson, Institute of Chinese Studies

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- The speaker, Dr. Diki Sherpa, examined how British Sinology in the 18th century shifted from European-derived interpretations of China to an “Asian framework”. She noted that this framework was largely shaped by Sir William Jones, whose Brahmanical theory of Chinese origins became an influential, although flawed, epistemic foundation.
- Dr. Sherpa outlined how Jones used Sanskrit textual authority, especially the *Manusmriti*, to claim that China’s civilizational roots were located in ancient India, specifically Bengal, thus re-framing China as derivative rather than an autonomous civilization.
- The speaker emphasised the political-intellectual context which included debates in Europe over Chinese antiquity, Jesuit Sinology, Enlightenment skepticism, and theological disputes around biblical chronology. Key mechanisms of knowledge production identified by the speaker included textual hegemony, Pandit-mediated validation, and comparative philology — methods that together enabled a forceful but weakly evidenced argument about Chinese descent from “fallen Kshatriyas”.
- The speaker further noted how Jones’ reconstruction of China contributed to early forms of Sinophobic thought and influenced later British Sinologists and colonial officials. The discussion highlighted the need to reassess colonial archives critically, particularly the ways in which linguistic comparison and selective textual reading were mobilised to produce “manageable” histories of Asia suited to imperial objectives.

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