



November 2023

10

3:00 - 5:00PM ET

International Center
201

The Overripe Imagination: Why Melons (Gua 瓜) Make People Think of Sex, in China and Elsewhere

In the erotic Ming novel *Jin Ping Mei*, Pan Jinlian reveals her promiscuous inclinations and oral fixation by habitually cracking melon seeds. In the earliest surviving full Chinese film, the comedy *Laborer's Love* (1922), the first thing our hero does is to saw open a watermelon. The image hints at his desire for the girl next door, alluding to the expression “split the melon” (*pogua*), a food-sex metaphor based on a graphic pun dating back to the Song dynasty. Melons show us that even an unlikely object can offer new perspectives on literary and cultural history. From Ming dynasty fiction to sublimated fantasies of the Mao era to the fetishistic extremes of Tsai Ming-liang’s pornographic film *The Wayward Cloud* (2005), Chinese artists have long associated melons with bodies, and with pleasures of the flesh. Why? Rea argues that some answers can be found in the language of *gua*, which create associations not found elsewhere. *Gua* also alert us to how objects can inspire metaphors of a certain intonation—in this case, from ripe to overripe.



Speaker: Christopher Rea is Professor of Chinese and former Director of the Centre for Chinese Research at the University of British Columbia. He is the creator of the Chinese Film Classics Project, whose website **ChineseFilmClassics.org** hosts the world’s largest online collection of early Chinese films with English subtitles, as well as film clips, essays, links, and an online course on early Chinese films. The website and the course are companions to his book *Chinese Film Classics, 1922-1949* (Columbia, 2021), which covers fourteen films, and has a Chinese edition forthcoming. Rea is also the author of the Levenson Prize-winning *The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China* (California, 2015) and the co-author of *Where Research Begins: Choosing a Research Project That Matters to You (and the World)* (with Thomas Mullaney; Chicago, 2022), which is also available in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Polish. He is currently working on a second volume of *The Book of Swindles* (Columbia, 2017) and on a cultural history of *gua* 瓜.