

PROF. ROBERT ANDRÉ LAFLEUR

MOUNTAINS OF DISCOURSE: HISTORY, ETHNOGRAPHY, AND THE COSMOLOGY OF CHINA'S SACRED MOUNTAINS

For three thousand years, China's five sacred mountains have sparked debates about their purposes, histories, and even locations. Today, they attract thousands of visitors daily—some seeking personal insight or fulfilling family traditions, others ticking off a “bucket list.” I've spent 1,200 days doing fieldwork on and around the mountains and far more time studying inscriptions, texts, religious treatises, and artwork linked to them. My research aims to explain a distinct approach to sacred mountain study. At its center is ethnography, which unites diverse themes across disciplines. This study goes beyond literary analysis. It attempts to build what I call “the ethnography of a concept.” Like storytelling, mountain travel traditionally follows a cosmologically prescribed order. Yet in Chinese cosmology—especially yin-yang and five-phase theory—the five mountains form a unified system. The tension between treating the mountains as distinct versus unified is not just semantic. Centuries of imperial practice reveal its depth. Ethnography offers a way to explore, if not resolve, these tensions. Its descriptive detail allows links between disciplines and offers insights into how a longstanding tradition connects the high and the low, the near and far—for all who have climbed these peaks across time.



Prof. Robert Andre LaFleur is an anthropologist and historian focusing on the intersection of text and culture in Chinese life. His work explores topics such as the Chinese almanac's role in popular religion, the “exilic imagination” of the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), and literary borrowing in Chinese historiography. He is the author of *China: Global Studies* (2003; revised 2010). LaFleur earned his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought. A professor of history and anthropology at Beloit College, he has chaired the Asian Studies program and history department, and teaches courses on East Asian history and culture.



Date:
Tuesday - 18 November, 2025



Time:
6.15 - 7.45 PM

**Location: Big Seminar room,
Hartmannstr. 14, Building D1, Erlangen**

Link for virtual attendance: <https://fau.zoom-x.de/j/62556506187>

