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Public Lecture Offerings

Literacy and Bondage in a Qing-dynasty Native Domain, Southwest China

How can we excavate the experiences of enslaved people from archives that systematically exclude enslaved voices, while negotiating the demands of a liberal sensibility that requires subjects to speak for themselves? In 1760, six slaves submitted a confession and plea for mercy to the magistrate of Wuding Prefecture, Yunnan, the immediate superior of their dead master, a Né (or Yi) native chieftain. The slaves had been caught, terrifyingly, between two factions struggling over who would succeed their master as the sole owner of all the lands and peoples within his extensive domain. Their plaint, which named the slaves as its collective author, was written in Chinese, a language they could neither speak nor write. This talk traces their footsteps as they followed their master's widow to the prefectural capital and found a translator and a cut-rate litigation master to fashion their plaint. I show how the slaves' own form of spatial literacy, developed through service in their master's house and participation in his rituals, may have helped them read and navigate the unfamiliar city. Thinking through the specificities of how slaves became writers and readers also helps better delineate the shape of slavery in Né places, which became the designated "slave societies" of Chinese social science despite ubiquitous slavery in every region and economic sector of the Empire. I argue that the native chieftain system itself became a system of bondage in Qing society, confining Né and other 'non-Chinese' to mountain enclaves while extracting their wealth and using their lives in military actions.

Playing with Corpses: Assembling Bodies for the Dead in Southwest China

This talk describes the ritualization of death in a "minority" community in Yunnan Province, China, called Júzò in the local Tibeto-Burman language. Here, people are

heir to an extraordinary range of resources for working on the dead, including abundant poetic language. Work on the dead takes the form of making them material and immaterial. Social personhood, involving relations among living and dead, is mutual entanglement through shared substance; dead persons are subjected to a long labor of disentanglement with the final goal of severing them from the shared world of matter and memory. Through work on the dead, people assess social relations and envision the cosmological foundations of the social world. In this context, a long history of official interventions meant to reform death ritual has been deeply consequential.

The focus of this talk is the assembly and disassembly of fully social dead bodies in the reform era, when death rituals were re-established after a hiatus of two decades. To attend to the active fashioning of dead bodies is to build on the focus that the tradition of the anthropology of death has maintained on the corpse and its transformations, while running counter to that tradition's tendency to take dead bodies as given, if problematic, entities left over after death. In Júzò, kinship begins with the assembly of dead bodies. Living bodies are made through generative relations of nurture and care; dead bodies are made through the materialization and actualization of ideal relations. Procreation and bodily health among humans and domestic animals and plants depends on life substance channeled through filial relations with dead parents. This process depends upon the successful fabrication of dead bodies out of idealized, formal images of the relations in which the dead were once suspended in life. The work of assembling dead bodies is the ground from which living kinship emerges.

The Golden Mountain Gate: Text and Experience in the Botanical Exploration of Southwest China

This talk examines the scientific collaboration between China's most accomplished botanical explorer of the 20th century, a farmer from northern Yunnan Province named Zhao Chengzhang and the Scottish botanical explorer, George Forrest. For nearly three decades, George Forrest employed Zhao Chengzhang and a team of Naxi-ethnicity men to explore the gigantic mountain ranges of Northwest Yunnan for alpine flowers. Under their guidance, Forrest attempted an unprecedentedly detailed map of correspondences between species and geography over the region. The key to this phytogeography, he thought, would be the "center of origin" of *Rhododendron*, up

beyond the mountains where Yunnan meets Tibet. The Naxi men had their own highly developed sense of this rugged landscape. When they buried their dead, purified their houses, or healed their kin, they listened to ritualists read manuscripts describing detailed routes taken by ancestors, spirits, and demons. Among these routes was the "road of the dead," which worked northwest and ascended to the "Golden Mountain Gate" at the place where Forrest believed a "paradise of Rhododendrons" would be found," a place he longed to reach before his own death. These practices of ritualized reading shaped Forrest's methods of deciphering the landscape and put him on the path to his own Eden. This is a story of the ways dynamic fields of social relationships articulate with struggles to redefine perceptual relationships with the earth and its inhabitants, rendering them into the specimens and classifications of science.

Classroom Discussion Topics

1. What can the ritualization of death teach us about personhood and kinship? What are dead bodies, and what gives them their power to transform our worlds? How can various anthropological approaches to death give us insight into our own worlds of social relatedness?
2. What are "indigenous peoples" in China, and what are their worlds like? How did the Ming and Qing states manage non-Han indigenous peoples through the native hereditary chieftain system (known as the *tusi* system)? How did the socialist state create a nation of 56 "nationalities," and what were its policies towards so-called "minority nationalities"? What is the current state's stance towards minority ethnic groups, and how is it transforming?
3. What is an "ethnographic" approach to history? How can one approach archives with a mind to excavating the voices, experiences, and worlds of powerless people who are rarely represented in archival materials?
4. What is a logographic script? If we compare Chinese (the world's most important logographic script) with the logographic script called Yi, also used in China, we can gain insight into both. Chinese script famously began its life in late Shang-dynasty oracle bone inscriptions as a way to record the results of divination. It turns out that Yi script retains relatively tight relations with divination and with ritualized picture-making. These features animate the script and make it a convenient vehicle for communications between humans and spirits.