



**VISITING  
SCHOLAR  
PROGRAM**

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## Public Lecture Offerings

### **Climate Change Injustice in Tibet: Impacts and Adaptation**

The Tibetan Plateau is warming at more than twice the global average rate, leading to more intense, frequent, and longer duration weather extremes. In this talk, I will introduce the Tibetan Plateau and discuss some of the multidimensional impacts that climate change is having on Tibetan herders, showing how climate change effects need to be understood within specific political, economic, and social contexts. In addition, I will discuss climate justice, what it means, and why Tibetan herders are experiencing injustice both in terms of the impacts of climate change, as well as policies purportedly for climate change adaptation.

### **Pests, Keystone Species, and Hungry Ghosts: Human-Pika Relationships on the Tibetan Plateau**

The plateau pika, a small, burrowing (and cute) mammal related to the rabbit, is ubiquitous on the Tibetan plateau. For over half a century, the Chinese government has carried out large-scale poisoning campaigns to exterminate the plateau pika, because it, like the prairie dog in the US, has been viewed as a pest that competes with livestock and causes grassland degradation. However, since the 1990s, ecological research has suggested that pikas are important keystone species rather than pests. What has been ignored in this debate is the way Tibetan herders understand and relate to pikas. In this talk, I will examine how Tibetans analyze what pikas are, and what draws them to specific sites, based on interviews in two pastoral communities, as well as readings from the *Epic of King Gesar*, which has

been performed since the 12th century and continues to be an important part of everyday life. I discuss how Tibetans relate to pikas in large numbers as “hungry ghosts,” which are drawn to places where the fertility of the earth has been depleted, causing irritation to territorial deities. In the discussion I use the idea of “political ontology,” to take seriously different worlding practices as they cooperate and conflict in a context of asymmetric power relations.

### **The Cultural Politics of New Tibetan Entrepreneurship in Contemporary China**

In the first decade of the 2000s, many educated young Tibetans wanted to work in non-governmental organizations to promote community development, cultural preservation, and environmental protection. A decade later, educated young Tibetans’ hopes and dreams had shifted toward entrepreneurship. What explains this shift? Under what circumstances does entrepreneurship become appealing and with what implications? In this talk I explore these questions, looking at the broad political and economic factors that led to this change. I then explore culturally specific meanings of entrepreneurship, and debates about what it means to be a proper Tibetan, in terms of religious commitments and cultural pride, in relation to money-making activities. I focus on the ways in which many of these entrepreneurs seek to create economic value as a way of creating cultural value and a sense of self-worth for Tibetans living in rural areas. I will also relate these ethnographic findings to geographical and anthropological discussions about neoliberalism.

### **The Making of Natural Infrastructure in China’s Era of Ecological Civilization**

Although infrastructure is conventionally thought of as human-designed systems such as railroads, pipelines, tunnels and ports, landscapes and nature itself are also increasingly being understood as “natural infrastructure.” China has promoted numerous forms of natural infrastructure as part of its sweeping framework of “ecological civilization.” After discussing ecological civilization, I argue that the creation of natural infrastructure, which is seemingly a technical matter, is in fact profoundly political. I will share case studies of two villages in post-earthquake Sichuan, where the campaign for ecological civilization and the designation of

“ecological red lines” as a way of producing natural infrastructure have led to the demolition of built infrastructure within scenic areas which had been very important to villagers’ livelihoods. Finally, I examine the “Sky River” project, a proposed gargantuan weather modification over the Tibetan Plateau, as another bid to turn nature (the atmosphere) into a form of infrastructure.

### **Global geographies of weather modification in an era of climate change**

As climate change impacts intensify, the practice of cloud seeding to induce precipitation and otherwise modify the weather is on the rise around the world. In 2018, for example, seven states in the western US entered into the Colorado River Basin Weather Modification Agreement to seek to augment snowpack. In response to unprecedented drought on the Yangtze River in summer 2022, the Chinese government stepped up its already extensive weather modification efforts.

Moreover, intensified weather modification efforts have contributed to geopolitical tensions. Weather modification is also associated in the public imagination with solar radiation management, a highly controversial form of geoengineering. Despite the importance of weather modification in the context of climate change, it has not attracted much recent attention from social scientists. I provide a wide-ranging and hopefully fun overview of weather modification in the US, China, and the United Arab Emirates through a geographical lens.

## Classroom Discussion Topics

1. **Shielding the Mountains: Film Screening and Discussion.** Why have Tibetans become environmentalists? How do Tibetan conceptions of nature differ from Western ones? What is the relationship between culture and nature? This 20-minute film, which I produced in 2010, explores these questions through a narrative that features Rinchen Samdrup, the leader of a Tibetan community environmental association in a remote area of Chamdo in the eastern Tibet Autonomous Region, and Tashi Dorje, a leading Tibetan environmentalist in China who first became interested in conservation after the death of a good friend at the hands of Tibetan antelope poachers. Viewers learn about the formation of coalitions of Chinese and Tibetan environmentalists that make Rinchen's work possible, as well as about the religious, cultural, and personal motivations for Tibetan environmentalism, and its basis in a particular understanding of "nature" and why it should be protected.
2. **China and Climate Justice at the COP:** In this conversation, we will discuss what climate justice means and how China fits into the question of global climate justice in its negotiating positions at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change meetings, and in the types of climate change solutions it is promoting. These arguments are based on my participation as an observer at UNFCCC COP 27 in Egypt in November 22, so I will also share some of my observations from that meeting. If students have participated, it would be ideal to discuss their observations and experiences as well.
3. **An Introduction to Contemporary Tibet:** What and where is Tibet? This is a trickier question than it may at first seem. I will talk about the politics of naming as part of a broad introduction to the history and current status of Tibet. This can include a discussion of cultural identity, historical disputes related to China's transition from an empire to a nation-state, the protests of recent decades, patterns of development, and the political and cultural situation today.