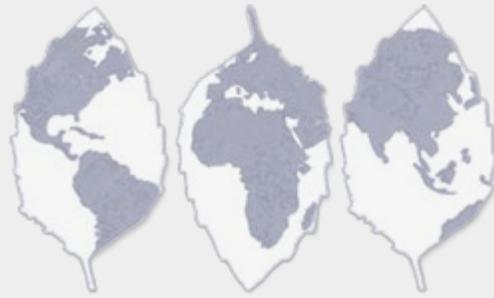


Heaps of Loose Sand: Environments and Construction in Desert China



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In 1924, China's 'father of the nation' Sun Yat-Sen famously lamented the state of the nascent Chinese nation, comparing the Chinese populace to "heaps of loose sand." This talk considers this strange metaphor that links social and geological disarray, material and inert, a strange contrast both to conceptions of the national and social forms that links them with life as a political ontology of the vital. I consider state attempts to govern and stabilize the shifty, desertified landscapes of western Inner Mongolia, China, an infamous 'cradle of duststorms,' and how this attempt to control the loose sand exposed by ecological degradation articulates the contours of experiments in governing human social life as part of state ecological goals. State projects for holding back the sand have made regions on the edge of deserts into the future sites of massive forestry projects, and have subjected local populations to an ecological calculus that gauges human life in terms of physical and ecological relations. I engage with Michel Foucault's reflections on an 'environmental' mode of governing, which aims no longer at the transformation of subjectivities, but rather works through the institution and manipulation of 'environments,' through which the effects of human activities can be indirectly coordinated. Transforming locals, especially goat herders who have been identified as direct vectors of environmental damage, into stewards of new, reconstructed environments has depended on an ad hoc state practice of creating different kinds of environments - policy, market, topographic - whose overlap and redundancy aims to channel and manage the effects of human and animal impacts on the land.

Jerry Zee is a PhD candidate at UC Berkeley. He received his BA and MA at Stanford (2007), both in Cultural and Social Anthropology.

Monday

May 13, 2013, 12:00-1:05 pm

Conference Room, Building 50, Room 51A



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