

Friday Seminar



Department of Anthropology
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
香港中文大學人類學系

Spring
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Joker: The Flip Side of Ancient Chinese Cosmology and Science in *Hecun*



NIE Youping: I am a PhD candidate in Anthropology at CUHK. My research interests include landscape, cosmology, state governance, science and technology studies (STS), and rural China. My dissertation, *A Geographical Tale of Uncertainty: Weather, Technology, and Cosmology in South-central China*, explores the entanglement of state technocratic projects and local cosmology, i.e., local spiritual beliefs, in understanding and acting upon the concept of “uncertainty” associated with weather patterns in a Chinese village. This village is situated in the Dongting Lake basin, a region prone to extreme climate fluctuations between drought and flooding.

Drawing on 16 months of fieldwork and historical material on *Fu* (符) rituals, this talk explores the distinctions between *Fu* activities and other local sacrificial practices that involve approaching spiritual powers with offerings, beseeching or begging for assistance. I pseudonymize my fieldsite in south-central China as *Hecun*. Through *Fu* rituals, *Hecun* villagers attempt to directly manipulate or even command the spiritual forces. Drawing on historical evidence, I propose that this fluctuating human-spiritual power dynamic can be traced to the transformation of ancient Chinese cosmology. I argue that in the pre-imperial courts there was a gradual technical transition from magical rituals to religious sacrifices. But in the local cosmology of present-day *Hecun*, both magic and sacrifice are evident. I further suggest that the human-spiritual power dynamic reflects a well-established local understanding of how people experience the capricious environmental forces to which they are immediately exposed. This local understanding contrasts with the scientific outlook towards “nature” that underpins these state-led weather-water projects in *Hecun*. By interweaving relevant anthropological discussion around “nature” with analyses of local rituals, this talk provides a nuanced understanding of local cosmology and offers insight into the entanglement of magic, religion and science.

Feb 14
1:00 - 2:30PM
NAH 213

ALL INTERESTED ARE WELCOME!

