Earthly Interphases: China Across Aerosol Thresholds

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As the headiest days of Reform and Opening settle into difficulty breathing, breakneck social and economic change sit alongside strange weather as two material substantiations of China’s contemporary. In a dust storm event, not only does particulate air pollution spike in the spectacular centers of Chinese political authority, but the country’s land physically shifts into an aerosol that tangles airspaces into one another, enters bodies, and, I argue, foments experimental political formations out of late socialist institutions. This talk investigates China’s meteorological contemporary through aerosol transitions that scaffold emergent modes of political attention and intervention. First, the country’s upwind deserts are enacted as potential storm events, and, second, urban air as a particulate aerosol, a massively-distributed solid rather than a benign emptiness. Land and air thus compose a geo-meteorological map of Chinese social and environmental governance as a contention with earthly interphases, where terra firma is one of only several possible states in a vexing continuum of phases of matter. It takes these moments of phase shift as sites for the condensation of political and ethnographic attention, showing how experiments in transforming and bracing for the meteorologies of China’s late socialism drive a series of displacements of socialist and liberal political formations into a cascade of more-than-human entanglements.

Monday
October 29th, 3:30 - 5:00 PM
Building 50, 51A