

RECOVERING VOICES

Seminar Series in Endangered Languages and Indigenous Knowledge



Timothy Thurston
Postdoctoral Research Fellow
Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage
Smithsonian Institution

presents:

No Laughing Matter: Language, Comedy and Modernity in post-Mao Tibet

Wednesday February 17, 2016 12:00-1:00pm
Rose Room (Room 337), NMNH

In the 1980s, *kha shags*, a form of Tibetan comedic dialogue similar to old Abbott and Costello routines, emerged on the Tibetan Plateau. Since then, comedy, has evolved into arguably one of the most popular and influential Tibetan cultural forms. But these performances do far more than simply entertain. As a sort of vernacular ethnography, they provide interesting vantage points from which to understand Tibetan engagements with language and culture in a rapidly changing and modernizing society. They also, however, inherit the mantle of Tibetan storytelling traditions and the Mao-era dictum that art serve the people as they seek to instruct Tibetan communities about the modern condition. Through placing characters of different social backgrounds on display, the comedies allow Tibetan audiences to evaluate both what people talk about, and (crucially) how they say it, as they publically meditate on Tibetan engagements with the modern society. In this talk, I introduce the development of these metadiscursive regimes between 1980 and 2010, and show how they play an important role in the creation of a uniquely Tibetan linguistic modernity in the People's Republic of China.

Dr. Thurston researches language and society in ethnic minority areas of China, focusing primarily on the Tibetan ethnic group. He is co-editor of the journal "Asian Highlands Perspectives." He has a variety of research interests that include: the intersections of verbal art, language, and society on the Tibetan Plateau, the ethnography of communication, humor as a way of interrogating social fault lines; sketch comedy; the uses of folklore in modern Tibetan cultural production; and modern Tibetan intellectual culture.

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Department of Anthropology
National Museum of Natural History
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC
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