



Polyandry and Wife Sale in Qing Dynasty China

Friday, September 11, 2015

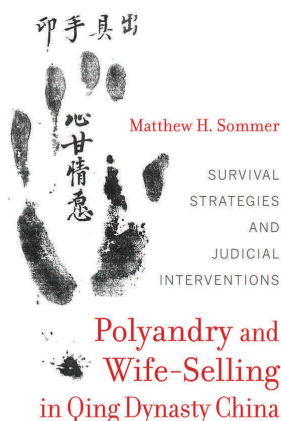
2:00 pm

Dulles Hall, Room 168

(230 W 17th Avenue)

Abstract:

In China during the Qing dynasty (1644-1912), polyandry and wife sale were widespread survival strategies practiced by the rural poor in conditions of overpopulation, shrinking farm sizes, and worsening sex ratios. Polyandry involved bringing in an outside, single male to help support a family in exchange for sharing the wife; wife sale involved the transfer of a woman from one husband to another, to become the latter's wife, in exchange for cash payment. These two practices represented opposite ends of a spectrum of strategies to mobilize the sexual and reproductive labor of women in order to supplement household incomes and maintain subsistence. If we take into account lived experience among the poor, no clear distinction can be drawn between marriage and the traffic in women in Qing China; similarly, the normative distinction between marriage and sex work that was basic to law and elite ideology cannot be sustained.



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Matthew Sommer is Professor of Chinese History at Stanford University. His research focuses on sexuality, gender relations, chosen kinship, and law during the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) and the main sources for his work are legal cases from central and local archives in China. He also uses popular fiction and other non-legal sources for historical research. Professor Sommer's first book, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China*, is primarily a legal history, but more recent projects use legal cases to explore social historical topics as well. His second book, *Polyandry and Wife-Selling in Qing Dynasty China: Survival Strategies and Judicial Interventions*, is coming out in Sept. 2015. Professor Sommer is now completing his third book, which analyzes male same-sex relations and masculinity in eighteenth-century China on the basis of some 1700 relevant cases.

Sponsors: This lecture is sponsored by the Department of History's Women's, Gender and Sexuality History Workshop and its Pre-modernist Workshop, and by the Institute for Chinese Studies as part of its "China and the International Mediasphere" Lecture Series.

Free and open to the public

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