

Institute for Chinese Studies Lecture Series

Rewriting Bondage: Literacy and Slavery in a Qing Native Domain, Southwest China

50
1969–2019
EAST ASIAN
STUDIES
CENTER

Friday, Nov. 1, 4-5:30 pm
Mendenhall Lab 115



Erik Mueggler

Katherine Verdery Collegiate Professor
of Anthropology
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

In 1760, six slaves submitted a confession and plea for mercy to the magistrate of Wuding Prefecture, Yunnan, the immediate superior of their dead master, Nuo Jiayou, a Né (or Yi) native chieftain. They had been caught between two factions struggling over who would succeed their master as the sole owner of all the lands and peoples within his extensive domain. Their plaint was written in Chinese, which they could neither speak nor write. This paper traces their footsteps as they traveled to the prefectural capital and found a translator and litigation master to fashion their plaint. I show how the slaves' own form of spatial literacy, developed through participation their master's rituals, may have helped them read and navigate the unfamiliar city. Thinking through the specificities of how slaves became writers and readers also helps better delineate the shape of slavery in Né places, which became the designated "slave societies" of Chinese social science despite ubiquitous slavery in every region and economic sector of the empire. I argue that the native chieftain system itself became a system of bondage in Qing society, confining Né and other indigenous peoples to mountain enclaves while extracting their wealth and using their lives in military actions.



Free and open to the public
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This event is co-sponsored by the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures and the Literature and Folklore in Greater China (LFGC) Student Organization. The ICS Lecture Series is supported by a U.S. Department of Education Title VI grant to The Ohio State University East Asian Studies Center.