

SEMINARS IN ENVIRONMENTAL AGRICULTURAL HISTORY SERIES

THE COSMOLOGY OF MINING: ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE
IN QING CHINA

TRISTAN BROWN OF MIT

APRIL 9, 2021

2:30-4:30 PM



Unprecedented population growth in China from the 17th century onward spurred disputes over access to minerals and mining sites in many regions of the Qing empire. Focusing on the province of Sichuan, this talk examines linkages between the litigation of mining disputes and popular understandings of the land and local environments. With law codes leaving many questions of mining to local communities, *fengshui* (lit. “wind and water”) came to play an important role in the regulation of mining in Qing Sichuan. Through the selective protection of *fengshui*, officials attempted to balance demand for mineral resources with the need to protect community commons and agricultural production. Though some commercial elites in the province voiced concerns over restrictions on mining ventures, Qing officials attempted to maintain the status quo for the sake of community harmony and dynastic stability. In the nineteenth century, this balancing act became increasingly difficult as officials confronted new threats posed by Western imperialism. *Fengshui* was elevated to international prominence when foreigners cast it as a “traditional custom” opposed to industrial development; in fact, it was a longstanding facet of Qing legal practice. An understanding of the centrality of *fengshui* in mining litigation explains the governing mechanisms of the Qing state, reframes key terms of the Sino-Western conflict, and reveals the power of indigenous knowledge in countering foreign exploitation.

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This seminar is part of the Seminars in Environmental Agricultural History Series and is sponsored by MIT's History Faculty and Program in Science, Technology, and Society.

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