

Inner Asian and Altaic Studies Lecture

Wednesday, October 6, 2021

1:15 pm-2:30 pm EST

Online event

[Register for Zoom link](#)

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Pests, Keystone Species and Hungry Ghosts: The Gesar Epic and Human-Pika Relations on the Tibetan Plateau

For over half a century, the Chinese government has carried out large-scale poisoning campaigns on the Tibetan Plateau in an effort to exterminate the plateau pika, which is viewed as a pest that competes with livestock and causes grassland degradation. Since the 1990s, an ecological counternarrative has emerged in which pikas are keystone species rather than pests, and indicators rather than prime causes of grassland degradation. Ignored in this debate are the ways in which Tibetan pastoralists understand and relate to pikas. In this talk, I will briefly discuss scientific debates about the causes of grassland degradation on the Tibetan Plateau, and then turn to a discussion of Tibetan analytics of what pikas are, and what draws them to specific sites, based on interviews and observations in two pastoral communities, as well as readings of the Epic of King Gesar. Bringing Tibetan analytics together with proposals for political ontology, I examine the ways in which these different ontologies, or practices of worlding, cooperate and conflict in a context of asymmetric power relations.