

**Inner Asian and Altaic Studies
Lecture Series 2023-24**



Dairy Cultures and the milk paradox of the Eurasian steppe

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Abstract:

Milk is a familiar food. And a fraught food. The natural food of mammalian infants, milk was first transformed into dairy products more than 9,000 years ago in the Near East, making it one of the earliest human-manufactured foods. Remarkably, its production required the domestication of not only animals, but also that of bacteria and yeasts – microorganisms too small for humans to see or even perceive. Dairy technologies spread alongside prehistoric migrations and social upheavals throughout Europe, Africa, and Asia over the next 5,000 years, were introduced to the Americas and Australia during colonialism, and then became a key vehicle of Cold War diplomacy during the 20th century. Today, dairy products are produced and consumed worldwide, and annual global milk and dairy production exceeds 700 million tons. And yet the majority of the world's population is estimated to be lactose intolerant. How did such an unlikely and often indigestible food become a staple of global cuisines? Building on emerging technologies in the archaeological and biomolecular sciences that are making dairy products visible in the archaeological record for the first time, this talk examines the long and often surprising history of milk in Eurasia. Using an interdisciplinary approach, I will take a fresh look at the phenomenon of lactose intolerance, its history of scientific study, and its unexpected ethnographic and archaeological paradoxes. Far from familiar, I aim to show that milk is a revolutionary food with an ancient origin and a modern scientific mystery at its heart.



Wednesday, April 3, 2024

1:15 pm-2:30 pm EST

Thomas Chan-Soo Kang Room, S050 CGIS-South

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