

GRADUATE COLLOQUIUM

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

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11:30-12:50

Cornett A125

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“Officials’ Heartache”: Depression, Bureaucracy, and Psychologization in China

Chinese government investigators and media “diagnose” increasing suicides among Chinese officials as resulting from depression, which they define psycho-medically, without, however, invoking medical expertise. These informal diagnoses construct opposing subjects: failed officials, socially irresponsible and apt to succumb to uncontrollable impulses, and rational, masterful subjects who promote harmony and self-actualize through public service. However, my ethnographic research reveals more complex and shifting subjectivities of grassroots officials as they experience psychological distress, work pressure and anger associated with inequalities in the bureaucracy governed by hidden rules and ethical contradictions. They operate in an emerging political climate where traditional emphasis on collectivity has been displaced in the name of individual fulfillment, and in which the state and its arms increasingly govern via psychologization, handling sociopolitical issues indirectly through management of people’s private lives and enmeshing psychology or “psychological” modes of thinking in government and social life. I conclude that while officials’ suicides indeed relate to depression, this connection is valid only when we view depression as multivalent, and as existing in tension with China’s psychologization trend and heightened socioeconomic inequalities.



Keyword: China, depression, suicide, autocracy, bureaucracy, psychologization, qian guize

EVERYONE WELCOME.