The Chinese-Russian Plague Expedition (Summer 1911): A Photographic Approach

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5pm, November 11 (Wed), 2015; Rooms 8 & 9, FAMES

Abstract The visualization of the first Manchurian pneumonic plague epidemic (1910-11) is commonly identified with the spectacular grotesque of Russian depictions of the outbreak, Chinese visual efforts to normalize the event, Japanese exercises in self-staging South Manchuria as the seat of scientific excellence, but also, beyond the three empires in control of the area at the time, with lay and missionary European and American sources, such as Richard P. Strong's lantern-slides. Examining what usually escapes historical attention, that is the aftermath of the great epidemic, this paper focuses on two photographic albums produced by Wu Liande (伍連德) during the joint Chinese-Russian plague expedition to the Inner Asian steppes in the summer of 1911. Framing this visual production within the epistemic conundrum faced by Wu in view of his inability to confirm the existence of plague in local hosts, this seminar examines how photography contributed to Chinese-Russian scientific competition, whilst at the same time rendering the environment on the Chinese-Russian frontier a scientifically knowable and actionable category.

Dr. Christos Lynteris is a social anthropologist working on biopolitical and visual aspects of infectious disease epidemics. He is Senior Research Associate at CRASSH, University of Cambridge, and Principal Investigator of the ERC funded research project Visual Representations of the Third Plague Pandemic. His is the author of The Spirit of Selflessness in Maoist China: Socialist Medicine and the New Man (Palgrave Macmillan 2012), with his new monograph, Ethnographic Plague: Configuring Disease on the Chinese-Russian Frontier, to appear in spring 2016.

All seminars take place on Wednesdays (unless otherwise arranged) at 5pm in rooms 8 & 9 in the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies. Tea will be served at the same venue at 4:45pm. All are welcome!