From Taboo to Constitution
Halal Food, Sharia, and Islamophobia in China

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5pm, Oct 19, 2016 (Wednesday) FAMES Rooms 8 & 9

Abstract  Why is it that debates about sharia (Islamic law and ethics) often go hand-in-hand with Islamophobia? From the French burkini to the English sharia courts, signs of sharia are lightning rods for xenophobia. The anthropology of Islam has explored these problems mainly through genealogies of the secular, often with reference to Western liberalism, either in Muslim majority or Muslim minority contexts. In the past year, sharia debates have occurred in a very different setting—China. The country has been seized by an historic controversy over a proposal for halal food legislation. Among Chinese Muslims (Hui), who number over 10 million in China, the prohibition against pork is the kernel of their practice of sharia. In recent years, due to the expansion of the halal food market, including the prospects of exporting made-in-China halal food to overseas markets, the industry has flourished but has done so largely unregulated. In a vacuum of state regulation, Hui have resorted to communal violence to enforce minjian (unofficial) rules that govern halal food production. Inter- and intra-ethnic violence has added fuel to the fire of anxieties about the “Islamicization” of China while Hui attribute Islamophobia to a vast conspiracy.

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!
resulting from intra-Party factionalism. This paper assesses the pained life—and death—of a legislative draft as an exercise to understand how religious and ethnic minorities translate a core taboo into the language of modern law. In evoking state law to protect a grundnorm of Chinese Islam, they reveal anxieties about the deformation of the secular—the transcendence of Islam in the public sphere of the Party-State.

Speaker  Matthew Erie is Associate Professor of Modern Chinese Studies at the University of Oxford. He is a comparative lawyer (Penn Law JD '08; Tsinghua Law LLM '08) and a cultural anthropologist (Cornell PhD) whose research engages multiple disciplines to examine Chinese law and society ethnographically. Specifically, he investigates the ways in which non-state authorities, particularly those not bound within or categorized by the jurisdiction of the modern state, shape individuals’ behavior and notions of property, rights, and community. Matthew has gained experience in China over the last twelve years as a law student, an NGO volunteer, a corporate lawyer, and an ethnographer. He spent two years living with Muslim communities in northwest China, fieldwork that formed the basis of his book, China and Islam: The Prophet, the Party, and Law (Cambridge University Press, 2016), the first ethnographic study of the contemporary practice of Islamic law among Chinese Muslims. His next project studies the possibilities for a Chinese model of “law and development” through the interaction between transnational legal norms and Chinese law in the context of “out-bound China.” Before Oxford, he practiced law in Beijing and New York City, and held academic positions at New York University School of Law and Princeton University. He has published in such journals as American Ethnologist, Law & Social Inquiry, Hong Kong Law Journal, and the Journal of Legal Education.