Chinese Materia Medica Heritage in Southwest and Northwest China: Ethnographic Fieldwork on Kinship and Landscape

Dr Lena Springer (Needham Institute)

5pm, February 15, 2017 (Wednesday); Rooms 8 & 9, FAMES

Abstract The process of achieving recognition for medicines as cultural heritage in China involves local clinics and drug traders. Chinese drugs come in various shapes and names in the daily work of these physicians and apothecaries, and they constantly remake the dynamic corpus of materia medica (bencao). Increasingly they engage with modern hospitals, with regulators of their occupational lives, and with researchers including scientists and

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!
fieldworkers who aim to survey not only Chinese drugs per se that are used locally, but also the roles of local clinicians, traders, and knowledge holders.

Springer’s research introduces findings from her fieldwork in regions of China. Starting from specific localities she traces the webs of exchanged drugs that extend through vast landscapes, and she investigates kinship, i.e. the roles of teachers, relatives, institutions who recognize knowledge about Chinese drugs both in regulatory and in informal regimes. Thus one such investigation started in southwestern Kaili city in 2005, and a second one in the northwestern Taibai mountain area of Qinling mountain range in 2010. Members of a family from Jiangxi province have established a clinic/pharmacy in Kaili, have also achieved professional and academic status elsewhere in China and Taiwan and thus cover various facets of materia medica expertise. A hospital specializing in medicinals from Taibai mountain illustrates further how local and national, scientific and religious actors are involved together in ongoing processes of safeguarding Chinese medicinal culture. The two cases of the family and the mountain are particular yet directly connected via the same actors and webs of knowledge and drugs.

**Speaker** Dr Lena Springer is Jing Brand Fellow at the Needham Research Institute in Cambridge. Highlighting scattered, multi-disciplinary expertise of ‘materia medica studies’ (*bencao*学, 本草学), she traces scientific and economic interactions in modern China from the vantage point of distinct experts of Chinese medicinal things and materials. Her postdoctoral development includes stays as visiting researcher in China since 2008, a collaborative project about migrants from China in Viennese higher education and healthcare, and her forthcoming book that recalls modern Chinese history according to the narrated careers of senior Chinese medicine physicians. Her second book about how regional suppliers of Chinese *materia medica* deal with the variation of names and the education of properties contributes to the Wellcome Trust project ‘Beyond Tradition’.