

Summer Semester 2022

Standards of Decision Making Across Cultures

China's Forced Confessions: The
Performance of Obedience

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Cornell UniversityMay 16, 2022
14:00 – 16:00
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Over the last decade, forced confessions have gained new importance as an instrument of social and political coercion in China. The authorities frequently disappear, detain, prepare, and then parade people on state television, both Chinese and foreigners, forcing them to publicly denounce themselves. This extra-legal practice breaks with the previous years of efforts to build a judicial system in China, as horrified Chinese legal professionals have also noted, before they, too, have been silenced. It casts aside past declarations of the intent to terminate both torture and forced confessions, which have an ignominious history in China. The new confession spectacles instead suggest a broad revival of Mao-era praxis, with echoes from Russia. This raises new questions about these painstakingly choreographed spectacles, widely regarded as false, both in China and internationally. Because of multiple witness accounts provided by recent victims, we know quite a lot about how the confessions are coerced. Yet many questions remain about "why" this is done, including why the Chinese authorities invest so heavily in these plainly illegal and scarcely believable measures which may seem to bring as much shame to the authorities, as the public shaming originally intended for their victims. In this lecture, Dr. Fiskesjö will discuss these issues and also present elements for an updated anthropological theory of the self, which should be expanded to account for the hitherto understudied destruction and replacement of the self.

Magnus Fiskesjö was educated in his native Sweden, in Copenhagen, and Shanghai, and at the University of Chicago, USA, where he received an MA for a thesis on Chinese archaeology, and joint PhD in Anthropology and in East Asian Languages and Civilizations, in 2000. Before that, in 1985-1991, he served in the Swedish embassies in Beijing (as Cultural Attaché), and in Tokyo; later, in 2000-2005, he was director of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, in Stockholm. Since 2005, he teaches in anthropology and Asian studies at Cornell University. His research interests include ethnic relations, ethnopolitics, archaeology, and heritage issues in East and Southeast Asia. He recently published a book on the Wa people of the China/Burma frontier region, entitled *Stories from an Ancient Land: Perspectives on Wa History and Culture* (Berghahn, 2021), and also several articles on China's forced confessions, and on the genocide in Xinjiang, China.