Seminar Title: Toilet Revolutions in Modern China

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Summary:

Since 2015, China pursues a "toilet revolution" aimed at upgrading public toilets and raising sanitation standards. Although this state campaign is recent, it can serve as an entry point into a much longer historical transformation involving diverse forms of state intervention in everyday toilet practices and infrastructures. Over time, this transformation led to the widespread adoption of flush toilets and sewer systems, as well as the decline of earlier sanitation practices based on the commercialization and recycling of human excreta as agricultural fertilizer. In this seminar, we argue that this civilizational shift was a key component of China's engagement with global industrial modernity and its rise as a global superpower, and we analyze different periods of this process of reconfiguration, from the late 19th century to the early decades of the 21st century. The seminar offers a new interpretation of the rise of a flush toilet civilization in China, drawing attention to the environmental challenges associated with flush toilets and the culture of flushing, while also questioning conventional negative assessments of earlier agrarian sanitation practices. Our aim is to develop an alternative history of Chinese practices of hygienic modernity at a time when the world is facing an unprecedented environmental crisis and there are growing calls for the adoption of more sustainable sanitation models that prioritize water conservation and the protection of increasingly scarce water resources. In doing so, we seek to place China at the center of contemporary debates on new visions of sustainable sanitation and the future of toilet technologies and human waste management systems.