Spring 2016 Anthropology Colloquium Series:

“Waldorf Changed my Life!” Urban Flight and Alternative Lifestyles among China’s Middle Class

Dr. Sara Friedman

Monday, February 22

4:00 PM
Glenn Black Laboratory
423 N. Fess Ave
(Followed by a reception)

Abstract:

Based on preliminary research conducted in the summer of 2015, I will discuss the growing trend of urban, middle-class Chinese abandoning their successful lives in large cities and relocating to semi-rural communities in China’s southwest. At first glance, this emerging phenomenon of reverse migration appears to be a response to deepening anxieties about environmental pollution and food safety in urban centers. Although these concerns certainly support urban flight, they are not the only or even the most central rationales for dramatic and often rash decisions that upend what are otherwise recognized as professionally successful careers and comfortable standards of material life. This presentation discusses urban flight in relation to three intertwined issues. First, I examine parents’ desire to educate their young children outside of China’s state-sponsored public education system and to provide their children with what they identify as a meaningful childhood. Second, I discuss how educational decisions for children affect adults’ own aspirations for a meaningful life, substantively transforming their personal values and definitions of security and success. Third, I reflect on how these dramatic life changes render families precarious in economic and political terms, but potentially protect them from more existential forms of precariousness that they see as afflicting peers who continue to pursue high-stress, consumerist urban lifestyles. This preliminary analysis is intended to diversify our understanding of China’s expanding middle class and to evaluate new configurations of value and precariousness emerging in China today.