

Zachary M. Howlett

Yale-NUS College, National University of Singapore
12 College Avenue West, #01-201, S138610, Singapore
E-mail: zachary.howlett@yale-nus.edu.sg • Office: +65 6601-5304

PROFESSIONAL APPOINTMENTS

Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Yale-NUS College, National University of Singapore, July 2017–present; Head of Studies, Anthropology, 2020/21.

Academy Scholar, Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 2016/17 & 2019/20.

EDUCATION

Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA

PhD, Anthropology, 2008–2016.

MA, Anthropology, 2011.

Doctoral dissertation title: “Fateful Action: Hierarchy, Transformation, and Ideals of Merit in China’s National College Entrance Examination.”

Dissertation committee and qualifying examinations

P. Steven Sangren (chair): Sociocultural anthropology, Chinese ethnology, popular religion, gender ideologies.

Magnus Fiskesjö (minor member): Sociocultural anthropology, historical anthropology, Chinese ethnic relations.

TJ Hinrichs (minor member): History of imperial China (960 to 1911 CE).

Petrus Liu (examiner of additional field): Modern Chinese intellectual history (nineteenth century to present).

Xiamen University, Xiamen, Fujian Province, China

Research Affiliate, Department of Anthropology, 2011–2013.

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany

German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) Postbaccalaureate Research Fellow, 1998–1999: Conducted sociolinguistic research on German-language address/deixis.

Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, USA

BA, German Studies, *magna cum laude*, 1998.

Foreign exchange: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany (one year).

RESEARCH AND TEACHING INTERESTS

- Sociocultural anthropology.
- China and overseas Chinese.
- Education and social inequality.
- Migration and urbanization.
- Marriage, gender, and demographic change

PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS

Book

April 2021 *Meritocracy and Its Discontents: Anxiety and the National College Entrance Exam in China*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Peer-reviewed Book Chapters

Forthcoming “The National College Entrance Exam and the Myth of Meritocracy in Post-Mao China.” In *Making Meritocracy in China and India*, ed. Tarun Khanna and Michael Szonyi. London: Oxford University Press

2020 “Tactics of Marriage Delay in China: Education, Rural-to-Urban Migration, and ‘Leftover Women.’” In *Gender, Education, and Global Delays in Marriage*, ed. Marcia C. Inhorn and Nancy Smith-Hefner, 177–99. New York: Berghahn Books.

2017 “China’s Examination Fever and the Fabrication of Fairness: ‘My Generation Was Raised on Poison Milk.’” In *Emptiness and Fullness: Ethnographies of Lack and Desire in Contemporary China*, ed. Susanne Bregnbæk and Mikkel Bunkenborg, 15-34. New York: Berghahn Books.

Articles

I have two articles in submission at reputable subfield journals and one article for which I have received an invitation to revise and resubmit for publication at a top-tier general anthropology journal. I have a further article manuscript in preparation for submission to a reputable area studies journal during the 2021/22 academic year.

Planned Second Book Project

“Bare Branches and Ghost Brides: Transforming Families in Twenty-First Century China”

GRANTS, FELLOWSHIPS, AND AWARDS

2019/20 & 2016/17 Academy Scholar, Harvard Academy of International and Area Studies, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs (two-year fellowship served non-consecutively).

2016 Hu Shih Fellowship in Chinese Studies, East Asia Program, Cornell University.

2015 National Academy of Education/Spencer Foundation Dissertation Fellowship Finalist.

2011–12 Mellon Foundation/International Institute of Education (IIE) Graduate Research Fellowship (awarded to replace the **Fulbright-Hays DDRA Fellowship** following 2011 Congressional budget cuts).

2009–14 U.S. Department of Education **Jacob K. Javits Fellowship** (four-year fellowship to support PhD studies).

2009 Lam Family Award for South China Field Research Grant, Mario Einaudi Center for International Studies, Cornell University.

- 2009 Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship (declined).
2008 Cornell University Sage Doctoral Fellowship.

CONFERENCE PARTICIPATION AND INVITED TALKS

Panels Organized

- 2021 “Comparing Cultures of Education in East Asia: Anthropological and Ethnographic Perspectives.” A panel organized for the Association of Asian Studies Annual Conference in Seattle. March 21-26.
- 2020 “Comparing Cultures of Education in Asia: Anthropological and Ethnographic Perspectives.” A panel organized for the AAS-in-Asia Meeting (“Asia at the Crossroads”) in Kobe, Japan (held virtually due to Covid-19). August 31–September 2.
- 2019 “Agency and Gender in Global Educational Contexts.” A panel organized for the 118th American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting (“Changing Climates”) in Vancouver, Canada. Fida Adely, discussant. November 23.
- 2019 “Marriage, Mobility, and Death in East Asia.” A panel organized for the Society for East Asian Anthropology (SEAA) Biannual Regional Conference (“East Asian Anthropology Now and Into the Future: Transformations, Dynamics, and Challenges”). Andrew Kipnis, discussant. Tokyo, Japan. August 2.
- 2018 “The Intimate Life of the State: Demographic Transition in East Asia.” A panel organized for the American Anthropological Association 117th Annual Meeting (“Change in the Anthropological Imagination”). Sara Friedman, discussant. San Jose, USA. November 16.
- 2017 “The Politics of Truth after the Fact: Shifting States in a Post-Fact World.” A 12-member (triple-session) panel co-organized with Gerry Groot, University of Adelaide, for the AAS/ASA/ASAANZ 2017 Annual Meeting (“Shifting States”), Adelaide, Australia. December 12.

Conference Presentations and Invited Talks

- 2021 “Magical Secularisms: Moral Crisis, Popular Religion, and Examination-Based Meritocracy in Post-Reform China.” A paper to be presented at the Spiritual Crisis and Moral Transformation in Contemporary China Workshop in Rochester, NY. November 5-6.
- 2021 “Fateful Rite of Passage: The National College Entrance Exam and the Myth of Meritocracy in China.” A talk presented virtually for the Duke-Kunshan University/Yale-NUS College Bridge Seminar. April 23.
- 2021 “Meritocracy and Its Discontents: Anxiety and the National College Entrance Exam in China.” A talk presented virtually for Yale Education Studies, Yale University. April 15.

- 2021 “The National College Entrance Exam and the Moral Crisis of Meritocracy in Post-Mao China.” A paper presented virtually for the Association of Asian Studies Annual Meeting. March 22.
- 2020 “The National College Entrance Exam and the Moral Crisis of Meritocracy in Post-Mao China.” A paper presented virtually for the Southwest Conference on Asian Studies. October 24.
- 2020 “Fateful Rite of Passage: The National College Entrance Examination and the Myth of Meritocracy in Contemporary China.” A paper presented on the panel “Comparing Cultures of Education in Asia” for the AAS-in-Asia Meeting in Kobe, Japan (held virtually due to Covid-19). September 1.
- 2020 “‘Bare Sticks’ and ‘Leftover Women’: Gender, Education, and Changing Patterns of Marriage in China.” Asia Fellows Seminar, Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard University. February 27.
- 2019 “The Politics of Filial Piety: Rural-to-Urban Migration and Women’s Educational Aspirations in Contemporary China.” A paper presented on the panel “Agency and Gender in Global Educational Contexts” for the American Anthropological Association 118th Annual Meeting in Vancouver, Canada. November 23.
- 2019 “The Politics of Filial Piety: Rural-to-Urban Migration, Education, and ‘Leftover Women’ in Contemporary China.” A paper presented on the panel “Marriage, Mobility, and Death in East Asia” for the Society for East Asian Anthropology (SEAA) Biannual Regional Conference in Tokyo, Japan. August 2.
- 2019 “Counterfeit Boyfriends and Ghost Brides: Education, Rural-to-Urban Migration, and Delayed Marriage in Contemporary China.” A paper presented on the panel “Shifting Marriage Patterns in Asia: Love, Law, and the New Middle Class” organized by Nancy Smith-Hefner for the Association for Asian Studies Annual Conference in Denver, USA. March 23.
- 2018 “Fateful Rite of Passage: The National College Entrance Examination and the Myth of Meritocracy in Post-Mao China.” A paper presented for the Meritocracy in India and China Workshop organized by the Lakshmi Mittal South Asia Institute and the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, Harvard University. Harvard Center India, New Delhi, India. November 27–29.
- 2018 “Counterfeit Boyfriends and Ghost Brides: Education, Rural-to-Urban Migration, and Delayed Marriage in Contemporary China.” A paper presented on the panel “Demographic Transition in East Asia” for the American Anthropological Association 117th Annual Meeting (“Change in the Anthropological Imagination”) in San Jose, USA. November 16.

- 2018 “Counterfeit Boyfriends and Ghost Brides: Education, Rural-to-Urban Migration, and Delayed Marriage in Contemporary China.” Yale-NUS Gender Cluster Workshop. October 15.
- 2018 “Counterfeit Boyfriends and Ghost Brides: Education, Rural-to-Urban Migration, and Delayed Marriage in Contemporary China.” A paper presented at the conference “Gender, Education, and Global Delays in Marriage,” organized by Marcia Inhorn and Nancy Smith-Hefner for the Yale MacMillan Center, Yale University. September 27-29.
- 2018 “Fateful Rite of Passage: The National College Entrance Examination and the Myth of Meritocracy in Post-Mao China.” A paper presented for the Meritocracy in India and China Workshop organized by the Lakshmi Mittal South Asia Institute and the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, Harvard University. Harvard Center Shanghai, Shanghai, China. May 16–17.
- 2017 “Beyond Cynicism and Performance: False Confidence and State Secrecy in China’s National College Entrance Exam.” A paper presented on the panel “The Politics of Truth after the Fact: Shifting States in a Post-Fact World” for 2017 AAS/ASA/ASAANZ Annual Meeting (“Shifting States”), Adelaide, Australia. December 12.
- 2017 “Fateful Rite of Passage: The National College Entrance Examination and the Ideology of Meritocracy in Post-Mao China.” Asia Fellows Seminar, Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard University. April 24.
- 2017 “Fateful Rite of Passage: The National College Entrance Examination and the Ideology of Meritocracy in Post-Mao China.” Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies, Weatherhead Center, Harvard University. March 28.
- 2017 “Fateful Rite of Passage: The National College Entrance Examination and the Ideology of Meritocracy in Post-Mao China.” Yale-NUS College, Singapore. February 6.
- 2016 “Geographical and Contextual Variation in Attitudes toward Education Policy: The Negotiation of Front-Stage Secularism with Backstage Religiosity in Chinese Public High Schools.” A paper presented for the invited session “Theater, Performance, and Spectacle in Educational Policy Research” at the American Anthropological Association 115th Annual Meeting (“Evidence, Accident, Discovery”) in Minneapolis, Minnesota. November 19.
- 2016 “Hope and Indeterminacy in Fateful Ritual: China’s National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) and Political Legitimacy.” A paper presented on the panel “The Politics of Ritualization and the Ritualization of Hope” at the 2016 Association for Asian Studies in Asia Conference (“Asia in Motion: Horizons of Hope”) in Kyoto, Japan. June 26.

- 2016 “Gambling for Merit: Chinese Lottery Games as Instruments of Moral Self-Cultivation.” A paper presented at the conference “East Asia and Tomorrow’s Anthropology,” organized by the Society for East Asian Anthropology of the American Anthropological Association in Hong Kong. June 19.
- 2016 “China’s National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) as a Fateful Rite of Passage: ‘A Great Army Crossing a Narrow Plank Bridge.’” A public lecture delivered for the Cornell Contemporary China Initiative, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. February 22.
- 2015 “Legitimacy and Indeterminacy in Social Ritual: China’s National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) as a Fateful Rite of Passage.” A paper presented for “The Politics of Ritualization and the Ritualization of Politics in East Asia,” a panel organized by Andrew Kipnis and Huwy-min Lucia Liu for the American Anthropological Association 114th Annual Meeting (“Familiar Strange”) in Denver, Colorado. November 20.

PUBLIC TALKS AND COMMUNITY OUTREACHES

- 2013 “The College Entrance Examination and Chinese Meritocracy—Reality or Ideal?” Public lecture at a rural Chinese high school. Guoguang High School English Department, Meishan, Fujian Province, China. June 13.
- 2012 “*Zhong-Mei daxue jiaoyu de kuawenhua bijiao*” [A cross-cultural comparison of college education in the United States and China]. In English and Chinese. Public lecture at Zhangzhou Normal University, Zhangzhou, Fujian Province, China. February 23.
- 2011 “*Gaokao yu Zhongguo shehui de zai shengchan*” [The College Entrance Examination and social reproduction in China]. In Chinese. Presentation at the Doctoral Student Salon, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Xiamen University, Xiamen, Fujian Province, China. December 20.
- 2011 “*Cong renleixue shijiao lai kan Gaokao yanjiu*” [Anthropological perspectives on researching the Chinese College Entrance Examination]. In Chinese. Presentation at the Graduate Student Workshop, Department of Anthropology, Xiamen University, Xiamen, Fujian Province, China. November 18.
- 2010 “The Chinese National College Entrance Examination.” Ithaca High School Mandarin Class Speaker’s Bureau. Outreach organized by the Cornell University Einaudi Center for International Studies. Co-delivered with Weifeng Chen, a visiting scholar from China. Ithaca High School, Ithaca, New York. November 9.
- 2010 “Chinese Wedding Traditions.” Outreach organized by the Cornell Einaudi Center for International Studies. Candor Middle School, Candor, New York. February 22.

FIELDWORK

- Dec 2017 Completed three weeks of fieldwork in China. This fieldwork had two goals. First, I conducted follow-up research for my current writing projects. Second, I conducted exploratory research for my next book project on delayed marriage and demographic transition.

- 2016 Fujian Province, China. Four weeks of summer fieldwork.

- 2014 Fujian Province, China. Four weeks of follow-up dissertation research.

- 2011–13 Fujian Province, China. Two years of multi-sited fieldwork on the National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) in a rural town, backwater prefectural capital, and large city.

- 2010 Fujian Province, China. Two months of summer fieldwork.

- 2009 Shanghai, China. Two months of summer fieldwork.

ACADEMIC SERVICE

- 2020–21 Head of Studies, Anthropology.

- 2020–21 Served as a Faculty Editor for the Yale-NUS Undergraduate Journal (YNUJ).

- 2021 Organized virtual talk by MIT PhD candidate and Yale-NUS affiliate Tim Loh on “Assistive Technologies for the Deaf in Jordan,” April 23.

- 2021 Organized year-end gathering and informational mentorship session for all Anthropology majors, April 9.

- 2021 Organized year-end capstone presentations for graduating seniors, April 7.

- 2020 Organized virtual talk by MIT PhD candidate and Yale-NUS affiliate Tim Loh on “Sign Language in Singapore,” November 17.

- 2020 Assisted in organizing virtual talk by Singaporean public health expert Professor Jeremy Lim on “Do We Believe in Health Equity in Singapore.” Co-organized with Dr. Céline Corderey.

- 2020 Organized mid-semester movie night community-building event for Anthropology majors, October 5.

- 2019 Faculty Co-facilitator of Student-Faculty Dialogue on Decolonizing Academia: With a student collaborator, planned and led a breakout group discussion on inequality in the classroom, January 23.

- 2018/19 Committee on Faculty Affairs. Elected junior faculty representative for the Social Sciences Division. Represented the concerns of junior faculty to senior faculty and College leadership. Assisted senior faculty in revising the Faculty Handbook.

- 2018/19 Served as a Faculty Editor for the Yale-NUS Undergraduate Journal (YNUJ).
- 2018 Cross-Cultural Awareness Programme. Attended full-day training with faculty and staff to improve cross-cultural communication and team trust. April 23.
- 2018 Experience Yale-NUS Weekend: Gave a demonstration lesson to help recruit incoming first-year students, April 14.
- 2018 Diversity Hiring Best Practices Initiative. Co-sponsor of successful initiative to implement diversity hiring guidelines for the Division of Social Sciences by following best practices at institutions with successful track records of improving diversity in faculty hires.
- 2017–19 Anthropology Major Website Webmaster. Responsible for revamping and maintaining the website in collaboration with student associates during AY 2017-18 and 2018-19.
- 2017-19 Faculty Advisor for *Tones*, an undergraduate multilingual literary magazine that promotes intercultural understanding and diversity.
- 2017/18 Yale-NUS Social Sciences Division Postdoctoral Fellowship Search Committee.
- 2017 Participated on informational lunch panel organized for CIPE for Yale-NUS undergraduates interested in going to graduate school, September 20.
- 2016 Harvard University postdoctoral fellowship information session panelist. Served on a panel discussion advising current Harvard doctoral students on application strategies for postdoctoral fellowships. September 15.
- 2015 Cornell University graduate-student orientation facilitator. Nominated to be one of 80 graduate students, faculty, and staff across the university to facilitate orientation workshops for incoming graduate students. August 24.
- 2015 Cornell University Language Resource Center. Gave a recorded interview on language-learning strategies for an online course module. February 6.
- 2014/15 Cornell University Department of Anthropology Graduate Admissions Committee, graduate-student representative.
- 2010/11 Cornell Anthropology/Feminist Gender and Sexuality Faculty Search Committee, graduate-student representative.
- 2009/10 Cornell Anthropology Graduate Student Association, vice-president.
- 2009/10 Cornell Anthropology Colloquium Committee.

SERVICE TO THE PROFESSION

- 2020 David Plath Media Award Selection Committee Member, Society for East Asian Anthropology (SEAA) of the American Anthropological Association (AAA).
- 2019 Served on the organizing committee for the Society for East Asian Anthropology (SEAA) of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) Biannual Conference (“East Asian Anthropology Now and Into the Future: Transformations, Dynamics, and Challenges”). Tokyo, Japan. August 1-3.

Press for Which I Have Reviewed Book Manuscripts

Cornell University Press (one manuscript)

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Yale-NUS

Modern Social Through (required Common Curriculum course for sophomores)
Language, Culture, Power
Anthropology of China
Anthropology of Education
Technology and Culture
Marriage and Kinship (to be offered Sem 2 of 2021/22)

Capstone Theses Supervised at Yale-NUS

- 2020/21 Brianna Lynn Leatherwood. “Gender, Beauty, and Opportunity: An Ethnography of Small-Scale Cosmetic Stores in a Fourth-Tier Chinese City.”
- 2020/21 Larissa Joy Lee Cheng Wen. “Producing Good and Useful Citizens: Mental Health Education under the Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) Curriculum in Elite and Public Schools in Singapore.”
- 2020/21 Lim Wei Da Damon. “Conservation and Park Management in Singapore.”
NB: Supervised during Sem 2.
- 2019/20 Sim Gek Theng Danielle. “Language Revival and Its Challenges: Baba Malay in Singapore.”
- 2019/20 Wong Zhi Ying. “Constructions of Authenticity in Social Emotional Leadership Training.”
- 2019/20 Quay Jing Ying Serena. “Creating the College Self: A Study of Self-Presentation in Singaporean Higher Education.”
- 2018/19 Mark Wenyi Lee. “Making Play Professional: How Competitiveness Affects the Video Game Play Experience.”
- 2018/19 Jane Zhang. “‘Dare to Be Different’: An Ethnographic Study of Female Instagram Influencers in Singapore.”

Independent Studies Supervised at Yale-NUS

Fall 2017 Representations of Gangsterism in Singapore

Head of Course at Cornell University

Fall 2015 Limits of the Human: Apes, Aliens, and Artificial Intelligence. First-year writing seminar, Cornell University. Independently developed and supervised the course, which was ranked by student feedback in the top 25 of over 180 first-year writing seminars across the university—a pool that includes classes taught by tenured faculty as well as by graduate students.

Guest Lectures

2016 “The Civil Examination and the Emergence of the Scholar-Gentry Elite: Mobility and Political Legitimacy during the Tang–Song Transition.” A guest lecture for the survey course “Imperial Chinese History,” Cornell University. April 4.

2014 “China’s Culture of Meritocracy: Historical Continuity and Change.” A guest lecture for the undergraduate course “History and Myth: The Rise of China,” Cornell University. November 13.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

2011–13 Volunteer English teacher at under-privileged rural and urban high schools in Fujian Province, China. Instructed classes of 50 to 60 high-school students in English while conducting doctoral dissertation fieldwork.

2005–08 Founding partner and senior curriculum designer at Business English Pod, Shanghai, China. Helped to grow the business into a global leader in business-oriented online EFL training materials.

2003–08 Freelance EFL instructor in multinational and joint-venture companies based in Shanghai, China. Developed, tailored, and delivered courses in English business communication, with a focus on writing and presentation skills.

2002–03 Senior EFL instructor for Informatics Professional Development Center (IPDC), Shanghai, China.

1999–2000 English lecturer, Wenzhou Medical College, Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, China. Taught English to classes of 50 to 60 undergraduate students. Conducted outreaches to local rural high schools.

1998–99 Business English trainer at Siemens, Berlin, Germany.

German as a Foreign Language

Spring 1998 German language teaching assistant, Department of German Studies, Brown University. Independently led discussion and review sections in introductory German.

LANGUAGES

Mandarin Chinese

- Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) Advanced Level C (i.e., “Band 9”), passed October 2007: An advanced comprehensive certification of linguistic competence (reading, writing, speaking, listening) administered under the auspices of the Beijing Language and Culture University for non-native learners of Chinese with over 3,000 hours of classroom training. Sufficient language-level certification for admission to social-science postgraduate programs in China.
- Able to read and translate scholarly materials and imperial-era vernacular literature with reference materials.
- **Experienced conference interpreter:** Served as an English-Mandarin conference interpreter in negotiations between U.S. and Chinese businesses (2007–9) and at an academic symposium (“Globalization and Comparative Humanities,” jointly sponsored by Cornell University and East China Normal University, Shanghai, China, July 31–August 2, 2009).

German

- Advanced proficiency.
- Able to translate scholarly literature.

Scandinavian

- Proficiency in spoken **Danish**; reading proficiency in **Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian**.
- Able to translate scholarly materials from all three languages into English.
- Able to read and translate **Ancient Icelandic** with reference materials.

French: Reading ability sufficient for bibliographic research.

Arabic: One year of intensive college study.

MEMBERSHIPS AND AFFILIATIONS

American Anthropological Association (AAA).

Society for East Asian Anthropology (SEAA).

Council on Anthropology and Education (CAE).

Association for Asian Studies (AAS).