ABSTRACT

A cultural history of yoga’s development in South Asia shows how the body has been implicated in the politics of nationalism, science and medicine throughout the twentieth century. The argument presented here is that if the scope of analysis is broadened to a global scale one gains a better perspective on this politics, and a clearer understanding of some of the contradictions attendant on the body’s cultural history. Yoga in modern India has most certainly been medicalized in terms of science and a discourse of scientific modernity, as well in terms that involved the “sanitization” and secularization of its exotic, esoteric and erotic antecedents. However, yoga fits logically into the rubric of nature cure, as this form of radical, revolutionary, alternative medicine emerged as an aspect of a global political ecology of the body in the early twentieth century. We can more clearly understand class distinctions and aspirations, alienation and public health issues in the yoga projects of Swami Sivananda, Shri Yogendra, and Swami Kuvalayananda – the chief architects of medicalized practice in India -- if we understand what they were doing in terms of a global political ecology of the body and health. Further, this helps us understand how and why we can understand yoga as nature cure in contemporary practice.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Joseph S. Alter teaches anthropology at Yale-NUS College and has published a number of books, including The Wrestler’s Body, Knowing Dil Das, Gandhi’s Body, Asian Medicine and Globalization, Yoga in Modern India and Moral Materialism: Sex and Masculinity in Modern India. His research is based in South Asia and is currently focused on the cultural history of nature cure as a globalized system of medicine, biosemiotics and social theory, and the natural history of animals in the human imagination. With a focus on ecology and natural history he runs a semester-long study abroad program in the Indian Himalayas, including groups of students from Singapore and the United States.

DATE

Wednesday, 9th September 2015

TIME

3.00pm to 4.30pm

VENUE

Malay Studies Seminar Room, AS7 #04-13, Kent Ridge Campus, NUS