



NEEDHAM RESEARCH INSTITUTE

5th JOSEPH NEEDHAM MEMORIAL LECTURE

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To be held by kind permission of the Master and Fellows of Clare College, Cambridge at the
Riley Auditorium, Gillespie Centre, Memorial Court
Friday 6th November 2020, 5.00 pm.

The craft of mud-making: matter, time and history viewed through China's cropsapes

by

Francesca Bray

(Emerita Professor of Social Anthropology, University of Edinburgh)



Abstract:

The crafting of mud, the controlled marrying of crumbs of soil with drops of water to achieve a desired consistency, is a technical process fundamental to building human worlds: farming and pottery, building and painting, mayonnaise and calligraphy all involve mud-making. Success in mud-making depends on good timing. Indeed, the proper timing of human interventions in material processes is a basic skill prerequisite not just to mud-making but to

all the transformations of our environment that nowadays we call technology. But the multiple layering of temporalities upon which technical success depends has not always received the attention it deserves from historians. Here I explore the importance of timing in the technical manipulation of matter using China's long tradition of agricultural writing. The rhythms and techniques of mud-making in the dry-land millet cropscares of North China differed fundamentally from those of the wet-rice cropscares of the south; so too did the socio-technological systems that took shape around them, and their historical trajectories. This lecture offers some reflections on mud as a useful medium for historians of technology and science to think about the plural temporalities of the material practices we study, including how short-span technical processes and rhythms might be woven into the mesh of history.

Bio:

Francesca Bray is a historian and anthropologist of science and technology, with particular interests in agriculture, food and gender. Her first book was the volume on *Agriculture* (1984) in Joseph Needham's series *Science and Civilisation in China*. Other works include *The Rice Economies: Technology and Development in Asian Societies* (1986); *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (1997); *Graphics and Text in the Production of Technical Knowledge in China* (2007); *Rice: Global Networks and New Histories* (2015); and *Moving Crops and the Scales of History* (forthcoming). She is Emerita Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh.

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