

Brown Bag Seminar No. 226

2026

3.18 (wed.) **12:10** ~ **12:50**

12:10-12:15

◆ Introduction

12:15-12:40

◆ Seminar
(Presentation)

12:40-12:50

◆ Q&A

Online
(Zoom)

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Gifts and Gigs:

Burning Man and the Paradoxes of the Tech Economy



Key Words

Burning Man

Gift economy

Gig economy

Silicon Valley

China

Festival culture

Platform capitalism

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Born in Alaska, Ian Rowen has spent most of his life in the Asia-Pacific region. Before his academic career, he worked as a tour guide, journalist, hotelier and entrepreneur in Taiwan, China, and the Philippines. He is fluent in Mandarin Chinese and proficient in Indonesian. Prior to joining Kyushu University Institute for Advanced Study, he served as Associate Professor at the Department of Taiwan Culture, Languages, and Literature and Assistant Professor of Sociology, Geography and Urban Planning at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, and a US Fulbright Scholar. He earned his PhD in Geography from University of Colorado in Boulder. His books include *One China, Many Taiwans: The Geopolitics of Cross Strait Tourism* (Cornell University Press, 2023) and *A Taiwanese Ecoliterature Reader* (Columbia University Press, 2026).

Burning Man — a temporary desert city built on principles of radical self-expression, decommodification, gifting, and participation — has functioned as both model and engine for the global tech economy. The event and Silicon Valley have fueled each other's rise, drawing from a shared inheritance of 1960s counterculture, cybernetic utopianism, and global commodity production. As a cultural infrastructure of the tech industry and its most spectacular arena for elite social networking, Burning Man's gift economy ethos has paradoxically accelerated the very wealth disparity and resource conflict it appeared to transcend — helping birth the gig economy it seemed to oppose. As the event globalized, it also attracted growing interest from Chinese elites, making it an unexpected lens onto geoeconomic collaboration and rivalry as performed through festival culture. Drawing on long-term action research as scholar, artist, and organizational insider, this talk traces how a remote and ephemeral desert experiment became a generative site for the contradictory world we now inhabit.