

**Humanistic Scholarship and the Anthropocene: Approaching China from a Sustainability Paradigm**

**Veranstalter:** Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of Zurich

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We live in the geological age of the anthropocene. It is not yet clear whether the anthropocene began with the industrial revolution, the discovery of the Americas, or even earlier still. However, there exists a broad scientific and social consensus that humanity impacts our planet now on a global scale and determines, as Prasenjit Duara pointed out, „the sustainability of the Earth more than any other force“. How do we respond to this fundamental change in our relationship to our planet? And how can humanities scholars working on China contribute to sustainable solutions? With an acute sense of urgency to rethink human(istic) values, the three day conference „Humanistic Scholarship in the Anthropocene“ heeded Gayatri Spivak’s call to „imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents“<sup>1</sup> to offer both critical reflection on our ecological crisis and to productively engage with historical, philosophical, religious and aesthetic passageways towards a more sustainable future. This conference was hosted by the University of Zurich Chinese Studies department (Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies) and received generous support from the Asia Research Institute (National University of Singapore), the University of Zurich Research Priority Program „Asia and Europe“, the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHDK), the Swiss Academy for Humanities and Social Sciences, the Zürcher Hochschulstiftung and the Zürcher Universitätsverein (ZUNIV).

As a temporal and analytical framework the anthropocene is gaining increasingly wider recognition. Today there are numerous books and specialized journals that testify to what ANDREA RIEMENSCHNITTER (Zurich) in her opening address called an „environmental turn“ in the humanities. The importance of addressing environmental is-

ues cannot be questioned. However, one of the problems with the current environmental crisis is that it is rarely a felt reality: analytically we know what the problem is, and yet we rarely act on this knowledge. By the same token, toxic waste, air pollution, and resource exploitation create various forms of what Rob Nixon has evocatively termed „slow violence,“ which often elude the short attention span of the hyper-active news cycle. He proposes as one solution to this problem the creation of symbols and narratives which can „bring into imaginative focus apprehensions that elude sensory corroboration“<sup>2</sup> to create solidarity among life-organisms. To state the conclusion in advance, this conference contributed to this task in at least three fundamental ways. Firstly, it addressed the shortcomings of technology and corporate driven solutions to environmental problems. Secondly, it engaged with new perspectives on local environmental knowledge, green protests and spiritual communities of environmental care, which are emerging in China and across East Asia today. And thirdly, it theorized new possibilities for eco-critical scholarship through such concepts as „circulatory history,“ „metropolitan conviviality,“ „the precariate,“ „insurgency movie,“ and „heavy metal poetry,“ to name just a few. Overall, this conference demonstrated a constructive engagement with green narratives emerging from China and East Asia today, which for this participant, at least, provided a welcome counterpoint to the reductive focus on the apocalyptic scenarios of the anthropocene.

The first panel centered on the role art and aesthetics play both in encouraging forms of green activism and in legitimating political ideologies of exploitation. SHELDON LU (Davies) strongly emphasized the vitality of Chinese-language eco-cinemas. These movies not only retrain our perception of the world through an „aesthetic of slowness,“ but can also foster novel spaces for social commentary and a new sense of planetary morality.

MENG YUE (Toronto) stressed in her pa-

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<sup>1</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, New York 2003, p. 73.

<sup>2</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard 2011, p. 15.

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per that awareness of environmental issues alone is not enough, as we are both the victims and culprits in the production of the „addictive substances of the anthropocene“ – chemical fertilizers, plastic, hormones, ... Drawing on the works of English conservationist Eve Balfour, she distinguished a non-chemical view on life from the „logic of the chemist“, which does not factor life itself into the science of plant growth and crop productivity. She explained that during the early stages of China's modernization there were, at least at the discursive level, possibilities for agricultural development through non-chemical farming. However, this changed completely by the 1930s, when a Marxist developmentalist discourse began to frame nature conservation and ecological resistance within the antagonism of the rural peasant and the urban worker, as exemplified in Mao Dun's novel „The Spring of Silkworms“ (Chuncan 1932).

The multilayered entanglement of environmental discourses, politics and art was also the topic of ANDREA RIEMENSCHNITTER's (Zurich) paper. She analyzed a variety of unofficial responses, both humorous and critical, to Xi Jinping's state campaign of the „China Dream.“ Especially the recent „burst in environmental topics“ in contemporary Chinese art suggests that there is growing discontent with the government's underspecified green vision. Riemenschneider put a big question mark behind the capability of the state's dream machinery to trigger sustainable solutions from below. Economic growth at any cost still trumps environmental and social reform. Symbolically portentous in this regard is the ubiquity of the „China Dream“ posters in front of construction sites, which stand for fast consumption and development.

In the second panel MIKE DOUGLASS (Singapore) and DAVID STRAND (Carlisle) focused on urban transformation in China and Asia more broadly. Both argued that the idea of the city as propeller of growth is winning out on the city as shared living space, but they also showed, on a more hopeful note, that urbanization is not a priori an antagonistic force to sustainable living.

Douglass explained that while urban growth in the post-colonial era had always been an important cornerstone of national

development, this changed by the 1990s, when a neodevelopmentalist paradigm came to dominate urban development throughout Asia. Neodevelopmentalism emphasizes corporate driven development, but differs from neoliberalism in its belief in a strong state to secure investment, restrict migration and limit participatory governance. This has had a profound impact on urban planning. For instance, urban space is in many Asian cities today designed to prevent people from gathering. However, there also exist a number of what Douglass calls „progressive cities“ such as Seoul, Busan and Fukuoka, which offer promising perspectives for reconciling growth with „human flourishing.“

One important dimension of „human flourishing“ is the biosphere and it is not surprising that Asia's fast-paced urbanization has been accompanied by an increasing demand for green spaces. The pressures of real-estate development and population density on green infrastructures have, according to David Strand, not only resulted in demands for public park conservation and construction, but have also given balconies, drainage systems, roof-tops and abandoned buildings new recreational, alimentary, and spiritual roles. An interesting case is the „green corridor“ in Singapore. Long before the government discovered the „green corridor“ as a high-profile opportunity to increase its environmental prestige, the green spaces surrounding the later to be abandoned train tracks had already been used by residents and railway workers for picnics, the erection of shrines and gardening. Strand showed that parks are more than simply the „green lungs“ of the city, but are increasingly important „entangled spaces,“ which shape our community values and foster new human and non-human coalitions.

In the third panel SIMONA GRANO and ZHANG YUHENG (both Zurich) presented a comparative analysis of two tree conservation movements in Taipei and Nanjing, respectively. They argued that environmental movements in China are unlikely to become catalyzers of democratic change as in Taiwan. MIKE SCHÄFER (Zurich) discussed recent developments in global climate change media coverage. With the exception of the U.S. and

Great Britain, a „societal turn“ in global climate change media coverage has taken place; we have shifted our focus from understanding climate change to analyzing its political, economic and social ramifications.

The fourth panel analyzed post-secular and post-human approaches to environmental ethics. The first two papers formed a subsection that could have very well been entitled, in P. Duara's phraseology, „saving the planet from the nation.“ Going beyond critiques of nationalism as propeller of resource exploitation, both PRASENJIT DUARA and KENNETH DEAN (both Singapore) looked at historical and newly forged networks of spiritual environmentalism and evaluated the extent to which these networks are beginning to gain critical purchase in environmental crisis management.

Drawing from his recent publication, „The Crisis of Global Modernity. Asian Traditions and a Sustainable Future“ (Cambridge 2014), Duara argued that it is necessary to replace linear, „tunneled“ histories of nations with the idea of „circulatory histories“. Circulatory histories are shared histories, as he explained, which take into account both the different experiences of events by different people and the often oblique routes, through which histories and ideas travel. One example is the transpacific shuttling of ideas between Bengali reformer Ram Mohan Roy, Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, which helps understand certain intellectual convergences between environmental movements in the US and India. Duara also showed that while eco-spiritual movements in Asia today draw on very different spiritual resources and traditions, they all share a non-dualistic worldview and, in difference to Western deep ecology movements, do not regard nature as sacred for intrinsic values, but rather as a by-product of the moral and natural order. Furthermore, these spiritual movements are open to change and reinvention, for which Duara gave the example of the recent „greening“ of Daoism and its transformation of Laozi into a spiritual protector of the environment (shengtai baohu shen).

Kenneth Dean analyzed Daoist cosmological thought and the forms of environmen-

talism these have fostered in Daoist ritual networks across China and Southeast Asia. He argued that while Confucianism has a strongly human-biased outlook on the world, Daoism has a much broader understanding of organic, inorganic, and cosmological interconnectedness. In the Daoist understanding, the body is a fragile construction, which is constantly threatened by demonic forces. By the same token, this receptive body takes on an important role in shaping cosmological processes. Daoist rituals and spirit possession are thus not repetitions of a pregiven order, but responsive to a continuously evolving cosmos. Drawing on examples from the Putian plane in Fujian, Dean argued that rituals are an important form of collective negotiation of communal values, which are increasingly also directed towards ecological issues. These Daoist networks are successfully expanding across Southeast Asia and gaining importance in the reconstruction of degraded local environments. Dean concluded that we would do well to invent our own rituals for the Anthropocene before it is too late.

„Saving the planet from humanity,“ to stay with the theme, was the topic of the second section of this panel, which analyzed critiques of speciesism in contemporary Chinese literature and poetry. Even though numerous critiques of anthropocentrism and speciesism more broadly have already been advanced, it remains very difficult to think beyond biologic divisions of life forms. JUSTYNA JAGUSCIK (Zurich) observes, in the works of Zheng Xiaoqiong a blurring of these boundaries by foregrounding the shared toxicity of bodies and landscapes. Zheng is known in China as the leading poetic voice of female migrant workers. However, the gendered plight of the factory worker in Zheng's poetic oeuvre is but one node in an expansive economy of pain, toxicity and marginalization. Iron and chemicals are in Zheng's work no longer symbols of industrial achievement as they now pierce the body and pollute the soil. Jaguscik analyzed Zheng's poetic intervention into China's industrialized landscape as specifically eco-feminist, because it foregrounds the dominance of patriarchal traditions in the exploitation of nature.

HAIYAN LEE (Stanford) presented a pa-

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per on anthropomorphism and newly emerging forms of animal writing in Chinese literature. Modern Chinese literature is, in Lee's words, „a predominantly anthropocentric enterprise.“ However, recently there has been a small explosion in animal-themed novels, which reconfigure the human animal relation on aesthetic and moral grounds. Lee drew on Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory of the „transitional object“ in childhood and Bonnie Honig's concept of the „public thing“ to analyze the fictional re-discovery of the South China tiger in „The Chinese Tiger“ (Zhongguo hu, 2008) by Li Kewei. She argued that the environment in general and mega-fauna preservation more specifically fit the criteria of these analytic concepts particularly well. The tiger as „transitional object“ and „public thing“ can enchant us and create affective communities of solidarity, but also forces us to acknowledge our indebtedness to animals themselves.

#### **Conference Overview:**

*Panel 1: Art, Performance and the Anthropocene*

Chair: David Strand (Dickinson College)

Sheldon Lu (University of California at Davies), Eco-Cinema and Chinese-language Documentary Films

Meng Yue (University of Toronto), Encountering the Substance of the Anthropocene: Writing (Post)industrial Materiality in China

Andrea Riemenschnitter (University of Zurich), Shanshui Aesthetics and the Chinese Dream

#### *Key lecture:*

Haiyan Lee (Stanford University), From Here to Eternity: A Sino-Jewish Encounter

*Roundtable and podium discussion: Social Change and the Humanities in the Anthropocene*

Moderator: Mike Douglass

Podium: Kenneth Dean / Prasenjit Duara / Haiyan Lee / Susanne Weigelin-Schwiedrzik

*Panel 2: Sustainable Cities*

Chair: Haiyan Lee (Stanford University)

Mike Douglass (National University of Singa-

pore), Asia's Urban Transition – the Spatiality of Human and Planetary Flourishing in the Anthropocene

David Strand (Dickinson College), Graying, Rusting, Greening and Innovating: Endless Growth Meets Limited Space in the Development of Asian and Chinese Parks and Green Space

*Panel 3: Grass Roots Movements and Environmental Governance*

Chair: Jessica Imbach (University of Zurich)

Simona Grano / Yuheng Zhang (University of Zurich), Newly-Born Tree-Huggers' Movements in China and Taiwan: The Emergence of Rules-Based Participatory Approaches

Mike Schäfer (University of Zurich), Media Communication about Climate Change. Comparative Perspectives and the Case of China

*Panel 4: Eco-Humanities? Post-secular Approaches to an Environmental Ethics*

Chair: Raji C. Steineck (University of Zurich)

Prasenjit Duara (National University of Singapore), Re-sacralizing the Landscape: Global Asian Circulations in the Anthropocene

Kenneth Dean (National University of Singapore), Three Ecologies of Chinese Popular Religion: Singular Subjectivities, Cultural Resilience and Ecological Sustainability

Justyna Jaguscik (University of Zurich), Green Language of Plants and Toxic Waste: Ecological Wounds in Zheng Xiaoqiong's Poetry

Haiyan Lee (Stanford University), The Silence of Animals: Writing on the Edge of Anthropomorphism in Contemporary Chinese Literature

*Closing Discussion: Transdisciplinary Scholarship in the Anthropocene: Traditions and Perspectives*

Chair: Andrea Riemenschnitter (University of Zurich)

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