



Symposium on Interdisciplinary Perspectives on China: New Research and Methods

4–5 October 2024

Seminar Room II, India International Centre, Main Building

Speakers' Biographies and Abstracts

The COVID-19 pandemic transformed how foreign scholars studied and wrote about China. Limited access to the country necessitated new approaches to conducting research, engaging with overlooked sources, and developing novel methodologies. Even prior to the pandemic, scholars had been exploring new topics, reanalyzing earlier arguments and studies, and producing a new body of scholarship on China, its history, and its connections to the broader world, both historically and in contemporary times. Over the past two decades, a new and innovative field of “Global China Studies” has emerged, significantly influencing research, teaching, and the conceptualization of China. This symposium presents glimpses of the latest research on China from multi- and interdisciplinary perspectives. It highlights new research and methods in Chinese art, history, literature, media, and urban studies. The aim is to explore how this research and these methodologies can contribute to the development of China studies in India, and how collaborations could be fostered between Indian scholars and institutions and NYU Shanghai, a U.S.-China joint-venture university located in Shanghai.

Friday, 4 October, 2024

Session II

On the Patronage of Miniature Stone Pagodas in Sixth-century China: Dedication, Organization, and Migration

Jinchao Zhao, Assistant Professor, Tongji University; Visiting scholar, NYU Shanghai

A number of miniature pagodas and hundreds of fragmented pieces were discovered at monastic sites and hoarding pits in northern China during the twentieth century. Notably, a specific category includes pagodas formed by a series of cubical stone blocks that are once stacked up in diminishing sizes. Predominantly unearthed in the Nannieshui 南涅水 County of Shanxi 山西 and several sites in eastern Gansu 甘肅, these pagodas, as indicated by dedicatory inscriptions and stylistic traits, were commissioned during the Northern Dynasties. However, the processes involved in creating, venerating, and perceiving these pagodas, the reasons for their prevalence in rural Gansu and Shanxi, and their connection to contemporaneous pagoda worship remain under-explored. This study delves into patronage details revealed by inscriptions, examining the crucial role of Buddhist rituals in the very making of stacked pagodas, the local organization of donors, and the dissemination of this practice in Shanxi and Gansu. It argues for a migration route of donors linking Gansu, Shaanxi, and Shanxi in several stages during the Northern Dynasties. Additionally, this research employs a network analysis approach to visualize and analyze the interaction among donor clans in Nannieshui, underscoring how digitization and the application of digital tools offer a novel avenue for examining the creation and worship of stone sculptures in early medieval China.

Jinchao Zhao specializes in Chinese Buddhist art. She is currently an assistant professor in Art History at the School of Humanities, Tongji University and an affiliated member with the Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai. She earned her M.A. in Comparative Literature from Peking University and Ph.D. in art and architectural history from the University of Virginia in 2021. Before joining Tongji, Dr. Zhao completed a joint-postdoctoral fellowship in Global Asian studies at NYU Shanghai and Fudan University. Jinchao's research interests include Buddhist visual narratives, early Indian art, and artistic interactions between China and India. Her research articles have appeared in *Religions*, *Asian Studies*, and *Eurasian Studies*, among others.

Session III

Gateway to the Buddhist World: Representations of India in Temple Inscriptions from Yuan-Ming Yunnan

Eloise Wright, Assistant Professor of History and China Studies, Ashoka University

The city of Dali stands in the southeastern foothills of the Himalayas, on a small strip of fertile lands between the snowy peaks of Mt Diancang and the glacial waters of Lake Er. While today it

is best known for the beauty of its physical surrounds, Dali has long been at the centre of overland trade routes connecting eastern Eurasia with the Indian Ocean. In 1253, the Mongol invasion ended the rule of the independent Nanzhao and Dali Kingdoms and incorporated Dali with the Yuan empire. While Dali was swiftly integrated into the economic and administrative structures of empires to its east, its historical entanglements with the Himalaya and the Indian Ocean world did not disappear. Dali's local elite, comprised of descendants of both Dali's pre-conquest elite and of settlers who had arrived with the Mongols or the Ming, used its history of trade and its Buddhist sites to position Dali as a centre of power in Yunnan, both in historical writings and in their present day. In this paper, I will examine representations of place in inscriptions from Dali's Buddhist temples. These inscriptions were typically set up to commemorate the repair or expansion of an existing, or perhaps abandoned, temple. The local or visiting literati who sponsored the construction would also sponsor a stone stele marking their contribution for an audience of future visitors. I argue that through contributing financially to these local institutions, and making records of their contributions, Dali literati were able to construct Dali as a Buddhist land, on the periphery of a sacred geography whose origin and metropole was in India. At the same time, the networks which actually supported the temples' continued existence were primarily local, and integrated with Sinophone (rather than Indic) pilgrimage networks.

Eloise Wright is Assistant Professor of History and China Studies at Ashoka University, Sonapat. Her research explores questions of place and identity through the local history of the city of Dali, in what is now southwest China. She is also interested in histories of language and writing, sociology and materiality of texts, and genres of writing about the past. She received her PhD from the University of California, Berkeley in 2019, and is a centre affiliate at the Lieberthal-Rogel Centre for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan, where she previously held a postdoctoral fellowship. In 2024–25 she is a Robert H. N. Ho Family Foundation Early Career Research Fellow in Buddhist Studies.

Session IV

Forbidden Romance: Love and the Law in Early Chinese Detective Fiction

Mengdie Zhao, Assistant Professor of Global China Studies, NYU Shanghai

This talk reevaluates the literary and historical significance of early Chinese detective fiction of the late Qing and early Republican period (1900s–1920s). Previous scholarship has focused either on translations of stories like *Sherlock Holmes* and *Arsène Lupin*, or on later Chinese detective stories which imitated these foreign classics. Earlier Chinese works have been criticized for their “immature” style and “conservative” morals. Not only did these works combine narrative techniques from detective fiction with traditional literary genres, but they also portrayed the Qing court more positively with diligent and sympathetic judges. However, I argue that the “mixed genre” style of these stories shows an effort to domesticate detective fiction for a local audience. The authors also used this innovative story-telling strategy to criticize the established judicial reasoning, rather than the judicial procedure—which was often the target for censure by many progressive intellectuals.

This talk shows how Lenfo (1888–?), a Manchu author and publisher, explored the judicial dilemmas born out of the conflict between legal codes built on Confucian family ethics and morality as it existed in the popular imagination. In the detective novel-cum-romantic tragedy, *Mrs. Chun Née E* (1911), the author expressed his criticism of legal decisions involving sexual offences based solely on the litigants’ familial relationship. By challenging literary and judicial archetypes, the author levels pointed criticism at the Confucian principles of the legal system, making a case for fundamental judicial and social reform.

Mengdie Zhao is an Assistant Professor Faculty Fellow of Global China Studies at NYU Shanghai. She is a scholar of Chinese literature with interests in legal history and gender studies. She received her PhD in Chinese literature from Harvard University in 2022. Prior to joining NYU Shanghai, she was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Society of Fellows in the Humanities at the University of Southern California. Currently, Mengdie is working on her book project, tentatively titled *Shades of Justice: Law, Legal Culture, and Literary Experimentation in Early Modern China*. This project examines the formation of new literary genres and narrative patterns in crime stories from the 15th to the early 20th century, coinciding with the expansion of the judicial infrastructure. Additionally, the book undermines unconventional critiques of law and presents alternative visions of justice as depicted in these popular literary texts.

Session V

Obscene Publications and “Immoral” Modernities in Shanghai and Colonial Singapore, 1920s–1930s

Yushu Geng, Postdoctoral Fellow, Center for Global Asia, NYU Shanghai

This paper examines the development and the regulation of Chinese “obscene” prints in Republican Shanghai and colonial Singapore, two important Chinese publishing hubs in the early twentieth century. Tracing the various meanings of the category of “*yin*” (which can be loosely translated as “obscene” and/or “obscenity”) in transnational Chinese contexts, I argue that “obscenity” was an inherently unstable concept defined not by sexually explicit content, but by the variegated efforts to regulate it. I demonstrate that “obscenity” effectively became a way to talk about and differentiate desirable and undesirable modernities in the early twentieth-century Sinophone world. Ultimately, I use the instability of “obscenity” to deconstruct several dichotomies deeply rooted within modern Chinese cultural and intellectual history, such as moral/immoral, modern/traditional, China/West, and China/the Sinophone diaspora. Empirically, I triangulated between archives in the UK, Singapore, and Shanghai, and adopted a transnational approach to move beyond ‘Sinocentric’ narratives of modern China. This transnational approach enables me to highlight the ways in which local conditions mediated products and discourses that circulate globally, and innovatively bring together two often separated line of historical research, that of the history of modern China and the history of overseas Chinese communities. My research thus contributes to the growing scholarship that seeks to move beyond the nation-state framework to consider commonalities and idiosyncrasies within Sinophone cultural production and intellectual practice in different place and time.

Yushu Geng is a cultural historian of modern China. She received her BA in History and MA in Modern History from Durham University and obtained an MPhil in Gender Studies and a PhD in History from the University of Cambridge. Prior to joining NYU Shanghai, she worked as a postdoc at Trinity College Dublin between 2021 and 2023, investigating the changing meanings of childhood in twentieth-century China. Her PhD project looks at the circulation and regulation of Chinese-language obscene publications in Republican China and colonial Singapore.

Her broader research interests include history of gender and sexuality, print culture, feminism, and global history. Her regional focus is China, but during her PhD training she also branched out to investigate the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, with a focus on Chinese communities in Singapore.

Portions of Yushu's PhD thesis have been published under the title 'What is Obscenity? Morality and Modernity in 1920s China' in *China Perspectives*. She co-edited *Rethinking Childhood in Modern Chinese History* (Routledge, forthcoming) with Dr Isabella Jackson, in which she contributed a book chapter and a co-authored Introduction. She has a forthcoming co-authored article on the transnational marketing in early twentieth century India and China in *Historical Journal*. She is currently revising her PhD thesis into a book manuscript and working on two side projects: one about masculinity and the Chinese Modern Boy in 1920s-1930s China and the other about child sexuality and sex education in Republican China.

Saturday, 5 October, 2024

Session VI

Follow the River: Discovering “Traditional” Borders in Late-Qing Frontier Management

Sayantani Mukherjee, Assistant Professor, Ashoka University

In the final decades of its existence, the Qing imperial state sought to unify and standardize policies of frontier management. In this context, mapping and surveying practices developed as socio-technological discourses that transformed how Qing authorities asserted their territorial claims in the Eastern Himalayas. How did military surveyors establish authoritative ideas about the “natural” limits of the Qing empire? This paper focuses on late-Qing surveys of the Zayul river basin in 1910-1911, commissioned by Zhao Erfeng and carried out by the surveyors Cheng Fengxian, Duan Pengrui, and Xia Hu. Between 1910 to 1911, Zhao Erfeng commissioned new surveys of the Zayul river basin, located in the Tibetan dominions at the north-easternmost tip of modern-day Arunachal Pradesh, to demarcate Chinese territory from that of British India. General Zhao's subordinate officials Cheng Fengxiang, Duan Pengrui and Xia Hu led surveying missions that mapped the route of the Zayul river, which flowed into British Indian territory through the Mishmi hills into Assam as the Lohit.

These surveys largely claimed the limits of natural features as the “natural” or “traditional” boundaries of the imperial state, against local knowledge productions that framed those same topographical features as connectors rather than dividers. Most scholarship on the history of Qing-era frontier management has tended to focus on Chinese nation-building practice. However, this paper foregrounds the tensions between the construction of “universal” discourses of imperial scientific practice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which claimed to orient the practices of geography, cartography and ethnography, and the constraints of the Qing imperial system predicated on the same coercive technologies to identify territory. The epistemic regime governing the production of geo-knowledge about the Eastern Himalayas rose out of a series of contestations between the appropriation and rejection of local and indigenous knowledge, networks, and actors, and this paper explores the construction of that authoritative knowledge and questions who could be considered an expert.

Sayantani Mukherjee is a historian of modern China and the trans-Himalayan Tibetan border worlds of 19th and 20th century Asia. She is Assistant Professor at Ashoka University in the Department of History and the Ashoka Centre for China Studies. She received her Ph.D. in History from Columbia University in 2021 and is currently working on her first book manuscript, tentatively titled “Between Two Worlds: British India, Qing China and the Technologies of Empire-Making in Tibet in the Nineteenth Century”. Drawing on archival research in multiple languages and sites across India, England, Taiwan and China, including Tibet, her project foregrounds the coercive socio-technological discourses employed by British India and Qing China in exploring, identifying, and spatially constituting Tibet.

Session VII

The Politics of Constructing the History of China’s Foreign Relations in the PRC

Tansen Sen, Professor of History, NYU Shanghai and NYU

Focusing on the Chinese Society for Historians of China’s Foreign Relations (CSHCFR), founded in 1981, this presentation examines how the narrative of China’s historical interactions with foreign regions and peoples has been constructed, propagated, and employed in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) between the 1980s and the 2020s. Divided into three parts, the presentation first outlines the emergence and development of Chinese-language scholarship on the history of China’s foreign relations before the 1980s. Next it analyzes the establishment of the CSHCFR in the context of the PRC’s “open-door” policy in the 1980s and the niche discipline it helped shape. The final part examines the ways in which, by invoking the “open-door” policy, China’s “Silk Road” heritage, and the Belt and Road Initiative, the CSHCFR negotiated with and eventually integrated the state’s ideologies, policies, and propaganda activities into its framing of the discipline. In addition to providing a detailed examination of pertinent Chinese records, the presentation argues that the field of history of China’s foreign relations, especially under the stewardship of the CSHCFR, has attempted to align itself with the state’s political ideologies as well as its foreign policy and propaganda agendas. In doing so, it has contributed to the construction of a politicized China-centric transregional narrative of China’s past.

Tansen Sen is Professor of history and the Director of the Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai, and Associated Full Professor of History at New York University. Previously he was a faculty at the City University of New York and the founding head of the Nalanda Sriwijaya Center at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. He is the author of *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600-1400* (2003; 2016) and *India, China, and the World: A Connected History* (2017; 2018). He has co-authored (with Victor H. Mair) *Traditional China in Asian and World History* (2012), edited *Buddhism across Asia: Networks of Material, Cultural and Intellectual Exchange* (2014), and co-edited (with Burkhard Schnepel) *Travelling Pasts: The Politics of Cultural Heritage in the Indian Ocean World* (2019), and (with Brian Tsui) *Beyond Pan-Asianism: Connecting China and India, 1840s-1960s* (2021). He is currently at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Princeton working on a book on the Ming dynasty admiral Zheng He, a collaborative project on China-India interactions during the 1950s, and co-editing (with Eng seng Ho) the *Cambridge History of the Indian Ocean, volume 1*.

Session VIII

Multiscale Spatial Analytics of Urban Block Forms in Megacities: Rank-size, Route choice, and De-specialization

ChengHe Guan, Assistant Professor of Urban Science and Policy, NYU Shanghai

The urban formation in megacities has traditionally favored the deployment of large-scale mega-blocks for efficiency and simplicity. However, recent policies advocate for smaller and more fine-grained urban block and grid arrangements. Previous studies have overlooked the importance of land use de-specialization and route choice options in analyzing urban blocks and urban form. To address this gap, we conducted a quantitative analysis using spatial indices to examine the spatial configurations in Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen. The results demonstrate that Shanghai exhibits a more balanced distribution of block sizes, performs better at the community scale, and is more accessible at the city scale. This study contributes by providing a framework supporting the need for flexible planning approaches based on local conditions in China and by establishing quantitative models and variable selection methods for comparing urban community layouts and road networks. It is worth noting that while scholars explore the capacity and flexibility of smaller blocks versus the merits of larger blocks in terms of amenity provision and security, these discussions should be considered within the context of multiscale spatial analysis. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that the built environment alone may not fully capture the perspectives offered by human activities.

ChengHe Guan is an Assistant Professor of Urban Science and Policy at NYU Shanghai, Global Network Assistant Professor, and Ph.D. Advisor at NYU Wagner. He is the founding co-director of the Shanghai Key Laboratory of Urban Design and Urban Science (LOUD) <https://urban.shanghai.nyu.edu/>. Dr. Guan is affiliated with the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences at Harvard University, the School of Ecology and Environmental Sciences at East China Normal University, and NYU Tandon School of Engineering. Additionally, he serves

as a senior research consultant to the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society at the University of Oxford and the New Development Bank.

Dr. Guan's research focuses on spatial analytics of urban morphology and green space planning, organized around two interconnected themes: (1) Urban green space analytics with AI-enhanced urban sensing techniques, and (2) Urban form analytics and simulation for climate-adaptive cities. His work is published in leading academic journals such as *Nature Communications*, *Communications Earth & Environment* (Nature Portfolio), *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, *Landscape and Urban Planning*, *Land Use Policy*, *Health and Place*, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *Environment and Planning B: Urban Analytics and City Science*, and *Cities*. Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.nl/citations?user=VXqmlksAAAAJ&hl=en>

Session IX

China and the Wireless Wave

Anna Greenspan, Associate Professor of Contemporary Global Media, NYU Shanghai

A hyperdense network of mobile devices has completely transformed everyday existence in contemporary China. Cell phones are used to access the largest e-commerce platforms in the world. QR codes are omnipresent and form the semiotic of a vast sharing economy that includes bikes, umbrellas and cell phone chargers. WeChat, the immensely popular messaging app found on every mobile phone, is used to talk to friends, colleagues and business partners. Mobile payment platforms, built by tech giants Alibaba and Tencent, have become so successful that everyone from fruit sellers to street beggars have stopped using cash. During the Coronavirus pandemic, mammoth Internet platforms joined with government services to create a “sensing layer” of QR codes and cell phone signals, which worked as an extremely effective method of techno- authoritarian control. This talk, which is based on my new book *China and the Wireless Undertow: Media as Wave Philosophy* (University of Edinburgh Press, 2024), will focus on China's intimate entanglement with the media environment of the 21st century.

The alliance between China and wireless media provokes a dystopian fear. Planetary computation is envisioned becoming subject to a single transcendent authority—a master switch controlled by Beijing. Sinophobia and technophobia have become almost indistinguishable. My book re-imagines the relationship between China and wirelessness by synthesizing contemporary media theory with certain figures of modern Chinese thought. Doing so it offers a new theoretical framework – focused upon a philosophy of the wave – with which to understand China's intimate involvement with our current wireless age.

Anna Greenspan is an Associate Professor of Contemporary Global Media at NYU Shanghai and a Global Network Associate Professor in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development at NYU. She is also a Co-Director of NYU Shanghai's Center of AI and Culture. Her research focuses on urban futures and emerging media. Anna holds a PhD in Continental Philosophy from Warwick University, UK. While at Warwick, Anna was a founding member of the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (ccru). Anna was the co-founder of the Shanghai Studies Society as well

as the research hub [Hacked Matter](#). She also ran a digital humanities project, [Moveable Feasts](#), that maps Shanghai's street food. Anna's book [Shanghai Future: Modernity Remade](#) was published by Oxford University Press in 2014. Her latest monograph [China and the Wireless Undertow: Media as Wave Philosophy](#) was published in the Technicites series with Edinburgh University Press in 2023. Together with Bogna Konior and Benjamin Bratton, she is the editor of [Machine Decision is not Final: China, and the History and Future of AI](#) (Urbanomic, 2024). She maintains a personal website at www.annagreenspan.com

Session X

BRI Infrastructure in Sri Lanka: Examining the Vernacular

Bhagya Seneratne, Postdoctoral Fellow, Center for Global Asia, NYU Shanghai

Sri Lanka was one of 23 countries to join the BRI as a founding member state in 2014. Infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka are often cited internationally as case studies when critiquing the BRI. Large-scale infrastructure projects such as the Hambantota Port and the Colombo Port City are two such projects that are considered as not being viable. This research paper contributes to the ongoing global discourse surrounding infrastructure development projects linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with a particular focus on Sri Lanka. Despite the significant impact of these projects, the voice of the Sri Lankan vernacular has remained conspicuously absent from scholarly investigations. Within this context, the study aims to address two central inquiries: Firstly, what narratives and perspectives emerge from the Sri Lankan vernacular regarding BRI-related infrastructure development initiatives? Secondly, how do these vernacular interpretations shape the discourse surrounding BRI projects within Sri Lanka? To address these questions, this paper relies on several primary sources of data, such as over 200 vernacular sources of literature: scholarly articles and media reports, interviews with bureaucrats and data from various ministries of the Government of Sri Lanka. Through a rigorous analysis of the content, it highlights themes from the Sri Lanka vernacular that provides multifaceted perspectives from within Sri Lanka towards Chinese infrastructure development projects within their country. This contributes valuable insights to the broader discourse on the BRI and its engagements in Sri Lanka from an economic, political and security perspective.

Bhagya Senaratne is the outgoing Postdoctoral Fellow of Global Asia at the Center for Global Asia, NYU Shanghai (2022-2024). Previously, she was a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Strategic Studies, at General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Sri Lanka. At Center for Global Asia, Senaratne leads the project on 'BRI and South Asia', and parallelly runs the CGA BRI Talk Series by conducting high-level interviews with government officials and diplomats. She will soon be taking up duties as Director - Teaching and Learning at one of Sri Lanka's oldest higher education institutions. Her research intersects Foreign Policy Analysis, China Studies, Ocean Politics, Maritime Security and Strategic Communications. She co-edited *Pakistan-Sri Lanka Relations: A Story of Friendship* in 2017 and *Sri Lanka's Post-Independence Defence Policy: Past, Present and Future Projections* in 2023.