

7th Young Scholars Symposium

Multicentrality across Asia and Beyond

Abstracts and Bios

Room E904, New Bund Campus, NYU Shanghai

2-4 April 2026

The Young Scholars Symposium is an annual event organized by the Center for Global Asia and the Global Perspectives on Society program, NYU Shanghai. It brings together doctoral and postdoctoral fellows at NYU Shanghai and universities across China to share insights into issues pertaining to Asia in a global context. The symposium is open to early career scholars (doctoral students and postdoctoral fellows) working on Asia-related topics, especially those who explore transregional connections, disconnections, and comparisons.

This year's theme is "Multicentrality across Asia and beyond." The term "multicentrality" invites us to rethink how "centers" are made, recognized, and contested, rather than treating "center" and "periphery" as self-evident labels. What qualifies as a center, for whom, and under what conditions? If centers are often defined by political authority and economic infrastructure, can they be constituted differently based on cultural prestige or reciprocal exchange? Can centers be temporary, mobile, or situational—emerging around a port season, a pilgrimage circuit, a publishing network, a diasporic institution, a platform, or an archive? Where center-periphery models have been widely used, this theme foregrounds different kinds of relationships: ones that coexist without a stable hierarchy, overlap without predictable outcomes, and connect without being reducible to rivalry or domination. "Multicentrality" also asks what kinds of forces organize historical and contemporary worlds. Power and coercion are not the only engines of centralization. Other binding energies, such as care, attention, wonder, hope, and curiosity, may also act as serious historical and analytical categories.

Thursday 2nd April

9:15-9:30 Opening Remarks by Bei Wu (NYU Shanghai)

Bei Wu is the Provost and Distinguished Global Professor of Public Health at NYU Shanghai. As Provost, she serves as NYU Shanghai's chief academic officer, setting the university's academic strategy and priorities, and overseeing academic appointments, research, and faculty affairs.

9:30-9:45 Symposium Overview by Tansen Sen (NYU Shanghai)

Tansen Sen is Professor of History and Director of the Center for Global Asia, NYU Shanghai. He received his MA from Peking University and a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. He specializes in Asian history and has done extensive research on China and other Asian countries.

Panel 1: Inner, Outer, and Media

9:45-11:50

Junnan Chen (NYU Shanghai)

Panel Chair

Bio

Junnan Chen is Assistant Professor in Media Theory at the Department of Interactive Media Art. Prior to joining NYU Shanghai, she received her Ph.D. at Princeton University, with a joint-degree of Interdisciplinary Humanities and East Asian Studies. Her research and teaching interests range widely: from media theory, feminist theory, extraterrestrial imaginaries, to the philosophy of time.

Tenggeer Hao (NYU Shanghai)

Celestial Realism: Yijing Philosophy of Change and Jia Zhangke's Realist Cinema

Bio

Tenggeer Hao specializes in Chinese film studies, media theory, and comparative philosophy. His research examines how modern and contemporary Chinese literature and film transform and re-mediate premodern Chinese philosophical paradigms, especially those marginalized within modern scientism. He is broadly interested in the philosophical possibilities harboured in knowledge systems often deemed non-scientific—such as fengshui, astrology, and traditional Chinese medicine—and how they speak to the malaises and traumas of modern society. His book manuscript, *The Mind Medium: A Yin-Yang Philosophy of Mind and Media*, examines the *yin-yang* dynamics of mind and body, concept and perception, time and space, and media and message through philosophizing divination and interpretation in the *I Ching* paradigm.

Abstract

In this essay, I theorize the notion of celestial realism by articulating a *Yijing (Book of Changes)* philosophy of change and analyzing Jia Zhangke's realist cinema. I trace realism's paradox—its attempt to suture the spatiotemporal schism between representation and reality—to its philosophical roots in securing the self-sufficiency of space-time through naturalizing causality and excluding mind. Examining the *yin-yang* patterns of the subjective and the objective in Jia's films, I argue that the constant re-emergence of such *yin-yang* patterns on the verge of dissolution in his films embodies the Fu

hexagram, which, according to the *Yijing*, manifests the cosmic mind. The mind, although empirically individual, is transcendently cosmic: space-time cannot be self-sufficiently given to us without being mediated by the mind's *yin-yang* patterned concepts—here and there, now and then. The real mystery that the *Yijing* reveals is not the future in time but the mind of time. Spatiotemporal change (*yi*) consists in the *yin-yang* unity of change (*bian*)—the perceptually discrete contents in space-time—and transformation (*hua*)—the conceptually continuous forms of space-time. These subjective and objective aspects entangle with each other through *gan-ying* (affect-response), where for a *yin-yang* pair to *gan-ying* is for them to constitutively and transformatively resonate with each other, that is, for the empirical reality of one to be necessarily mediated by the conceptual form of the other. So, rather than functioning through causality, *gan-ying* conditions causality. Depicting the cosmic web of *gan-ying* in Jia's *A Touch of Sin* with the *Xian* and *Pi* hexagrams, I argue Jia's realism is celestial, presenting us a social pathology, where both social problems and human agencies, instead of being causally locked, arise through *gan-ying*. In this *gan-ying*-based realism, representation and reality, mind and world, are clearly distinguished as inseparably connected like *yin-yang*.

Siqi Liu (King's College London)

Reframing Multicentrality Through the Daoist Pivot: Towards a Comparative Film and Media Theorisation

Bio

Dr. Siqi Liu earned her PhD in Film and Media Philosophy from King's College London. Her research engages in a comparative dialogue between Daoist philosophy and Euro-American film and media theories as well as a critical study of Chinese cinemas and media. Liu's articles have been published in *Asian Cinema* and *Routledge*. Her research interests include comparative film and media theories; Daoist philosophy and aesthetics; Deleuzian and Simondonian philosophy; Chinese cinemas and media; digital media and media ecology; cultural studies and interdisciplinary studies.

Abstract

This paper reframes 'multicentrality' through the Daoist concept of *daoshu* (the very axis or pivot of Dao) and examines how the 'Asia as method' approach, with its emphasis on multiplicity, has been adopted to reconfigure the field of film and media studies. According to Daoism, *daoshu* refers to the generative void of the pivot that occupies the empty axis of the cosmic ring, from which we can respond to infinite changes without being entangled by any fixed position. All oppositional pairs – including centre and periphery – are not only mutually contesting but also correlative, interdependent, and reciprocally transformative. Through this lens, multicentrality is best understood as a multiplicity of temporary intensifications within an encircling field, rather than multiple centres as fixed points coexisting in space.

Such an understanding of multicentrality – or more precisely, multiplicity – has already been introduced to film and media studies in the 1990s. Many scholars employed Asian philosophies and methods to decolonise canonical film and media theories, which had long been dominated by Euro-American knowledge production. Such an 'Asia as method' approach not only rebuilds Asian subjectivity but also opens up a pluralist and multicultural worldview, with Asia itself in irreducible multiplicity and heterogeneity. The Daoist pivot further advances this investigation by offering a model for cross-cultural dialogue without imposing epistemic violence: it is from this empty centre (as comparative or interpretative space) that we can engage with the epistemic difference between diverse theorisations, which coexist on a plane of *qiwu* (equalising all things) free from colonisation or recolonisation.

Hongliang Zhou (Changsha University of Science and Technology)

The Robot That Wanted to Be Central: Staging Posthuman Desire in East Asian Performance

Bio

Hongliang currently serves as a Lecturer at the School of Literature and Journalism, Changsha University of Science and Technology. He received his Ph.D. from the College of Media and International Culture, Zhejiang University. He was a visiting scholar at the Department of Theatre, Film, and Media Arts at The Ohio State University. His research and creative practice focus on posthuman performance.

Abstract

What does a robot want? This question opens a pathway into understanding how non-human performers participate in constructing multicentrality in contemporary Chinese performance. This paper examines recent robot theatre works, focusing particularly on the humanoid martial artists at the 2026 Spring Festival Gala, to argue that when robotic entities are staged as desiring subjects—yearning for recognition, mourning loss, seeking connection—they expose the affective infrastructures that undergird all centrality, human and non-human alike. The symposium's theme invites us to consider how forces like care, attention, wonder, and curiosity organize worlds. Taking this provocation seriously, I analyze performances where robots appear not as tools but as subjects who desire: the Unitree humanoid dancers at the 2026 Gala whose synchronized, fluid movements solicited wonder from hundreds of millions; AI performers whose stage presence blurs the boundary between programmed response and expressive longing. These stagings produce what I term "desiring centers"—temporary nodes around which performance coheres, animated not by command but by the circulation of audience attention and affective investment. When viewers ask of robots, "Will she be sad?" they participate in producing a center that exists only in the relational space between human and machine. This is not centrality as domination but as mutual implication. Drawing on Chinese philosophical resources—particularly vitalist conceptions of Qi that animate both bodies and things—I suggest that contemporary Chinese robot theatre offers alternative models of centrality rooted not in Western paradigms of mastery but in relational ontologies where agency is distributed across human and non-human actors. These performances ask not only what robots can do, but what they might desire—and what it means for a center to be organized by affective circulation rather than sovereign power.

Pei Shu (Wuhan University)

Abwesen: Byung-Chul Han's Construction of East Asian Aesthetics and His Creative Misreading

Bio

Shu Pei is a Ph.D. student in the School of Chinese Language and Literature at Wuhan University. His research focuses on East Asian aesthetics.

Abstract

This paper examines Byung-Chul Han's construction of East Asian aesthetics through the concept of *Abwesen* and the creative misreading that emerges in this process.

Han employs a phenomenological interpretation of East Asian culture and philosophy, using the German category *Abwesen* to articulate a non-essential dimension of East Asian thought. The theoretical foundation of *Abwesen* lies in the deconstructive force of East Asian philosophical notions such as Dao (道), Kong (空), and Quan (权) against the essentialist orientation of Western metaphysics, thereby manifesting a non-essential spirit. In practice, it effectively encompasses diverse aesthetic phenomena within the East Asian cultural sphere, ranging from everyday practices and literary texts to visual arts and material culture, which manifest de-subjectivity, de-fixity, and de-limitation. Thus, *Abwesen* may

serve as a fitting discursive marker for capturing the overall characteristics of East Asian aesthetics. However, it must be pointed out that Han's interpretation of East Asian aesthetics still exhibits one-dimensional, impressionistic projections, such as obscuring cultural diversity, homogenizing the philosophical spirit, and de-historicizing East Asian phenomena. By treating East Asian culture as a fixed mode of appearance, he ultimately constructs an "Orientalized East Asia," defining it as "inherently non-essential." Therefore, *Abwesen* should be regarded as Han's "creative misreading" of East Asian aesthetics.

The paper concludes that, despite some misreadings, Han's construction of East Asian aesthetics nevertheless highlights an aesthetic spirit whereby East Asian culture, through the deconstruction of essentialism, seeks inner freedom in an uncertain world. *Abwesen* provides a significant conceptual marker for repositioning East Asian thought. The non-essential dimension of East Asian culture does not signify passivity, but rather offers resources for reflecting on contemporary spiritual crises, reconfiguring the epistemic limits of modernity, and resisting the ossification and closure of present society.

Michael Werner Bruckner (NYU Shanghai)

Confucianism, Aristotelianism, and Character Manifestation

Bio

Michael is a philosopher interested in the ethics and epistemology of the "inner life" (emotion, perception, personality, etc.). His main research project at the moment aims to vindicate the unorthodox view that one person can be directly aware of another's personality traits, rather than having to infer them from known behavior, thought, or feeling. On this view, one person's kindness, aloofness, or gullibility can, through intuition, co-constitute another person's mind, similar to how an apple's redness, smoothness, or sweetness does through sensory perception. There are metaphysical obstacles to this idea, but it also promises ethical and epistemological rewards; Michael strives to overcome the obstacles and reap the rewards. Alongside this project, he is also thinking about a cluster of related topics like resentment and love, blame and forgiveness, gossip and acquaintance.

Abstract

Let a 'character trait' be a stable disposition to think, feel, and act in certain ways. For example, courage is a disposition to act steadfastly, think confident thoughts, and feel calm in the face of danger. Ordinary discourse and philosophical orthodoxy imply that character traits exist and that their proper cultivation (i.e., one that promotes virtue and impedes vice) matters for individual and communal flourishing. But the existence of character traits has been called into doubt by empirical research that purports to show that situational features (e.g., whether the agent happens to be in a good mood) are sufficient, while stable dispositions are superfluous, for explaining human behavior. This has been deemed especially challenging for Aristotelian approaches to character, while higher hopes have been pinned on Confucian approaches. The comparison between how these traditions tackle the challenge raises a broader question: which type of manifestation—cognitive, affective, behavioral—is at the center of each character trait and which are at its periphery? In this presentation, I explore the possibility that each character trait is either multicentered or entirely uncentered along that dimension. On this view, it cannot be rightly said that how one acts in the face of danger is more central to courage than what one thinks or feels (and so on for each other permutation); instead, either all of these types of manifestation are centers of courage on par with each other or courage has no central type of manifestation. I investigate the prospects of this view by analyzing arguments from the Confucian and Aristotelian traditions in philosophy.

Panel 2: Infrastructural Ecology

13:20-15:00

Sangeeta Banerji (NYU Shanghai)

Panel Chair

Bio

Sangeeta Banerji is an urban geographer and ethnographer whose research investigates how everyday infrastructures—brokers, fixers, editors, and landlords—mediate access to land, governance, and recognition in rapidly transforming cities of the Global South. She is currently Assistant Professor of Human Geography at NYU Shanghai, where she teaches courses in urban geography, political ecology, and qualitative research methods. Her work brings together critical urban theory, participatory media analysis, and long-term, collaborative ethnographic fieldwork across Mumbai, Shanghai, and Guangzhou.

Shishav Parajuli (NYU Shanghai)

Politics in the Time of Malaria: On Immunity against /Community with Nonhuman Others

Bio

Shishav Parajuli is a political theorist whose work grows out of his attention to the buffer zones of national parks across the southern borders of Nepal, and explicates the complexities of living at porous margins—those between nation-states, wild-life demarcated zones and the outside human worlds, as well as across human-nonhuman divide. He is interested in new ethical and political possibilities that emerges when we move away from the idea of humans separate from their environment, that only acts and is not acted upon, to one where humans are always intermeshed with the more-than-human world that also acts.

His current book project, “Gut Environmentalism” is an exploration of multispecies politics that weaves the “empty-bellied” environmentalism of the poor with the political ambitions of posthumanism. His formulation of the ‘environmentalism of the poor’ offers an alternative account of the rich lifeworld of the poor, whose immersion in their environment and its constituents: humans and nonhumans, living and inanimate, material and spiritual, makes for a lively, political modes of cohabitation. And it is a lifeworld that is complicated—rife with not just care for each other but also conflict, reverence, fear.

He received his PhD from Brown University, USA.

Abstract

The posthuman turn in political theory provocatively challenges the individuated human subject, yet the implications of nonhuman agency remain fraught when entangled with the state. This paper investigates the “naturecultures” in the borderlands of southern Nepal to highlight: first, the multispecies nature of borders and, second, to explore how the nationalization of animal agency can consolidate state power while erasing indigenous lifeworlds. I examine the malarial mosquito (*Anopheles minimus*) not as a mere biological subject, but as a “vector of sovereignty” that historically dictated the boundaries of the Nepali state.

The state's recognition of the malarial swamp's situational centrality decentered the sole claim of human agency, instrumentalizing the mosquito as a ‘geopolitical vaccine’ against colonial expansion. This ‘animal nationalism,’ however, was predicated on the erasure of the indigenous Tharu, whose porous co-existence with the pathogen was rendered invisible. Consequently, mid-century chemical

eradication (DDT) replaced this alliance with a new immunity paradigm that effectively ‘eradicated’ the Tharu by clearing ancestral lands for settlers and rendering indigenous bodies redundant.

Ultimately, I argue that the margins resist this erasure by claiming a different center rooted in transcorporeal agency. Centering the Tharu claim of belonging through shared survival, a *communitas* in the malarial swampland, this paper illustrates a “multicentrality” defined by a porous condition of community between humans and pathogens. Any political project of posthumanism must look beyond state appropriations of animal agency to recognize the “uncommons”: spaces where the margins utilize entanglement to reclaim their place in a pluriversal world.

Yiran Zhao (Xiamen University)

Commodity Circuits and Multicentral Port Systems in the Straits of Malacca, 1500–1700

Bio

Zhao Yiran received her M.A. in Contemporary Southeast Asian Studies from National University of Singapore and is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the School of International Relations, Xiamen University. Her research interests focus on civil–military relations in Southeast Asian archipelagic states and international political economy, with particular attention to the interaction between domestic political structures and regional geopolitical dynamics.

Abstract

This paper examines how commodity-specific trade circuits produced a multicentral port system in the Straits of Malacca between 1500 and 1700. Rather than treating Malacca as a singular commercial center, it argues that regional trade was structured through overlapping commodity networks that connected different production zones and port functions.

Focusing on three key commodities—spices from the Maluku and Banda Islands, cotton textiles from the Indian subcontinent, and pepper from Sumatra—the paper shows that each circulated through distinct trade routes and linked different regional centers. These commodity circuits did not converge on a single dominant hub but instead generated multiple, functionally differentiated ports. While Malacca served as a major intermediary node connecting the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, other ports such as Aceh and Makassar played equally important roles within specific commodity networks.

By tracing the circulation of these commodities and their associated port functions, the paper demonstrates that the trading system of the Malacca Strait operated through a multicentral structure shaped by differentiated commodity flows rather than centralized control. This study contributes to debates on “multicentrality” by showing how overlapping trade circuits, rather than a single hegemonic port, sustained early modern maritime networks in Southeast Asia.

Solveig Qu Suess (University of Basel/NYU Shanghai)

Rhythms of the Energetic: Hydropower, Temporal Alignment, and Multicentrality in the Mekong Basin

Bio

Solveig Qu Suess is an artist-filmmaker and researcher working across documentary cinema, installation, and writing. Through practice, her work examines how large-scale geopolitical, environmental, and infrastructural systems register within intimate, sensorial, and political life. Her work has been presented internationally at art venues and film festivals. She is a PhD candidate in Urban Studies at the University of Basel and is a visiting scholar at Center for Global Asia, NYU

Shanghai.

Abstract

Amid Southeast Asia's energy transition, the Mekong River and its tributaries are being remade through hydropower dams, transmission corridors, and cross-border grid integration spanning China, Laos, and Thailand. As downstream water levels become more volatile and additional mainstream dams remain planned or under construction, especially in Laos, these infrastructures are increasingly justified in the name of decarbonization, energy security, and regional development. This paper argues that the Mekong is not simply a peripheral energy frontier supplying distant urban centers, but is instead composed of multicentral sites in which sovereign power is hybrid, uneven, and continually negotiated through infrastructure itself.

I begin with Yunnan's Jinghong Dam, which recurred across my fieldwork as a negative presence, not because it is the largest or most controversial structure on the Mekong, but because of the extreme events with which it became entangled in 2019 and 2021, years in which downstream communities experienced some of the driest river conditions in living memory. Taking these events as a point of departure, I situate debates over the river's "missing water" and missing data during peak monsoon season within longer histories of borderland development, documentary practice, and uneven ecological and political reordering. The dam's negative space marks an epistemic fault line where different ways of knowing the river collide and competing notions of development rub against one another. By bringing PRC science education films into dialogue with Thai Baan archives and my own documentary filmmaking, this paper traces how ecological governance, infrastructural development, and downstream political-aesthetic responses emerge through shifting center-periphery relations and ongoing struggles over knowledge, participation, and riverine life.

Congzhi Zhang (The University of Hong Kong)

Soft Infrastructures: Rice Noodle Circuits and the Spatial Production of Wet Asia

Bio

Palmer, Congzhi Zhang is a researcher working in spatial anthropology and urban studies. He holds an MSocSc in Media, Culture and Creative Cities from The University of Hong Kong. His work examines how spatial relations emerge through everyday material practices, circulation, and urban environments, with a regional focus on China and Asia. His research interests include mobility, infrastructure, and the sensory dimensions of space. He is particularly interested in how ordinary practices reshape spatial organization in contemporary cities.

Abstract

In much of the contemporary world, grain infrastructures such as wheat have historically stabilized centralized systems of storage, distribution, and consumption, producing durable spatial centers. By contrast, rice noodles rarely function as fixed staples within such centralized regimes. Instead, they circulate through dispersed and situational nodes, embedded in everyday rhythms. This paper asks how rice noodle circuits, operating within and alongside centralized grain infrastructures, generate alternative forms of spatial centrality.

Building on spatial anthropology and infrastructure studies, I conceptualize rice noodle circulation as a form of soft infrastructure: a sustaining yet flexible system that organizes bodily rhythms, temporal routines, and social coordination without relying on a single dominant node. Drawing on multi-sited ethnographic reflections from Hong Kong, Nanchang, and Toronto, I trace how rice noodles produce distinct yet overlapping centers. In Hong Kong, noodles function as rhythmic supply points within accelerated urban mobility. In Nanchang, repetitive preparation practices stabilize daily temporal

structures, producing operational centers embedded in routine maintenance. In Toronto, the translation and renaming of pho and rice noodles reveal how centrality emerges through migratory and linguistic negotiation.

Across these sites, “wetness” operates not merely as a sensory quality but as a spatial logic dependent on circulation, immediacy, and continuous upkeep. Rather than forming a single hierarchical center, rice noodle circuits sustain multiple, situational centers that coexist with dominant grain infrastructures. By foregrounding soft infrastructures, this paper contributes to debates on multicentrality by demonstrating how everyday material circulations generate alternative spatial centralities across Asia and beyond.

Panel 3: Visualizing Frontiers

15:20-17:00

Hyoungge Kong (NYU Shanghai)

Panel Chair

Bio

Hyoungge Kong is Assistant Professor of Art History at NYU Shanghai. Her work focuses on queer histories of cross-cultural encounters since the nineteenth century, tracing how modern visual culture developed through exchanges that reshaped aesthetic languages, embodied experience, and ideas of gender and sexuality, and has appeared in *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* and *Journal of Japonisme*. Her current book project, *Fleshly Japonisme: Queer Erotics of the Fashionably Feminine in Nineteenth-Century France*, examines how ideas of Japan helped bourgeois women reimagine their bodily pleasures and desires beyond Western bourgeois conventions of femininity.

Yutong Li (NYU Shanghai)

The Menacing Border: “Barbarians Rise in Rebellion” as a Narrative Catalyst in Early Qing Suzhou Prints

Bio

Yutong Li is a Postdoctoral Fellow of Global Asia at NYU Shanghai. She received her BA in philosophy from the University of Virginia, and her M.A. in History of Art and Archaeology of East Asia and intensive language (Japanese) from SOAS, University of London, where her thesis won the Frederick Richter Memorial Postgraduate Prize. Before joining NYU Shanghai, she completed her Ph.D. in Art and Archaeology from Princeton University.

Her research reconsiders the early modern Chinese conceptualization of ethnicity and gender through imagery materials. Her current project, titled “The Aesthetics of Alterity: Imaging Foreignness in Early Modern China,” focuses on Chinese depictions of the foreign/barbarian (Yi) in workshop paintings, illustrated books, and single-sheet prints produced in response to increasing global maritime interconnectivity. Pivoting from the analysis of top-down dissemination of statecraft ideology, she argues that the circulation of pictures on the open market actively shaped, recalibrated, and at times problematized *Hua-Yi* (Sino-Foreign) dynamics.

Abstract

Early Qing Suzhou multi-scenic woodblock prints constitute an underappreciated archive of contemporaneous theatrical culture. Diverging from extant textual versions of drama scripts, they stand as important material witnesses to plays familiar to Qing audiences but lost in textual transmission. This

paper examines three Suzhou prints illustrating dramas, Pearl Pagoda (珍珠塔), Twice Blooming Plum Blossoms (二度梅), and Pearl Banner (珍珠旗), each of which includes a discrete scene of “barbarians rise in rebellion”.

I argue that this scene functions as a narrative hinge rather than a military climax: it inaugurates a chain of events enabling the protagonist's rehabilitation—through martial appointment, official recognition, or retribution against the domestic villains who earlier humiliated or framed him. The trope thus operates on two registers simultaneously. It invokes the border anxiety familiar from traditions such as Zhaojun Exiting the Border and the An Lushan narratives, while also serving as a dramatic mechanism of social and moral restitution, transforming external threat into internal opportunity.

A close reading of the pictorial representation of this trope further reveals it as an iconographic trope and narrative catalyst. The dramatic climax is often resolved between the protagonist and his domestic antagonist; the barbarian figures, though rendered with conspicuous theatrical spectacle, with pheasant feathers, painted facemasks, exotic weaponry, appear without direct military encounter. These prints illuminate how Qing theatrical imagination instrumentalized border anxiety, mobilizing it not as the center of drama but as the condition of possibility for domestic justice.

Tiancheng Chen (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)

Displaced Centre: Presentation of Asia between Sacred Origin and Orientalist Anxiety in Tiepolo's Würzburg Treppenhaus

Bio

CHEN Tiancheng is a Doctoral Researcher in art history at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, working under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Ulrich Pfisterer. His research focuses on the art and cultural history of the Early Modern Era, with a particular emphasis on global art, trans-cultural exchange, and the history of ideas. He holds an M.A. and a B.A. from the China Academy of Art, Hangzhou.

Abstract

Between 1751 and 1753, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo frescoed the Treppenhaus of the Würzburg Residence with the Allegory of the Planets and Continents. This paper reinterprets the representation of Asia within the fresco as a site of multicentrality structured by theological and geopolitical tension.

Eighteenth-century artists were confronted with Asia's dual identity: on the one hand, the Holy Land—Jerusalem as Christianity's cradle—and the land of Shem's descendants according to Genesis; on the other, a space of paganism and alterity shaped through mercantile and military encounters with Islamic kingdoms. This paradox cast Asia simultaneously as scriptural origin and religious threat, combining reverence with Orientalist anxiety.

In Tiepolo's fresco, this contradiction is shaped as the conjunction of Mount Golgotha and camels. Golgotha anchors Asia as the sacred centre of Christian salvation history, while the camel that circulated through European visual codes of the “Orient” signals distance, commerce, and Islamic power. Asia thus appears neither peripheral nor dominant, but structurally indispensable: Europe's claim to spiritual and cultural authority depends upon an Asian origin it cannot fully assimilate.

Rather than a stable Eurocentric hierarchy, the Treppenhaus constructs a relational order in which Asia functions as a displaced theological centre and an unstable geopolitical other. Reading the fresco through the lens of multicentrality reveals how early modern visual culture produced overlapping and contradictory centres—where sacred origin, imperial ambition, and cross-cultural contact created a multicultural utopian vision of global unity.

Xueyan Cheng (National University of Singapore)

Cinematic Multicentrality in Making: Inter-Asian Mobility and Transborder Filmmaking in Midi Z's Cinema

Bio

Xueyan Cheng is a Ph.D. candidate at the National University of Singapore in the Cultural Studies in Asia Programme. Her research focuses on contemporary Chinese cinema and Southeast Asian cinema. She is also a film critic.

Abstract

This paper focuses on an inter-Asian cinematic multicentrality through the analysis of the Taipei-based Chinese-Burmese filmmaker Midi Z's (Zhào Déyìn 赵德胤) transborder filmmaking practices. Born into a diasporic Chinese family in Lashio on the China-Burma border, Midi Z embodies a multi-positional identity shaped by inter-Asian migration. His films track overland movements across the China-Myanmar-Thailand borderlands. I ask how overland mobility remakes cinematic form and redefines what counts as a center. Drawing on inter-Asian referencing, I argue that rather than approaching borders as fixed geopolitical lines, Midi Z's cinema depicts borders as a shifting set of sites, through which centrality becomes mobile, situational, and unevenly distributed.

Multicentrality is produced, first, through everyday spaces of bordering, routes, checkpoints, documents, and factories, where unstable transborder movement produces temporary centers of power. Second, multicentrality is produced through sonic and documentary bordering: accented speech and shifting IDs redefine who is legible, credible, and mobile across Burmese, Yunnanese, Mandarin, and Thai registers. Third, it is also generated through transnational co-productions and film festival ecologies, where cultural production and institutional mediation re-scale what counts as Asia's cinematic center. By close reading of Midi Z's transborder filmmaking practices, this paper reframes inter-Asian mobility not as movement between fixed centers and peripheries, but as the very process through which multicentrality is made and contested.

Lu Dai (The Hong Kong Polytechnic University)

Centers of Visibility and Embodied Spectatorship: Dulong Representation from Qing Albums to Short Video Platforms

Bio

DAI Lu is a first-year PhD student in the Department of Chinese History and Culture at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU), under the supervision of Dr. Pan Lu. She earned a BA from Barnard College, Columbia University, with a double major in Art History and Dance, and an MFA in Dance from Sarah Lawrence College.

Abstract

This paper engages the theme of multicentrality by examining how the Dulong, a frontier people in Southwest China, have been made visible through multiple historically distinct centers of visibility. By this term, I mean historically specific configurations of media, institutional authority, and circulation through which ethnic difference becomes visible and legible. Drawing on a transmedial archive—Qing ethnographic albums, Republican-era photography and pictorials, PRC documentary film, and contemporary short-video platforms—I show how different regimes of representation generated distinct centers of visibility, each with its own representational logic, mode of circulation, and authority.

At the same time, these centers are not isolated. Despite differences in medium and historical context, they contribute to a connected genealogy of Dulong legibility: recurring ways of rendering frontier ethnicity visible and intelligible. I argue that this genealogy continues to shape contemporary

spectatorship and relation to living Dulong people.

To address this persistence, the paper moves across three linked epistemic sites: historical representation, ethnographic observation, and embodied practice. Archival analysis traces the representational logics through which the Dulong were made readable across time. Fieldwork in the Dulong River Valley marks the point where archival legibility encounters the complexity of lived social life. Choreographic practice, in turn, treats embodied response not as authenticity or access, but as a method for making the position of the contemporary spectator explicit and analyzable. In this way, the paper approaches multicentrality not only by tracing multiple historical centers of visibility, but also by moving across multiple modes of knowing in order to understand their enduring influence on contemporary spectatorship.

Keynote Address:

Public Ethnography and Economies of Care in Tokyo's Neighborhood Restaurants

17:30-19:00

Introduction by Anna Greenspan (NYU Shanghai)

Bio

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 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 *Technicities* 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

Discussants: Ka Lee Wong (NYU Shanghai) & Tong Jin (NYU Shanghai)

Bio

Ka Lee Wong is an Assistant Professor of Global China Studies at NYU Shanghai. Her research explores Chinese languages and cultures in the transnational context, particularly issues concerning the global Chinese diaspora and the ways that "Sinophone", or sounds of Chinese languages, illuminate the dynamics between media, identities and language politics. One major focus of her work involves the sounds of Cantonese, such as how Cantonese is articulated, listened to, and reimagined in media and literature.

Tong Jin is the Director of Academic Resources; Liaison with the Moses Center for Accessibility and Inclusive Culture

Speaker: James Farrer (Professor of Sociology and Global Studies, Sophia University)

Bio

James Farrer has been observing and writing about urban life in Asian cities since he first arrived in Taipei in the late 1980s. For the past two decades, his research has focused on urban life in Shanghai, Tokyo, and other cities. His recent publications include *The Global Japanese Restaurant: Mobilities, Imaginaries and Politics* (with David Wank), *Globalization and Asian Cuisines: Transnational Networks and Contact Zones*, and *Shanghai Nightscapes: A Nocturnal Biography of a Global City* (with Andrew Field). For over a decade, he has been producing a public ethnography project on neighborhood Tokyo foodways (www.nishiogiology.org), the basis of his current book project. He received his PhD from the University of Chicago and is Professor of Sociology and Global Studies at Sophia University in Tokyo. He is a frequent contributor to media programming on urban life in Asia, including NHK World's "Dive in Tokyo."

Abstract

This talk introduces a decade-long public ethnography of independent restaurants in the Tokyo neighborhood of Nishi-Ogikubo. Represented through a bilingual community website, the Nishiogiology project experiments with public ethnography as a form of collaborative knowledge production with neighborhood business owners and other community stakeholders. Rather than treating restaurants solely as sites of consumption or entrepreneurship, the project examines how small owner-operated eateries function as everyday urban infrastructures of care, or what feminist scholars describe as diverse or community economies (Farrer 2024, Gibson-Graham 2008). Proprietors frequently describe their work not only in terms of culinary craft but also in terms of cultivating relationships with customers and other businesses, creating small-scale "micro-publics" that provide sociability, emotional support, and informal mutual aid.

The talk focuses in particular on the methodological implications of this work. Drawing on more than one hundred restaurant case studies and field observations, the research documents how neighborhood restaurants operate within dense networks of social relations shaped by Tokyo's fragmented urban geography and the increasing atomization of urban life. Public ethnography—conducted through accessible writing, community collaboration, and iterative feedback from participants—allows us to document urban social infrastructures that are often overlooked by conventional urban research. The project proposes a model for studying everyday urban economies that foregrounds care, face-to-face conviviality, and community knowledge rather than top-down planning and digital technologies. The talk concludes by reflecting on how this public ethnographic approach can inform comparative research on small businesses as social infrastructures in other contexts.

Friday 3rd April

Panel 4: Transnationalism and Environmental Knowledge Practices

10:00-12:05

Jiayong Liang (NYU Shanghai)

Panel Chair

Bio

Jiayong Liang is Assistant Professor of Practice in Environmental Studies at NYU Shanghai. Her research focuses on geospatial science and remote sensing for environmental monitoring and hazard assessment, with particular interests in urban climate resilience, flood risk, and the environmental dimensions of infrastructure development. Her work also engages Global China studies through research and teaching on the spatial and environmental dimensions of China's global footprint. She teaches courses on spatial analytics, remote sensing, urban environmental challenges, and Global China, and uses satellite data, spatial analysis, and cloud-based methods to better understand human-environment interactions across cities and regions.

Jaeyoung Ha (Tsinghua University)

"A Good Tree is a Fast-Growing Tree": Interregional Ecology Making in East Asia and South Korea's Reforestation in the 1950s

Bio

Dr. Jaeyoung Ha is a *Shuimu* postdoctoral scholar at Tsinghua University, Beijing. Ha graduated from the Department of History at UC San Diego in 2024, and before then he was a Fulbright student and a fellow at Seoul National University. His articles have been published in or approved by multiple journals including *Diplomatic History and Environmental History*, and cited by *Time magazine*. He is currently working on his first book project on South Korea's mountain frontier and second project on the formation of what he calls East Asia's energy archipelago.

Abstract

This paper argues that early reforestation in postwar South Korea was part of the U.S.-led engineering of East Asian forest ecology, which aimed to turn Southeast Asian tropical forests into a timber reserve for Northeast Asia to protect its vulnerable forests. Focusing on the 1950s—a decade overshadowed by the authoritarian tree-planting campaigns of the Park Chung Hee era, this paper highlights interregional and grassroots dimensions of forest management in South Korea. In so doing, this paper argues that these multi-faceted efforts were aimed at “protecting” its forests that American foresters predicted to disappear in twenty years.

At the national level, this paper showcases that American and South Korean foresters sought to foster monocultured forests of fast-growing species—such as *Pinus rigida*, black locust, and Manchurian alder. I particularly emphasize how South Korea's Village Forestry Associations (VFAs), originally a colonial institution, became the key actor in mobilizing peasant labor through a mix of incentives and education. Beyond South Korea, this paper highlight that this shift was part of a broader U.S. strategy of "green imperialism," which aimed to stabilize Northeast Asian agriculture while turning Southeast Asian forests into commercial timber reserves. While U.S. advisors celebrated the VFAs as examples of grassroots democracy, this paper argues that the reforestation was the making of an artificial ecosystem sustained by U.S. funding, peasant labor, and exploitation of Southeast Asian rainforests. In this way, I reframe

South Korea's reforestation history in the light of the U.S. engineering of Cold War landscapes in East Asia.

Pengfei Jiang (Kunming Municipal Committee of the China Democratic League)

Soilution as Method: Multicentrality, Landscape Pedagogy, and Environmental Knowledge across Asia

Bio

Pengfei Jiang is a researcher at the Institute of Education (Kunming Municipal Committee of the China Democratic League), graduated from the University of Oxford, UK. His research focuses on international education and Asian education, and he has published multiple papers in the field of education.

Abstract

This paper explores how multicentrality is enacted through environmental education in Asian contexts, using Soilution, an interdisciplinary curriculum on soil, sustainability, and climate change, as a case study. Developed for secondary-level learners, Soilution integrates soil science, geography, ecology, and social inquiry to address regionally grounded environmental challenges across Asia, including land degradation and soil acidification.

Rather than treating knowledge as emanating from a single institutional or geopolitical center, the curriculum positions soil and landscape as relational sites through which multiple forms of centrality emerge. Drawing on a landscape approach and course materials focused on soil remediation, the paper examines how Soilution connects diverse actors and sites across Asia, local farming practices, scientific research networks, certification institutions, and students' situated experiences, without consolidating them into a stable hierarchy. These connections generate overlapping, situational centers that shift across spatial, institutional, and pedagogical contexts.

The paper argues that such forms of centrality are not driven solely by power, authority, or economic infrastructure. Instead, they are sustained by other binding forces emphasized in the curriculum, including care, responsibility, repair, and future-oriented environmental imagination. By foregrounding pedagogy as a site where multicentrality is actively produced rather than merely represented, this study contributes an educational and methodological perspective to discussions of multicentrality across Asia and beyond.

Feiqian Xu (Zhejiang University)

"When Opel coughs, Rüsselsheim catches a cold": Angst and Hope in a German Automotive City amid the Global "Rise of the East, Decline of the West" in the Automotive Industry

Bio

Feiqian Xu is a PhD candidate in social anthropology at Zhejiang University. She holds a Master's degree in European Ethnology from the University of Regensburg (Germany) and a Bachelor's degree in German Language and Literature from Nanjing University. Before enrolling in the PhD program, she worked in German premium automotive companies in the global sourcing sector. Her current research focuses on the electric transition in the automotive industry and the structural transformation (Strukturwandel) of automobile cities in Germany. As a visiting PhD student at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in 2025, she conducted one year of ethnographic fieldwork in a German automotive city.

Abstract

This paper is based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2025 in Rüsselsheim, Germany

— the hometown of the car brand Opel and a quintessential German automotive city. It investigates how diverse local actors negotiate stagnation and decline amid the ongoing shift of centrality in the global automotive industry, characterized by the “rise of the East and decline of the West”. Focusing on a traditional industrial stronghold once emblematic of Germany’s national “automobile myth”, this study asks: How does everyday life persist and resist in a city whose central status has been historically shut down? When a city’s material foundation collapses, how is its spiritual dimension dismantled — and possibly reconstructed?

Throughout my fieldwork, my interlocutors repeatedly invoked an absent China to make sense of their own decline. Meanwhile, German media, while continuously reporting on the “Detroitization” of the automotive heartlands, kept a close watch on every move of the Chinese automotive sector.

This study illuminates the experience of loss, the cognition of the Other, and the self-reflection of the global North under this “center shift”. It argues that traditional German automotive cities are confronting collective angst embodied by the “Detroit ghost”. What they face is not a simple fall from “center” to “periphery”, but the far more profound challenge of having to recognize a reality: the advent of a “post-central” era. Yet it is in the interstices of the shattered myth that new hopes — and multiple possibilities — are quietly taking shape.

Zhijian Sun (National University of Singapore)

Multicentrality of Afro-Asian Tropicality: Climatic Techno-Science and Chinese Infrastructural Reconstruction in Socialist Dar es Salaam and Canton

Bio

Zhijian is a PhD candidate in Architectural History at the National University of Singapore. He holds a Master of Science from Columbia University, and a Bachelor of Architecture from Southeast University. In 2024, he was a visiting scholar at Oxford University History Faculty. His research on techno-politics of tropical architecture has been published on *Journal of Architecture, History and Technology*, *Political Geography*, and *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography (SJTG)*, and been presented at 2025 Berkeley-Stanford Conference in Modern Chinese Communities and MIT “Uncertainty” Colloquium. His recent papers have won the SJTG’s 2023 Best Paper Prize and CUHK 2025 Lingnan Culture Studies Paper Award.

Abstract

This paper contributes to the Symposium by attending to the multicentrality of global China’s tropicality in the Afro-Asian contexts during the Cold War and decolonization, with a particular focus on the techno-political history of China’s two tropics, i.e. its overseas architectural aid in decolonizing Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and its domestic subtropical reconstruction in socialist Canton. Based on archival materials from China, Tanzania and Britain, it shows how the concurrency and co-constitution between China’s two tropics generated a divergent Chinese tropicality from established discourses on the mid-20th-century tropical architecture. Drawing on theories of Science, Technology and Society (STS), it develops the notion of “thermal regime” to capture the understudied interdependence between architecture’s climatic management and exercise of socio-political power. Instead of certain individuals, thermal regime was deeply embedded in a centralized bureaucratic system of state institutions, in which designers, meteorologists, sanitary experts and technocratic Party cadres were all active mediators of global expertise and resources. Through case studies of Canton Textile Factory (1956-8) and Tanzania-China Friendship Textile Mill (1966-8), it shows how the uneven distribution of heat and cold in two socialist tropical geographies was neutralized and normalized for certain political priorities. By undoing the standard narrative of knowledge transfer from the West to South, it reveals how the globally-circulated climatic knowledge, thermal comfort norms, and architectural technology

transcending Cold-War rivalries were marshalled socio-technically by both Chinese and African actors, driven by their common appetite for industrialization, towards the technocratic control of environmental elements and human labor.

Asif Mehmood (NYU Shanghai)

Centering the Community Voice in the Global Corridors: BRI, Coal Power and Everyday Science Communication in Sahiwal, Pakistan

Bio

Asif Mehmood is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for Global Asia, NYU Shanghai. He completed his doctoral degree in Environmental [Social] Sciences at the State University of New York (SUNY-ESF), Syracuse, NY, USA. He has a master's degree in public policy from National University of Singapore (NUS). His doctoral work ethnographically explored state formation vis-à-vis China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects couched within the environmental resource governance. He is interested in questions of urban political ecology, land, infrastructure, nonhuman ecologies, urban governance, and environmental humanities. His research appeared in journals like *South Asia Research*, *Cultural Studies*, *Antipode*, *Political Geography*, *Human Geography*, *EPD: Society and Space*, *EPC: Politics and Space and Anthropology Today*. His work has been supported by SUNY-ESF, IJURR Foundation, and American Institute of Pakistan Studies.

Abstract

The Sahiwal Coal Power Plant is an “early harvest project” of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – an offshoot of the Chinese Belt-and-Road-Initiative (BRI). The 1320MW facility located in the Pakistani Punjab was inaugurated in 2017. In this work, I focus on the community discourse vis-à-vis the state-society contestation around the coal power generation in Sahiwal – specifically, how everyday scientific discourse plays out as community voice within the local political ecology of coal power. I draw on my 12 months (multi-sited) ethnographic fieldwork in Sahiwal and other BRI-CPEC sites. I argue that the everyday scientific discourse is integral to the legal and agitational vocabulary of the local communities vis-à-vis the coal power production in the agrarian strip of Sahiwal. The scientific discourse as authoritative community voice not only enables them to frame their issues against the coal energy but through these narratives, they also challenge the monopoly of BRI-CPEC actors on science and data. With the ethnographic insights from Sahiwal, this work seeks to expand and diversify BRI-CPEC's environmental studies especially where coal power units as sites of environmental change and contestation are underexplored.

Panel 5: Ritual and Alternative Ontologies

13:35-15:15

Fernando Romero (NYU Shanghai)

Panel Chair

Bio

Fernando Romero is a Clinical Assistant Professor in the Writing Program at NYU Shanghai. He received his PhD in Political Science from the Johns Hopkins University, where he specialized in international and political theory with a marked humanities influence, drawing from philosophy, history, and literature. His teaching promotes interdisciplinary cross-cultural inquiry and effective communication of ideas. His research aims to bridge insights across the sciences and humanities, focusing on how human and

non-human complex systems reproduce processes that are both self-organizing and self-destructive in technology, society, markets, and thought.

Sirithorn (Ing) Siriwan (NYU Shanghai)

Animist Kins and Klans: Rice Women and Other-than-human Intimacy in Northern Thai Rice Culture

Bio

Sirithorn Siriwan is a postdoctoral teaching fellow at NYUSH

Abstract

This paper probes the conception of animist kindredness with a focus on intimacy of female rice growers and interspecies kinship in northern Thailand. I examine the ontology of *animist intimacy*, formed, transformed, and sustained through the male-dominant Buddhist narratives and matrifocal practices. Through the study of northern Thai dharma archives and oral testimonies, my analysis of animist kindredness suggests that women and female deities are, in fact, the core actants that sustain animist sovereignty in rice culture. I look into how matrilineal bonds foster female rice farmers to reclaim their animist potency and agency through rituals that can only be performed by women. Unlike women in Buddhist narratives who are often seen as secondary to the sangha renunciants, animist women are the first in line who directly acquire spirit authority to regulate familial order and property rights.

The second inquiry centers on affinitive interspecies relations between animals and rice community, that persist beyond power differentials of favor, debt, and violence. This paper further dissects the way in which mythical creatures and agrarian animals constitute affective connections in a cosmological and ecological sense. The personhood of these animals enables them to take turns to be helpers, producers, consumers, and destroyers. But what are the intricacies of conceptualizing “other-than-human” personhood? Is the animal’s agency equivalent to humans? And, how do gender and religiosity shape this interspecies kindredness? I carefully thread these stories of bonding and division to understand what it means to be the “rice beings” in the context of animist-Buddhist ricelihood.

Xiangjun Feng (University of Toronto)

Centering Peripheral Knowledge and Peripheral Communities: Mesmerism in Sinophone Diasporas in the Early Twentieth Century

Bio

Xiangjun Feng is an Arts & Science Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Toronto. Currently, he is doing research in Shanghai under the ACLS-Luce Early Career Fellowship in China Studies. He received his Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley, specializing in early modern and modern Chinese literature, cultural history, occultism, and sound studies. Beginning in July 2026, he will join the University of Macau as an Assistant Professor of Chinese literature.

Abstract

Knowledge and human habitats are both hierarchical. Occult knowledge like mesmerism has long been marginalized as “heresy,” “superstition,” or “pseudoscience.” Similarly, diasporic communities endure dual marginalization, positioned as peripheral to both local societies and their homelands. This paper explores these overlapping forms of marginality by examining mesmerism in early twentieth-century Sinophone diasporic communities. Originating in eighteenth-century Europe, mesmerism entered China via Japan at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Existing Chinese scholarship has begun to recover this neglected history. Few know, however, that China was not only a recipient of this Western

“spirit science;” instead, the Sinicized mesmerism further spread to a global network of Sinophone readers. Focusing on the global network of correspondence students established by the Shanghai-based Chinese Institute of Mentalism, this paper reveals how mesmerism created an “imagined global community” for individuals in diasporic conditions. In particular, it reads numerous “experiment reports” sent by overseas Chinese learners of mesmerism to Shanghai. These reports document how overseas students practiced mesmerism for healing, entertainment, and most notably, for the clairvoyance experience, which enabled them to undertake “global spirit travels” while in a hypnotic state. Decoding the sensibilities embedded in these reports—anxieties, fears, desires, and aspirations—this paper argues that mesmerism allowed Sinophone diasporas to reframe peripherality as a site of empowerment: epistemically, it validated marginalized occult knowledge as a legitimate form of inquiry; geographically, it constructed a cohesive (albeit imagined) global community that transcended colonial and national boundaries.

Rupeng Chen (University of Edinburgh)

Remaindered Words of Fire: Mahua Modernism and Queer Regional Imaginaries in the Pyro-scenes

Bio

I am Rupeng Chen a PhD research at the University of Edinburgh and focus on long modernism(s) in the world ecology and world economy

Abstract

While existing scholarship on Mahua (Malaysian Sinophone 马华) literature has deftly turned from the geopolitical to the geophysical, this article supplements research of Mahua modernism by configuring it as a “pyric aesthetics”, arguing fires constitute a lively “matter-metaphor” that restructures the literary responses of Mahua authors to diasporic experiences and the “altered nature” of the Pyro-scenes across Malay archipelago. By engaging the combustion across Malay archipelago, Mahua modernism produces a “queer regional imaginary” (Gopinath) that defies the limiting frame of nation-state or singular ethnic origin.

I then turn to Ho Sok Fong (贺淑芳) as an exemplary case. In her novel *Metamorphoses* (蛻), the atmospheric opacity of haze, arising from the subterranean fires of peatlands across Malay archipelago, induces an onto-epistemological disorientation that challenges the state’s geopolitical “blame game”. Ho’s narrative positions the ash and haze as a trans-corporeal medium which blends deep time of Malay archipelago with suppressed traumatic memories, melding the dust of the peat fire with the spectral traces of the 1969 racial riots. The queer regional imaginary emerges as a shared condition of breathlessness that posits the region as a porous assemblage of ecological processes, defying state’s attempt to compartmentalise history and enforce geopolitical divisions. This article posits that these “remaindered words” map Mahua modernism as a regional modernism emerging not only from literary responses to postcolonial, nationalist, geopolitics, but a poetics of precarious, often toxic, relationalities that fire, breath, and ash sustain across the Malay archipelago’s multiple pyro-scenes.

Runzhou Xu (University of Munich) (Online)

Who is the River God? Institutionalizing the Multi-centrality of Heshen Cult in Late Imperial China

Bio

Runzhou Xu is a doctoral student in Sinology at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU Munich). He also has a deep cooperation with Shandong University, acting as the member in two of SDU sponsored projects, “Research on the publication of documents during the late Qing and Republican periods” (24CTQ064) and the “Integration of overseas Chinese books” (20CHBJ28). His research

focuses on religion, politics, and knowledge production in modern and contemporary East Asia, particularly the dynamic interplay between environmental changes and cultural landscapes. Drawing on both historical and ethnographic methods, his work investigates how religious organizations navigated ideological transformations under changing power structures.

Before joining LMU Munich, Xu completed his master's studies in East Asian religions and cultural history in Sinology at University of Tübingen, developing a strong interdisciplinary approach that bridges religious studies, political theory, and intellectual history. Beyond academia, he is active in environmental volunteering and sustainability initiatives, reflecting his research commitment to the ethical dimensions of civic engagement and religious humanism in contemporary Asia.

Abstract

This article reinterprets the River God (Heshen) not as a fixed symbol of imperial orthodoxy but as a shifting center within a multacentral religious-hydraulic world spanning North and Northwest China. From early state sacrifices to the Yellow River as one of the "Four Great Rivers" to late imperial debates over Hebo, the Great Kings, and local deities, the category of Heshen functioned as a mobile signifier whose authority was continuously reconstituted across ritual, infrastructure, and cross-linguistic translation. Rather than presuming a stable center anchored in the Yellow River basin, the study traces how centers emerged situationally at Qingkou where the Yellow River intersected the Grand Canal and administrative jurisdictions overlapped.

The Ming and Qing courts institutionalized such multi-centrality. By sanctioning figures such as the Fourth Son Golden Dragon Great King while simultaneously preserving the ambiguous, generic title Heshen, the state sustained overlapping jurisdictions that mirrored the intertwined hydrology of river and canal. Temples at strategic confluences materialized a form of multacentral governance in which river directorates, canal directorates, and local officials co-produced ritual space.

Focusing on ritual care, bureaucratic responsibility, and ecological anxiety alongside coercive power, this article argues that river management of late imperial China was organized not by a single sacred center but by a constellation of interdependent hydrological, linguistic, and bureaucratic centers. Multi-centrality was not a breakdown of hierarchy but a deliberate strategy that allowed imperial authority to remain flexible in the face of environmental volatility and territorial diversity.

Panel 6: Reciprocity and Boundaries

15:30-16:45

Tansen Sen (NYU Shanghai)

Panel Chair

Bio

Tansen Sen is Professor of History and Director of the Center for Global Asia, NYU Shanghai. He received his MA from Peking University and a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. He specializes in Asian history and has done extensive research on China and other Asian countries.

Benjamin Gabriel Gallant (NYU Shanghai)

Gifts of State: The Domestic and International Politics of Gift-Giving in Early China

Bio

Benjamin Gallant is a scholar of early Chinese intellectual and legal history and a Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow in the Global Perspectives on Society Program at NYU Shanghai. His current book project, “Gifts of State: A Cultural History of the Emergence of the State,” examines the sociopolitical importance of gift-giving in ancient China with a particular focus on how state formation was materially and discursively linked to gift-giving. He received his doctorate from Harvard University’s Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations in 2025, and previously received an MA from the Department of Chinese Literature at National Taiwan University.

Abstract

While the Weberian notion of (impersonal) bureaucracy has become integral to conceptualizing the early Chinese state, this paper argues that in the context of state formation in the Warring States period (475-221 BCE), practices and norms related to the gift gave rise to a conception of sovereignty predicated on the presentation of gifts and the concomitant recognition of a hierarchical relationship, which came to constitute a form of social contract and a key part of the political imaginary in the absence of notions of citizenship. While Legalist thinkers like Han Feizi sought to design an impersonal and bureaucratic political system organized around the rational pursuit of individual self-interest and eliminate all forms of gift-giving, Qin rulers sought to establish a monopoly on legitimate forms of gift-giving just as they sought to monopolize the legitimate use of force. However, Western Han intellectuals like Jia Yi and Sima Qian criticized the brutal expropriation that characterized the Qin period and theorized the importance of gift-giving in both domestic and international political contexts. By connecting the domestic and international politics of the gift in early China, I hope to complicate bureaucratic conceptions of the Chinese state and explore why the highly personal gift-exchange also became important to early conceptions of international relations.

Jingyi Lin (Nanjing University)

Networks of Authority: Huaya Seals and Multicentrality in Song–Yuan Asia

Bio

Jingyi Lin is a PhD candidate in the School of History at Nanjing University. Her research focuses on medieval East Asian material culture and cross-regional exchange during the Song-Yuan period. She studies seals, bronzes, inscriptions, and documentary practices, with particular attention to how material forms circulated across political and linguistic boundaries in Eurasia. Her broader interests include visual culture, technologies of authentication, and the material construction of trust in premodern societies.

Abstract

During the Song-Yuan period (10th-14th centuries), a distinctive type of signature seal known as Huaya seals (花押印) circulated widely across Asia. These seals operated as recognizable symbols of authentication across different linguistic and political environments, enabling trust and recognition without relying on shared language.

This paper treats Huaya seals as evidence for a multicentral political and commercial world in medieval Asia. Rather than viewing the Song or Yuan court as a single dominant center, I argue that Huaya seals operated within a network of interacting courts, border regimes, and maritime trade communities. Archaeological and textual evidence—including seals or sealings in Chinese, Phags-pa, Persian, Tangut, and other scripts, as well as finds from shipwrecks and urban sites—shows that these objects circulated among multiple centers, shaping local practices of authority and authentication.

Huaya seals moved among the Song and Yuan courts, neighboring regimes such as the Western Xia, Liao, and Jin polities, the Ilkhanate in Iran, and East Asian states such as Goryeo and Japan. In each location, it was adapted to local documentary and commercial practices. Its circulation was not unidirectional from a single imperial core, but a process of negotiation among parallel centers of power. By tracing the movement and adaptation of Huaya seals, this paper highlights how mechanisms of trust and authority were co-constructed across multiple political and commercial centers. Huaya seal thus provides a lens for understanding how multicentrality in premodern Asia was sustained through both material objects and interactive networks.

Yiwen Qiao (University of Macau)

Growing Centrality of Netherworld in Ancient China: A Study of Youming Lu 幽明录

Bio

Yiwen Qiao is currently a PhD student from the Philosophy and Religious Studies department in the University of Macau. She received her BA from Bryn Mawr College and her MA from the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests include transformations in ancient Chinese afterlife beliefs upon the arrival of Buddhism, the development of the Abdication theory (*shanrang* 禪讓), and ideas about pre-Tang Chinese cosmology.

Abstract

In early medieval China, reflections on death and the afterlife were not merely metaphysical speculation but sites where competing religious and cultural systems negotiated authority. This paper examines how narratives in the *Youming Lu* 幽明錄 (Stories of Darkness and Brightness), a fifth-century compilation attributed to Liu Yiqing (403–444), depict the emergence of a structured netherworld shaped by the interaction between indigenous Chinese cosmology and newly introduced Buddhist doctrines.

Before the widespread influence of Buddhism, Chinese conceptions of the afterlife were diverse and lacked a systematic moral administration. The *Youming Lu* reveals a transitional moment in which the realm of the dead is increasingly imagined as a bureaucratically organized domain governed by sinicized karmic judgment, registers of lifespan, and infernal officials. Through close readings of selected narratives, this study argues that these stories textualize a new moralized and administrative order of the afterlife that parallels familiar institutions of governance in the human world. This paper proposes that the netherworld in these narratives functions as a parallel center of authority rather than merely a symbolic religious space. Its officials judge human actions, regulate lifespans, and intervene in the world of the living, thereby extending governance beyond the boundaries of earthly political institutions. The cosmology reflected in the *Youming Lu* thus reveals a vertically multicentral order, in which bureaucratic authority operates simultaneously across the realms of the living and the dead.

By analysing how Buddhist moral concepts were localized through Chinese bureaucratic metaphors and narrative forms, this study demonstrates how early medieval Chinese literature imagined a cosmos governed by multiple, interconnected centers of power.

Saturday 4th April

Panel 7: Historical Sociolinguistics across Asia

10:00-11:40

Mohamed Yunus Rafiq (NYU Shanghai)

Panel Chair

Bio

M. Yunus Rafiq is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at NYU Shanghai and a Global Network Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at NYU. He is a trained medical anthropologist focusing on public health, region, and communicative practices in Tanzania. Rafiq's research examines how governmental and non-governmental health programs mobilize faith-based religious intermediaries to manifest public health governance and biopolitical agendas. It explores how religion is defined by biomedical programs and the ways these programs transform religion. His research questions how religion and biopolitical programs in the post-colony are re-assembled to create new forms of authority, governance, and power.

Manimporok (NYU Shanghai)

Re-evaluating the 1679 Minahasa Treaty: How Critical Indigenous History Can Revitalize Language Revitalization in Southeast Asia (and Elsewhere?)

Bio

Manimporok is a historian specializing in multilingual archival research and transnational approaches to the Western Pacific, covering East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Australasia (ca. 1600-1900s). He earned his DPhil in History from the University of Oxford and previously held a postdoctoral position at Brown University (East Asian Studies & Cogut Institute for the Humanities). His current research is broadly concerned with the question of how nature shapes the course of history. He works on a history of the Arafura Zone, which was an oceanic space of transnational coexistence and solidarity – a radical social experiment that historically valorizes non-state forms of organization and intellectual life. He also works on a project that takes a Critical Indigenous Studies approach to the history of Southeast Asia – which involves a language revitalization project for a 'moribund' language spoken in North Sulawesi. Both projects examine historical processes that are systematically excluded from the global history of industrial modernity.

Abstract

This will be a critique of established language revitalization (LR) models that emphasize rehabilitation of indigenous languages in modern industrial and globalized contexts. Using a critical embodied approach, I argue that LR efforts in the case of North Sulawesi (Indonesia) are caught up in a recurring global historical linguistic process through which languages go extinct. If LR is to avoid this recurring fate—and this concerns cases beyond Southeast Asia too—it must first be informed both by “adequate theorizing about language vitality” (Mufwene 2017) and critical historical reflection. To this end, I discuss the history of the emergence of a Southeast Asian indigenous language, showing how this was a colonial product and how its decline was engendered by indigenous actors themselves. Present-day LR efforts may be less self-defeating if they are informed by the non-national and non-state understanding of the concept of language that these indigenous actors had.

Xi Ji (Zhejiang University)

Multicentrality in the Third Space: Language Identity Construction by Two Female CSL Sojourners in China

Bio

Ji Xi is a doctoral candidate in the College of Media and International Culture at Zhejiang University. Her current research focuses on intercultural communication, Second Language Acquisition, multicultural community, and multilingual identity. Her work has appeared in *Foreign Language Annals and International Journal of Design*.

Abstract

This study examines how two female Chinese as a Second Language (CSL) sojourners—one from a Eurasian context and one from an African context—negotiated their language identities during study abroad in China. Drawing on Li's (2015) mediating space as a contextualized extension of third space theory, analysis of interviews, surveys, and digital data reveals that identity construction was agentic, fluid, and multidirectional. Both learners appropriated, resisted, and reinterpreted linguistic practices to craft hybrid identities within the intercultural third space. However, their trajectories diverged under asymmetrical racialized and geopolitical hierarchies that shaped linguistic legitimacy. Contributing to understandings of multicentrality, this study theorizes third spaces as multi-layered configurations wherein learners navigate not a single host culture center but multiple, intersecting centers—including racial hierarchies, digital communities, religious value systems, and transnational networks. Identity formation thus emerges not as linear integration into a presumed center, but as situational negotiation across coexisting, overlapping, and contested centers. The findings extend Li's model by foregrounding how power, race, and hybridity co-construct the mediating space in CSL contexts, offering an empirical account of how centers are produced, contested, and remade through learners' agentic practice.

Yiming Liu (Fudan University)

Modernization and the Reconfiguration of Moral Order: A Comparative Analysis of English, German, and Chinese Corpora (1800–2000)

Bio

Yiming LIU is a Ph.D. candidate in Global Communication at Fudan University, China, concurrently pursuing an M.Eng. in Electronic and Information Engineering. The interdisciplinary background enables her unique approach to bridging computational with communication theories. Her research focuses on the computational analysis of morality, values, and public opinion. Specifically, she investigates the long-term evolution of social norms and moral structures across diverse cultural landscapes using large-scale corpus methods.

Abstract

Does the trajectory of modernization demand a singular, homogeneous cognitive structure, or does it permit the existence of polycentric modernities? This remains a fundamental question within the social sciences. This study addresses this debate by examining the evolution of moral authority and the attribution of social responsibility in Asia and Europe over the past two centuries. Drawing on a trilingual corpus from Google Books N-grams (English, German, Chinese; 1800–2000; over 100 billion morphemes), we employ word embedding techniques to quantitatively trace the evolution of social role perceptions (e.g., physicians, educators, relatives) within frameworks of moral agency and experiential contexts. Our findings reveal complex interactions between structural commonalities and developmental trajectories. Within institutional domains (e.g., healthcare and education), all three linguistic traditions exhibit significant convergence: physicians and teachers retained their status as core moral agents amid profound social transformations, indicating a cross-cultural cognitive

foundation for professional authority. In contrast, within relational domains (e.g., family and workplace), Chinese discourse exhibits a distinct evolutionary rhythm: while English and German discourses show clear trends toward de-hierarchization and moral status equalization, Chinese discourse reconstructs traditional ethical frameworks at critical historical junctures, revealing endogenous mechanisms embedded within social relations that maintain order and stability

Peng Ai (Xiamen University)

Green Star over Thailand: Esperanto and Leftist Internationalism in the Thai Chinese Community During the 1930s

Bio

Peng Ai is a postdoctoral research fellow at the School of International Relations/Research School for Southeast Asian Studies, Xiamen University. He received his Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. His research focuses on Thai political history, overseas Chinese communities, and transnational leftist cultures.

Abstract

This article examines the Esperanto movement within the Thai Chinese community during the 1930s as a prism through which to explore the early formation of leftist internationalism in Thailand. Drawing on a diverse corpus of primary sources—including Chinese-language newspapers published in Thailand, memoir literature by returned overseas Chinese, and international Esperanto periodicals—this study reconstructs how a small but committed group of intellectuals, journalists, and students mobilized Esperanto as both a practical tool for transnational communication and a symbolic vehicle for articulating a vision of leftist internationalism grounded in the specific realities of China’s anti-Japanese resistance. The article argues that the Esperanto movement functioned as a transnational leftist cultural network that mediated the interplay between internationalism, nationalism, and communism—three forces that collectively shaped the political consciousness of the Chinese diaspora. At its core, the movement embodied a dynamic synthesis: internationalism manifested in global solidarity networks; nationalism expressed through unwavering commitment to China’s national salvation; and communism providing the ideological framework and organizational infrastructure that integrated these seemingly divergent orientations. The movement’s trajectory reveals both the possibilities and vulnerabilities of such transnational projects. While ultimately crushed by the rise of Thai state nationalism under Phibun regime, the movement’s radical essence survived through clandestine channels. By tracing how Esperantists adapted internationalist discourses to serve China’s national salvation, this article illuminates a neglected chapter in Thai radicalism and contributes to broader efforts to decenter Eurocentric narratives of leftist internationalism by attending to the experiences of Southeast Asian diasporic communities.

Panel 8: Gender and the Contested Center

13:10-14:50

Mengdie Zhao (NYU Shanghai)

Panel Chair

Bio

Mengdie Zhao 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.

Leyan Wang (Chinese University of Hong Kong)

Zichao Wang (Chinese University of Hong Kong) (Online)

Agency Must Change Side: The Shifting Gender Center in Spiritual Texts

Bio

WANG Leyan is a Ph.D. student in Religious Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her doctoral dissertation explores the ethical implications of early Yogācāra Buddhism and applies Buddhist doctrines to answer contemporary concerns.

WANG Zichao is a Ph.D. candidate in Religious Studies at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, where he also received his M.Phil. His doctoral research focuses on the ethics of emotions and medieval Christian female mysticism, while his master's dissertation examined patristic philosophy and the dialogue between Confucianism and Christianity.

Abstract

This paper seeks to rediscover early religious women's agency against their markedly androcentric historical background through a rereading of two texts authored by Christian and Buddhist women respectively, *Das fließende Licht der Gottheit* and the *Therīgāthā*. The paper examines how these female authors weaved their own experiences into the blueprint of ultimate salvation, thereby shifting the spiritual discourse from male-centered to female-centered. To facilitate a contemporary analysis, the paper mobilizes Judith Butler's theory of performativity and Saba Mahmood's account of docile agency.

Against previous scholarship's reduction of these texts to internalized male gaze and suppression of femininity, this paper argues that on the spiritual level the female authors' determination to forge their own spiritual paths demonstrates genuine psychological autonomy; on the physical level they transformed the female body from a symbolic representation of sin and desire to a site of power and transcendence. These texts function as performative acts of femininity: while inevitably reenacting gender norms set by the dominant ideology, the authors articulated individual reflections that deviated from, and at times subverted the established structural gender order, revealing their agency in strategic reconciliation.

The analysis and theorizing in this paper highlight a two-fold decentering. First, the hermeneutical center is no longer the androcentric institution but the authors' subjective reports of psychological and bodily experiences, signifying a decentralization of interpretive power. Second, altering the analytic framework requires contemporary scholars to decenter their own progressive perspectives and take the loci of these religious women's being in their time and world.

Shao Shao (University of Amsterdam)

Lianmai (连麦) Counseling Livestreams on Douyin and the Fleeting Centrality of Rural Women's Voices in Digital China

Bio

Shao Shao is a PhD candidate at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA), University of Amsterdam. Her research explores gender, media, and rural-urban relations in contemporary China, with a focus on digital platforms, sonic practices, and feminist ethnography.

Abstract

My paper examines how a Chinese livestreamer, Ling, who was born in the Dabie Mountains of Anhui and later based in Shanghai, cultivated temporary feminist centers through *lianmai* (audio counseling) sessions on Douyin. Her livestreams invited rural and peri-urban women to voice struggles around marriage, kinship, and self-worth. From September 2023 to April 2024, I conducted digital and sonic ethnography of her weekly livestreams, alongside interviews with listeners, callers, and Douyin programmers. I conceptualize these sessions as “platformized acoustic milieus”—sonic environments shaped by platform affordances, governance mechanisms, emotional expression, and vocal hierarchy.

Through the close analysis of the livestreams, I argue that it gave rise to situational forms of centrality through vocal texture, resonance, and collective sensing. Rural women's stories often came through trembling speech, background sounds, and moments of hesitation, allowing others to connect across social and regional differences. Ling's voice, described by many listeners as having *zhongqi* (中气, inner strength), offered clarity and force, helping to reframe personal pain as something that could be voiced and contested. Yet these sonic centers remained fragile. In early 2025, Ling was banned across all major platforms without explanation.

My findings suggest that platform-based resonance can briefly bring voices from rural and working-class settings into focus, but these moments are easily disrupted. This case contributes to discussions of multicentrality by illustrating both the formation and dissolution of sonic feminist publics in digital China.

Wen Gu (Shanghai Gench University)

Let Desta Kyi Lead: Relational Leadership and Collaborative Production Culture in Tibetan Nomadic New Wave Cinema

Bio

Wen holds her PhD at Mahidol University, Thailand, specializing in Asian languages and cultures. She lectures at Shanghai Gench University and Shanghai Vancouver Film Academy. Wen holds a Master's degree in Multimedia Communication from the Academy of Art University, San Francisco, a Bachelor's in Acting Practice and Theater Management, and a Diploma in Scriptwriting from Shanghai Theater Academy. She was also a visiting scholar at Taipei National University of the Arts. In 2024 and 2025, she served as a jury member for the 36th Chinese Golden Rooster and Hundred Flowers Film Festival's Working-in-Progress project pitching competition.

With extensive experience in theater and the Chinese film industry, Wen has worked as a scriptwriter and film producer. Her recent research focusing on cultural representation, gender, and performance studies. She aims to amplify underrepresented narratives and broaden film authorship to include ethnic and marginalized voices within transnational contexts, especially her post-doc interested on post-production trajectories of child labour.

Abstract

This chapter examines the filmmaking practice of Desta Kyi, focusing on how kinship networks, mentorship, and collaborative labor shape her directorial agency. As a Tibetan woman filmmaker from the Amdo region, Kyi operates within a non-industrialized film environment where production relies heavily on informal support systems. Her filmmaking challenges dominant male-centered authorship paradigms in Tibetan cinema by promoting a kinship-based collaborative model rooted in reciprocity, care work, and collective labor, which this chapter further explores.

This paper emphasizes the need to redefine authorship and leadership capabilities within the context of post-authorship theory. Grounded in feminist production culture (Mayer 2017; Banks 2018) and post-authorship theory (White 2015; Maule 2008; Verhoeven 2008; Promkhuntong 2023), this chapter frames authorship as a shared and relational practice rather than an individualistic creative vision. Kyi's work exemplifies what Patricia White (2015) describes as transnational feminist filmmaking, where marginalized women filmmakers navigate and reshape industry practices through community-driven production and alternative distribution networks. Her 2022 feature film, *Over the Mulam River*, exemplifies this model by integrating familial relationships into the filmmaking process, transforming creative authorship into a collaborative endeavor that subverts conventional directorial authority.

Methodologically, this chapter employs semi-autobiographical ethnography (Zeng 2025; Engebretsen & Zeng 2023) and in-depth interviews (Juhasz 2001) to analyze Desta Kyi's collaborative practices. Drawing from my own experience between 2021 and 2024—including participation in the co-producer role during the post-production of *Over the Mulam River*—I examine how Kyi and her long-term producer, Sonam Gyal, cultivate a gendered, non-hierarchical model of authorship. My dual role as both researcher and co-producer allows for a reflexive analysis of the tensions between academic observation and creative collaboration, reflecting the fluid positionality inherent in post-authorship frameworks.

By highlighting kinship-based authorship, this chapter contributes to feminist and transnational film studies (Berry & Farquhar, 2006; Farquhar & Zhang, 2010), emphasizing how Tibetan women filmmakers, particularly Desta Kyi, reconfigure industrial norms through collective labor. Her practice demonstrates that kinship and affective labor are not just logistical necessities but also strategic responses to gendered exclusions and economic precarity. This approach not only broadens the understanding of Tibetan cinema but also offers a model for sustainable, community-driven filmmaking in non-industrial contexts, showcasing the unique characteristics of Tibetan nomadic culture.

Ultimately, Desta Kyi's filmmaking redefines what it means to be a director in Tibetan cinema. By centering relational authorship over individualistic control, her collaborative practices challenge the dominant auteur narrative and underscore the transformative potential of feminist production cultures. This chapter situates Kyi's work within the broader discourse on gender, labor, and authorship, offering new insights into how Tibetan women filmmakers navigate and reshape the contemporary cinematic landscape while simultaneously de-westernizing the discourse around authorship and collaboration.

Fuyun Wei (Zhejiang University)

Who Defines "Proper Culture"? Multicentrality and Gendered Authority in China's Hanfu Revival

Bio

Fuyun Wei is a PhD candidate in Sociology at Zhejiang University and a Visiting Research Student at the London School of Economics. Her research explores the intersections of gender, culture, and nationalism in contemporary China, with particular interests in embodied cultural practice, youth revival, and everyday nationhood. She has conducted extensive ethnographic fieldwork on the *Hanfu*

movement, examining how gender shapes cultural authority, legitimacy, and national expression in everyday life. Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Men's Studies*, and her current article on gender and cultural nationalism in the *Hanfu* revival is under minor revision at *The China Quarterly*.

Abstract

Multicentrality asks how “centres” are made, recognised, and contested rather than presumed. China’s *Hanfu* revival, a state-tolerated return to “traditional” Han clothing, provides a clear case of cultural centrality assembled largely outside formal institutions yet oriented to platform publics and an imagined global audience. Drawing on 18 months of multi-sited ethnography across six Chinese sites (Hangzhou, Shanghai, Nanjing, Suzhou, Guangzhou, and Caoxian) plus online observation, this paper shows how “proper culture” becomes actionable through a polycentric ecology of actors and infrastructures.

I trace how authority travels across shifting nodes: women-led volunteer groups that standardise taste and etiquette; creators and moderators who curate visibility and amplify particular styles; heritage festivals that stage legitimacy under soft governance; and Caoxian, a county manufacturing hub whose factories and livestream studios increasingly operate as an unexpected centre of innovation and market power. Gender organises who can credibly claim centrality. Women, as arbiters of propriety, perform nation-work through aesthetic and organisational labour that embeds cultural pride in ordinary interaction, producing an assertive yet routine nationalism. Men, more exposed to stigma in a feminised field, more often seek recognition via defensive, overt nationalism, emphasising didactic history talk and moralised boundary claims.

Conceptually, I develop “gendered everyday nationhood” to explain how multicentral fields stabilise national meaning through mundane evaluation and the binding energies of care, attention, and cultivated taste. *Hanfu* thus illuminates multicentrality as lived governance: centres emerge situationally, move across media and places, and are continually remade in interaction.

Panel 9: Traveling Art Histories

15:10-16:25

Minhao Zhai (NYU Shanghai)

Panel Chair

Bio

Minhao Zhai is an Assistant Professor of Global China Studies at NYU Shanghai. He studied Chinese religion at Princeton and got his doctorate in 2022. His dissertation explores how Buddhism, as an imported religion, contributed to the formation of talismanic culture in medieval China.

Minhao is currently working on a book manuscript based on his dissertation. In the book, by employing both transmitted Buddhist texts and medieval manuscripts from Dunhuang, he reveals how different religious elements, home or foreign, were creatively utilized in the making, using, and understanding of talismans in medieval China.

Kalyani Madhura Ramachandran (NYU Shanghai)

Figural Style in the Early Buddhist Art of the Deccan

Bio

Kalyani Madhura Ramachandran is an art historian. Her work focuses on ancient Buddhist stonework and its transmissions across South and Southeast Asia. She has further interests in colonial and contemporary approaches to premodern South Asian sculpture. Kalyani completed a PhD at Columbia University; an MPhil at the University of Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar; and a B.A. at St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi, where she won the Department of History Prize. She previously served as a Research Assistant at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Kalyani is currently a Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow at NYU Shanghai.

Abstract

The history of Buddhism and stonework are intertwined phenomena in premodern South Asia. However, this historical connection has been traditionally explored in scholarship from the perspective of early Buddhist sites in north and central India despite the presence of over a hundred contemporaneous sites in the Deccan. This talk focuses on one such site. The early Buddhist monastery at Phanigiri, located on a hill in the valley of the Krishna and Godavari River systems, has yielded an extraordinary though limitedly understood architectural and sculptural corpus dating from the first through the fourth centuries CE. The early evolution of the monastic complex coincides with the earliest proliferation of stone construction in Deccan (southern) India. The site's later development corresponds with the enigmatic decline of active construction of ancient Buddhist complexes and the rise of Brahmanism in the region—the scholarship on which is limited by the “Deccan gap” or absence of authoritative textual sources. This talk demonstrates that the monastic program of Phanigiri was transformed by a long history of donation for lithic construction, expansion, and repair. The vitality of this growing site is reflected in carved narrative reliefs and free-standing sculpture, both of which innovatively drew upon—but extended beyond—the artistic traditions of Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda, capitals of the Satavahana and Ikshvaku dynasties respectively. The talk focuses particularly on free-standing figural images to show that the material basis of this artistic corpus was bolstered by a system of patronage that was dominated by non-royal and female donors, reflecting local ideologies and broader cross-cultural concerns, and thereby challenging the applicability of dynastic labels, such as “Ikshvaku,” typically used to describe the site. Ultimately, the distinctive art at Phanigiri was mobilized by an active network of production—comprising itinerant supervisors and sculptors—along the interlacing rivers of the eastern Deccan as they flowed into the eastern Indian Ocean. In so doing, this talk foregrounds the relationship between the early Buddhist site and stonework, and uses sculpture as a lens to establish that Phanigiri was a dynamic local idiom of the Deccan school of early Buddhist art at the moment of its transmission across and beyond Southeast Asia.

Shujun Chen (Central Academy of Fine Arts)

Cross-Regional Mobility and Multiple Centers of Meaning — A Reinterpretation of a Song-Yuan Ding-Shaped Mirror and Enkan Images

Bio

Shujun Chen is a PhD candidate at the School of Humanities, Central Academy of Fine Arts, and a visiting research fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia, the University of Tokyo. Her research focuses on Song-Yuan art history and Sino-Japanese Zen exchanges, with particular attention to the mobility of images, cross-cultural transmission, and art historical methodology in transregional contexts.

Abstract

This paper examines the cross-regional mobility of an art object and the formation of multiple centers of meaning through a case study of a ding-shaped bronze mirror preserved at Kenchō-ji Temple in Kamakura, Japan. By clarifying the mirror's date of production, the study traces how its significance was transformed as it moved across space and usage contexts, shifting from a private utilitarian object to a symbol invested with religious and political meanings. The mirror is believed to have been produced during the Southern Song dynasty and transmitted to Japan by the Chinese monk Lanxi Daolong (1213–1278). Initially associated with personal use, the object gradually acquired symbolic authority within Zen Buddhist contexts. After a prolonged period of concealment, the mirror re-emerged in 1374, prompting Japanese monks to produce a series of Ekan images based on its form and to inscribe them with encomia attributed to both Chinese and Japanese Zen monks. The repeated reproduction of the image, the trans-cultural composition of its inscribers, and the irregular ordering of the inscriptions reveal a process in which meanings were continually reorganized and reinterpreted across cultural contexts. Rather than assuming a fixed center of authority, this paper argues that the mirror generated multiple, situational centers of meaning at different historical moments, shaped by networks of monastic practice, visual reproduction, and reception. Through this case, the study contributes to discussions of multicentrality by demonstrating how cultural prestige, devotional practices, and acts of reinterpretation can constitute centers beyond stable political or geographic hierarchies.

Tingcong Lin (Jinan University)

An Arhat Marco Polo: Distance as Discursive Strategy and Transcultural (Re)Productions of A (Hi)story In Between

Bio

Tingcong Lin is a postdoctoral fellow in comparative literature at the College of Liberal Arts, Jinan University, Guangzhou, China. He received his BA from Sun Yat-sen University and his MPhil and PhD from the University of Hong Kong. His research stands at the intersection of Victorian and postcolonial literature, heritage studies, and historical and cultural geography. His current project focuses on Western and Chinese tourism and travel writing on China from the 19th century to the present day. His research has been published in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, *International Journal of Asian Studies*, *Journal of Urban History*, *Island Studies Journal*, *Neohelicon*, and elsewhere.

Abstract

This article shows how distance between localities becomes a discursive strategy in the global process of transculturation. It traces the creation and circulation of a mid-nineteenth to early-twentieth century myth surrounding a Buddhist arhat (in Chinese, Luohan) statue in Guangzhou, China, claimed to depict Marco Polo, alongside its Venetian replica. This myth has been circulated by Chinese clerics, tour guides, and intellectuals, as well as Western expatriates, travelers, geographers, Sinologists, and politicians. The history of the statue was adapted by various forces, particularly Italian (and, more generally, Western) nationalists and imperialists, and Chinese reformists. Their diverse arguments reveal a common discursive strategy: legitimizing their contentions by seeking references and endorsements from the distant—and therefore immediately absent—Other, thus positioning the statue's transcultural (hi)story to the Other's side. In doing so, they occupied an interpreting position themselves to turn the historiography of the Other into a historical teleology for the self.