

Epistemologies of Water in Asia

Karl Jaspers Centre for Advanced Transcultural Studies, Heidelberg, 13.–14. December 2014

On December 13.–14., 2014 the Research Group “Waterscapes in a Transcultural Perspective” hosted this interdisciplinary workshop, organized by Dr. Ravi Baghel. A small group of early career researchers and project members gathered in Heidelberg to discuss and develop further research questions pertaining to the „epistemologies of water in Asia.“

The premise of the workshop was that there is something distinct about water knowledges in Asia and a closer look at the diverse meanings and experiences with water require deeper examination.

The workshop opened with an innovative *Academic Speed Dating* session. This provided the foundation for a familiar and productive atmosphere that stimulated discussions and future collaborations. The two-day workshop was structured into three panels, “discourses,” “controversies,” and “semantics.” It concluded with a reflection on the commonalities, differences and future directions for research on the topic.

Niranjana Ramesh, PhD candidate at UCL, opened the panel session on “discourses” with her presentation on desalination plants in London and Chennai with regard to the socio-technical dimension of water and the politics of knowledge. Ricki Levi (PhD Candidate Tel Aviv University) presented her work on water in Rajasthan, where she is investigating the philosophy and aesthetics of water conservation. Dr. Vera Lazzaretti, of Università degli Studi di Milano, showed how the new management of a well in Benares created a manufactured heritage that impacted the knowledge and practices connected to it. Lea Stepan (PhD candidate Heidelberg University) presented on kinaesthetic knowledge in irrigation practices and current perceptions of water in the context of organic rice farming in Bali. Georgie Carroll, PhD candidate at SOAS, University of London, contributed a poster on eco-aesthetics of water as depicted in Indian courtly poetry. The contributions in this panel engaged with various actors and discourses on water and the interminglings, negotiations, conflicts and shifts at the interface of “the epistemologies of water.”

The second panel on “controversies” emphasized how different epistemologies of water create controversies about daily practices and what is labelled as “expert” knowledge. Dr. Heather O’Leary (McMaster University) argued that water, while moving between different social classes in Delhi, has a symbolic meaning as currency, whose value rapidly changes with time. Dr. Joe Hill found boundaries pertaining the different knowledge systems of irrigation management across high mountain valleys. While regional circulation of knowledge across state borders is indeed blocked, local villagers in fact even favour single interventions. Aditya Gosh (Heidelberg University) presented his work on the embankments in the Indian Sundarbans and the contestation between local residents and conservation initiatives. A poster by Dr. Sabrina Habich (University of Tübingen) on the implementation of central water policies at local level in Yunnan Province, China, and another poster by Marielle Velander (London School of Economics) on discourses and controversies surrounding disaster management after heavy flooding in Kashmir completed the panel.

In the third panel on “semantics,” Dr. David Blake (independent researcher) investigated power structures of water supply and irrigation management in Thailand concluding that the current rule of the Thai king can be seen as a form of Wittfogel’s hydraulic despotism. Dr. Leslie Mabon (Robert Gordon University Aberdeen) discussed the ways in which uncertainties about radioactive contamination are created and mediated after the Fukushima disaster. Luisa Cortesi, PhD candidate at Yale University, examined water technologies in the context of embankments in Bihar, which challenge established modes of knowing water. A poster by

Frances Niebuhr (PhD Candidate Heidelberg University), described the dialectic interconnections between a big hydropower project and the re-location of a temple and the meaning ascribed to major flood event in the vicinity. A poster by Amelie Huber (Bogazici University) examined the socio-political dimensions of a hydropower project in the eastern Himalayas.

In the concluding discussion, participants developed key questions for future research on the theme of the workshop. The discussion addressed the analytical and epistemological implications of the participants' research on water knowledges. One question that emerged was whether, and to what extent the engagement with water could open a new tool box that would help to challenge existing epistemologies of water.

An edited volume building upon the workshop is now inviting contributors.

Ravi Baghel and Lea Stepan

Popular Memory of the Mao Era and its Impact on History

French Center of Research on Contemporary China (CEFC-HKU), Paris, 15.–16. Dec. 2014

At an usual autumn day in 1976, a knell suddenly tolled all over China. Mao Zedong, who had overcome thousands of difficulties and finally reached to found the PRC, a young socialist state, closed his eyes forever. Mao's death marks the passing of an era. As a general consensus largely accepted, the periodization of post-1949 can be roughly divided into two periods. 1976 has become a watershed. The revolutionary period of 1949–1976 is called "Mao Era." The post-Mao Era's beginning is marked by Mao's death, the downfall of the "Gang of Four," and the consolidation of Deng's power (in 1978). Nowadays, for most Chinese, the Mao Era has been long gone, so have those deeply buried histories of the blood-soaked decades, political struggles, and fresh memories from people who had witnessed the age of turbulence.

As time passing by, in the PRC the boundary of speech has been slightly loosened up. Thus the collective memories of the Mao Era have chances to become a popular topic. The memories are usually divided into two categories: officially recognized memories controlled by the mouthpiece of the government (traditional media, Internet propaganda, etc.) and popular memories that mostly take positions of grassroots class. As no coincidence, there's a great gap in between. Despite being feeble, the influence of popular memory couldn't be ignored. Not only helping to expand the boundary of speech, popular memory can also affect official discourses to some extent. For instance, along with the rise of plentiful popular memory of "the great famine," the official discourse has been changed from "the three years of natural disaster" (*san nian ziran zaihai*) to "the three difficult years" (*san nian kunnan shiqi*) which refers to 1959–1961.

Sinology has been very sensitive to the thriving development of popular memory of the Mao Era in the PRC. At a time like this, a conference called "Popular Memory of the Mao Era and its Impact on History" was convened in Paris. Organized by CEFC, this conference is one of the research results in the framework of the project "New Approaches to the Mao Era (1949–1976): Everyday History and Unofficial Memory" funded by ANR (France) and RGC (Hong Kong). The conference speakers included scholars from various fields (literature, historiography, sociology, film studies, and sinology) coming from both China (mainland and Hong Kong) and the western world (France, Netherland, Germany, and USA). Five experts of Chinese or Soviet studies had been invited as discussants for each panel (the institutionalization of popular memory; vectors of popular memory; reconsidering history: grassroots resistance;