

The Country and the City Connecting People and Their Places in Environmental History

Rachel
Carson
Center

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Sponsors: Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society (RCC), Center for Ecological History, Renmin University of China (RUC)

Convenors: Xia Mingfang (Renmin University of China), Christof Mauch (RCC), Donald Worster (RCC/RUC/University of Kansas)

Presenters: Sun Donghu (Beijing Academy of Social Sciences), William Cavert (University of Cambridge), Mei Xueqin (Tsinghua University), Ruth Oldenziel (Eindhoven University of Technology), John Flower and Pamela Leonard (Virginia Polytech), Wang Lihua (Nankai University), Jordan Sand (Gerogetown University), Emily Brownell (University of Northern Colorado), Alana Boland (University of Toronto), Cao Mu (Nankai University), Sarah Hill (Western Michigan University), Hou Youngjian (Shanxi Normal University), David Gobel (Savannah College of Art and Design), Alya Ainiwaer (Xinjiang Normal University), Sara M. Gregg (University of Kansas), Tom Robertson (Worchester Polytech Institute), Xie Shi (Sun Yat-Sen University), Mart Stewart (Western Washington University), Albert L. Park (Claremont McKenna College), Fukao Yoko and Yasutomi Ayumu (Osaka University), Wade Graham (Pepperdine University)

From 28 May 28 to 1 June 2014 the international workshop “The Country and the City: Connecting People and Their Places in Environmental History,” was held in Beijing, organized jointly by the RCC and the Center for Ecological History at RUC. More than 60 experts and scholars from China, the United States, Canada, Britain, the Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, and Japan attended the meeting.

The opening ceremony held in the conference room of RUC’s Yifu hall was led by CEH director Mingfang Xia, with speeches and greetings by Dean Huang Xingtao and University President Chen Yulu. President Chen affirmed the significance and the value of contemporary environmental history studies both at home and abroad. He pointed out that rural and urban settings are compromises between human and nature, encompassing confrontations and exchanges of habitat, with

interactions on every level. He also said that China produces all kinds of social problems in the process of urbanization, both as a result of the sheer numbers of rural peasants and urban dwellers, and the cultural and social issues deriving from the evolution of environmental and ecological problems.

The dean said that the schools and colleges will continue to support the construction of the ecological history research center and strengthen exchanges and cooperation with the RCC to provide a better platform for dialogue so that both domestic and foreign scholars can be aware of environmental history and ecological civilization and can contribute to a green future.

The former chairman of the American Historical Association and professor for environmental history at the University of Wisconsin, William Cronon, gave a keynote lecture entitled "History of all Kinds of Natural: Urban Environment of City and Countryside." He focused on alerting scholars to the fact that both rural and urban areas are not distinct, objective categories, but denote certain cultural connotations. These categories are used in the study of environmental history and need to be reflected effectively. He drew on connections to his study *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great Western*, where he tells us the story of nineteenth century Chicago, where processes of exchange with the hinterland lead to the growth of an international metropolis. He emphasized that in order to understand the relationship between city and countryside, environmental history needs to break down borders between the two in dimensions of time, space, and ideology, and explore the inseparable ecological and cultural interactions, thus establishing a two-way relationship between man-made and natural environments.

In the themed discussions, the scholars focused on characteristics of "environment," material cycles, "urban and rural planning," and power relations. Discussions referred to the conflicts between people and place in environmental cognition and sense of belonging, food and energy exchange, waste treatment, the evolution of material circulatory systems between urban and rural areas, their influence on the relations between city and country, the connections between urban and rural at different levels of power, and the role played by changes in the urban and rural contexts.

The meeting also adopted new forms of discussion. After brief paper presentations and Q&A sessions, scholars conducted group discussions. Besides in-depth discussion on the topic in question, scholars were also able to address related issues, such as the cultural construction and deconstruction of nature, value judgments and moral appeal in the selection and use of historical data, emotiveness in natural disasters and diseases, differences in traditional ecological ideas between China and the West, the influence and significance of the *Annales* school on the study of

environmental history, and the role of religion, technology, class, and power during the process of urbanization.

SUN DONGHU presented a brief overview on environmental historiography of Beijing. He pointed out various problems that exist in environmental history research and stressed the importance of interdisciplinary research to complete the picture. Air pollution as urban life in eighteenth century London was topic of WILLIAM CAVERT's paper, exploring how during the nineteenth century smoke became a literary referent for the city's morale. George Macaulay Trevelyan and his influence on rural conservation practices in England was the focus of MEI XUEQIN's paper. As shown over the course of his career, these practices stand as an example of how his class slowly transformed from being landowners to protectors of the land. RUTH OLDENZIEL in her paper tried to disentangle the histories of cycling cities, suburban sprawls, and car countries, in order to better understand their infrastructural connections. The transformation of cultural meanings in urban and rural landscapes in Dali, Yunnan were analyzed by JOHN FLOWER and PAMELA LEONARD, stressing the influence of urban imaginings and rural identity on power struggles over land. WANG LIHUA looked at the transformation of construction material in Southern China as response to fire hazards, highlighting the changing connections between urban building sites and rural providers of bamboo. Drawing on a *longue durée* environmental history of Tokyo Bay and its cultural representations, JORDAN SAND laid out the importance of the city's aquascape compared with the rural hinterland as aesthetic object and source of food. The politics of food in post-independence Dar es Salaam was the topic of EMILY BROWNELL's paper, highlighting the way that family networks were influenced by changing governance, and the increasing abstraction of nature with food commodification in this course.

ALANA BOLAND looked at water management in Chinese cities in the 1950s, tracing the early development of irrigation systems and the unknown amounts of wastewater that influenced city-hinterland-relationships. CAO MU explored public toilets as agents in the re-valuing of human waste from valuable fertilizer to nuisance, using the example of urbanizing Tianjin in Republican China. SARAH HILL's global history of landfilling from Neolithic to modern times showed the closely entangled co-evolution of cities and their garbage dumps and the desire to create "sanitary" arrangements. The influence of vinegar production on landscape and agricultural practices in the area of Guanzhong and the shifting involvement of locals in landscape transformation was analyzed by HOU YOUNGJIAN. DAVID GOBEL looked at the history of city planning in Savannah, Georgia, from an utopian agrarian vision to an almost harmonious model of a green(ed) rural city and source of inspiration for urban ecological development. The challenges that urban modernization has to protect traditional architecture and balance environments were addressed in

ALYA AINIWAER's paper on the renovation of Kashi Gaer (Xinjiang), here particularly focused on the shifting economic use of grasslands around the city.

SARA GREGG examined the influences of the Enlarged 1909 US Homestead Act, highlighting how lack of knowledge and economic disadvantages of farmers in certain regions became transformative for the landscape of the American West. TOM ROBERTSON's paper explored the changing relations between Bangkok and its hinterland before the Vietnam War, in particular the influence of highway construction and its effects on tourism and conservation. Water-related environmental changes in the Tai Lake area from eleventh to sixteenth century were presented by XIE SHI. His paper not only concentrated on landscape transformation induced by city and infrastructure development, but also distinctly integrated social mechanisms and practices. MART STEWART examined US country-city relationships with focus on relationships between slaves and slave owners and their environments. The construction of "the rural" and its transformation into a reconstructive tool for political, economic, and social critique was analyzed by ALBERT PARK. FUKAO YOKO and YASUTOMI AZUMU presented a socio-ecological study of Manchuria 1900-1930 under foreign invasion and the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway, showing how these induced a positive feedback cycle for Chinese immigration at the cost of biodiversity. Hawaiian Molokai as example for countryside without cities was presented by WADE GRAHAM, illuminating how global processes shape the landscape on a local scale and emphasizing the destructive force of intrusive monocultures.

Finally, Professor XIA MINGFANG, Director of the Center for Ecological History at RUC, and Professor WILLIAM CRONON offered a reflective summary of the conference. Professor Xia pointed out that in the face of a series of problems in the process of urbanization, we need to rethink the relationship between man and nature, and explore the value of countryside and nature. Blind, unreflected urbanization will lead into a wilderness for man and nature. An exploration of the ecological value of Chinese ancient philosophy and the experiences of western urbanization can provide historical and ecological reference points for Chinese urban construction.

William Cronon made suggestions for how environmental scholars should write history and study the relationship between human and nature. First of all, environmental history requires a broader nature, one which includes both the non-human and the human world. Secondly, the study of urban and rural relationships should uphold the view that history is studied in a certain time and place, and reflect on the effectiveness of its categories. The categories of country, power, class, market, capital, and natural ecological systems should be introduced into the study of urban environmental history, building a more multi-dimensional framework. Lastly, environmental history's ultimate

concern should be to adjust the contradiction and conflict between the human and non-human worlds, enable them coexist harmoniously, and tell and shape an integral history together.

— Ma Xingzi, Agnes Kneitz

