

International
Symposium



Environmental Humanities in East Asia: Challenges & Opportunities

Date: Saturday, June 21st, 2025

Venue:

Conference Room

College of Liberal Arts

Cheng Building, B1

National Taiwan Normal University



國立臺灣師範大學
National Taiwan Normal University



文學院

Schedule

Time	Description
9:20-9:50	Registration
9:50-10:00	Opening Ceremony
10:00-11:00	Panel 1 / Moderator: Hannes Bergthaller (NTNU) Roland Borgards (Goethe U Frankfurt) "Turning, Rethinking, Decolonizing: A Short History of Animal Studies" Ursula Heise (UCLA) "Environmental Humanities and Cultural Change"
11:00-12:00	Panel 2 / Moderator: Hsinya Huang (National Sun Yat-sen University) Yuki Masami (Aoyama Gakuin University) "The Environmental Humanities in Japan: A Status Report" Wei-da Fang (National Taiwan Normal University) "Environmental Protection, Ecological Education, and the Humanities in Taiwan"
12:00-13:30	Lunch Break
13:30-14:30	Panel 3 / Moderator: William Ng (NTNU) Chia-ju Chang (City University of New York) "What Can Meditation Do in Times of Ecological Crises?: Toward 'Chan Ecocriticism'" Keith Chan (Shandong University) "Ecological Humanism in Christianity and Confucianism"
14:30-15:30	Panel 4 / Moderator: Shiu-huah Serna Chou (Academia Sinica) William Ng (National Taiwan Normal University) "The Web of Life: Buddhist Ethics Beyond Humanity" Mucahid Mustafa Bayrak (National Taiwan Normal University) "Beyond 'Yes or No': Rethinking Individual Climate Adaptation"
15:30-15:45	Tea Break
15:45-17:30	Roundtable Discussion Moderator: Hannes Bergthaller (NTNU) Discussants: Roland Borgards, Ursula Heise, Chia-ju Chang, Yuki Masami, Wei-da Fang, William Ng, Mucahid Bayrak

Introduction

Ecological crises are cultural crises. They affect not only people's physical bodies, but also daily habits and belief systems; they are driven not only by technology and demographics, but also by desires, hopes, and fears. The humanities therefore have an important role to play in our efforts to understand and deal with the present crisis of the biosphere. Over the past two decades or so, this insight has led scholars from across the humanities and sciences to conceive of their work as part of a larger interdisciplinary enterprise called the environmental humanities.

In much of the West, the environmental humanities have already assumed institutional form. There are MA programs in the environmental humanities at prestigious universities; there are academic conferences, journals, and book series devoted to the new field; there are partnerships with museums, collaborations with filmmakers, and other forms of public outreach. In East Asian countries, no similar coalescence seems to have occurred: while there is much excellent scholarship in ecocriticism, environmental history, or environmental philosophy, scholarly collaboration across disciplinary boundaries still appears to be comparatively rare.

Why this should be so (if indeed it is the case) and what could be done to change it is one of the issues we aim to discuss in our symposium, if only as a conduit to broader questions: to what extent are the environmental humanities in their current form shaped by the historical experience and conceptual legacy of Europe and its settler colonies? Or, conversely, might such concerns detract us from the degree to which the logic of industrial modernity overrides cultural differences? How do lived realities in our region inflect the intellectual priorities, the pedagogy, and the institutional politics of the environmental humanities? How compatible are key concepts of environmentalist discourse in the West (not only nature and culture, but e.g. also anthropocentrism, capitalism, or speciesism) with cultural traditions in East Asia – and how does our perspective on this question change if we understand environmentalism to be a thoroughly global and transcultural phenomenon?



Panel I

“Turning, Rethinking, Decolonizing: A Short History of Animal Studies”

Roland Borgards

Professor at the Institute for German Literature and its Didactics
Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany

Animal Studies grew out of the deconstruction of the so-called anthropological difference, i.e. as a critique of the idea that humans and animals stand in hierarchical opposition. This leads to larger theoretical debates about relationality which are also at the heart of the Environmental Humanities: the newly conceived animal is a being entangled, caught up in and bound up with others – other animals, humans, plants, weather, minerals, the entire web of life. Animal studies thus extends into planetary dimensions: only a planetary thinking which understands animals as enveloped in more encompassing relations can form an adequate conception of animals. As Cultural Animals Studies are becoming more integrated with the Environmental Humanities, they are also transforming into Planetary Animal Studies. This talk will argue that this necessary turn towards a planetary perspective also hold out the prospect of decolonizing Animal Studies and Environmental Humanities. The inherent multiplicity of the planetary is also a multiplicity of ontologies, of different modes of access to the world. Even in its critiques of Western thought, most scholarship in Animals Studies and the Environmental Humanities remains beholden to it. Planetary Animal Studies can open a pathway out of this impasse, allowing for new forms of theory and practice in the Environmental Humanities which lead beyond customary forms of Western rationality.



“Environmental Humanities and Cultural Change”

Ursula Heise

Marcia H. Howard Chair in Literary Studies

Department of English

Institute of the Environment & Sustainability

University of California, Los Angeles, USA

“The sky is easier to engineer than the human brain,” one character says in the television series *Extrapolations* (2023) in a dispute over whether or not to initiate geoengineering to cool global temperatures. Her dialogue with another character, who argues that cultural change rather than technological intervention is needed to combat global warming, raises issues that are crucial to the Environmental Humanities. What is the role of culture in the engagement with environmental crises? If cultural change is indeed needed to solve environmental problems, what factors might bring about such change? This presentation will explore different theories of cultural change and the ways in which they have implicitly or explicitly shaped research in the Environmental Humanities.



Panel 2

“The Environmental Humanities in Japan: A Status Report”

Yuki Masami

Professor at the Department of English
Aoyama Gakuin University, Japan

For the past decade, I have been sowing seeds of Environmental Humanities which, in Japan, is not as active as it is in western countries. I will introduce three major projects that I initiated: the AGU Environmental Humanities Forum launched in April 2021, the on-campus collaborative research on the topic of “more-than-human stories” in 2022-2024, and Japan’s first EH certificate program for MA students, launched in April 2024, which is based on a credit transfer system among three Tokyo-based universities including AGU. Sharing some of the obstacles that I have experienced in proceeding with these projects, I will discuss commonly seen hesitation, if not skepticism, about one’s involvement in environment-related projects in Japan’s higher education and research.



“Ecological Education, and the Humanities in Taiwan”

Wei-Ta Fang

Distinguished Professor and Director

Graduate Institute of Sustainability Management and Environmental Education

National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan

Even more than in most Western countries, public debates about environmental issues in Taiwan continue to be dominated by the natural sciences. Drawing on several case studies from recent projects to protect Taiwan’s vulnerable wetlands, this talk will examine the role which culturally specific beliefs and attitudes play in these efforts, and suggest ways in which humanistic scholarship and pedagogy might contribute to them in the future.



Panel 3

“What Can Meditation Do in Times of Ecological Crises?: Toward ‘Chan Ecocriticism’”

Chia-ju Chang

Professor of Chinese at Brooklyn College
City University of New York, USA

Meditation is often seen as a quietistic turning away from the world. This talk will argue that, on the contrary, it can make an essential contribution in the effort to come to grips with today’s ecological crises. Chan ecocriticism, an interdisciplinary field within Environmental Humanities and Contemplative Studies, understands Chan/Zen meditation as a transformative method for collective awakening, addressing the distorted perspectives that shape society. Focusing on the themes of worldmaking and scale, the talk draws from Yogācāric-Chan Buddhism to outline a framework for “bodhisattva cartography”—a guiding vision for enlightened worldmaking in times of uncertainty.



“Ecological Humanism in Christianity and Confucianism”

Keith Ka-Fu Chan

Professor at the Center for Judaic and Inter-religious Studies
School of Philosophy and Social Development
Shandong University, China

Ecological Humanism refers to an idea that the identity of human person in the world should not be isolated from the world (or cosmos). Even though Christianity and Confucianism are commonly regarded as either theocentric religion or humanistic ethical-cultural traditions, this paper aims at demonstrating that the human-world motif is fundamental and essential for these two religious-cultural traditions. Based on Orthodox and Protestant traditions, human being would be regarded as micro-cosmos in which all dimensions of the world are integrated into the human person. Therefore, human being would be treated as “priest” or “mediator.” Also, Confucianism, based on the idea expressed in the Book of Means, the ideal human (“great Man”) is also connected by the Heaven. The Cosmological dimension of the ethical potentiality is clearly expressed in the different texts in Confucianism. Therefore, we can see that both traditions emphasizes the interrelationship between human and nature, even though both also maintains that human being is unique in the world.



Panel 4

“The Web of Life: Buddhist Ethics Beyond Humanity”

William Ng

Professor at the Department of History
National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan

Worldviews shape how societies perceive life and nature. While Christianity is often seen as anthropocentric, emphasizing human dominion, Chinese religions—particularly Buddhism—offer a non-anthropocentric, life-centered perspective. This paper explores the Buddhist worldview as a dynamic system of concentric circles, extending ethical concern beyond humans to all sentient beings and the environment. At its core, Buddhism teaches *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination), emphasizing the interdependence of all existence. By examining the philosophical foundations and modern applications of Buddhism’s life-centered worldview, this study highlights its significance in contemporary discussions on animal ethics and environmental sustainability. Through its dynamic, inclusive model, Buddhism provides a compelling alternative to anthropocentric paradigms, encouraging a more compassionate approach to life and nature.



“Beyond ‘Yes or No’: Rethinking Individual Climate Adaptation

Mucahid Mustafa Bayrak

Associate Professor at the Department of Geography
National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei

The climate crisis demands a critical reassessment of adaptation, vulnerability, and resilience, particularly for smallholder and Indigenous farmers who, despite their adaptability, face disproportionate risks. This talk examines adaptation through a political ecology lens, with case studies from Taiwan and Vietnam, arguing that it is often framed as a neoliberal construct—shifting responsibility onto farmers rather than addressing deeper structural inequalities. By reframing these concepts, we can foster bottom-up strategies that not only enhance climate resilience but also challenge broader social and power imbalances. This discussion will specifically engage with climate adaptation scholarship relevant to East Asia.





Environmental Humanities

National Taiwan Normal University

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Certified Program in Environmental Humanities at
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