

Editor's Introduction to the Volume

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This volume contains papers prepared for the XV EastAsiaNet (EAN) Research Workshop, hosted by Ca' Foscari University Venice on May 14-15, 2015.¹ These proceedings consist of two sections, each relevant to one of the themes addressed by the workshop: the nature-culture-society nexus, with particular reference to the role of water as a natural and symbolic resource, and practices and expressions of cultural and scientific diplomacy. The six papers featured in this volume are representative of the variety of disciplinary and methodological approaches characterising the study of contemporary East Asia, drawing both from the social sciences and the humanities. The section on human-nature interactions opens with Sean Golden's contribution, focused on the evolution of China's ecological discourse. The paper is a poignant account of the contribution made by both classical Chinese thought and modern political culture in normalising interactions between man and nature. By bridging scholarship on ancient China with the study of contemporary politics, Golden provides a lucid contribution to our understanding of current trends and challenges ahead in envisioning a more sustainable future for the Asian country. Japan's quest for environmentally sustainable energy sources is the key concern of the second paper, authored by Yveline Lecler. Her contribution provides an in-depth analysis of organisational and policy structures of Japan's hydropower sector, with a special focus on the potential of small-scale hydropower systems. The paper also sheds light on future scenarios and relevant institutional constraints for the development of Japan's hydropower resources. The last contribution of the first section, authored by Giovanni Bulian, analyses processes of social construction of seawater and seascape in Japan's fishermen communities. The paper introduces original fieldwork materials collected by the author in Kamishima, a small island at the mouth of Ise Bay. It revolves around the role played by the mutual relationship between human beings and nature in shaping identities and

1 Further information about EAN's mission, composition, and activities can be found on the network's website at URL <http://www.eastasianet.org/index.php?id=3>.

cultural expressions. In exploring interactions between nature, culture, and society, Bulian's work complements the normative and regulatory perspectives at the core of Golden's and Lecler's papers.

The interaction among cognitive attitudes held by diverse societies and the practices used by powerful actors to normalise cultural mindsets are the key topics touched upon in Tobia Maschio's and Marco Zappa's papers, featured in the second section of the volume. The first relates to the contentious role of the Confucius Institute, an organisation affiliated to the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, entrusted with the promotion of Chinese language and culture abroad. Asia studies scholars have greeted its establishment across Europe and the US with mixed reactions. On the one hand, as a chance to foster collaborative initiatives; on the other, as a course of concern, due to its potential role as a tool of PRC's soft power, projecting an image of China - and the world - respondent to Beijing's political interest. Maschio contributes to the latter strain of research: his work provides an informative analysis of discursive strategies used by the Confucius Institute, focusing on the representation of China's culture and history, as depicted in the online portal Confucius Institute Online.² On his part, Zappa's work rather focuses on the *glocal* dimension of cultural interactions, by analysing the societal response to the increasing Japanese presence in Hanoi's Ba Dinh district (Vietnam). His work shows a positive example of community's adaptation to the change in wider social, economic and political conditions. In the last work contained in this volume, Gregory Lee draws from the tradition of critical cultural studies to offer a sharp critique of the so-called 'China model' as an alternative, distinctive path to modernisation. A path that not only is portrayed by Beijing as rational, efficient, and inherently positive, but also possesses a considerable appeal among Western audiences, due to its perceived efficiency in delivering growth. Lee contends that in fact the path pursued by China's élites for the most part of the XX century has been informed by scientism, or the belief that science and its technological applications may be a panacea for the country's ills. This approach has led to a gradual and yet meticulous removal from the arena of intellectual debate of instances of democratization, marginalizing as well alternative patterns of development. This process, the author argues, regards China as much as Western societies. In fact, Lee reckons that by looking at China's change into a consumerist society, largely driven by a "need, a thirst for technology [...] we are in fact looking at ourselves". Judging from the enthusiasm that increasingly characterises Europe's public debate over China's achievements, we might as well be looking into our future. Lee's paper is therefore a call on Asia studies scholars to transform their

2 Accessible at URL <https://www.openlearning.com/ConfuciusInstituteOnline>.

research into a locus for a critical reflection on the way(s) our societies envision their future.

Such a reflexive approach is key to reframing the field of Asian studies in ways that are both scientifically sound and socially relevant. A large community of early stage and experienced scholars – including the ones featured in this volume – is contributing to the pursuit of this aim. However, considerable room for improvement remains to redefine methodological boundaries of the field, creating an epistemic community capable of a critical reflection on issues of societal and political relevance. This endeavour should be carried out with scarce regard to disciplinary pedigrees, but rather focusing on the relevance, rigour, consistency, and feasibility of methods of inquiry. This is no easy task, since Asian studies scholars would have to handpick and experiment themselves with the best resources, skills, and knowledge that can be brought into play to explore the social and cultural phenomena constituting their subject of study. However, some comfort can be found in history: after all, Oriental studies were born in a time when demarcations among different disciplines were much less coercive than nowadays. Most pioneers of the field – Matteo Ricci, to name one – were skilled not only in what we now call the humanities, but were rather equipped with a vast knowledge of social and natural phenomena, and endowed with a holistic intellectual attitude. This allowed them to play a vital role as knowledge brokers between widely different actors and across institutional contexts.³

The author of this brief introduction does not long for a return to a romanticised past. He does hope, however, that more scholars will take upon themselves the challenge of reshaping our field of study, by means of ethical commitment, scientific curiosity and civic engagement. A first testing ground would be the study of the New Silk Roads, as envisaged by China and her partners in the framework of the Belt and Road initiative (BRI). Far from being a mere collection of infrastructural projects, the initiative is destined to reshape institutions of large parts of Eurasia. Understanding the New Silk Roads implications is a challenge calling for a long term, collaborative, interdisciplinary effort engaging Asian studies. Indeed, EAN scholars are already at work in this respect: a second volume – currently in progress – stemming from an EAN workshop is going to be devoted to the new Silk Roads.

Before leaving the floor to the authors of these proceedings, the Editor wish to thank the anonymous reviewers who appraised the submitted papers: their voluntary contribution was fundamental in crafting this volume.

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³ This does not equate to an hagiography of Oriental studies *tout-court*: for centuries they were tainted with racial prejudice and political, confessional, and economic interests. In short, they often had less to do with science than with power.

