

Anthropology Connection

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From the Field

New Chairperson & Graduate Division Head

As Prof. Andrew Kipnis completed his three-year term leading the Department, Prof. Sea Ling Cheng has begun her new duty as Chairperson of the Department of Anthropology, CUHK as of 1 August 2024. Meanwhile, Prof. Teresa Kuan has started her new duty as Graduate Division Head.

As someone who used to work as a Research Assistant in the Department in the 1990s, becoming the Chair of Department feels a bit surreal. I got into anthropology because it transports me (sometimes figuratively, sometimes literally) to different worlds and planes of existence. It is exciting for me to learn about unfamiliar practices and ideas of people across time and space, analyze and understand the differences that divide us, as well as the connections that we share. For me, this knowledge is not just academic, but deeply personal. It deepens my self-understanding while opening up possibilities and pathways for change. Besides, it's just fun to turn our everyday assumptions upside-down, and to know that we should take nothing for granted!

I am excited to take on the Chair position in the midst of many new happenings. Let me just stick to the three most important ones: 1. We are very excited to have Prof. Aaron Hames to join us as Assistant Professor this year. His research expertise on ageing in Japan will inject new energies into the research and teaching profiles of our department. 2. We have a new batch of 7 PhD and MPhil students joining our department, their proposed research are all at the cutting edge of anthropological and archaeological knowledge. 3. We have renovated many of our offices. The most important is our fully renovated and newly equipped archaeology lab - thanks to Prof. Lam Wengcheong and Prof. Christina Cheung's initiatives and labour of love.

I hope the Department could become a home-base for our students and faculty -- a supportive space for the intellectual challenges that Anthropology offers. This semester, we have started a series of Anthro Chats, "Shut-up-and-Write" sessions 3 times a week, and fruity Mondays. Maybe not so coincidentally, they represent three key goals of mine for the department: Talk to each other more, write more, and stay healthy!

Have a fantastic year ahead.



Message from Prof. Cheng

Anthropology Game

After over a year's developing and test playing, we are happy to let you know that an anthropology role play game will be launched very soon! The game set will be made available for the public, and workshops will also be organized. Stay tuned, and make sure to come play with us to experience anthropology in a game!

45th Anniversary

Next year will be the 45th anniversary of the founding of the Department of Anthropology. Please look forward to a series of celebration activities!

Promotion

Dr. Wai-man Tang is promoted to Senior Lecturer, starting from 1 August 2024. Congratulations!

Teaching Award

Prof. Gordon Mathews was awarded the Exemplary Teaching Award in General Education 2022. Congratulations!



"We discuss provocative questions in my classes, ranging from 'Why are human beings so afraid of death today?' to 'Is patriotism good or bad for the world?' to 'Why does foul language so often invoke sex? Isn't sex about love?' to 'What do you think is the future of Hong Kong?' Rational discussion using critical thinking, where we can all learn from one another, is the essence of university learning, and this is what I strive for in my classes."

Research Award

Prof. Leilah Vevaina was awarded the Research Excellence Award 2023-24 of Faculty of Arts. Congratulations!

"I am honoured to receive this award as a recognition of many years of research. As an anthropologist who does field research on charity, religion, and law in contemporary India, none of this is possible without so many amazing research interlocutors in India and Hong Kong."



RPG Students Update

Recent PhD graduate Dr. Rui Sun was awarded the Ernst Mach Grant to complete a research stay based in the University of Vienna between December 2023 and August 2024. Also, she published an article titled "You Need to Listen to the Market!": Making Decisions Through Senses in China's Largest Cut-Flower Market" in American Behavioral Scientist as OnlineFirst.

PhD candidate Ms. Yiyang Xiao has become a member of the coordinating team of the Early Career Researchers Network at the Association of Critical Heritage Studies, which aims to connect young researchers interested in critical heritage studies.

PhD student Ms. Wenzhao Chen has been awarded the Wenner-Gren Dissertation Fieldwork Grant for her research project "The making of intimacies in and beyond hair salons: an ethnographic study of male rural migrant hairstylists in Guangzhou, China".

Undergraduate Scholarship Awardees

Roland Tsang (Scholarship for the Outstanding Anthropology Undergraduate)

It has been a few years since I chose anthropology as my highest priority just because the name sounds cool. Now at my third year with anthropology, I found it not just “cool”, but meaningful too. What I like about anthropology is that I can apply my life experiences into learning, gaining new insights on both. It feels rewarding, as everything I experienced can potentially be valuable. Having something I enjoy in this discipline really pushes me to be better, even though it can be hard at times. I hope you can also find out what you enjoy about anthropology!

Xiaohan Zhang (Scholarship for the Outstanding Anthropology Undergraduate)

I chose to study anthropology after my decision to come to Hong Kong from Beijing. I thought I should study something that I can't in mainland, and I was also interested in “is there a difference between human and other animals?” After I came here and took ANTH1010 Humans and Culture, I became interested in cultural anthropology because it touches on a lot of “unanswered questions” and asks us to think deeper on “why do humans do what they do” and “why do humans think the way they think”(after knowing the “hows”). It was a hugely rewarding and challenging journey as anthropology is a very reflexive subject. Throughout this journey, teachers in our department helped me a lot, whether by extending the deadlines, helping me out one on one, or just giving me the freedom to explore what I love. I can't ask for a better group of administrative staff for our department because you've always provided a lot of support backstage and reply to our emails instantly. Last but not least, don't miss out on the department field trip!

Yeyan Hu (Scholarship for the Outstanding Anthropology Undergraduate)

What is Anthropology? This is likely one of the most frequently encountered questions for an anthropology student. I could say that it studies humans, examines cultures, emphasizes on a holistic perspective, and encourages us to step outside our own frameworks to reflect on things we take for granted. Four years of learning is still inadequate to fully grasp the essence of anthropology, but I am delighted to have joined this anthropological family, entering the vast field of “what anthropology entails”...I would say, anthropology is more than just an academic discipline; it is akin to a key that unlocks unlimited possibilities for understanding this colourful world.

Matthew Joseph Brace (Faculty of Arts Scholarship for Outstanding International Student)

I chose the anthropology program at CUHK because it sits at a unique crossroad between quality and location. I came here because I wanted to get out of my comfort zone and live somewhere where I could use what I learned in class outside of it as well. Between the academic vigor of lectures and the many uncountable and unique areas of Hong Kong to investigate, I think I've made the right choice so far. As for classes themselves, I have really enjoyed seeing how each different professor has their own research niches and own way of approaching ideas in general. Before enrolling, I was told that anthropology was too broad, but it's good to see that in reality people are able to find and make research into the areas they're personally passionate about.

Yan Lam Lau (Faculty of Arts Admission Scholarship)

Choosing CUHK, I aspire to equip myself with knowledge and skills, while fostering personal growth in this beautiful environment. I think my journey at CUHK and the Anthropology Department has been great so far. Although it took me some time to adapt to the new learning environment, I now see anthropology as a new lens to understand the world, and I am excited to further develop my knowledge and passion at CUHK.

Events

EAAA 2023

The 2023 East Asian Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, "East Asian Anthropology in a Roiling World: Pandemics, Politics, Potentials" was organized by the Department and held on 6-8 October 2024 at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. More than 160 scholars, forming 35 panels including a roundtable by the founders of EAAA, participated and presented on a wide array of studies of East Asian anthropology. While the presentations had to turn online on the third day due to typhoon, the Annual Meeting successfully facilitated the exchange of ideas and perspectives. Special thanks to the office staff and student helpers who worked hard to make it happen!



Summer Workshop

The 2024 Anthropology Methods Summer Workshop was held on 7-11 June 2024. 34 students from different institutions received intensive training in ethnographic research methods under the guidance of Dr. Joseph Bosco, contributed to thoughtful discussion among themselves, and also gained a deeper understanding of anthropological fieldwork from sharings by advanced PhD students from the Department. Nice to meet you all and hope to see you again at the Anthropology Department!

2024 FYP Forum

The 2024 Final Year Project Forum was held on 24 April, 2024. In the 5-hour Forum, 22 undergraduate students presented their final year research projects for 5 minutes each and answered questions from the audience. Their projects cover various interesting themes: archaeology and materiality, social and cultural change, education and youth, communities and relatedness, gender, body and sexualities, and economies, hierarchies, and identities, with fieldwork mostly done locally in Hong Kong and also in mainland China. Congrats to all the graduating students!

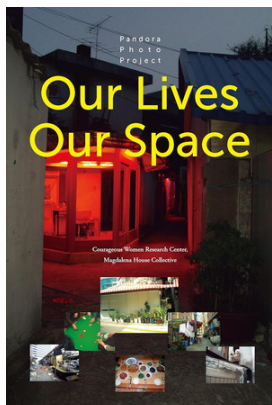


PGSF 15

The 15th Annual CUHK Anthropology Postgraduate Student Forum "Solidarity Beyond Boundaries" was organized by research postgraduate students and held on 1-2 March 2024. More than 40 graduate students and young scholars joined to present on a wide range of research topics in 9 panels. The keynote address was given by Prof. Tim Ingold, who also conducted a writing workshop with the Forum participants. Many thanks to the Forum Committee and all the participants!



Publications & Grants



Sealing Cheng

2024. Co-authored with Ae-Ryung Kim, Ock-Jeong Lee, Jaehee Baek, Mi-Hye Won and Heeyoung Yi. *Our Lives, Our Space: Pandora Photo Project*. Seoul, Korea: Bookdramang Publishers.

Christina Cheung

2024. Co-authored with Fanny Chenal, Magali Fabre, Marie Horviller, Estelle Herrscher and Aline Thomas. "Stable Isotope Analysis of Human and Faunal Remains from Rosheim, Middle Neolithic, France." *Bulletins et Mémoires de la Société d'Anthropologie de Paris* 36(2).

2024-27, RGC Early Career Scheme: Motherhood in Turbulent Times – Reconstructing Breastfeeding and Weaning Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Italy using Stable Isotope Analysis.

Sidney Cheung Chin Hung 張展鴻

2024. 《飲食香港：一位人類學家的日常觀察》(譚宗穎譯)。香港：三聯書店。

Andrew Kipnis

2024. "Anthropology's Lost Language Syndrome." *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 25(1):1-26.

2023-25, RGC General Research Fund: Designs for the Dead in Hong Kong.

Venera R. Khalikova

Co-authored with Ruslan Yusupov. 2024. "Religious Minorities in the 2019 Hong Kong Protests: Ambivalence, Strategies of (Non)participation, and Claims of Belonging." *Journal of Asian Studies* 83 (2): 372–382.

2024-27, RGC Early Career Scheme: Precarious privilege of highly skilled transnational migrants: An ethnography of South Asian women expatriates in Hong Kong.



Teresa Kuan

2023. "Truth or Trick: Thinking of Trolley Problems as Tinkering." *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology*, Special issue: 'Trolley Problem' anthropology: stylized ethical dilemmas and the response of ethnography 67(3): 102–108.

Wengcheong Lam 林永昌

Co-authored with Luo Shengqiang. 2023. 汉代荆州南部（郴州地区）铜器分析及所见汉代铜工业相关问题 (Metallurgical Analysis of bronzeware from the southern end of the Han Jingzhou and issues related to the bronze industry). *南方文物* (Southern cultural relics) 3.

2024–26, RGC General Research Fund: The archaeology of Han bronzes from western Lingnan and the integration of Lingnan into the Han Empire.

Gordon Mathews

2024. "Hong Kong anthropologists within global neoliberalism and national and local politics." *Etnográfica* 28 (2):533–547.

Leilah Vevaina

2023. *Trust Matters: Parsi Endowments in Mumbai and the Horoscope of a City*. Duke University Press.

2022–24, RGC Early Career Scheme: Funerals, Faith, and Finance in the Parsi Zoroastrian Diaspora.

Wai-man Tang

2024. "'Community Sports without Communities?': Community Sports Development in Neoliberal Hong Kong." In *Sport in Hong Kong: Culture, Identity, and Policy*, Tobias Zuser and Lawrence Ka-ki Ho, eds., pp.27–46. New York: Peter Lang.

Chaoxiong Zhang

2024–26, RGC Early Career Scheme: The Art of Being Resilient: Confronting the State and Pursuing Cultural Liberalism in Southwest China's Glutinous Rice Cultural-Ecological Zone.

from the field:

fieldwork sharings from research postgraduate students

NOT TYPICAL ELEPHANTS

CHANG LEI

Before visiting N, an Asian elephant researcher in Xishuangbanna, southwest Yunnan Province, I thought it would be a great opportunity to explore how scientists perceive the local human-elephant conflicts and compare their views with those of local farmers. However, things didn't unfold as I had anticipated.

N's office was located in a botanical garden, close to the nature reserve. The scent of tropical plants filled the air, making the experience feel exotic and exhilarating to someone like me, from the north. After being immersed in information about the ecological role elephants play in tropical forests and how to calculate forest carrying capacity, I asked N about his daily research routine. "Do you enter the nature reserve yourself? Or do you collaborate with other scholars to collect data?"

"Well, we don't actually conduct research here," N replied. "We collect bodies, feces, and other data from Southeast Asian countries." After a pause, he added, "The forest in Xishuangbanna is untouchable to us. It's close to China's border, and the administrative procedures are just too cumbersome and time-consuming."

That was the moment I realized: all the stories he had shared lacked specific place names. We were sitting near the Xishuangbanna nature reserve, but talking about elephants from abroad. Sensing my confusion, N explained further. "Chinese elephants aren't typical for scientific study."

"What do you mean by 'not typical'?" I asked. "Chinese elephants are overprotected. They've become bolder and more aggressive, with no fear of humans. While other Asian elephants tend to avoid villages and are nocturnal, Chinese elephants walk right into villages in broad daylight." "So, they are not typical," I murmured, processing the information. "Yes," N confirmed. "There are around 40 to 50,000 Asian elephants globally, but only 300 here in China."



A leaflet promoting elephant conservation



Farmers made simple electronic fences to protect crops from elephants

Vision's Contingency

Darren Tsz-Hin Fung

If popular wisdom tends to homogenize people with visual impairments—utter lack of sight, the ability to read Braille, and dependence on canes to navigate public spaces, my research project has allowed me to understand the diversity of experiences among the visually impaired in Hong Kong. Many people with “low vision” (aka the “partially sighted”) use magnifying devices to read. Some of them walk with a cane, but many don’t. As they depend on sight, among other senses, to go about their everyday life, some of the challenges they have to deal with are different from those faced by people without functional vision. I discuss my meeting with Raymond and the experience of Laura—who are both people with low vision—to illustrate such challenges.

Raymond and I are having lunch in a bustling restaurant. It is my first time hanging out with him after being briefly introduced to him weeks ago. Unlike the previous occasion, when he wore sunglasses outdoors, he is donning what appears to be a pair of typical prescription glasses. As we are about to finish lunch, I suggest going to another place for tea so that I can talk to him in a quieter environment about how his gradual loss of sight has impacted his life. With one hand holding a cane and the other holding my backpack, Raymond trails behind me to another restaurant.

We arrive at a café whose floor-to-ceiling glass windows overlook the street. Cars and people stream by under the blue autumn sky. Attracted by the view, I pick a table right next to the glass windows, through which the sunlight pours into the restaurant.

After taking his seat, Raymond changes to wearing a pair of sunglasses.

At one point during the interview, Raymond explains to me how people who have become visually impaired recently and he can relate to each other based on particular ways of seeing. He observes, “I tell my visually impaired friends that I like gray days, since I see things more clearly on gray days. I can’t see well when it is sunny. If I say this to you, you won’t get what I mean. But if I tell my visually impaired friends, they get it. They also like gray days and don’t like sunny weather.” I can’t help but wonder if Raymond is implying that the strong sunlight is preventing him from seeing clearly. He then tells me that he would have felt more comfortable if we had sat at a table away from the glass windows.

As I learn from my time spent with Raymond that afternoon as well as from interviews with other people with low vision, how clearly one can see changes from one situation to another due to lighting, how well-rested one is, the tasks one's eyes have to perform on a given day, among other factors. Or, in the words of Karis Petty (2021, 290), who has also conducted research on people with visual impairments, “[b]lindness’ or ‘seeing,’ as sensory capacities/experiences, are not experienced consistently.”

If contingency of vision, and most sighted people's lack of awareness of it, create forms of social connection and disconnection for Raymond, perceptual inconsistency makes passing a fragile endeavor for Laura. When Laura first started her job as a part-time server at a theme park, she did not tell anyone at work that she is visually impaired. Back then, her work schedule alternated between day shifts and evening shifts. Since she worked inside an outdoor food vending cart, and the theme park aimed to create a certain ambience through dim lighting inside the cart and its vicinity, she could not see clearly when working in the evening. Moreover, while Laura feels more comfortable with the white light of fluorescent tubes, she cannot stand the yellow light of the bulbs used at her workplace. Therefore, she decided to disclose her visual condition to her supervisor, and successfully requested to work only day shifts.

After working as a part-time staff member for a couple of years, Laura expressed her wish to switch to a full-time position to her supervisor. However, her supervisor told her that she does not meet the criteria of being a full-time server. Laura has since brought up this request again for a couple of times. Her supervisor has denied her request without giving specific reasons. She suspects that she is not offered a full-time position because she cannot work evening shifts.

Raymond's and Laura's experiences exemplify some of the hurdles people with “low vision” face. They depend on their functional vision to go about their daily lives, and thus have to contend with unpredictable environmental factors affecting the clarity of their vision. For those whose visual impairment is not immediately discernible, they have to think about whether to conceal or reveal their disability in different situations.

Reference

Petty, Karis Jade. 2021. “Beyond the Senses: Perception, the Environment, and Vision Impairment.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 27 (2): 285–302.

Fieldwork in a hair salon

Chen Wenzhao

I conducted my preliminary fieldwork in a mid-end hair salon in a metropolis in southern China in August 2024. My connection with this hair salon began as I accompanied my friend to have her hair done in May, which allowed me to have a pleasant chat with the hairstylists. About three months later, I began to work as a free receptionist in the shop with the permission of the bosses.

Feeling nervous and even displaced on the first day of my arrival, I found myself welcomed by the staff with their genuine friendliness. After their introduction of the daily routines in the shop to me, we started to chat about how they entered the industry, what clients they had met, and their working experience as hairstylists. The great percentage of rural-origin workers in the shop is typical of the hairstylists in urban China. Many hairstylists that I met in cities dropped out of school in their teenage years, spent about half a year as an apprentice in their hometown, where living costs were lower than in cities, and then came to cities to work as assistants for two or three years who help with perming and dyeing before they become hairstylists. In the meantime, they also learned haircut skills. Before they become real hairstylists who can rely on hairstyling for livelihood, they must spend another one or two years practicing their skills in voluntary haircut activities for the elderly and children, or serving clients at a low price in low-end shops.

My major tasks included greeting clients, getting water for clients, storing their bags in the locker, noting down their reservation information and allocating hairstylists for the clients who had not reserved a particular hairstylist. While my job can sometimes be tiring when there were many clients, it was much more relaxed than the hairstylists' and assistants' work. It was common for them to stand for six or even longer hours per day and miss their lunch or dinner. Weekends were normally the busiest period, and the staff may work overtime until midnight after their customers' hair was all done.

To have a deeper understanding of hairstyling, I tried learning to wash hair along with an assistant. Although it seems easy, the process is much more complicated than I thought. Washing hair for others is significantly more difficult than washing hair for oneself: we need to memorize the approximate starting and ending positions in each round of the scratch, scratch the scalp not with our nails but the upper part of the fingers, avoid spilling water on the face, ears, and the body of the client, and pay close attention to how to hold the client's head in a powerful yet gentle way so that the shampoo at the bottom of the head can be washed. Apart from these procedures, we need to constantly observe the clients' expressions in case they feel uncomfortable with the hair wash. Paying attention to so many things at the same time can be really exhausting. So for the friends who ask me, "Do you really need to LEARN to wash hair?" or "Can you cut others' hair after doing the fieldwork?", I have to say that please do not undervalue the profession of hairstyling and there is a long long way for me to go...

FIELDWORK IS, FIGURES REFLECTED ON A GRANITE WALL

ZHENG XINCHE

I shall begin my fieldwork story with an image. It is a story Mr. Zhou told me in our interview, about the moment after his diagnosis of cancer when he made up his mind to give up smoking:

“Before that (the diagnosis) came out I kept thinking it wasn’t breast cancer. I was staying at the Inpatient Building (of the hospital) for several nights and I kept smoking, pack after pack, with thoughts conflicting in my mind. I was also aware of the high fatality rate of cancer and it’s probably about time for me. On that morning, I went out for a new pack of cigarettes, and I ran to the main gate of the hospital for smoking. Five cigarettes in a row as I thought it all through: I’m going to have the surgery and can never smoke after that. I remembered this very clearly: five cigarettes, in ten minutes! After these five I rolled up the pack with several left inside, and threw them all into that large, metal garbage bin near the gate, which was surrounded by men, standing there and watching me. Some hustled towards me, yelling, ‘No! Don’t! Give them to me!’ (laugh) They wanted my cigarettes... I didn’t let them. I pushed the pack further down into the bin.”

Quick-witted, Mr. Zhou continued talking about what happened later and how he became an expert on everything he can do for his recovery. At the time I had no idea this image of him throwing away cigarettes can give a punch on my mind, with lingering impacts even till today. So I didn’t follow up for more details – his feelings, motives.

But I simply couldn’t get over with the image. I keep thinking about it.

Of course, not everyone shares my level of naiveté back then. I was this aspiring and cheerfully clueless graduate student, wishing to “know” what the males with breast cancer have experienced and how they feel about it. “Knowing” is the part I thought I had control of. What can you do when you have many fieldwork materials like this image, which you have no idea how to decode? To what extent do I really know them?

I started to have this feeling of being overwhelmed by too many images flashing by without revealing much information to me. Hospital is a place of “everything everywhere all at once”, so I need to purposefully take a ten-minute break from time to time at the empty stairwell near my office at the hospital. One day as I rested there while taking some sketchy notes, I noticed people’s shadow being reflected on the granite wall:



And I realized that figure is probably what I can know about my informants at best. A sometimes blurry, and constantly changing one. The one I see at a distance.

That's when Lisa Stevenson's theory on "an imagistic rather than discursive knowing" of our field and our informants started to make sense to me. Images hold something that texts fail to grasp and convey, with a different kind of power in them to deliver. They have a different punch.

But meanwhile, I'm not saying what we get from fieldwork is untruthful. I guess deep down, I'm nervous and unsettled to present only one possible reality – why is it the case that my version of reality is the one? If I'm committing to this one route drawing from A to B, am I denying all other routes or even omitting C, D, or E? True, one can choose different genres – to write expository or poetic texts, or to use images (thanks to Teresa's comment on this in our previous conversation); still, drawing on relations and navigating among them, thus deciding to commit to one route, is the decision we all need to make. It takes an ethnographer much courage to present a figure, even it is only reflected on a granite wall several steps away.

A Happy Ending

Lyu Zihan

Zhu finally finds the butterfly he has been dreaming of all his life. Its name is golden Kaiser-i-Hind butterfly (*Teinopalpus aureus*, 金斑喙凤蝶, abbreviated to golden Kaiser in following texts). The golden Kaiser is one of China's three first-class protected insect species (the others are two rare cockroaches found in high-altitude areas). According to local rangers, the golden Kaiser is the national butterfly of China, but the only specimen found in Wuyi was "stolen" to the British Museum in the late 20th century. For bug guys in Fujian, the golden Kaiser is a marvelous but untouchable dream: you cannot find it on your own; if you are lucky enough to see it, it is only because it comes to find you.

One night in Tongmu, he tells me that he suddenly has a strong feeling without any signs at all. He decides to call his friends in Fuzhou one by one to see if their telephoto cameras are available for some days. An hour later, he sighs in bed, but his tired tone after several staying-up nights cannot hide his exhilaration: Tomorrow, he is going to pick up two bird watchers at the railway station. They will carry a telephoto camera, a trump card to photograph a golden Kaiser. It is now August, just about the time of the butterfly's outbreak. If he misses it this time, there will be another year of waiting.

His efforts pay off. I am not lucky enough to witness the happy ending of his story as a searcher – I am off to another village the next day. I am also eager to share these moments with my informants, but apparently the golden Kaiser does not come to find me. What follows is the narrative from Zhu, whose dream has come true:

But misfortune follows. He drives up the mountain at dawn of the next day, and after a forty-minute bumpy ride, his car gets a flat tire near the top. He cannot find a spare tire among all the groceries in his car trunk. For the next three hours, the rest of the night, he and his two friends have to drive down at low speed with the broken tire rubbing against the ground. They end this trip by driving to the nearest auto repair at a town he has never been to before, but they decide to start another trip: to visit a somewhat famous Taoist mountain nearby. Unexpectedly, however, a miracle comes to find them there: a golden Kaiser shows itself in a place that their previous trails never lead to.

When I meet Zhu again two days later, he excitedly tells me about his adventure: they go up to the top of the mountain before dawn and shine their flashlights into the sky (Fig 1). As a habit, the golden Kaiser is seen to “chase the wind”, rushing up to the top from the lower altitude at dawn. Two hours pass, and they do not manage to greet a single butterfly, only to see moths and bats. Hopeless and exhausted, they walk into an old Taoist temple at the top to burn incense. But as they step out of the temple door, a giant, golden-spotted figure flies past their eyes: there it is!



Fig 1 The dawn. Photo by Luo, a birdwatcher.



Fig 2 A golden Kaiser. Photo by Silver Pheasant, a birdwatcher.

Zhu sighs again. This butterfly is truly a transcendent being. It only appears by chance, as if it happens to give charity to the mortal searchers of this world. It has previously been photographed by Zhu's supervisor when it oddly got stuck on a spider's web, and it has already been seen drinking dewdrops on the railing of a bridge. After three years of fieldwork, it finally appears in front of Zhu's eyes. This butterfly seems very cooperative, stopping for a long time on a cluster of flowers, probably tired of flying or fighting with other males, as Zhu speculates (Fig 2). His birdwatcher buddies take hundreds of photos. A few days later, Zhu spots the butterfly for the second time this summer, and for his life. This time, he photographs it by himself. His dream has a good ending.

“Taking Shortcuts”

Ma Jinghan

I spent the summer of 2021 in Chengdu, an urban hub in southwest China, initiating conversations with female strangers who had dieted to lose weight, binged on food, and induced vomiting for more than one year. While clinical language would name their conditions as eating disorders, I was trying to figure out how these people understood their own conditions, and how I as analyst can locate these personal experience in their relational and social situations. Wing was one of my interlocutors, twenty-three years old, a master’s student in modern Chinese literature. In one of our meetings, I asked Wing why she kept bingeing and vomiting. She said:

“For a person who cares about her body shape, binge eating and vomiting is like **cheating with a game bot (開掛)**. When I was dieting, I was so hungry that I could not fall asleep. I was repressing myself. But now I can follow my feelings. Things like appetites and sexual desires are irresistible. A starving body will seek every opportunity to feed itself. . . . Am I lazy? Every day I run six to seven kilometers in the morning and do resistance training in the evening. But people like **taking shortcuts (走捷徑)**.”

Three years ago, Wing first started to lose weight. She wanted to look slimmer, just like every girl around her. She knew that she had to eat less and do more exercise — the “open secret” of slimming. She believed that self-discipline would make her life better, and nobody would disagree. Unlike those losers who whine a lot and do little, however, Wing successfully lost 10 KG body weight in ten months.

Then Wing learnt about “cheating meals (欺騙餐)” on the internet. It is said that one cheating meal every one or two weeks protects the body from extreme starvation and has slimming effects in the long run. Wing tried it out, letting go of her long-suppressed appetite. Since then, her appetites became totally out of control. The frequency of her cheating meals rose from every two weeks, to once a week, to twice a week. Cheating meal became what Wing called “cheating day” and “scamming meal (詐騙餐)”. She not only regained the weight that she had lost, but was also terrified by the prospect of getting heavier day by day.

This was never Wing’s anticipation — every dieter expects herself to be the one who becomes thin and stays thin forever. Panicking, Wing stuck her fingers down the throat to induce vomiting, which worked. Fingers solved the problem for a while. Yet as her throat gradually grew “insensitive to fingers”, vomiting became more and more difficult. Again, Wing sought solutions from the internet. She learnt the tube method.

“A totally new world,” said Wing. A trimmed hose connects the bursting stomach and the open air, a lot of water coming in, a lot of vomit coming out. Compared with fingers, the tube allows Wing to have “cleaner” pukes with less effort. While one could get insensitive to fingers, vomiting will only become easier and cleaner as one masters the knowledge and the skill.

When Wing was a newbie, she was too excited to take a break from bingeing and using tube — she would do five to six rounds a day. Two years later, today Wing not only became more skilled at using tube, but also managed to lower the frequency to only one time a day. She allowed herself to binge at dinnertime and then purge, leaving the daytime for other things, like studying. Bingeing and vomiting became her new routine.

This new routine is also source of pressure. On the one hand, Wing was worried about her physical health. Long-term bingeing and vomiting made her suffer from severe constipation, occasional dizziness, swollen glands under the chin, and frozen hands and feet even in the summer. “I don’t think I’ll live till the age of fifty,” said Wing, “I dare not do a full-body physical test. I might be diagnosed with stomach cancer.” On the other hand, the pressure came from keeping her bingeing and purging a secret. While people see dieting and doing exercise as virtuous, they see bingeing and vomiting as self-indulgent, wasteful, and freaky. Wing feared what other people might say had they known about her bingeing and vomiting. She said: “Every day I felt like a thief.”

Secrecy goes hand in hand with fear, but also pleasure. For a thief, what is pleasant is what they steal. For Wing, secrecy serves as the foundation of a carefree bingeing episode — a situation where she totally and temporarily loses awareness of the concrete and abstract social other, and the social pressure of self-discipline. Before every bingeing dinner, Wing would make several orders of delivery food. The food that she prepared usually had strong tastes, containing lots of sugar, sodium, carbs, and oil. She also prepared easily captivating TV shows to watch while eating. She usually ate in her own room — a space where nobody would interrupt. She ate like a wolf. There was pleasure in the first few bites, but then she started to feel nothing but “mechanically ate”. In a state of being unaware of others, Wing shortly stops seeking social reference for what is the right thing to do/eat — the right thing to do/eat is to just eat whatever she wants.

When drowsiness or stomachache brought the bingeing episode to an end, the consciousness of the social and the imperative of self-discipline came back. This is when vomiting becomes desirable. Bingeing and vomiting is a shortcut because it allows Wing to take a secret break from the social demand of self-discipline. It is a shortcut that generates guilt, fear, and pleasure. It is, if we put ourselves in Wing’s shoes, the most viable way to live a good life.

Post-fieldwork Reflection: holiday versus work

Zuo Mengge

The other day, an article about what is anthropology from BBC Radio's program "Thinking Allowed" caught my eye. It opened with, "You just want a holiday, don't you?" The author, Dr. Andersson, amusingly notes how anthropologists are sometimes perceived as "layabouts with too much time on their hands."

My research site, Sanya, is a popular holiday destination. Friends who heard about my fieldwork expressed varying degrees of "envy," imagining I was enjoying the sea, sun, and beach with coconut drinks every day. I'd confessed to some that I didn't feel like I was on holiday at all. As in many ethnographic studies, life and work are not separated as they usually are (claimed to be) in our modern society. I could observe all the time if I chose to, which could be exhausting.

When explaining my work to interlocutors, I'd often hear the next time I saw them, "You're still here? Ai! How nice that you've had such a long holiday!" Initially, I felt frustrated and compelled to justify that I was engaged in "real work." Over time, I learned to simply smile and let it slide. But get this - upon returning to Hong Kong after a year, my supervisor greeted me cheerfully and asked, "How was your stay in Sanya? Did you get to relax there?" I appreciate his concern, and I wish I had. Maybe someone can do fieldwork in a more relaxed way, but I've never heard anyone say so. My first thought was, come on! You know I didn't go there for a holiday. After a moment, it made me ponder why I somewhat downgrade "relaxation" and "holiday."



For many in mainland China, retirement symbolizes a work-free, worry-less holiday-like life. My interlocutors, perhaps uniquely in China's history, were officially retiring at a relatively young and healthy age. China recently raised the retirement age for the first time since the 1950s. The public discussion online, carefully managed by the government, still reveals sentiment about a precarious future due to demographic change and vulnerable pension systems. Young people's self-mockery rhetoric is that before worrying about pensions, let's see if we can live up to the retirement age if we keep working like this. Behind this lies widespread dissatisfaction with jobs and the life surrounding them.

If there's one thing my fieldwork teaches me, it's that people don't hate work but crave recognition for their work, regardless of age. I've caught myself doing it, too. When I explain that I'm not on holiday, I'm seeking that validation. The same could be said for my interlocutors as well. Their experiences made me reconsider the arbitrary lines we draw between work and leisure/holiday/retirement. Anthropologists have long engaged with this question by providing alternatives to the categories we've more or less internalized. This calls back to why our fieldwork is sometimes perceived as a holiday - the way we conduct our research already, to certain sense, destabilizes these boundaries.

Now, I am tasked with writing about this reflection piece, paying off my past year's "va(o)cation."

Happy Work!

Reference: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/16mICRBLD67XtL4hIMMHdF7/ethnography-what-is-it-and-why-do-we-need-it>



The Governmental Tea

Li Xing

Every half cup of water should go with half a teaspoon of tea and one teaspoon of sugar. “Then here you are, black tea with a refreshing taste of sweetness.” I find myself thinking while waiting for the tea to boil. This is in the modestly equipped kitchen of a ward office, the smallest local government unit in Nepal.

My ongoing PhD fieldwork explores the Nepali state’s efforts to build a more comprehensive system of civil registration. Work that falls in this field includes registering vital life events, such as birth, death, marriage, divorce and migration, and issuing relevant certificates. These certificates further serve as vital supporting documents for obtaining Nepali citizenship. Over the past few years, the national government, with support from international agents like the World Bank, has implemented a new legal structure regulating civil registration and built a digitalized system in place of the previous handwritten-based bureaucratic procedures. To trace this new system in practice, my fieldwork brings me to different levels of governmental institutions in Nepal.

From small ward offices, where most civil registration tasks are undertaken, to the Department-level office, where relevant laws are interpreted and the online registration system is monitored, I have shared countless cups of tea with my interlocutors there. While the higher-rank office has fancier teacups, it is at the ward office, where I sometimes take up the duty of a teamaker.



Painted notice on the wall in the hallway within a ward office.

It writes “Please complete all the work related to birth, marriage, migration, and death certificate within 35 days.”

Usually, each ward office is staffed with an office assistant, who is almost always a woman in my experience. Besides managing some basic administrative tasks like stamping and archiving documents, the assistant would prepare tea and some modest refreshments for the office members, including at least one ward secretary, who handles various bureaucratic tasks as a government civil servant, and a few elected ward representatives who don't have to follow office hours but often come to the office as well.

In the ward office whose members I know best, when the assistant was on leave, one of the woman representatives would take up the cooking responsibilities, and I would always offer to assist. Occasionally, when there were no other woman members of the office around, I would take up the cooking duties.



An office room-turned kitchen in the Ward Office.

Willingly or unwillingly, I have internalized the gendered (self)expectation for women to take up care work, whether in domestic or office settings. My active participation in such labour won me the fame of a diligent and virtuous daughter-in-law, though unmarried. Sometimes I wonder: as a non-native anthropologist, am I overly actively reproducing the gender stereotypes in the field?

(Trying to) Interview Authoritative Interlocutors

Amy Lam Wing Tong

My research led me to interview clinicians working in a very specific field -- intersex medicine (also known as Disorder of Sex Development). As a non-medical student, I had to pull every string, or even just cold calling, to reach these authoritative individuals.

Doctors, especially those working in public hospitals, are a hectic bunch. Understandably they are not inclined to check strangers' emails.



Eventually, I would first email them to introduce myself and the project.

Then, overcoming my social awkwardness, I would call them directly to ask whether they received the message.

Luckily, these calls were usually picked up by a gentle-voiced female secretary, and they would kindly check with the doctor for me.



Soon, I would get a reply.

I prepared things big and small. Sending in interview questions and other documents in advance was a basic.



I always wore the same dress-- The green was calming and elegant. I thought it made me look sort of like a nurse.



On that day, I arrived nearly two and a half hours early just to settle down and prepare. Eventually, I walked through the maze-like corridors and arrived at the spot.



But my interlocutor was not there.

I don't really know her--

I just rushed back from another district. Nobody told me you were coming today--



WHAT WAS IT THAT YOU ARE DOING AGAIN !?

ANXIETY

I have never heard someone talk that fast...

Well, plans can't always keep up with changes.

Dialogues are modified; Based on real situations.

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