



2024 Online Symposium of
the Network of Asian Environmental
Philosophy

Mountains & rivers

November 21-22

2024 Online Symposium of the Network of Asian Environmental Philosophy

Dates: November 21-22 Participation is free.

Theme: Rivers and mountains in environmental philosophies in Asia

Rivers are flowing, ever-changing and becoming.

Mountains tend to be represented as more static aspects of landscapes.

Rivers and mountains are at the heart of many environmental philosophies in Asia, across different cultures, traditions and practices. Environmental philosophy explores the ways we relate to nature, framed by **cultural worldviews and imaginaries**, and nourished by local practices. The diversity of environmental philosophies could offer toolboxes to adapt or cope with the environmental crisis, from climate change and biodiversity loss to pollution. This symposium aims to create opportunities to learn from each other on the diversity of environmental philosophies in Asia to foster dialogue towards sustainable pathways.

The NAEP 2024 Online Symposium will gather contributions from scholars, practitioners and stakeholders on a broad range of aspects **within Asian worldviews**.

Language: The primary language of the conference is English. We aim to be non-native friendly, so we make it a rule that we speak slow and accessible English.

Organisation: Orika Komatsubara, Laïna Droz, Dipanwita Pal, Concordia Marie Lagasca-Hiloma, Romaric Jannel, Spriha Roy, Tekla Nanuashvili, Felipe Cuervo.

About the Network of Asian Environmental Philosophy (NAEP)

The Network of Asian Environmental Philosophy (NAEP) was founded by a **group of scholars** in the field of environmental philosophy in Asia in 2019 with the goal to support works related to environmental philosophy within Asian traditions of thoughts broadly conceived or related to grassroots perspectives on environmental issues in Asia. Visit our website: www.asiaenviphilo.com

Program NAEP 2024

Thursday November 21

Session 1 (13:00-14:00 JST) Workshop: What is NAEP? Results from NAEP latest project on eco-orientalism and eco-nationalism and future directions

Session 2 (14:15-15:45 JST) Rivers (Moderation: Laïna Droz)

- **Danqiong Joy Zhu:** Devouring Deluge and Rivers of Healing
- **May Aye Thiri:** Whispers of the River: Exploring Relational Values of Water Ecosystems in Burmese Creative Artistic Works
- **Anand A.S. and Dr. Rukmini S.:** Stories we live by on the banks of Mayyazhi: A Study of M Mukundan's "On the Banks of the Mayyazhi" from a socio-cultural literary perspective.

Session 3 (16:15-17:45 JST) Mountains (Moderation: Orika Komatsubara)

- **Renz Villacampa:** On Disrupting Neoliberal World-building: The Environment as Biocultural Space and the Cordillera Indigenous Notion of Pansigedan"
- **Hang Thi Thu TRUONG and Christian CULAS:** Conceptions and practices of mountains, rivers and forests among the Raglai of Nui Chua National Park, Central Vietnam
- **Tekla Nanuashvili:** The Role of Sansuiga in the Formation of Modern Discourse on Nature in Japan

Session 4 (18.30 - 19.30 JST) Roundtable: Stories of animism (Moderation: Felipe Cuervo)

- **Nisha Sidhique Dr. Christopher Rajasekaran:** The Notion of 'Deep Ecology' and the Significance of Rivers and Mountains in Southern Himalaya: A Study of Mamang Dai's Selected Poetry

Program NAEP 2024

Friday November 22

Session 5 (14.00 - 15.00 JST) Panel organised by **Shan Gao**: The Hudson River School and Chinese Landscape Painting: Comparative Studies between Emerson and Zhuang Zi

Session 6 (15.15 - 16.45 JST) Eco-feminism (Moderation: Priya Roy)

- **Rui XIE**: Trans-corporeal Feminism, Submerged Perspectives, and Wastewater on Contemporary Chinese Screens
- **Muhammad Ali and Jawad Khan Niyazi**: Water, Women and the Subcontinent's Partition in Jyotirmoyee Devi's "The River Churning"
- **Amrita DasGupta**: Water in the life of Amphibious Women of the Indian Ocean Deltas

Session 7 (17:00 - 18:30 JST) Cinema and literature (Moderation: Dipanwita Pal)

- **Anandita Saraswat and Aratrika Das**: Agency of Rivers in Gond Art: Examining Multispecies Relationality in Finding My Way (2016)
- **Philippa Lovatt**: Sonic Materiality and Ambience in Som Supaparinya's Energy Generation Series
- **Sukanya Maity**: From the Waves to the Concrete: Bengali Cinema in the Age of Capitalocene

Session 8 (18.40 - 20.00 JST) **Open workshop with NAEP 2024 organisation team**: Symposium synthesis and future common projects

(Title Image: William Zhang, Panoramic view of iconic Guilin hills

<https://unsplash.com/photos/aerial-view-of-green-trees-and-mountains-during-daytime--Qd91Sg6aZ8>)

Booklet of Abstracts - NAEP 2024

- **Danqiong Joy Zhu:** Devouring Deluge and Rivers of Healing

The purpose of this study is to conduct a socio-cultural-ecological inquiry into rivers in the context of environmental disasters, particularly excessive hydro-meteorological disasters. The theoretical framework I adopt is the one of biocultural ethics (co-inhabitants, habitus, and habitat), specifically the ecological-ethical links between people and the hydrological landscapes they inhabit. In this study, I will first trace the symbolic origins of rivers and deluge from a cross-cultural perspective, focusing on texts and narratives in classical Chinese literature, such as those delineating descriptions of hé liú (河流, river), jiàng shuǐ (洚水, deluge), as well as narratives of rivers in the myths, oral histories, and folklore of China's ethnic minorities. These texts reveal a holistic image of the river in traditional Chinese culture, encompassing ontological, epistemological, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions, and offer some valuable insights for answering questions such as What is a river?, What is the beauty of a river?, and How do people live with a river (or even deluge)?, etc. These narratives also shape the relationship between Chinese people and rivers. The deluge would eventually recede, and therapeutic healing would come from the rivers. In the form of biophysical healing through peaceful rivers or the Dujiangyan Irrigation System, or sponge cities of Turenscape, rivers offer people harvest, convenience, beneficence, and socio-ecological well-being, and more importantly, in the form of psychological and spiritual healing through the writings of Chinese literati such as Su Shi, rivers grant post-traumatic restoration, wisdom, endurance, and ceaseless hope.

Key Words: biocultural Ethics, deluge, river of healing, landscape architecture

- **May Thiri:** Whispers of the River: Exploring Relational Values of Water Ecosystems in Burmese Creative Artistic Works

Creative works and storytelling through songs, music, poems, and visual performances can be strongly linked to biocultural identities. Artists use these forms of expression not only to communicate, express emotions and pass on knowledge but also to raise awareness of the environmental and societal issues affecting their communities. These artworks provide rich insights into cultural values, beliefs, and identities. In the context of ecosystems, relational values explore the profound connections between nature, individuals, communities, and culture. These values emphasise the significance of ecosystems beyond their practical uses, highlighting their role in shaping cultural, spiritual, and social identities. By examining artistic expressions, we can uncover how these relational values are embedded within creative works, as artists often draw from the ecosystems around them to reflect their communities' cultural and spiritual ties to nature and people. This research explores Myanmar's cultural heritage, where water emerges as a central theme in literature, visual arts, and songs. By analysing

30 songs, 11 poems, 5 novels, and one documentary, the study demonstrates how water ecosystem services serve as a powerful motif, reflecting water's influence on Myanmar's collective consciousness and its relational significance in shaping societal values.

Keywords: songs, novels, burmese, river, water, identities

- **Anand A.S. and Dr. Rukmini S.:** Stories we live by on the banks of Mayyazhi: A Study of M Mukundan's "On the Banks of the Mayyazhi" from a socio-cultural literary perspective.

Rivers have always been a source of life for all our existences. We learn from the rivers that wherever may be the origin our destination is one. The ignorance of the destination we lay our lives in between. In these 'in betweens' lay many stories where some are sweet to remember while others are not. M. Mukundan a Malayalee writer's one such story is "Mayyazhippuzhayude Theerangalil." Mayyazhippuzhayude Theerangalil" or "On the Banks of the Mayyazhi" is a semi fictional narrative set in Mahe (named after the river), one of the unconnected districts of the Union Territory of Pondicherry that geographically lies within the state of Kerala. Originally written in Malayalam the novel was translated into English, Tamil and French with its original version and translations bagging several accolades. With 44 rivers and around 34 prominent lakes, the state excels itself as a popular tourist destination. But for the natives, these water bodies occupy a completely different level of significance as it is an important part of their ecosystem. Rivers evoke a wide spectrum of emotions in the minds of Keralites, it acts as a source of their happiness, livelihood, misery, tradition, culture and even nostalgia. This intricate relationship between the river and the people has been explored by many renowned writers who hail from the state.

This paper aims to highlight the stories that have been lived by on the riverside in general and focuses on primarily on the stories lived by from a socio-cultural literary perspective on the Banks of Mahe, which the river is named after.

Keywords: "On the Banks of the Mayyazhi," socio- cultural, literary perspective, rivers.

- **Renz Villacampa:** On Disrupting Neoliberal World-building: The Environment as Biocultural Space and the Cordillera Indigenous Notion of Pansigedan"

The imperative of progress has long been rendered as territory of the neoliberal world-building. Its overbearing reach has shaped the trajectory of the developmental agenda of modern societies. In this setup, natural resources such as rivers and mountains are curated and expended in the linearity of 'produce-process-reproduce' of the neoliberal market and eventually likened to its very own commodities: depleted and overconsumed. Nonetheless, marginal spaces offer alternative grounds where a great refusal can stand. I argue that the notion of

pansigedan of the Indigenous peoples of the Cordillera region disrupts the brand of development peddled by dominant powers. Further, pansigedan is taken to refer to the state of wellness and total well-being of the community, hinging on culturally sensitive models of progress. As typified by these Indigenous communities, this allowed for a bottom-up approach towards the development of mountains and rivers and their use for ecotourism, biodiversity research, and external studies. This ushers a participative form of development that enables these communities to genuinely take a project as their own and posits the formation of community programs and initiatives informed by their own experiences. Largely, this aptly supports my claim that their lands and waters serve as the ontological foundation of their being, knowing, and valuing. I termed this as 'dynamic spatial events' where their struggle to negotiate a space and liberate their narratives from the canon of dominant powers can fully take place.

- **Hang Thi Thu TRUONG and Christian CULAS:** Conceptions and practices of mountains, rivers and forests among the Raglai of Nui Chua National Park, Central Vietnam

Our ethnographic studies (2020-2022) of the conceptions, representations and practices relating to mountains, rivers and forests among the Raglai populations of Nui Chua National Park (Central Vietnam) have highlighted the specific relationships that link this community with these natural entities. For the Raglai, these relationships are interwoven with their ancient knowledge and agricultural and forestry techniques, and are deeply embedded in the group's symbolic, mythological, spiritual, emotional and sensitive systems. The Raglai are an agroforestry people from Central Vietnam (150,000 inhabitants). Their language belongs to the Malayo-Polynesian family, and they are thought to have come from the Pacific over 1,000 years ago. Our presentation will mainly focus on the positions of local natural entities in Raglai ways of thinking about the world (ontologies). Raglai communities say, for example, that "our mountains, rivers and forests are our family" and that "our forest protects people and villages". Natural entities are named after family members, and Raglai family names are derived from entities in the natural world around the village. On the basis of these elements and their cultural contexts, we will analyze the Raglai ontologies by crossing the anthropological approaches of Philippe Descola (2013), Tim Ingold (2013) and mesological approaches of Augustin Berque (2014). As an opening conclusion, we'll show how the Raglai's specific ways of being in the world come up against techno-scientific and dominant systems of thought and action when they're forced to apply national park regulations that require them "to protect rivers and forests".

- **Tekla Nanuashvili:** The Role of Sansuiga in the Formation of Modern Discourse on Nature in Japan

In the spring of 2024, the works of the renowned Japanese landscape painter Sesshū (1420–1506) were exhibited at the Kyoto National Museum within a conceptual framework that celebrated Japan's unique culture and its connection with mountains. Although trained in Chinese Shanshui painting (山水画, Sansuiga in Japanese), Sesshū is recognized in Japan as one of the pioneers of this genre, elevating him to a unique status in Japanese art.

While mountains in China held Taoist and neo-Confucian cosmological meanings, it is worth questioning whether they took on a different role in Japan. Notably, early modern Japanese landscape paintings, claiming to follow Sesshū's legacy, often reflect local geography, suggesting that mountains may have become a symbol of regional identity. This research explores how Sesshū's mountain paintings, a common theme in Song China centuries before, made him a legend in Japan and his paintings a part of national identity in the modern era.

It is important to examine the difference in significance of mountains in Shanshui painting in Song China and their transformation since Muromachi-period Japan. The goal of this research is not to define what mountains symbolized for Sesshū himself, but to investigate his paintings as the cultural monuments they have become. How do we exhibit them today? What sort of conditions allowed modern Japan to create certain narratives of its relationship with national landscapes? How can the centuries-old art form of Japanese Sansuiga be part of this narrative in the way it is exhibited nowadays?

- **Nisha Sidhique Dr. Christopher Rajasekaran:** The Notion of 'Deep Ecology' and the Significance of Rivers and Mountains in Southern Himalaya: A Study of Mamang Dai's Selected Poetry

Vellore. VIT, Vellore. The study investigates the elements of bio regionalism and deep ecology in the selected poetry of Mamang Dai, who is a renowned Indian English writer from the Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh. The literal meaning of Adi is 'hill' or 'mountain people'. The Adi's are the tribal people who live in the foothills of the southern part of Himalaya. They traditionally follow animism, and worship nature, ancestral spirits, and deities. As a prominent writer from North Eastern India, her works explore the diverse dimensions of the geography of her land and how the colonial ideologies of power and material politics affect the quintessential life of local/ tribal people. Her non-fictional works include Arunachal Pradesh: The Mountain Land and Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal enumerates the vast and diverse cultural heritage of the land and how the symbols of mountains and rivers are primordial in their daily life. The Poetry collection River Poems unravels the natural rhythm of the community's long cultural past and how it is contaminated by the colonial and post-colonial power politics. Her lyrical poems such as "No Dreams", "Small Towns and the River", "Floating Island", "Remembrance", "I'm

Going Back to Old", "An Obscure Place", "Hello Mountain", and The Desire of Ink" illustrate her fascination with deep ecology and the 'floating identity' of native people by the dominant power structure. In her poetry, the hills and rivers are extensively used as metaphors of the innate, hidden, and intrinsic history of her land, and she attempts to reconstruct the glory and cultural legacy of the marginalized indigenous tribes by incorporating the myths, oral tradition, and folklore of the native people.

- **Panel organised by Shan Gao:** The Hudson River School and Chinese Landscape Painting: Comparative Studies between Emerson and Zhuang Zi

Panel Abstracts: In this panel, we will focus on four questions which are all related to cultural landscape. (1) In art, how are mountain and water aesthetically appreciated? (2) How does philosophy of Emerson and Zhuang Zi influence the expression of art which is represented respectively in Emerson and Zhuang Zi? (3) How does politics influence the landscape painting at the beginning of establishment of new China which plays an important role in shaping people's aesthetic appreciation of mountains and people's national identity? (4) Why do mountains become the center for Chinese art creation including architecture of Buddhism and Daoism, stone carving, Chinese movie and music?

- **Rui XIE:** Trans-corporeal Feminism, Submerged Perspectives, and Wastewater on Contemporary Chinese Screens

This essay delves into the potential trans-local dialogues of Chinese ecofeminist cinemas amidst the Wasteocene era, focusing on the avant-garde works of two directors from Shanghai and Hong Kong, Lou Ye's Suzhou River (2000) and Fruit Chan's Public Toilet (2003). Draw on Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality and Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, I tend to examine how these two films portray the states of immersion and transformation of the female bodies within polluted waterways in the Chinese neoliberal post-socialist contexts. On the one hand, I contend that Lou employs the doppelgänger image of the mermaid and the dirty, abandoned Suzhou River in globalized Shanghai to underscore the hidden environmental degradation and disorientation of memories. In particular, the plastic mermaid doll alludes to the consumption remnants of post-socialist Chinese cities by symbolizing the material entanglement between humans, marine life, and trash. Fruit Chan's Public Toilet, on the other hand, uses toilet waterways to link diseased bodies across Beijing, Korea, India and New York, revealing the global entanglements among diverse water bodies. Viewing excrement as a potent socio-environmental metaphor, the film portrays the "ocean girl" who consumes fish excrement, as a symbol of the eerie transnational fluidity and pollution. Furthermore, in contrast to Guillermo's The Shape of Water (2017) and Stephen Chow's The Mermaid (2016), these two films use a reflective DV cinematography style to craft the imaginations of the subtle human-aquatic

interactions, emphasizing the transformative potential of post-human embodiment in the Asian contexts.

- **Muhammad Ali and Jawad Khan Niyazi:** Water, Women and the Subcontinent's Partition in Jyotirmoyee Devi's "The River Churning"

This research argues that water emerged as an important storyteller during the riots of 1947's partition, the stories being particularly based on how the subcontinent has always come to see its women; as savours of honour and as epitomes of purity. Taking Jyotirmoyee Devi's novel The River Churning as its primary text, the article contends that be it the small water reservoirs of the subcontinent such as wells and ponds, or be it its longest river, Ganges, all are important receptacles

of the region's culture and history, and have essential knowledge to impart regarding the ill-grounded values pertaining to the female gender, who at times had to jump into wells to save their families' honour amidst partition riots, and at times had to take baths in the Ganges to prove their chastity. The research takes hydro-criticism as its theoretical lens, with Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Allison Nowak's Shelton's shared idea of water as a carrier of knowledge aiding in establishing the primary text as an authentic read on the subcontinent's water as an informer. The conclusion extracted from this research is that Devi is but a rebellious author, who by making one of her characters jump into a pond and by keeping the other from taking a bath in the Ganges, shuns the idea that India's water is holy or life-giving, and subtly argues instead that all of the subcontinent's water-bodies only added to the pain of female partition victims.

Key Terms: Water, Partition, Ganges, Submerged Knowledge

- **Amrita DasGupta:** Water in the life of Amphibious Women of the Indian Ocean Deltas

The sex workers of Mongla reside on the banks of the Passur River. Their occupational land is being gnawed at by the river forcing them to conduct sex trade on the remaining land or on the boats. The women of Mongla brothel are in a continuous conflict with the Bangladesh Government to safeguard their legal "right to livelihood" since 2010 which should get them secured rehabilitation. However, such struggles have yielded no outcomes yet. Their uncelebrated and unarchived lives, I realized would undergo trauma if pushed for direct interviews as part of oral history collection. Hence, I resorted to arts-based research: In a six-month long workshop, each week I provided them with words that resonated with their lives; such as water, friendships, soil, fish, men. Depending on what kind of emotions these words invoked in them, the sex workers painted for a week and came back to the next weekly workshop with their drawings and described them. The descriptions provided an unique widow into their lives around water that no interviews could ever archive. The art works produced remain as an archive of their

undocumented and soon to be forgotten lives. The artistic project provided the sex workers the space to control their narrative and speak about it without trauma. Going against the methodological theories of archives being patriarchal and from the past, the art pieces allowed them to be the matriarch of their present-day archive that they shall keep for the future to see. In this paper, I would like to talk about the experiential methods of history writing and archive creation through arts-based research.

- **Anandita Saraswat and Aratrika Das:** Agency of Rivers in Gond Art: Examining Multispecies Relationality in Finding My Way (2016)

Writings on adaptability in the Anthropocene era necessitate recognizing the agency of natural entities like rivers and emphasize the need to acknowledge human entanglement with non-human entities (Biro 2013; Cohen and Duckert 2015; Ghosh 2016; Rao 2023; Oppermann 2023). In this, critics have highlighted the importance of retrieving non-dualistic Asian religious beliefs (Smith 2016; Jalais 2022). Hindu festivals such as Ganga Dussehra and associated mythological beliefs of water deities reassess the anthropocentric understanding of natural resources like rivers, emphasizing reciprocal networks of interdependence between human and non-human entities (Cunha 2019; Strang 2023). This paper expands these arguments and focuses on Gond's indigenous religious understanding of rivers as reflected in their art in the graphic narrative Finding My Way (2016). Gond paintings and folklore become symbolic of their religious principles (Padhi and Goswami 2020). Gond folklores confound the abstract depiction of rivers highlighted in the disciplines of positivist science and geomorphology (Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt 2015). The mythological understanding of rivers has been channelized by Gond artists (Rajendar KumarShyam, Dilip Shyam, and Pradeep Marawe) to resist the extractive ideologies of hydro- infrastructure which critique the techno-managerial discourses of resource usage. The paper analyzes these religious Gond worldviews in Finding My Way as alternative knowledge systems to rethink the agency of rivers and emphasize the multispecies, and hydrosocial relations that become necessary for navigating the contemporary climate crisis.

- **Philippa Lovatt:** Sonic Materiality and Ambience in Som Supaparinya's Energy Generation Series

Thai video artist Som Supaparinya's 'energy generation series' investigates the politics, ethics and aesthetics of infrastructural development. The construction of hydroelectric dams in the Mekong region serve as a source for her multi-channel installations My Grandpa's Route Has Been Forever Blocked (2012), When Need Moves the Earth (2014), A Separation of Sand and Islands (2018) and Two Sides of the Moon (2021). Tracing connections with colonial and pre-colonial environmental histories of the Mekong through her own documentary footage, found archival materials, aerial photography, and field recordings, the series addresses how dams

impact upon local ways of life that are intimately connected to the environment and how the land and riverscapes affected have been dramatically and irrevocably altered by human activity. Energy infrastructures emit electromagnetic radiation that is sometimes perceived as an audible hum but is often below a human's range of hearing (Kahn, 2013). Attending to the limits of perception, Som investigates the sonic materialities and ambience of energy infrastructure through her collaborations with sound artists Arnont Nongyao and Koichi Shimizu. In reading this aesthetic practice as a form of critical soundmapping (Droumeva, 2017), this paper argues that a larger set of networked infrastructural and architectural relations can be drawn in her work between rivers, dams, roads, railways, and monuments featured in *Shooting Stars* (2010), *Roundabout at km 0* (2017), and *Collapsing Clouds Form Stars* (2021). These form part of a contested mediatic environment linking Thailand's military and Cold War histories to recent political and environmental activism through sound.

- **Sukanya Maity:** From the Waves to the Concrete: Bengali Cinema in the Age of Capitalocene

Rivers have been an integral part of the Bengali filmscape, owing to their significance in the geographical landscape of both West and East Bengal (Bangladesh) as well as of other predominantly Bengali-speaking zones like Assam and Tripura, which further impacted the mutual and diverse cultures of these regions. Rivers in Bengali films, mostly of yesteryear, have themselves been major characters, often shaping the course of the stories, and often as narrators of the regions' history, from independence to partition. Beyond the anthropocentric narratives, films like *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* (A River Named Titas), *Subarnarekha* and *Padma Nadir Majhi* (Boatmen of River Padma) presented the co-existing communities living by the rivers and the role the rivers played in the lives of those people, spearheading a discourse on the intertwined socio-economic relations between humans and the natural waterscapes. The contemporary filmscape of Bengali cinema has witnessed a gradual, yet steady decline in stories revolving around rivers as well as a diminishing presence of mostly working-class communities that are in an unmediated alliance with the rivers. With time, rivers have mostly turned into props or backdrops in popular Bengali films, with spectacular concrete infrastructural marvels built in their vicinity taking over the screen space. This paper critically looks at popular Bengali films in the post-independent period, in the cursory intervals of neo-liberalisation as well as in the age of speculative urbanism. It argues that films, as a predominant mass medium, have shifted their gaze to a capitalocentric representation, where both humans and natural elements have been relegated to neglected spaces while the spectacular manifestations of concrete structures gain prominence, and that they can serve as critical junctures to explore the changing aspirations of the film consumers and of the world that they are located in.