



SGNCS

Society for Global  
Nineteenth-Century Studies

**Empire, Climate, and Literature in the Long Nineteenth Century:  
Comparative Histories of China and ‘the West’  
Adeline Johns-Putra**

The links between empire and climate are increasingly well established. From accounts of comparative record-keeping across the British colonies to studies of the Austro-Hungarian empire as an incubation space for modern climatology, it is clear that empire facilitated a growing understanding of climate that we now associate with Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment scientific method. Literary scholars have concurred, showing how a modern conception of the dynamics of climate underpins the realism of the late nineteenth-century novel.

However, it may also be the case that the kind of climate knowledge thus maintained and legitimated was useful in shoring up European imperial authority in turn. To explore this alternative viewpoint, this workshop introduces a different model of empire. Imperial China boasts an unbroken tradition of record-keeping, including of climate, over three thousand years. In the Qing dynasty (1614-1912, meteorological data were drawn from all corners of China, such meticulous reporting allowing these Manchu emperors to exercise control over a Han population. Yet, such detailed record-keeping did not result in what the West would recognise as climate science; instead, traditional attitudes of ‘human-heaven induction’ (*tian-ren ganying*), according to which climatic events are an expression of heavenly pleasure or displeasure with imperial rule, continued to hold.

Is the absence of nineteenth-century climate science in China a symptom of what historian Joseph Needham famously described as China never experiencing an Enlightenment (because, as Mark Elvin elaborates, it didn’t need to)? Or does such a question commit a (cultural-imperialist) error by assuming that there is only one kind of climate knowledge? And, if the great realist novels of European literature tend to confirm the Western impulse toward climate modelling, what insights does Qing literature offer us? Drawing on work-in-progress, published studies to provide context, and contributions from participants, this workshop attempts some preliminary answers to these questions.

**Adeline Johns-Putra** is Professor of Literature at Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool University in Suzhou, China. She was President of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment UK and Ireland (ASLE UKI) from 2011 to 2015. She is the author of *Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel* (2019), *The History of the Epic* (2006), and *Heroes and Housewives: Women’s Epic Poetry and Domestic Ideology in the Romantic Age* (2001); her edited volumes include *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate* (with Kelly Sultzbach, 2022), *Climate and Literature* (2019), and *Cli-fi: A Companion* (with Axel Goodbody, 2018). She is currently working on a project on Chinese and ‘Western’ histories of climate and literature, and writing *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and Climate*.

**Please send a 250-word abstract of your work-in-progress together with your CV to [Adeline.JohnsPutra@xjtlu.edu.cn](mailto:Adeline.JohnsPutra@xjtlu.edu.cn) by 1 February 2023.**