

From the Chinese Streamside Garden to the British Botanists: *narrating China's biodiversity to the world*

Thanks Prof. Zhang Yaxin for inviting me to speak on this conference. My core research and teaching interest is in international communication. Today, I'd like to take a narrow angle and share some thoughts on how good stories about China can be told through its vast biodiversity.

Slide 2

The importance of stories about China's biodiversity in global information flows

What does Biodiversity mean? Biodiversity is **all the different kinds of life** you'll find in one area—the variety of animals, plants, fungi, and even microorganisms like bacteria that make up our natural world. Each of these species and organisms work together in ecosystems, like an intricate web, to maintain balance and support life.

In recent years, China has increased its biodiversity conservation efforts. There has been increasing coverage on animals and plants in the Chinese media. The recent story of some wandering elephants in Yunnan Province made headlines in the international media. The Chinese middle-class people are becoming more and more aware of the importance of healthy eating and that has effectively led to a wide discussion about agricultural biodiversity in Chinese society.

This October, China will host the COP 15 to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Kunming.

But how to tell stories about China's biodiversity to the world? In this particular presentation, I will focus on the long-term influence of Chinese plant species and its media representations on the UK.

Slide 3

The Chinese Streamside Garden at the UK's RHS Garden Bridgewater

I'd like to start with a recent Chinese garden project in the UK to illustrate how the world can celebrate China's *biodiversity*.

In May 2021, the UK's Royal Horticultural Society launched a new garden called RHS Garden Bridgewater which is located in Salford outside Manchester. This is a stunning new 156 acre **RHS** Garden in the heart of Northwest England. The site of this garden dates back to the reign of Queen Victoria in the mid-19th century. It then survived a fire and two World Wars before it was demolished in the 1940s. The launch of this new garden basically revived an English heritage woodland.

Covering just over seven acres, and a work in progress, a Chinese Streamside Garden has a central location at the Bridgewater. Its newly constructed stream meanders slowly from a upper lake to a lower water. Along the length of the watercourse are a series of smaller pools and weirs, while an intricate path weaves over five stylised wooden bridges.

This Chinese Streamside garden is a cross-cultural collaboration between the Royal Horticultural Society and the British Chinese community in Northwest England as well as the China Flower Association in China

CGTN clip from YouTube - 1.55 mins

Slides 4-5

Integrate a Chinese Garden within an English heritage context

Let me quickly talk about how a Chinese Garden was made to integrate within a British heritage context, in an English woodland.

The UK benefits hugely from the biodiversity of China. The number of species specific to China that have been important to UK gardeners is numerous. For every British native plant, there's about 20 versions in China. So the ratio in terms of biodiversity is huge. In terms of Rhododendrons 杜鹃花, magnolias 紫玉兰, *Cornus kousa* 山茱萸 (Chinese dogwood), there's a huge array of plants that UK gardeners often use.

However, British gardens and Chinese gardens are very different in terms of the materials, the structures and the nuances. Building a Chinese Garden in isolation is quite easy. But to integrate it within an English woodland and make it fuse, naturally and not jar in its context is quite a challenge. The garden managers at Bridgewater started working with some Chinese partners in the northwest. These Chinese partners were very keen to explore the cultural crossover, and also to create a genuinely classic Chinese Garden at Bridgewater.

Some garden managers even went to China a couple of years ago and visited various Chinese gardens. And they've looked at styles which are more naturalistic and rustic in terms of the use of their material. They visited many imperial-style, or Beijing-style gardens. Those gardens are very impressive and there are lots of purple and gold colours and them. But a Chinese imperial-style garden isn't going to work in a wood in the UK. After a few years of consideration, RHS ended up pursuing a Yangzhou-style streamside garden.

This Chinese streamside garden really reflects RHS's vision to celebrate and illustrate the huge contribution made to British horticulture by Chinese native plants.

In this streamside garden, you will a range of plants species specific to China. Here are some of their pictures on the slide.

Slides 6-9

RHS's latest Garden magazine features Frank Kingdon-Ward's 1909 adventure in China

The variety of Chinese plants is extensive and they are a rich cultural resource. So many good stories can be told about Chinese plants with deep human interests. For example, the RHS's latest Garden

magazine published a fascinating feature on the well-known British botanist Frank Kingdon-Ward and his 1909 adventure in China.

Kingdon-Ward first went to China as a English teacher. Somehow, he met an American zoologist Malcolm Anderson in Shanghai. He joined Anderson and had his first planting-collecting expedition.

The trip is a circular route. It started and ended in Shanghai. They crossed many mountains and plains of central China via the Yangtze River. They covered over 2,000 miles which is close to 4,000 km. The entire journey took a year.

They reached Kangding in a Xizang area in Sichuan on 21 June 1910. And they realised another British botanist, Ernest Wilson had already collected plants here 10 years earlier.

Kingdon-Ward's first new species was collected in Kangding. Other specimens he found included climber Jasminum and an evergreen shrub.

What is more interesting behind this expedition is the personality clash between Kingdon-Ward, an English gentleman and Anderson, an American adventurer. Basically, Anderson thought Kingdon-Ward was physically weak and too inexperienced in plant collecting. They fell out with each other on one occasion during the expedition. Kingdon-Ward decided to leave Anderson and go his own way. Then he got lost in a Xizang area and even attacked by some local bandits. In his books, Kingdon-Ward would not even mention Anderson in his account of this expedition. He portrayed his lost experience in Xizang as an unanticipated accident.

Slide 10

Narrating the history and presence of China's biodiversity beyond the media culture/market/system media market within China

The Chinese streamside garden and the story of Kingdon-Ward are perfect examples of the long-term influence of Chinese plants on the British society and the British people. These two examples demonstrate that China's biodiversity can be celebrated across national borders.

In the field of international communication studies, the state always remains the principal reference point, on the basis of which media systems, media markets and media cultures are theorised.

As two European media theorists Hepp & Couldry criticise, many current media theories have an implicit 'territorial essentialism'. That's to say, they tend to define media cultures within national borders. To help you understand this diagram, let me go back to the two examples I talked about. CGTN would always be perceived to be a China's national broadcaster sponsored by the Chinese authority propagating Chinese messages. On the other hand, the RHS Garden magazine is a British niche commercial media product serving those British people who are interested in gardening. If one only thought along 'territorial essentialism' lines, one would probably not think positively about whether there are any shared values between these two media systems.

Slide 11

Focus on cultural thickenings across territorial boundaries

However, in this age of global media capitalism or consumerism, we probably should abandon this type of container thinking.

Again, Hepp and Couldry (2009) propose that media cultures should be considered as territorialised and de-territorialised thickenings. The concept of cultural thickening, a bit complicated as it sounds, basically means cultural richness and interconnections.

Here is another diagram for you. If you situate messages on China's biodiversity in the context of global media capitalism, you will find there are some many shared interests across national and cultural boundaries. For example, You can find numerous videos on YouTube about Chinese gardens. Some are made by professional media organisations like CGTN and many more are made by amateurish YouTubers. Ordinary people who are interested in gardening wouldn't necessarily care about when those videos come from unless they had very strong ideological opinions.

Slide 12

Different levels of cultural thickenings related to China's biodiversity

I can extend the concept of cultural thickening and argue that China's biodiversity can be thought about at different levels in different countries and cultures.

On the ethnicity level, we are witnessing an increasing number of overseas Chinese diasporas. For example, the Chinese community in Northwest England played a very active role in the building of the Chinese Streamside Garden.

On the commercial level, there is a high number of Chinese food and botany enthusiasts everywhere. The fact that the RHS Garden magazine would publish a story related to China is proof of this.

On the human health level, there is a rise in the number of health communities, such as followers of Chinese civilisation, users of Chinese medicine, which define themselves in particular as not territorially bound.

To conclude, a good Chinese story should not only concern the Chinese people but should concern all the people in the world who enjoy the same nature and live on the same planet.