Environmental Crises and Cultures of Survival

(ANTH 2380 / UGEC 2950)
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
T2 2026

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Lecture meeting time/place: Tuesdays 12:30 - 2:15pm, Wo Ho Man Yuen Building 304
Tutorial meeting time/place: Tuesdays 2:30 - 3:15pm, Wo Ho Man Yuen Building 408
Office Hours Mondays and Wednesdays 10am-11am
Office Hours Sign-up Sheet:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1tfHyyi2TsXFrUE0q77Bj28XiXFpXefVy86M_6FiFSco/edit?usp=sharing

Course description:

"The environment" can have different meanings for different people. It can be a framework for understanding disrupted sets of socio-natural processes and relationships; a harsh and threatening force to be overcome; an unremarkable backdrop of everyday life; a destination for recreation and rejuvenation; or a mere abstract and distant concern.

To approach "the environment" and our planetary environmental crises anthropologically, in this class we will not only examine the ways that environments shape and are shaped by human activities, but also examine how concepts such as the environment, nature, and biodiversity have emerged historically, vary cross-culturally, and can be mobilized to serve certain interests over others. These two tasks are key goals for this course.

Another key consideration in this class is politics, praxis, and how to cultivate "cultures of survival" in the face of existential environmental crises. Today's progressive environmental anthropology, like the broader field of sociocultural anthropology, embraces taking political positions, and actively seeks to create knowledge that can translate into political practice. The class will thus also focus on various efforts to survive and to imagine and construct better environmental futures.

The course will feature a "post-nature nature writing" assignment, through which students will spend time at and dwell on different iconic environments of Hong Kong, ranging from shopping malls to hiking trails. Students will also participate in the #breakfreefromplastic global movement by saving one week's worth of their plastic waste and auditing the materials as a class. The culminating class project will be an object/substance "implosion," through which we collectively disentangle the environmental/social privileges and injustices tied to everyday things and the substances within.

Learning Outcomes:

As a result of this course, students will be able to:

- Analyze and evaluate abstract texts and conceptually rich films with respect to notions of nature, environment, justice, and more
- Understand and analyze scholarly literature and argument, particularly with respect to theoretical orientation and sources of support on topics related to the environment
- Formulate and communicate ideas, critiques, and arguments through written, verbal, and visual formats in the form of written assignments and in-class presentations
- Attain a new appreciation for and perspective on human embeddedness in the material world and the unevenness of environmental risks to humans

Attendance:

Please plan to attend all classes and be on time. Frequent or excessive absences and tardiness will be disruptive to others and will negatively affect participation grades. However, some absences for health, personal, and extracurricular reasons can occur. If 1 class meeting is missed, your instructor will work with you on ways to make up for participation points. For each unexcused absence beyond this 'freebie', you will lose 3% of your overall course grade. A similar policy applies to tardiness. You have 2 'freebies', after which you will lose 1% of your overall course grade for each additional instance you are late to class. Such deductions will come from your participation grade.

Reading:

Readings for this course include some journalistic non-fiction and activist reports along with scholarly texts. Some of the readings will be quite challenging. Please note that it is not necessary to understand everything that is written. Instead, you should try to understand main ideas and grapple with key concepts. All readings and reading response/questions assignments must be completed prior to the class for which they are assigned. All course readings will be available on the course website in pdf format.

Participation:

This course will be primarily discussion-based and class participation is essential. Class participation means attending classes, arriving on time, volunteering to speak when there is a chance, demonstrating preparedness by offering thoughtful comments/questions, and when possible making more rigorous, analytical, or imaginative points. It is imperative that everyone be respectful of other people's ideas and opinions. While we can and should debate issues and positions, we should not attack other people personally for the ideas they express in class.

Grading Scheme:

- Weekly reading/discussion questions, responses, and short essays: 30%
- (Post-nature) nature writing essay: 20%
- Object/substance implosion and final paper: 30%
- Letter to Future Self: 5%
- Attendance & Participation: 15%

Grading Scale

A	93+
A-	90-92.9
B+	87-89.9
B	83-86.9
B-	80-82.9
C+	77-79.9
C	73-76.9
C-	70-72.9
D+	67-69.9
D	63-66.9
D-	60-62.9
F	<60

Please note that:

- A, A- grades reflect achievement of exceptionally high merit
- B+, B, B- grades reflect achievement at a level superior to the basic level
- C+, C, C- grades reflect basic achievement
- D+, D, D- grades reflect achievement that falls short of satisfying expectations yet still warrants credit

Average Instructional Time required in this course: This course meets for 2.5 hours per week. In addition, students should expect to spend approximately 5 hours per week outside of class reading, writing, studying, and otherwise engaged in completing assignments for this class.

Weekly Schedule:

Jan 6 (Week 1) Introducing the class

Jan 13 (Week 2) Waste Politics in Hong Kong, Asia, and the World

Read:

- Nele Fabian and Loretta leng Tak Lou: "The struggle for sustainable waste management in Hong Kong: 1950s-2010s" *Worldwide Waste: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 2(1), 1-12.
- Adam Liebman: "Waste politics in Asia and global repercussions" *Education About Asia* 26(1), 35-40.
- End Hong Kong's shameful role in illegal plastic waste trade (op-ed, 2021)

Watch in class: If you don't know, now you know - Asian nations reject western trash

Jan 20 (Week 3) Global Political Economy

Read:
- Jason Hickel: *Less is More: How Degrowth will Save the World* (2020) Intro and Ch.1 (80 pages)

Jan 27 (Week 4) (Post-Nature) Nature Writing

Read:
- Aldo Leopold: *Sand County Almanac* selection
- Xi Xi's Marvels of a Floating City (CUHK library also has English version in a book)

Nature writing notes due

Feb 3 (Week 5) Thinking like a Mountain/Mall

Read:
- Steven Vogel: *Thinking Like a Mall: Environmental Philosophy After the End of Nature* (2015) p.129-144
- Stefan Al: *Mall City: Hong Kong's Dreamworlds of Consumption* selection

Recommended additional reading:
- Charmaine Kong: "Cleaning up after capitalism": recentring blue-collar work in the spatial semiotics of waste (fieldwork in HK luxury malls) (2025) *Social Semiotics*

Post-nature nature writing notes due

Feb 10 (Week 6) Hong Kong's Ecologies of Comparison

Read:
- Tim Choy: "Passions" and "Endangerment" from *Ecologies of Comparison* (p.19-50)

Watch in class: Flowing Stories (2014) 1hr 37min

Recommended additional reading:

- Winnie L.M. Yee: “Coming of Age in Post-Urban Hong Kong: An Ecocritical Approach to Land-Writing and Land-Filming”
- Jesse Rodenbiker: “Shark fin city: transitional marine wildlife economies in global Hong Kong” *Urban Geography* 46(1).

Post-nature nature writing essay due

–Lunar New Year–

Feb 24 (Week 7) The (contemporary Chinese) art of unnoticing

Read:

- Lou, Loretta leng Tak: “The art of unnoticing: risk perception and contrived ignorance in China” *American Ethnologist* (2022).

Watch in class: The Story of Plastic (96 min)

–Reading Week–

March 10 (Week 8)

Read:

- “Human crap” by Gabrielle Hecht (here)
- “Plastic-production emissions could triple to one-fifth of Earth’s carbon budget” (here)
- The plastic chemicals hiding in your food (here)
- MacBride, Samantha (2012). *Recycling Reconsidered*, Intro, p.1-15

March 17 (Week 9)

Read:

- Hidden Hazards: The Chemical Footprint of a Plastic Bottle (report), p.1-44
- Elmore, Bartow J. 2014. *Citizen Coke: The Making of Coca-Cola Capitalism*, Prologue and Intro
- “The Brutality of Sugar: Debt, Child Marriage and Hysterectomies” (here)

Conduct plastic waste brand audit in class

March 24 (Week 10)

Read:

- Dumit, Joseph. 2021. “Substance as method: Bromine, for example,” in *Reactivating Elements*, Duke UP, 84-107. (focus on p.84-90 and p.96-103)

March 31 (Week 11)

Read:

- Tsing et al's Field guide to the patchy Anthropocene (2024) selections

Week 12 - Ching Ming Festival (no class meeting)

Implosion project draft due

April 14 (Week 13)

Individual meetings with the professor

Implosion project final due

Appendix A: Participation

What does it mean to participate in class?

An important component of this class is discussion. There are different kinds of contributions you can make to discussion, all of which you are expected to work on over the course of the semester. None of these are possible without coming to class each session having read the assigned readings:

1. Attentively listening to discussion participants to build on what has already been said
2. Asking participants to clarify unclear contributions
3. Summarizing key ideas that have emerged during the discussion
4. Articulating an answer to a posed question
5. Raising questions that help advance discussion
6. Offering an original idea related to the topic of discussion
7. Drawing on evidence (social scientific data, personal experience, popular culture) to either support or challenge ideas
8. Constructively critiquing an idea offered in the readings or by a participant
9. Pointing out how various comments complement each other or are at odds
10. Playing "devil's advocate."

Religious Holy Days

DePauw accommodates students who are adherents of a religious tradition and wish to fulfill obligations of that religious tradition on holy days. Students are expected to notify their instructors of their intent to fulfill the obligations of their religious tradition well in advance of these days. For the sake of this policy, "holy days" are defined as periods of time in which either: activities required by normal class participation

are prohibited by a religious tradition, or a special worship obligation is required by a religious tradition. For this class I ask that you notify me by e-mail at least 14 days in advance of the date in question.

ADA Statement

It is the policy and practice of DePauw University to provide reasonable accommodations for students with properly documented disabilities. Written notification from Student Accessibility Services is required. If you are eligible to receive an accommodation and would like to request it for this course, please contact Student Accessibility Services. Allow one-week advance notice to ensure enough time for reasonable accommodations to be made. Otherwise, it is not guaranteed that the accommodation can be provided on a timely basis. Accommodations are not retroactive. Students who have questions about Student Accessibility Services or who have, or think they may have, a disability (psychiatric, attentional, learning, vision, hearing, physical, medical, etc.) are invited to contact Student Accessibility Services for a confidential discussion in Union Building Suite 200 or by phone at 658-6267.

Student Title IX policy

DePauw University affirms its commitment to fairness and equity in all aspects of the educational experience. Harassment and discrimination based on gender or sexuality—including sexual harassment, sexual assault, intimate-partner violence, stalking, gender-based violence, and voyeurism—prevent students from accessing an equal education and violate university policy as well as the law. Find full information at https://www.depauw.edu/studentacademiclife/campus-safety/sexualrespect/. If you or someone you know experience behavior that is coercive, discriminatory, harassing, or sexually violent, you are encouraged to contact Dionne Jackson, DePauw's Title IX Coordinator by phone at (765) 658-4155 or by email at titleixcoordinator@depauw.edu.

Academic Integrity Policy

You develop best intellectually when you clearly recognize how your own ideas build on and are supported by others. [Academic discipline goals] occurs only when ideas, experiments, and results are shared among the [academic discipline] community. This process depends on absolute honesty and trust among [academics]. We should be modeling such integrity whenever we are engaged in [academic] pursuits. As such, I take academic integrity very seriously and fully expect each of you to do the same.

In particular, you must uphold the academic integrity policy found in the Academic Handbook which means you must refrain from all forms of dishonest academic behavior (e.g., cheating, unauthorized collaboration, plagiarism, double-submissions). Lapses of academic integrity will be dealt with according to the policies set forth in the handbook. If you are not sure what constitutes dishonest academic activities as it applies to this course, please ask me.

While there are many times when I will encourage collaboration to facilitate learning, there are other times when I will clearly indicate that students are required to work alone to complete an assignment. There are times when it is entirely appropriate to utilize external sources, in that case sources should be properly cited and you should take care not to plagiarize from outside sources, electronic or print. For other course activities your learning may best be demonstrated without the use of external sources, my instructions will be clear whether outside sources are appropriate.