

Friday Seminar



Department of Anthropology
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
香港中文大學人類學系

Fall
2025

Microbiome research and anthropology between the West and the East

This lecture presents a multi-sited ethnography, with a focus on its China component. The overall project, *HealthXCross* (funded by the European Research Council, 2021–2026), analyzes and compares how scientists in different parts of the world study microbes as entities that connect humans to their environments. It takes into account variations in technologies, methods, approaches, and socio-political contexts.

Microbiome science is popularizing a symbiotic understanding of health and ecology: between 50% and 90% of the cells in the human body are microbial. The microbiome influences metabolism, weight, immunity, allergies, mood, and personality. It is shaped by factors like diet, birth, antibiotics, and social interactions — just as it, in turn, shapes us. Health emerges from this human-microbial ecosystem, challenging an anthropocentric view. The microbiome reveals how humans, microbes, and environments are deeply interconnected in the processes of life.

While microbiome science has revealed how microbes entangle human and environmental health, what remains unclear is how this process may give rise to new cultural concepts and practices of health. To explore this question, the project examines several case studies from regions such as Europe, the United States, Africa, and the Pacific. Since 2023, these cases have been complemented by a dedicated focus on China and Greater China, made possible by FARE funding (Italian Ministry of Research) through the project *Microbiome Technoscience in Shanghai and Hong Kong in Pandemic Times: An Anthropological Study*. This lecture will discuss preliminary findings from the HealthXCross/FARE project.

Prof. Roberta RAFFAETA' is an associate professor of Socio-cultural Anthropology at the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, and Deputy Director of NICHE (The New Institute: The Centre for Environmental Humanities), where she coordinates the research cluster 'Technoscience, Health and Justice in an Interdependent Planet'. Since obtaining a PhD at the University of Lausanne, she has worked at various universities in Italy and abroad (US, Australia, Switzerland). Her research has been funded by the European Commission, The Italian Ministry of Research, Fulbright, Wenner Gren and others.

Oct 24

1:00 - 2:30PM

NAH 114

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