



Chair of History of Education and Education Policy Analysis

Public guest lecture

Monday, January 19, 2026 - 10:00 – 11:45

University of Zurich, Main Building, Rämistrasse 71, 8006 Zürich

[KOL-G-204](#)

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China's "Ecological Civilization" as Alternative Ethico-Onto-Episteme to Radicalize Global Sustainable Development?: Flashpoints and New Imaginaries

Global education for sustainable development remains largely implicated within a capitalist coloniality through fixation with economy and human manipulation of natural resources. To implode this trap calls for an alternative ethico-onto-epistemic perspective, i.e., "a cultural approach" (Rappleley et al., 2024), to radicalize the prevailing yet impotent cognitive, behavioral, and technological pedagogies of modern paradigm. "Ecological civilization" (shengtai wenming), China's high-profile discourse constructed and construed as a "successful" integration of its ecological heritage (tianrenheyi) and Marxist eco-socialist momentum, claims the potential to challenge and replace, rather than mimic, global capitalism's vision of sustainable development (Gare, 2021).

Drawing upon Foucauldian thinking on discourse-episteme interpolation, this talk problematizes the epistemic (in)validity as well as conditions of (im)possibility of the above-claimed past/East-present/West integration and cultural alternative in two aspects. First, it compares UN's Global Sustainable Goals framework and China's Civilization Ecology discourses for ethico-onto-epistemic overlapping and differences. Second, it examines how Chinese ecological heritage of tianrenheyi is re-invoked, mobilized, and reassembled with Marxist ecological insights into "ecological civilization", explicating possible epistemological flashpoints and exclusions. In so doing, it scrutinizes the extent to which China's ecological civilization, or rather, tianrenheyi, can be re-imagined as an alternative ethico-onto-episteme to overcome the central limit of capitalism, i.e., chronic tension between economic development and environmental sustainability (Vltchek & Cobb, 2018). Using China as a case study, this talk hopes to shed new light on re-invoking indigenous wisdom to decolonize the trap/trope of modernity-coloniality.

Students, colleagues, and other interested individuals are cordially invited to attend this event. We look forward to welcoming you!

Weili Zhao obtained her PhD from UW-Madison and is interested in problematizing China's current educational discourses as the (dis)assemblage of tradition and modernity, East and West. Her publications include a monograph, *China's Education, Curriculum Knowledge and Cultural Inscriptions: Dancing with The Wind* (2019, Routledge), and two edited books, *Euro-Asian Encounters on 21st-Century Competency-Based Curriculum Reforms* (2021, Springer, with Daniel Trohler) and *Epistemic Colonialism and the Transfer of Curriculum Knowledge across Borders* (2022, Routledge, with Thomas Popkewitz and Tero Autio). She is also on an international editorial team for doing a Routledge book series on Postqualitative, New Materialist and Critical Posthumanist Research (<https://postqualitativeresearch.com/>).