



Sinofon

**SPEAKING PLANTS IN THE  
LANGUAGES OF GLOBAL AND  
CHINESE CAPITALISM**  
(ONLINE WORKSHOP)

**BOOK OF ABSTRACTS**

**2021**



Palacký University  
Olomouc

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LANGUAGES OF GLOBAL AND  
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**March 25, 2021  
Palacký University in Olomouc**

**Sinophone Borderlands – Interaction  
at the Edges**

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Excellent research

Website: <http://sinofon.cz/>  
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This Workshop proposes to examine how humans and plants – as non-humans are engaged together in Inner Asia, in medical and economic life of the Russia-China borderlands, in particular.

**Organizers:**

*Mongolia & Inner Asia Studies Unit* (MIASU, University of Cambridge) and “*Sinophone Borderlands: Interaction at the Edges*” Project (Palacký University, Olomouc, the Czech Republic)

# PROGRAMME

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**10:00** Sayana Namsaraeva (*University of Cambridge*) & Natalya Ryzhova (*Palacký University, Olomouc, Czech Republic*) – **Introduction**

**Panel 1 – Plants and seeds in Imperial and Colonial Encounters**  
Chair: Hedwig Waters (*University of Leiden, the Netherlands*)

- 10:15** **Stephanie Ziehaus** (*Palacký University in Olomouc*)  
Soybeans in transfer. Russian imperial expansion and the transfer of knowledge and seeds between Austria, Manchuria and the Amur region
- 10:45** **Natalia Ryzhova** (*Palacký University in Olomouc*)  
Cultural, Wild and Federal Soybeans on the Amur: Legacy Effect
- 11:15** **Olaf Guenter** (*University of Leipzig, Institute of Anthropology*)  
Alfalfa – entangled stories from the Aral Sea
- 11:45** **Tobias Holzlehner** (*Martin-Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Germany*)  
Wild Rhizome: Zhen'shen' (panax ginseng), forest landscapes and foraging at the margins of Chinese capitalism
- 12:15** **Victoria Namzhilova & Irina Van, Subad Dashieva** (*Baikal Institute for Nature Management & Institute for Mongolian, Buddhist and Tibetan Studies & Ulan-Ude*)  
Indigenous plants of the Russian Transbaikalia: Enhancing biopharmaceutical power of China
- 12:45** **Sayana Namsaraeva** (*MIASU, University of Cambridge*)  
Siberian tea for Vladimir Putin and moral economies of the China-Russia Borderlands

**13:15** **Lunch Break**

**Panel 2 – Speaking Plants**  
Chair: Sayana Namsaraeva

- 14:30** **Caroline Humphrey** (*MIASU, University of Cambridge*)  
Bad cannabis, good cannabis: Contradictions of a plant's social life in Buryatia
- 15:00** **Tatiana Chudakova** (*Department of Anthropology, Tufts University, USA*)  
Artemesian Dreams: Cultivating Weeds in Russian Pharmacology

- 15:30** **Olga Belichenko & Victoria Kolosova** (*Ca' Foscari University of Venice*)  
Tradition without Roots: History and modern use of the Russian Ivan-chai (*Epilobium Angustifolium*)
- 16:00** **Daniel Dedovsky** (*Palacký University in Olomouc*)  
Contemporary commercial utilization of the traditional medicaments in the area of Southern Siberia (Republic of Altai) and its ecological impacts
- 16:30** **Tatiana Safonova** (*Central European University, Austria*)  
Bringing Protected Plants Home to Protect Them: Populist Environmentalism in a Hungarian Village
- 17:00** ***Discussion and Concluding remarks***

**Tradition without Roots:  
The history and the modern use of Russian Ivan-chai  
(*Epilobium Angustifolium*)**

Belichenko, Olga (*Ca' Foscari University of Venice / National Museum of Natural History (MNHN), Paris*) & Victoria Kolosova (*Ca' Foscari University of Venice / Institute for Linguistic Research of Russian Academy of Sciences, Saint Petersburg*)

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The first food use of rosebay willow herb (*E. angustifolium*) on the territory of the Russian Empire was mentioned by Stepan Krasheninnikov in the 18th century: the inner pith of its stalks was consumed by the Tungus people. However, the modern use of this plant in widely available infusions marketed as 'traditional' and 'authentic' Ivan-chai is most likely dates back to adulteration of Kyakhta Chinese tea in Russia. Throughout the 19th century it was sold locally as well as transported to the West. The leaves of the plant were burnt and mixed with clay in order to resemble the highly valued Chinese drink. After the ban on the use of *E.angustifolium* in tea mixtures, it transformed in a cheap tea surrogate, the only drink available to the poorest tea consumers. In our presentation we will describe the radical transformation of the image of Ivan-chai in Russia in recent years, as well as the geography and the role of Chinese technologies its production.

**Artemesian Dreams:  
Cultivating Weeds in Russian Pharmacology**  
*Chudakova, Tatiana (Department of Anthropology,  
Tufts University, USA)*

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This paper examines *Artemisia* (wormwood) and its histories of use, both within the realm of medicine and outside of it, focusing on its deployment and early cultivation experiments in Soviet pharmacology. While wormwood's most typical associations in the public eye recall the cultural mythos of absinthe, some species of *Artemisia* have been valued, in Traditional Chinese Medicine and Tibetan Medicine, as an important component in a variety of pharmaceutical formulae, and, relatively recently, as an essential source of Artemisinin for the prevention and treatment of malaria. This paper focuses on a different history of the plant's polyphonic efficacies by tracing efforts to domesticate and cultivate it as an industrial resource in the Soviet Union, where it was reimagined as a potential precursor to camphor, needed for both medicine and early celluloid production. By following agricultural and pharmacological experiments with transforming *Artemisia* into a cultivar, I argue that the different, often competing, imaginaries of plants' utilities, both pharmaceutical and industrial, are predicated on processes of scale-making that materialize the state's infrastructural relationships as much as they reflect shifting ideas about what constitutes a plant's "active ingredients."

## **Contemporary commercial utilization of the traditional medicaments in the area of Southern Siberia (Republic of Altai) and its ecological impacts**

Dedovsky, Daniel (*Palacký University in Olomouc, Czech Republic*)

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My research consists of collecting of samples of traditional medicaments from local healers, pharmacy shops and street markets. Interviews with local healers and vendors, but also with farmers were held to detect recent changes in gaining sources, but also transformations of ways of preparation of the medicaments and its traditional medication. Surveying of the booming farming and growing of up to now wild animals and plants for medical reasons has shown an increasing tendency in the Post-Soviet period.

The goal of my research is to perform an analysis of commercially produced drugs based in local tradition in our Laboratory in Olomouc to identify its components and to verify the declared presence of ingredients. Evaluation of the real healing power of these drugs should follow and also detecting the amount of the threatened or even endangered species used in the commercial sphere of traditional medicine.

A survey of the nature of export of these articles to China has been made to detect the level of ecological threat of the Chinese interest in Siberian healing. To this phenomenon is directly connected a development of animal husbandry and arable farming of healing plants; it could serve as a possible solution of the ecological problem, but it also introduces new problems and dangers.

## **Alfalfa – Entangled stories from the Aral Sea**

Guenter, Olaf (*Institute of Anthropology, University of Leipzig, Germany*)

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The following story has been passed down from the Aral Sea region: Around 1905 or 1906, the fodder plant alfalfa was introduced from Russia in the Amudarya Delta, for which the region around Čimbaj offered ideal conditions. Initially, the extraction of alfalfa seeds only covered the needs of the local population, but soon more and more surpluses were produced.

Lucerne or *alfalfa* (*Medicago sativa*) is an erect-growing, herbaceous and perennial plant of the legume family (*Fabaceae*, *Leguminosae*). It is cultivated worldwide on a large scale as a fodder crop for animals. It is estimated that it was cultivated by humans thousands of years ago, probably in the arid regions of Central Asia, where it still occurs wild today. Because of its good fodder value, it was quickly spread by humans to other countries, and was already known to the ancient Persians and Egyptians. Like most species of legumes, alfalfa lives in symbiosis with root nodule bacteria. With the help of these microorganisms, the alfalfa roots can bind the nitrogen that is so important for plants not only from the soil but also from the air, which gives it the advantage that it can also thrive in nutrient-poor soils.

With increasing demand, the need for industrialisation of lucerne processing arose around 1910–1912. Thus, a few farms were set up in Čimbaj, each employing around ten workers. When the season arrived, a large number of transport boats (*qajyq*) were moored on the banks of the Kegejli Canal. The goods were brought by water to Xoğejli and from there shipped by river to the Aral Sea. It was then transported by the Trans-Siberian Railway to Europe or Vladivostok, from where the alfalfa was also exported to the USA.

**Wild Rhizome:  
Zhen'shen' (*panax ginseng*), forest landscapes and  
foraging at the margins of Chinese capitalism**

Holzlehner, Tobias (*Martin-Luther University  
Halle-Wittenberg, Germany*)

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Among the three mainly commercially used ginseng types – Korean ginseng (*P. ginseng*), Chinese ginseng (*P. notoginseng*), and American ginseng (*P. quinquefolius*) – the wild variety of zhen'shen' (*panax ginseng*) from Russia's Primore region is considered to be of the highest quality and potency. The wild plant – native to northeastern China, Korea, and the Russian Far East – with its unique habitat requirements, is a rare and difficult to collect, yet highly prized commodity. Culturally driven demand for wild ginseng in China has produced far-ranging trading and foraging economies that connect the remote forest and mountain landscapes through local collectors/hunters and Chinese traders with the affluent consumers in China. Notions of wild/wilderness are thereby constituent to the root's commodified value (specifically in relation to farmed ginseng): Sourced in the 'wild' market of native foraging and cross-border smuggling and at the same time rooted in the 'wild' potency ascribed to this specific variety of ginseng in the context of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

The paper follows the complex and rhizomic meshwork of plant, ecology, cosmology, pharmacology, trade, and consumption from the shaded forest groves of the remote Sikhote-Alin mountain range to the medicinal stores and "ginseng boutiques" in China (and eventually the bloodstreams of patients). True to its rhizomic character, the valuable root and its intricate relationship with humans (re-) appears in different times and locations. Wild ginseng landscapes, remote forests marked by frictions of distance and terrain, have through time been places at the edge of markets, from the organized extraction in the Primore region during the 19th century to contemporary foragers of the Appalachian Mountains in the 21st century, each supplying a lucrative Chinese and increasingly global market. Tracing these configurations reveals not only an intricate cross-border foraging and trading network, but furthermore allows insights into the symbolic and historic dimensions of an exquisite commodity at the edge of Empire, where the co-evolution of a human-plant interaction is mediated (medicated?) by chemical compounds and notions of wildness. People make plants, plants make people; the socio-economic life of the anthropomorphic ginseng rhizome attests to that.

**Bad cannabis, good cannabis:  
Contradictions of a plant's social life in Buryatia**  
Humphrey, Caroline (*MIASU, University of Cambridge*)

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Great perspectives for the Buryat Republic were anticipated with the announcement by Russian Prime-Minister Mishustin in February 2020 that cannabis (*konoplya*) production is to be legalised. Previously cultivation was only permitted for medicinal purposes, but now huge federal-level investments could be expected for commercial production of useful biodegradable objects in a region with plenty of land and a suitable climate. Such joyful announcements omitted to mention that southern Buryatia was already covered with thousands of hectares of wild cannabis that was widely used to make illegal narcotics, and that the local authorities had been battling for years to eliminate the plants. But the wild cannabis resists annihilation. And it has its own out-of-sight economy. This paper will explore the contradictory capitalisms in which cannabis is meshed in a region where people are desperate for income.

## **Siberian tea for Vladimir Putin and moral economies of the Russia-China Borderlands**

Namsaraeva, Sayana (*MIASU, University of Cambridge*)

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When Russian president Vladimir Putin has recently declared that he is drinking tea made only with wild herbs collected in Siberia, public attention became much preoccupied with magical formulas of the herbal assemblage – various leaves, mushrooms, roots, berries, and flower heads of Siberian wild plants – that empowers a body of the sovereign with strength, energy and protect him from the Covid infectious viruses. By taking a close look to a 'social life' of one of these ingredients, namely *Sapozhnikovia divaricate* (also known as *fangfeng-shu* 防风属 – a medical herb widely used in Asian traditional medicine), I will follow all transformations of this botanical from the local to the global, and the ways how it became a highly demanded immune-related raw material in Chinese and international pharmacology industry. Paraphrasing "Why plants are also good to think with?", I will use the *fangfeng* as an example to demonstrate growing economic and environmental disparities between China and Russia borderlands, and moral dilemmas that local population in Eastern Siberia faces, when the home landscape became treated as a resource deposit of a neighboring country.

## Cultural, Wild and Federal Soybeans on the Amur: Legacy Effect

Ryzhova, Natalia (*Palacký University in Olomouc, Czech Republic*)

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According to official history and historiography, in the 1930s, the Amur Experimental Station bred several first soybean varieties (*Amurskaya yellow* – 41, 42) resulted in this crop industrial production in the USSR. Breeders used two species: *Amur yellow population* and feral *gracilis* (in another version – wild *Amur bean*, *amursky bobik*). The *Amur yellow population* is a so-called old-place (or peasant) variety resulting from complex ethnic, economic, political, and ecological processes in the Qing and the Russian Empires peripheries. The *gracilis* is a species found and described by botanist Skvortsov in 1927 in the Amur River basin. Skvortsov believed that he discovered a new wild variety, but another botanist Hymowitz (1970) debunk it. Hymowitz claimed that the intensive soybean cultivation centuries ago contributed to the emergence of *gracilis*, a soybean not wild but wild-growing or feral. Curiously, Hymowitz attributes the intensity of soybean cultivation only to the Han Chinese, although other ethnic groups – like the Manchus or the Daur – were engaged in farming in the Amur River basin long before the arrival of the Han Chinese. It is hardly possible to answer who left the cultural soybeans transformed into feral ones, and accordingly, nobody can answer who and how bred the *Amur yellow population*.

In my report, I aim to discuss the “legacy effect,” to refer to enduring influences on nature which shape species, ecosystems, and economic landscapes even when influences seem to have stopped. Feral *gracilis* story reveals that although the official history of cultural plants in the USSR usually starts with colonizers’ advent in the region, it is not easy to hide prior influences. The soybean industry in the USSR owes its emergence not only to the Soviet breeders but also to many generations, who disappeared but left feral plants behind.

## **Indigenous plants of the Russian Transbaikalia: Enhancing biopharmaceutical power of China**

Namzhilova, Victoria (*Department of the Regional Economic Research, Siberian Branch Russian Academy of Sciences, Ulan-Ude*) Irina Van & Subad Dashieva (*Institute for Mongolian, Buddhist and Tibetan Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Ulan-Ude*)

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Our presentation examines the phenomenon of predatory collection of roots of a wild plant *Sapozhnikovia* (*Saposhnikovia divaricate*) on the territory of Transbaikalia and the Republic of Buryatia in Russia. The illegal collection of the roots began quite suddenly few years expanding over new territories year by year and enlarging number of people involved. A key factor in the large-scale harvesting of the *Saposhnikovia* was the rising supply demand of medicinal raw materials for Chinese pharmaceutical industry and traditional Chinese medicine. Though the plant is listed in the Red List of Threatened Plants of the TransBaikal region, it is still illegally exported abroad. According to our findings, the roots are illegally transported using three routes: through the nearest border crossing points with China in Zabaikalsk/Manzhouli, through the seaport of Vladivostok, and also through Kazakhstan.

The scale of collection causes a wide public resonance because of the damaging environmental effects and soil erosion. On the other hand, collection of *Saposhnikovia* became often the main source of income for local people, who used to live from the nature.

We link the recent spread of *Saposhnikovia* collection fever over Siberia with situation in Mongolia, where the authorities has tightened environmental legislation thus making *Saposhnikovia* collection almost impossible. The *Saposhnikovia* roots have analgesic, antipyretic effect, and are valued for its diaphoretic and expectorant medical effects. According to the latest data, the roots of the plant are one of the main components of the drugs used to combat COVID-19 in China. There is a high interest in introduction of *Saposhnikovia* into domestic medicine and of its cultivation. Considering government strategies for the development of preventive medicine, the cultivation of this medicinal herbs has good prospects.

## **Bringing Protected Plants Home to Protect Them: Populist Environmentalism in a Hungarian Village**

Safonova, Tatiana (*Central European University, Austria*)

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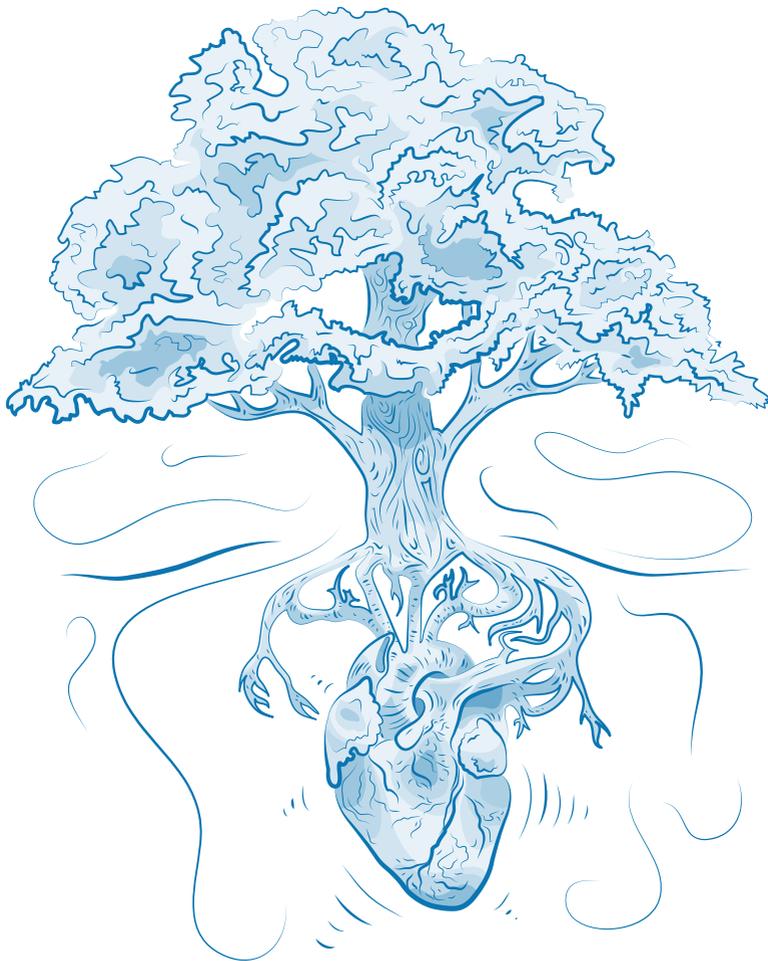
In this paper I am going to share some reflections based on ethnographic field-work conducted in a Hungarian village between 2014 and 2020, during the rule of a populist regime. I will show how transformations of a welfare system as well as the development of populist propaganda in various spheres have created specific standpoints and lifestyles for villagers. In the case of attempts to protect rare species by bringing them home and growing them in the garden, I will show how the logic of a populist state is reiterated by citizens and how environmental thinking becomes a form of simultaneous acceptance and resistance to this state.

## **Soybeans in transfer. Russian imperial expansion and the transfer of knowledge and seeds between Austria, Manchuria and the Amur region**

Ziehaus, Stephanie (*Palacky University in Olomouc, Czech Republic / University of Vienna, Austria*)

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Promotion of agriculture is a universally used tool of colonization, shared among all settler colonial societies expanding into steppes and grasslands. The cultivation of "wastelands" goes hand in hand with the settlement of Russian peasants and the expansion of the Russian Empire. The Amur region presents a unique case study as this process of settlement and colonization was accompanied by the transfer of knowledge in soybean cultivation from Northern Manchuria to Russian agriculturalists, but also by the transfer of cultured soybean seeds from the World Exhibition in Vienna 1873 to the Russian Empire experimental soy fields in Podolie (Ukraine) and the Amur region. This movement of seeds demonstrates the transfer of knowledge in imperial expansion, showcasing how the Empire expanded not only territorially, but also via scientific knowledge. The material transfer of seeds is accompanied by the cultural transfer of knowledge and practices connected to the cultivation of soybean and takes part in the overall process of the Russian Empire-Building.



## **Sinophone Borderlands – Interaction at the Edges**

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