

“Plant Some Plants, Plant Some Hope, Plant Some Future”. Urban Gardening at Lingnan University of Hong Kong: An Interview with Prof. Kin-Chi Lau

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► Einzenberger, R., & Hochmuth, M. (2015). “Plant some plants, plant some hope, plant some future”. Urban gardening at Lingnan University of Hong Kong: An interview with Prof. Kin-Chi Lau. *ASEAS – Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 8(1), 95-102.

Prof. Kin-Chi Lau is currently Associate Professor at the Department of Cultural Studies, Lingnan University, Hong Kong.¹ Her areas of interest cover cultural studies, contemporary China studies, and comparative literature as well as critical pedagogy and gender studies. She promotes the idea of a *transition campus* at Lingnan University and is one of the initiators of the organic Urban Gardening Project² there. She is also a founding member of the Global University for Sustainability.³ Rainer Einzenberger conducted this interview with Prof. Kin-Chi-Lau on the topic of urban gardening in Hong Kong via Skype in March 2015. Michaela Hochmuth was in charge of the editing. The interview portrays the Urban Gardening Project, its history, structures, and organizational characteristics. It engages with the participants of the project and their challenges and difficulties in realizing it. The broader and complex concepts of food sovereignty, food security, and ‘commons’ build the contextual background of this dialogue.

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Prof. Kin-Chi Lau ist derzeit außerordentliche Professorin am Institut für Kulturwissenschaften an der Universität von Lingnan, Hong Kong. Ihre Interessensgebiete umfassen Kulturwissenschaften, zeitgenössische China-Studien, vergleichende Literaturwissenschaften sowie kritische Erziehungswissenschaften und Gender Studies. Sie treibt die Ideen des *transition campus* an der Universität von Lingnan voran und ist diesbezüglich eine der Projektinitiatorinnen des Stadtgartens für biologischen Anbau. Darüber hinaus ist sie Gründungsmitglied der Global University for Sustainability. Rainer Einzenberger führte dieses Interview mit Prof. Kin-Chi Lau zur Thematik des städtischen Gartenbaus in Hong Kong via Skype im März 2015. Michaela Hochmuth war für die Editierung verantwortlich. Urbane Landwirtschaft erfreut sich in Südostasien angesichts wachsender Besorgnis über Klimawandel und fortschreitende Urbanisierung sowie im Kontext einer Wiederaufwertung bio-ökologischer Anbauformen als „gutes“ Essen einer wachsenden Popularität. Das Interview zeichnet das Stadtgarten-Projekt, dessen Geschichte, Strukturen und organisatorische Merkmale nach. Es beschäftigt sich mit den Akteuren und Akteurinnen sowie deren Herausforderungen und Schwierigkeiten im Zuge der Umsetzung des Projekts. Die umfassenden und vielschichtigen Konzepte von Ernährungssouveränität, Ernährungssicherheit und *commons* stellen den kontextuellen Rahmen des Dialogs dar.

1 For Prof. Kin-Chi Lau university profile, see: www.ln.edu.hk/cultural/staff/lau-kin-chi.

2 The title of this interview “Plant Some Plants, Plant Some Hope, Plant Some Future” (Lingnan Gardeners, 2014, p.1) originates from the first newsletter of the Urban Gardening Project at Lingnan University.

3 For more information, see the Global University for Sustainability’s website: our-global-u.org.

RAINER EINZENBERGER: You initiated an organic Urban Gardening Project at Lingnan University in Hong Kong in 2014. What was the intention of the project and how did the idea for this project come into being?

KIN-CHI LAU: We started this project in September 2014 but prior, we had been very much concerned with questions of food security, food safety, and food sovereignty. These issues have been our main concern ever since we convened two forums on questions of sustainability. In December 2011, we held one main conference called the South-South Forum on Sustainability⁴ at Lingnan University in Hong Kong and in December 2012, we had the second forum in Chongqing at the Southwest University. To these two forums we invited over 200 scholars and activists from over 30 countries across different continents, including Cuba, Brazil, Mexico, Peru, Bolivia from South America; South Africa, Mozambique, Mali, Senegal, Egypt from Africa; Thailand, India, Nepal, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Korea, and Japan from Asia; as well as countries from Europe and North America. So the concern about food sovereignty and sustainability has already been there for many years.

As for the project at the university, the main idea is that it would be a pedagogic project by which students could gain more understanding not only about plants and gardening, but also about issues of global warming and climate change. Lingnan is a small liberal arts university. We have about 2,700 undergraduates, 3,000 associate degree students, and maybe 2,000 postgraduate students. Previously, I sent students to do their internships at different farms in Hong Kong or even in Beijing. But this only benefited a few students. So, we thought, putting the garden in the campus itself would arouse more curiosity and interest, and with that we can promote certain issues.

In September 2014, we made an application to the president of Lingnan University to give us some sites on campus and he was quite interested in the idea. He himself liked planting and came from a rural background in mainland China. He endorsed our plan. The main locations for the garden plots are between several main academic buildings, which means most people pass through the sites every day. At these central sites, we started to make planting boxes, find soil, get seeds, and then find people who wished to get involved.

Today, the people involved come from two different groups: One group are students who are taking some of my courses, which have to do with questions of sustainability, farming, or understanding global issues. So as part of their assignment, the students are doing some farming at the garden during the semester. Another group is called 'the Lingnan Gardeners' which includes staff, students, alumni, friends, or family members. This group is open for anyone who is interested – even people from the neighborhood can come and be part of the project – and we encourage everybody to participate according to their time and energy available. Sometimes, we also have specific groups to whom we give the produce, for example the cleaning staff, or the security guards. The idea is that although we organize this project and take care of the seedlings and plants, the produce belongs to anyone who cares to come to the campus on the harvest days to have their shares.

4 For the South-South Forum on Sustainability, see: www.southsouthforum.org.

Apart from the farming and harvesting in the garden, we also organize seminars to talk about food safety and other issues. One question we try to tackle is the question of 'commons'. For instance, we tailor-made some 20 planting boxes with wooden frames for the gardens in the campus. When people joined the Lingnan Gardeners group, some people came and asked, "Which box is mine?" They had the idea that if they took care of a box, it would be theirs and so they would be entitled to the produce. We encountered this question many times when we were asked what we would do with the harvest. We have been trying a lot to emphasize that we would want the people to see the campus as a common space, for which we are only caretakers. Concerning the garden, we only need to manage the water and the soil, since the plants grow by themselves. We announce the harvest day at the beginning of the month in our newsletter. On harvest day, whoever comes by will be able to enjoy a part of the harvest. But the idea of commons is already very alien to many people who are so used to private property, privatization, and the monetized economy.

We also tell students that the campus is a common space – not only for students and staff, but also for the cats living at Lingnan University campus. When we started the planting, one main discussion we had was how we could coexist with these cats, since they would mess up the gardens a little bit. We eventually designed some 'playground' for the cats with soil in certain boxes, and the cats got the message and did not mess with our plants in the garden plots.

Another issue we had was that the campus management team used to spray pesticides to kill mosquitos and other insects. When we started this project, we wanted to bring back butterflies and bees because we saw so few of them on the campus, yet they are so important to nature. But we were told by the management team that if there were any report of bees they would have to kill them since people were used to some 'urban' idea of what was an appropriate environment for humans, and they would see bees with their stings as dangerous. So bees needed to be eliminated. After we started the organic farming, we negotiated with the management team to refrain from spraying pesticides in the garden areas and now we have bees and butterflies in our areas, but not in others. This may appear to be trivial issues, but we bring up these issues to our students, some of whom may never have thought about them before. We explain for example why certain chemical pesticides are killing all microorganisms in the soil and that normally there are millions of microorganisms in a handful of healthy soil. In particular, we raise the issue of organic farming and the problems of modern farming.

EINZENBERGER: How come the cultural studies program initiated such a project, and not e.g. agricultural sciences or life sciences?

LAU: Cultural studies at Lingnan University is quite a unique program because we are an interdisciplinary program and we have faculty members who are quite actively involved in social movements and local and global initiatives. That is also why it seemed quite natural that it would be the cultural studies program running this gardening project.

In our undergraduate studies, for example, we cover the question of ecological justice in the curriculum. We discuss the linkages between ecological and socio-economic

justice. As students normally learn only with their heads but not their hands and their hearts, we ask our students to sweat and labor in the garden. Through growing local organic products, we also encourage students to see how over 90 percent of the food we consume in Hong Kong is imported – some of it travelling very long distances from the USA or Europe to come to our dining table. In our master's program we have been running new courses which are concerned with the food crisis, the future of farming, food sovereignty, and food movements. Further, we have courses on global issues and global cultures where we also take up questions of sustainability. We draw on experiences from the people's science movement in India or the Aymaran indigenous movement in Peru, where we see the different initiatives on water, soil, and food. Such issues have been taken up in our courses.

That is why, I think, this subject is not only a matter of life sciences. At the cultural studies program, we try to understand the kind of crisis we are facing in today's world and we also try to look for alternatives. But if we discuss alternatives that are too grand or too remote from daily life, then the impact on the students is going to be limited. That is why we also have this kind of farming project on the campus itself – so that it offers some kind of experiential learning, watching the plants grow and linking that to different issues. For example, we saw how the *heat island effect*⁵ on our campus caused the plants to grow very well in the winter because of all the glass and concrete walls surrounding the gardening plots. We asked our students to do some research and they found that the heat island effect in Hong Kong was serious and that the temperature rose by 3 degrees Celsius for every kilometer from the edge of the city moving towards the city center, and that the average rise of temperature in Hong Kong in the last century was three times the rise of the average world temperature. These are some examples of how we try to link local experience with broader perspectives and global concerns.

EINZENBERGER: You refer to your campus also as transition campus, how is this linked to the transition movement⁶ which tries to find small-scale local responses to the global challenges of climate change and ecological limitations?

LAU: In the summer of 2014, we went to the UK to see some of the *transition towns*, for example Totnes⁷ and Bristol⁸. Introducing the idea of the transition town and transition campus is a first step to have people critically reflect upon the whole question of urbanization. The idea of the mainstream is that being modernized means you are urbanized. Whether it is Hong Kong, or mainland China, or other countries, people take pride when the proportion of peasants is altogether very small, and if the urban population is high, it is taken as something positive. In 2011, China already had over 50 percent of the population being urban. But we know that cities are basically parasitical, since they do not produce food and there are a whole series of problems

5 The (*urban*) *heat island effect* is the phenomenon of the average urban air temperature being higher than that of the nearby rural environment. This effect varies in time and place as a result of geographical, meteorological, and urban characteristics. See also Kleerekoper, van Esch, & Baldiri Salcedo, 2011.

6 For the transition movement, see: www.transitionnetwork.org.

7 For Transition Town Totnes, see: www.transitiontowntotnes.org.

8 For Transition Town Bristol, see: transitionbristol.org.

related to urbanization. Therefore, on the one hand, the idea of the transition campus is to look for alternatives to global warming and the unsustainable ways of life in the urban environment. On the other hand, it is to try to reverse and change some of the values that favor and also privilege urbanization. One agenda for us is to try to see how people can value farming and the peasants because they produce food and because they have been the most exploited sector of the population for a whole century. It is in this context that we try to promote the idea of the transition campus. The transition campus is one way in which we also try to pose the questions addressed by the rural reconstruction movement in China. For about 15 years I have been working with some professors, students, and social movements in mainland China to encourage young people to go back to the countryside, stay there for six months or one year, so that they can learn about the problems of the countryside and through their experience there, reflect on their ideas about urbanization and modernization.

EINZENBERGER: Where did the knowledge for the gardening project come from, did you have some advisors or experts?

LAU: Yes, we have one graduate from our master's program who is the director of the Little Donkey Farm⁹ in Beijing. He is an agricultural expert and has done organic farming in China for 12 years now. As our key expert he teaches students, helps to plan the farming, and takes care of some of the problems. We are all learning together with him. I myself started to learn organic farming back in 1994, when I started some poverty alleviation projects in the rural mountain areas of mainland China. At that time I thought that I needed to know more about farming and agriculture before I could start interacting with the local villagers. I have been trying to learn from this and it has been a great pleasure for me to do farming.

EINZENBERGER: How are the participants actively involved in the gardening experience working physically with the plants and soil?

LAU: Students had to do some hard labor during the clearing and the construction of the garden and some students told us that they had never sweated so much within two hours. Others made their first experiences in constructing a path. One main impact is that they realized the amount of labor, care, and time involved in growing a plant. Certain perceptions, usually taken for granted, for example that rice is just easily available at the supermarket or that there is abundant supply at the wet market, might change. We will also be growing some paddy rice on the campus so that students not only know how rice grows, but that they also learn that food is precious. Many students told me that one reflection they have since their involvement in the project, is the kind of importance they now attach to food, and how they now feel that the prices for food which takes so long to grow are inappropriately low.

9 The Little Donkey Farm is the first Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm in Beijing. For more information see: www.littledonkeyfarm.com.

EINZENBERGER: You also have special harvest days for women in your urban garden projects. What gender aspects do you see in this context?

LAU: That particular harvest day was the international women's day on March 8th but in fact among the Lingnan Gardeners, three quarters are women. We have some men but they are a minority. Of course there are certain gender aspects to the questions of farming and food but this is not a main focus of our work, maybe because most of the initiators and participants are women, and most of us are feminists. So we put in a lot of value to reciprocity and to contributions which cannot be calculated by monetized exchange. These are some of the feminist values and approaches which we have taken up.

EINZENBERGER: How important is healthy (organic) food for Hong Kong people, and is it affordable?

LAU: This question is related to a much more complex context about value change, cultural change, and social change. Organic food from abroad is available in certain supermarkets in Hong Kong for the upper and middle classes, and organic vegetables are even imported from mainland China to Hong Kong. Now in Hong Kong you have big corporations in the organic food market. But since the price for organic food is 50 to 100 percent higher than for conventional food, for the general population – the lower and lower middle classes – it is hard to afford. But if you would stop going to restaurants and cook at home, you probably can afford all the organic food for your meal. But then there is also the question of time and energy that you have to spend on going to the market and on cooking. That is also some constraint in Hong Kong because so many people work overtime. I think the 'cook your own meal' movement that has been going on in different parts of the world needs to be promoted in Hong Kong. But that will also require changes in work time patterns and in the intensity of work.

EINZENBERGER: China experienced several food scandals in the last years (with baby formula, rotten meat, etc.). How was this taken up in the Hong Kong media and has this influenced the idea for the project?

LAU: The Hong Kong media of course has been reporting a lot about food scandals because this is a question that people are concerned with. The food scandals come not only from mainland China but also from Taiwan, which previously was supposed to be very safe, and then it was found that contaminated and recycled oil was used or that they were using color and flavoring ingredients. So there have been food scandals from mainland China, from Taiwan, and occasionally from Hong Kong itself. I think the awareness for safe food is quite high in Hong Kong. There are quite a lot of mechanisms introduced by the government for quality control. For instance, if there is bird flu somewhere in mainland China, no live poultry, chicken, or duck would be imported to Hong Kong. Sometimes I feel that the phobia about food safety is excessive. There is need for more education about food that seems to be hygienically produced and safe, such as junk food from big food chains, but of course some of us

know that it is not healthy. There is still a lot that we need to do in terms of people's understanding about what kind of food is healthy.

Another aspect on which we would like to focus is the idea of local production for local consumption. It is both a question of food sovereignty, and the need to reduce the distance that food travels from around the world to the dinner tables in Hong Kong. That of course has direct consequences for the CO₂ emissions, climate change, and global warming. Hong Kong is very vulnerable in terms of its dependence on food imports from the USA, Brazil, and mainland China.¹⁰ This question is relevant not only in terms of food safety and food sovereignty, but also in terms of the ecological footprint.

EINZENBERGER: What resonance does your project have in Hong Kong and maybe beyond?

LAU: Many people have been interested in our project and we got reported on in some mass media. After we started this project, some universities in Shanghai and Chongqing also got interested in promoting the idea of the transition campus. They contacted us and wanted to see how they could grow organic food on the campus as an educational project for all students. Many universities in Southeast Asia, South Asia, or China have sites where they do organic agriculture, but mostly by the agricultural departments. For us, we want to stress not only growing organic food but also a whole series of issues. So we have been discussing this with other colleagues from Shanghai and Beijing, and there is some interest in building certain networks so we can interact with and learn from each other.

EINZENBERGER: Do you also have networks with Southeast Asia?

LAU: Yes, for example in Thailand, we visited Chiang Mai University two months ago and also know many colleagues at Chulalongkorn University. They have been sending students for internships to the countryside and to villages. Apart from academia, we also have contacts with several rural reconstruction movements in Southeast Asia and South Asia – in the Philippines, Thailand, India, and Nepal. With them, we have been working on networks to see how we can share our resources to run short term courses or particular programs for young people.

EINZENBERGER: In Vienna, since recently, there are many urban agriculture and gardening initiatives. Would you say that urban gardening in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia is becoming popular or is it rather a marginal issue within a small group of academics or activists?

LAU: Of course, in a way it is still marginal but I also find that urban gardening has gone beyond a small group of activists or academics. In some neighborhoods, for instance in some primary and secondary schools, we can also see the promotion of urban gardening. These initiatives also come up as a kind of response to the problems

¹⁰ According to the statistics of the Office of the United States Trade Representative, in 2013, Hong Kong was the 6th largest export market for agricultural goods. Mainland China was the largest (United States Trade Representative, 2014, p. 1).

of food insecurity, global warming, etc. Somehow we can try to promote this more as an alternative to the crises and problems that we face today.

EINZENBERGER: Do you see any evolving research topics in this context?

LAU: I think one question is about food movements. How there can be autonomous food movements of people who grow their own food, in their local neighborhoods, and take up urban farming or subsidize and support rural regeneration movements, and also how these would be related to lifestyle changes. I think Michael Pollan¹¹ said in his promotion of the food movement, that as long as people cook their own meals they won't have all the problems of obesity and heart disease which come along with the consumption of junk food.

But these issues need to be taken up by the general public and not only by activist groups, advocacy groups, or academics who discuss them in the classrooms. People need to make efforts to make some changes, however trivial they may appear to be.



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¹¹ Michal Pollan is a US-American author, journalist, and activist with a focus on the entanglements of nature and culture. For more information see: www.michaelpollan.com.