Note from the Editor

This issue of *East Asian Science, Technology and Medicine* includes a “Focus” entitled “Swarms, herds and peoples: examinations of interspecies dynamics in China,” which is jointly edited by David Bello and Michele Thompson. As the title suggests, this Focus draws our attention to the shift in perspective brought about by environmental history, compared to the more traditional approaches of history of science. Here human knowledge of and interaction with animals are understood as part of a historically variable system that encompasses both the human realm and its environment, a system in which the various components interact and shape each other dynamically. In particular, the light shed by environmental historians on topics that have long been studied under the name of ‘agriculture’ confirms the fact that the knowledge and practice that we study are not constructed by human actors within ‘cultures’ that are independent from and impact on ‘nature.’ Instead they are indeed part of the complex ways in which culture and nature shape each other, so that no such knowledge or practice can be regarded as either ‘mere human constructs’ or ‘purely objective.’ In this respect environmental history and history of science have much to share with one another.

Mark E. Frank’s contribution discusses the earliest large-scale engagement of the Chinese state with yak pastoralism, which formed part of the consolidation of its control over Tibet. This took place in the 1930s, when Han Chinese livestock scientists established the Taining Experimental Zone in the Kham region of Tibet, where they carried out attempts at industrialising yak husbandry. In 1943, following the alleged trespassing of yaks belonging to them on pastures belonging to local ranchers, a dispute arose between the two groups. This dispute, Frank argues, is revealing of the extent to which Han scientists had adopted the Tibetan technology for yak ranching, including a form of transhumance that had previously led to the characterisation of Tibetan yak ranchers as nomads—nomadism being construed as a backward way of life compared to the sedentary life associated with Han agriculture.

David Bello’s article on “the Qing locust” focuses on a locust eradication operation that took place in 1761 in a zone that was partly in the Shanxi province, partly in Mongolian territory. It involved close cooperation between Mongol Bannermen and Han Chinese administrators. Arguing that agrarian practices in the Qing empire resulted in the development of a specific ‘Qing locust,’ Bellow shows that swarms could be occasions for reinforcing Mongol-Han ties within that empire. In this case, including insects into a historical narrative provides a counter-example to the

overwhelming representation of inter-ethnic links in terms of conflict, and shows that, in this case, the environment fostered inter-ethnic cooperation.

Both these contributions highlight the role of the environment, and in particular of animals, in reinforcing links among different human groups who became neighbours as a side effect of the construction of a multi-ethnic state, both under the Qing dynasty and the Republican period.

This issue also includes a study by Margaret Wee Siang Ng of the use of pain in medical knowledge and practice relating to childbirth, as it can be understood through medical texts from the third century CE on, and, from the twelfth century on, through specialist treatises—authored by male practitioners. She shows that for centuries the pain experienced by parturient women at various stages of birth was regarded as useful guidance to recognise these stages, and argues that during the last centuries of the imperial period there was a gradual change towards regarding non-pathological childbirth pain as merely an inconvenience rather than as a sign that deserved attention from the birth attendant.

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