

Be Kin With the Plant Inhabitant: From Plant Humanities Initiative to Plant South Salesroom

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ABSTRACT

Emerging from the discourse of environmental humanities, plant humanities debuted at Dumbarton Oaks in 2018 as an interdisciplinary field. As living species, plants possess both biological and cultural attributes, holding unparalleled socio-cultural significance. This article recollects the author's journey of encountering plant humanities in the 2020 Plant Humanities Summer Program, and co-initiating an action group in China, Plant South Salesroom, to promote the burgeoning plant-matters idea among wider audience. Plant South Salesroom raised the phrase "Zhiwu Shimin" (植物世民, Plant Inhabitant) to get rid of the ingrained plant blindness and open potential dialogues between scientific and humanities studies. It makes the modified research framework of plant humanities more accessible. Rooted in the plant humanities studies, Plant South Salesroom has conducted diverse public-engaged practices at local cultural space, combined with culture-oriented creation and spread. The activities of Plant Walk, Plant Life Interview, Local Plant Post, and Plant Tabloid facilitate the participants start to appreciate plants in the original form and be kin with them. Reciprocally, the feedback received during the practices and the insights captured under the perspective of plants also enriched the existing plant humanities studies.

KEYWORDS

Plant Humanities;
Plant-Matters;
Plant South Salesroom;
Plant Inhabitant;
Local Practice

HIGHLIGHTS

- Calls for observing and sensing everyday plants, relieving plant blindness, and being kin with plants
- Introduces the origin of plant humanities and summarizes localized plant humanities practices in Chinese cultural context
- Proposes "Zhiwu Shimin" (植物世民, Plant Inhabitant) to embed China's local experience in Western-developed plant humanities research framework

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1 Plant Humanities Initiative at Dumbarton Oaks

Plant humanities is an emerging field in environmental humanities, as a part of "the Greening of the Humanities" movement from the

1990s. The idea of plant humanities debuted in September 2018 when Dumbarton Oaks, a research institute affiliated with Harvard University, launched the Plant Humanities Initiative ("the Initiative" hereafter) for "highlight[ing] the enduring significance of plants to

human cultures”^[1]. The Initiative emphasizes the methodologies and perspectives of humanities, recognizes plants as living beings rather than passive objects, to help reassess plant–human relationships and “address pressing human and environmental challenges in the Anthropocene.”^[1] Meanwhile, the Initiative also facilitated the Plant Humanities Lab in conjunction with JSTOR Labs, which is an open-access innovative digital platform supporting humanities scholars to study plant narratives, aiming to make plant humanities more accessible to a wider audience through digital writings on socio-cultural histories of plants.^[2]

The author participated in the academic journey of the 2020 Plant Humanities Summer Program. During the first three weeks, the morning seminars discussed associated interdisciplinary ideas about plant humanities, such as environmental humanities, critical plant studies, nature writings, and science and technology studies. While the afternoon courses generally introduced digital humanities and the developed digital tools for textual, visual, and spatial narratives of the Plant Humanities Lab. For the latter three weeks, the author grouped with other two participants to craft a plant narrative of *Pelargonium* spp. This project focuses on the less-known story of *Pelargonium* spp., ranging from “its unique morphology and nomenclature to its far-reaching impact in the fields of industry, technology, agriculture, culture, and society.”^[3]

With the inspiring plant-matters research framework, this program made the participants aware of their rooted plant blindness that plants are often overlooked by humans both visually and perceptually^[4]. It allowed the participants to notice those consistently marginalized plants, and appreciate them as the original forms other than the aesthetic appearances and symbolic meanings of plants. It should be plants, instead of human, to unpack the complex plant–human entanglement, which has existed throughout history and in everyday life.

2 Co-initiating the Plant South Salesroom

Shifting from being plant blindness to a plant humanities enthusiast, the author has begun to explore this burgeoning research framework in Chinese cultural context since 2021, to promote the idea of appreciating everyday plants and their social-culture histories to the public. However, the consensus and approaches shared by existing plant humanities studies are hard to explain how plants interact with their surroundings and are limited to decipher plant–human narratives. Moreover, plant humanities and the closely related Botany are both imported concepts from the Western world.

To break the cultural and language barrier for Chinese public audience to better understand the idea and the essence of plant humanities, the author co-initiated an action group, Plant South Salesroom, in mid-2022, focusing on local cultural practices concerning plants, environments, and local cultures.

Besides overthrowing anthropocentric cognition theoretically, simple physical practices—such as appreciating the seasonal changes of a tree rather than seeing it as a non-living background—could also challenge the long-lasting plant blindness. Compared with precisely translating the academic term “plant humanities” in Chinese for triggering a plant-matters discussion, identifying a more acceptable phrase concerning the broader audience became the primary task for the Plant South Salesroom and its following local practices.

3 Proposing the “Zhiwu Shimin” (Plant Inhabitant)

Plant South Salesroom draws on Bencao (本草), the traditional Chinese study of medicinal plants, to embrace plant humanities into Chinese context. It has strong connections with the nomenclature of flora in ancient China, especially before the 12th century, within the realm of natural history.^[5] Accordingly, the phrase “Zhiwu Shimin” (植物世民, Plant Inhabitant) was raised to situate Bencao and its embedded traditional knowledge into the existing Western-developed research framework, gradually localizing plant humanities studies within the particular cultural context and contemporary academia. “Zhiwu” (植物) means plants, while “Shimin” (世民)—a created Chinese phrase—shares the same pronunciation with “citizen” in Chinese. This wordplay highlights treating humans and plants as equal “citizens,” and contributes to the awareness of appreciating plants in details and taking care of them as family members, instead of having a quick glimpse. Moreover, “Shi” (世), which means “world” (世界) in Chinese, further extends the scope of the phrase beyond “cities,” such as suburban and countryside. “Shi” is also one of the common Chinese translations of “-ence” in “Anthropocene,” which can help remind people of the significance of this dynamic actor in current era facing the unprecedented climate challenges.

In terms of the English expression of “Zhiwu Shimin,” the word “inhabitant” is chosen to question the rationality of binary plant classification (native–invasive). Since “inhabitant” means “a person or an animal that lives in or occupies a place” in *Oxford Languages*, “Plant Inhabitant” was raised to put plants to the equal position of humans and animals, and to challenge the anthropocentric culture cast on plants. For instance, the modern classification rules tend

to simply categorize a plant species as native or invasive. However, landscape historians Gert Gröning and Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn once pointed out “[plants] grew in certain locations, became extinct or grew again somewhat modified in new locations. [...] plants are not as static as some would have it. [...] As elsewhere so with plants ‘*panta rhei*’”^[6]. It demonstrates that the actual situation is more ambiguous than the native–invasive division and the species identification can be a complex judgment. This phrase, “Plant Inhabitants,” thus serves as the trigger to successively unpack every overlooked plant story and to open the potential dialogues between scientific and humanities studies.

4 Public Practice Rooted in Plant Humanities Studies

Based on the existing research framework of plant humanities studies and the locally modified concept of “Plant Inhabitant,” Plant South Salesroom has conducted various online/offline public practices and related research and culture-oriented creation, to call a public concern for plants and strengthen plant-human connections.

4.1 Plant Walk

To reveal the obscured yet pivotal role of plants, Plant Walk invites people to a half-day *flânerie*^① to explore the urban environment by observing and sensing “Plant Inhabitants.” Compared with theoretical discussions and reflection, observing and sensing a plant can better encourage people to recognize

the plant like a person, and notice its complicated natural and cultural growing situation. Also, on-site experience would be more straightforward to promote a reflection on the urban-nature binary. For instance, the first *flânerie*, which took place in the Wukang area of Shanghai, engaged three constructed landscapes under different degrees of maintenance—a pruned hedge and grassland, a community garden, and an idle courtyard—thus demonstrated different nature–culture relationships to the *flâneur*^② directly (Fig. 1). Especially, when a *flâneur* had no humanistic practice experience before, this plant-humanities-driven approach would hopefully create an “aha” moment to relieve one from his/her rooted plant blindness.

Since November 2021, the Plant South Salesroom has led seven Plant Walks in Shanghai, Ningbo, Linhai (Taizhou), and Shenzhen in China. It gave a vivid account of stories about plant humanities studies, and engaged people who were interested in to interactive

1. Three constructed landscapes, as distinctive demonstrations of different degrees of urban-nature maintenance, engaged in the first *flânerie* in the Wukang area of Shanghai, China.
2. Discussion about the natural and cultural attributes of urban street trees which are inspired by the landscape historian Sonja Dümpelmann’s book *Seeing Trees*.
3. An interactive task during the Plant Walk: proposing an ideal dwelling for the adopted “Plant Inhabitant” within the community.
4. The special interactive workshop during the Plant Walk in Ningbo, China to map the Sun Yat-sen Park through the “eye” of plants, contrasting most contemporary landscape masterplans that only recognize plants with legend.



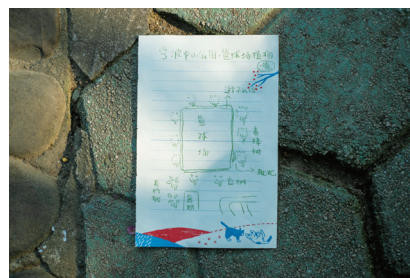
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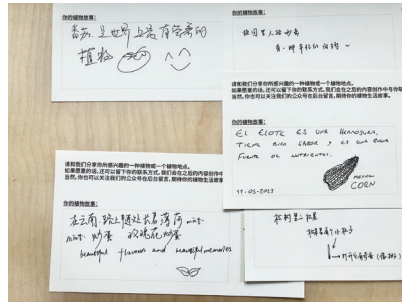
4-2 © Duomozhe

- ① The French word “*flânerie*” refers to the activity of wandering around the city and observing the surroundings.
- ② “*Flâneur*” refers to people who participate the *flânerie*.



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5. The first Local Plant Post at the “Down to Earth” exhibition organized by BottleDream in Shanghai during the World Earth Day in 2023
6. Postcards with shared plant stories collected during the “Down to Earth” exhibition



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workshops for joining a more accessible approach towards plant humanities studies (Figs. 2 ~ 4). These on-site explorations and plant-human interactions enriched the discussion of how plants signify the interactions between humans and the urban ecosystem. It is more crucial for each participant to see and perceive the once overlooked plants when returning to their living communities where the Plant Inhabitants accompany their everyday life.

4.2 Plant Life Interview

The Plant Life Interview proposed in March 2023 draws more attention to the daily interaction between humans and plants, and collects the participants’ interesting stories with plants to share on social media once a week. The game “Jigu Chuanhua” (击鼓传花, hot potato) is applied to engage more participants in telling their experience of observing, caring for, or working with a plant in their daily life, one by one. As the participants have different backgrounds and life experiences, it forms an interdisciplinary description of plants, which promotes the plant humanities research framework more adaptive to the Chinese context. For instance, a participant once mentioned that the *Oxalis corniculata*, which is commonly called “Sanye Cao” (three-leaf grass) in Chinese, is also nicknamed “Xiansuan Ji” (salty and sour chicken) at his hometown. Likewise, another species is named “Eryue Hong” (blossom in the second lunar month). Both examples highlight the pivotal influence of Chinese language and local knowledge on the naming of plants.

4.3 Local Plant Post and Plant Tabloid

Based on the positive feedback of Plant Walk and Plant Life Interview, the Local Plant Post was then initiated to establish temporary stops at local cultural space to collect, distribute, and circulate local plant stories (Figs. 5, 6). At each pop-up stop, we invite visitors to write down plant stories on a designed postcard and deliver it into the postbox to be included as “exhibits” of the subsequent online or offline exhibitions.

The naming of “local plant” also responds to the questioning of binary cognition of plants as native or invasive species, like that of “Plant Inhabitant.” Plants can migrate actively, but are mostly passively traveled around the world with us. As the environmental historian Alfred W. Crosby termed “ecological imperialism” to describe how Neo-Europes colonized and conquered the land and its ecological system^[7], it seems ironic to sociologically distinguish the origin of plants in the shadow of “blood and soil” ideology^[6]. Rather than discerning a species as native or invasive (somewhat negative) following modern scientific classification, “local plant” tends to eliminate the anthropocentric meaning of plants, advocating for focusing on plants themselves and further caring for them accordingly.

In addition to everyday plant stories, Plant South Salesroom also appreciates the effect of plants on human civilization, especially those unrecorded historic changes driven by plants. Meanwhile, these flowing urban nodes developed by the Local Plant Post can be ideal mediums for the circulation and exchange of burgeoning humanistic ideas.

Together with the subsequent Local Plant Post settings, the Plant Tabloid came into being as a zine series (Figs. 7 ~ 9). Titled *A Nomadic History of Pineapple*, the first Plant Tabloid is based on the author’s previous studies on the cultural landscape of pineapples around the world. It examined the historical materials and cultural interpretations of pineapple in the context of East Asia. This issue articulates how this tiny exotic species, once became a symbol of nobility and artistry, has influenced the society and reshaped human culture. It is the “colonization” of pineapples.

5 Epilogue: Plant Matters

As a nascent action group, Plant South Salesroom continuously explores the boundary of local cultural practices concerning “Plant Inhabitant” and plant humanities studies. Inspired by humanistic insights from the modified research framework, the group emphasizes that observing and sensing each plant



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7. The Local Plant Post at Cigu Space, a local exhibition and activity space for culture and art in Xiamen, Fujian
8. The first issue of Plant Tabloid at Cigu Space
9. The Local Plant Post and the first issue of Plant Tabloid at Jiezi Shuwu, a bookstore in Quanzhou, Fujian

presented in daily life could relieve the rooted plant blindness, thus strengthening our perception of everyday surroundings. Reciprocally, the broader feedback received during each public practice and the multifaceted insights captured under the perspective of plants could also enrich the existing plant humanities studies.

Concluding with what curator Giovanni Aloï once wrote: “language has haunted plants for so long that we find it difficult to think of them as anything other than symbols”^[8], both the idea of the Initiative and the practices of Plant South Salesroom reveal that plant matters, and emphasize on being kin with the “Plant Inhabitant” to faithfully respect who they are!

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与植物世民为伴： 从植物人文倡议到植南门市部

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摘要

植物人文研究起源于环境人文领域。得益于美国敦巴顿橡树园研究图书馆于2018年设立的一项倡议，植物人文研究首次作为一个跨学科领域进入大众视野。同为有机生命体，植物身上兼具生物和文化属性，具有重要的社会文化意义。本文回顾了笔者在2020年植物人文暑期项目中邂逅植物人文研究、开展植物叙事研究，并回到中国联合发起“植南门市部”行动团队来推广“以植物为重”的理念的经历。为摒弃根深蒂固的植物盲症、开启科学与人文研究之间的潜在对话，该团队将植物人文研究本地化，并提出了更符合中文语境的“植物世民”一词。

迄今为止，植南门市部以研究为基础，结合文化内容创作和传播，已经在中国多个城市的本地文化空间开展了形式多样的公众参与实践活动：通过“植物行走”带领参与者在城市中漫游，对植物进行观察，并辅以植物人文相关的讲解与讨论；以击鼓传花的形式进行“植物访谈”，收集并分享大家在日常生活中和植物之间的故事；与本地文化空间合作，设立流动的“本地植物邮局”，邀请人们写下自己的植物故事，并进行社交媒体和线下展览的分享；还以“植物小报”的形式发表植物人文研究成果。参与者们开始通过这些活动欣赏植物的“原貌”，并逐渐建立与“植物世民”的伙伴关系。与此同时，公众的参与反馈和植物视角下的研究洞察也极大地丰富了现有的植物人文研究。

关键词

植物人文；
以植物为重；
植南门市部；
植物世民；
本地实践

文章亮点

- 呼吁观察和感知我们身边的植物，缓解植物盲症，并与植物建立伙伴关系
- 介绍了植物人文研究起源，并对中文语境中的本地植物人文实践进行总结
- 通过提出“植物世民”一词，将中国本地经验纳入西方起源的植物人文研究中

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