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Looking at space-people relationships through the anthropotopy approach

Katiana Le Mentec

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Anthropologue
Ethnologue de la Chine
Chargée de recherche au CNRS
UMR 8173 Chine Corée Japon (CNRS/EHESS/UdP)
<http://cecmc.ehess.fr/index.php?2982>
katianalementec@protonmail.com

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Author: Katiana Le Mentec (Centre for Studies on China, Korea and Japan)

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A new gaze to explore affected space: glimpses at examples from Sichuan and Sicily

Context of the communication

An early version of this paper was submitted to the bureau of censorship on the 27th October 2022 for participation to the 6th Frontier Development Forum (CFFD) “Civilization Exchange and Mutual Learning & Global Transport Cooperation” organised on the 19th November 2022 at the Minzu University of China (Beijing) by the Ethnic Minorities Study Center of China (EMSCOC), and the Collaborative Innovation Center for Ethnic Minority Development. This paper was presented at this forum on the 19th November 2022 and again in January 2023 at the Department of Ethnology at the Southwest Minzu University (Chengdu).

This communication is presenting an ongoing research project in its early phase. The limited length did not allow for much development, hence this communication only addresses a limited amount of issues. It was conceived as a draft and as an introduction to a new research approach. It was not written to be submitted for peer review. Obviously, it does not constitute and cannot be considered as a definitive text/reflection. Any quote should take this context into consideration.

Abstract

The relationships humans have with their spaces have been studied in multiple dimensions and from various disciplinary angles. The words, vernacular notions and scientific concepts to designate these spaces and relationships are numerous and these examinations have shed more detailed light on our understanding of the dynamics at work between humans and spaces. My proposal builds upon these achievements while using a new perspective to look at this topic : a gaze from the specific and differential relationships that people have with their spaces. This approach is not intended to be revolutionary. The idea is to test a different perspective in order to stimulate a heuristic analysis and help better understand some contexts and challenges humans are faced with, in our contemporary world. This paper offers a brief introduction to this new perspective, which I call the *anthropotopy* approach. It is divided in four parts. First, I will discuss the choice of the research scope, which includes any kind of affected space. Then I'll switch to the core of the approach : taking into account the different ways in which a single space can be considered by people. This will lead us to the concept of *anthropotopy*. In a third step I will address the implications of looking at space-human relationships through this perspective. In the conclusion I will present a selection of research avenues for this approach, based on data I gathered in China in the past and new data I am currently collecting in Sicily.

Key words

Anthropology, space, territory, transformation, anthropotopy, human-space relationship

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Looking at space-people relationships through the anthropotopy approach

通过人域方法观察空间与人的关系

A new gaze to explore affected space : glimpses at examples from Sichuan and Sicily

探索受影响空间的新目光：从四川和西西里的例子中窥见一斑

Author

Katiana Le Mentec

Tenured Scientific Researcher at the CNRS

Anthropologist at the China, Korea and Japan Institute (EHESS/UdP/CNRS), Paris (France)

Draft 27/11/2022

In the last eighteen years my work has mainly been based on ethnographical research developed in Western China, mainly working on forced relocation, cultural policies and popular religion. Today I am presenting a new research project I am working on. The focus is on space-people relationships and, in particular, in contexts of affected space and territorial upheavals. This reflection is not limited to China; the horizon is transversal, looking at humans and anthropological processes in general. I am proposing a new approach which looks at space-people relationships with the aim of completing knowledge we already have on anthropological processes involved when a space is considered affected, changed and transformed.

The relationships humans have with their spaces have been studied in multiple dimensions and from various disciplinary angles. The words, vernacular notions and scientific concepts to designate these spaces and relationships are numerous and these examinations have shed more detailed light on our understanding of the dynamics at work between humans and spaces. My proposal builds upon these achievements while using a new perspective to look at this topic : a gaze from the specific and differential relationships that people have with their spaces. This approach is not intended to be revolutionary. The idea is to test a different perspective in order to stimulate a heuristic analysis and help better understand some contexts and challenges humans are faced with, in our contemporary world.

This paper offers a brief introduction to this new perspective, which I call the *anthropotopy* approach. It is divided in four parts. First, I will discuss the choice of the research scope, which includes any kind of affected space. Then I'll switch to the core of the approach : taking into account the different ways in which a single space can be considered by people. This will lead us to the concept of *anthropotopy*. In a third step I will address the implications of looking at space-human relationships through this perspective. In the conclusion I will present a selection of research avenues for this approach, based on data I gathered in China in the past and new data I am currently collecting in Sicily.

1- Opening the scope of the research question

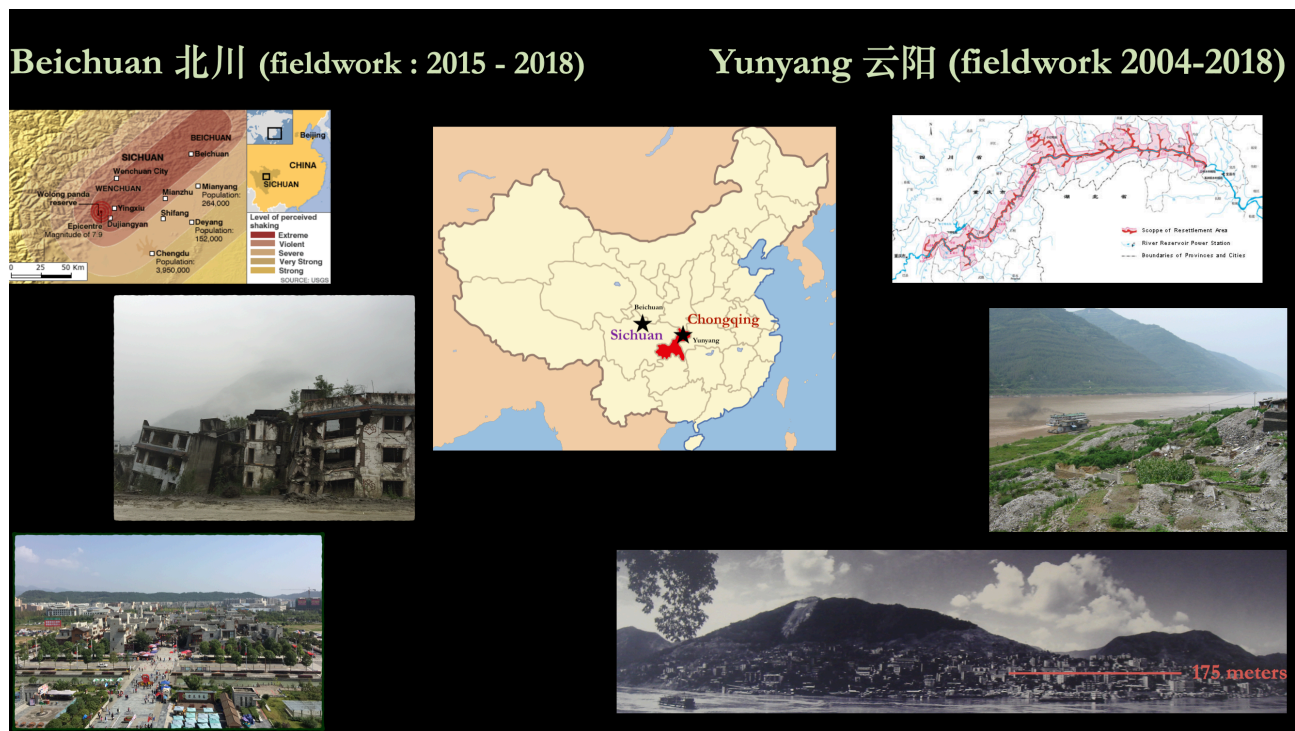
In the last few decades there has been an anthropology research boom on disaster issues throughout the world, including China. Research departments were opened, academic associations created, conferences and workshops were organised. Most of these research endeavours have dealt with crisis management, reconstruction as well as socio-eco and political consequences. Many of these projects respond to a practical need. To the difference of “disasters”, territorial upheavals are not perceived by the academic world as an area of research of their own. Territorial upheavals and more generally contexts in which spaces are transformed or affected were not thought to form a consistent research area from which processes could be balanced and compared. By opening the scope of my research question to *affected space*¹ I am proposing to expand into a new era for research. Exploring such contexts

¹ This perspective was at the core of my CNRS application submitted successfully in June 2015 with a research project entitled *Bouleversements territoriaux dans le monde sichuanais (Chine). Programme d'analyse anthropologique des conceptions sociales en transformation.*

from a different gaze and focusing on space-human relationships is heuristic in allowing us to better understand anthropological processes involved when people's spaces, places, territories are affected.

This research scope includes any event involving the change of a space, whether it is sudden or progressive, or indirectly or directly induced by humans activities or not. The cause of the transformation is merely considered to be one factor, among others. What's important is that people who know or inhabit the space view it as affected or transformed in some ways. This could include landslides, earthquakes, hurricanes, floods or fire, but also any urban and rural space development, from water reservoir formation, deforestation to urbanisation, as well as desertification and pollution. Spaces can be remodelled, dismantled, destroyed, submerged, burned down, buried and contaminated. Space pollution for instance can be visual, olfactory or audible. A space can be affected by the presence of a chemical product or the presence of a virus. The common thread is that a space is considered affected by those who know or use it. Such "space affecting" events can be explored in a transversal, cross-cutting manner, in particular to analyse the humans-space relationships. How do people view these changes and how do they react to them? What do space-affecting events do to humans and the relationships they have with their spaces?

My work in China led me to this peculiar perspective. I came to consider "affected space and territorial upheavals" as an area of research of its own after undertaking an ethnographic study in seriously disturbed territories in West China.



Since 2004, I worked in the Three Gorges area while the water was rising upstream due to the Three Gorges Dam. The scheduled water rising not only visually changed the landscape, but it also induced a significant spatial planning, removing trees, large rocks, and human structures from river banks to allow for smooth river transport while the non-flooded space was being redeveloped for relocated people. New residential, commercial and industrial areas as well as entire new cities were formed. Rural areas were also impacted including the relocation of tombs and cult places as well as the construction of new villages and transportation infrastructures. After the last rise of water in 2009, these projects coincided with a national policy reinforcing rural and urban landscaping. In the Three Gorges area, regional space transformation did not only affected local people. When the famous Three Gorges landscape modification was announced, a parade of strolling tourists from China and abroad came to "catch its last glimpse".

At the time, although I was immersed in this multi-faced territorial upheaval context, this was not my research interest. I was working on other issues, such as how local popular culture, religion and cultural

policies issues were involved in the process of the forced relocation. I still documented space issues that came up during my fieldwork. In 2015 I began to seriously consider them as a topic of research. Pursuing fieldwork in the Three Gorges area, I also began working in another site near the epicentre of the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake. There too the topography changed, many humans structures were destroyed and a broad undertaking of land planning followed.

These contexts - a gigantic water reservoir, a powerful earthquake and the restructuring of rural and urban areas - induced numerous effects on various kinds of spaces and on the relationships people have with them. Looking at two particularly affected counties, Yunyang and Beichuan, I continued to explore related issues : the human relation to landscape and topographic changes, the consideration of lost space, ruins, and sites associated with death. Since both Beichuan and Yunyang county-seats were entirely relocated after destruction and submersion, I also explored processes of urban reconstruction and space stabilisation, including toponymy, legends, rituals and geomantic practices.

These cases-studies are ongoing. Simultaneously, I launched a more general reflection on an anthropological perspective to look at such events. The category of “affected space and territorial upheaval” is flexible enough to allow a transversal analysis on what humans think about, talk about and do when their spaces are affected, with whatever forms and temporality and whatever the reasons people associate to these changes. The goal is not to search for laws on how humans react in such contexts, but to examine modalities that may be common or variable throughout humanity, taking into consideration their various forms in a specific time and space. To do that I am relying on my own ethnographic data from West China and from Sicily, as well as on second hand data.

2 - Space considered affected by people who are engaged in various kinds of relationship with this space

In 2018 I organised a new course on this topic for Master students and young scholars². It gave me the opportunity to initiate this reflection : building up a perspective trough which seizes “affected space contexts”, exploring dead ends and, most of all, discussing with young and advanced researchers interested in collecting data in similar contexts. It was during the preparation of the course that I came to consider the category of “affected spaces” and define the notion of *anthropotopy*.

“Space, territory, site, place...” there are many terms with fluctuating definitions depending on the authors, research currents, and disciplines. “Space” is more open, more flexible and allows us to include blurry, no-delineated spaces, such as an atmosphere which could be polluted. Also, “space” includes non-physical areas, dreamed, imagined, or even virtual spaces, all of which are pertinent in this approach since these kinds of space are also part of people’s life, as we will see later.

I am interested in what I call “considered affected space”. Ethnographic data at our disposal show that when a space is altered - like the Three Gorges landscape - different groups of people might consider and express this event in radically different manners, not only regarding the value of the change (positive/negative/ambivalente) but even on the very acknowledgement of a change. For some people a space is affected or changed and for others it is not. My approach takes into account the plurality of subjectivities without giving the predominance to one point of view over others.

Séminaire EHESS

Territoires affectés
Explorations ethnographiques et anthropologiques

Organisé par
Katiana Le Mentec
(CCJ, CNRS/EHESS/UGAP)

3ème mardi du mois
10h-13h

MSH
54 bd Raspail 75006 Paris,
Salle ASI_24

★ places limitées ★

Présentation du séminaire :
<https://enseignements-2019.ehess.fr/2019/ue/3067/>

Programme 2019/2020

Séance introductive 15 octobre
À la croisée des domaines de recherche sur l'événement, la catastrophe et les espaces :
L'anthropologie des bouleversements territoriaux.
Des anthropotopies et de leurs basculements.

Thème 1 - Espaces visuels, paysages et topographies affectés
Séance 19 novembre
Étudier les anthropotopies affectées dans leurs dimensions visuelles et topographiques.
Le cas de la région des Trois Gorges (Chine)

Séance 21 janvier - Table ronde avec invités
Tang Yun & Zhang Yuan (Ethnologues, Université Minzu du Sud Ouest, Chengdu, Chine)
Mapping the "Valley": a Topographical Study on Longqi Valley.
An Earthquake Affected Qiang People's habitats in Wenchuan, Northern Sichuan

Thème 2 - Quand les eaux affectent le territoire
Séance 18 février
Étudier d'un point de vue anthropologique les débordements des eaux.
Focus complémentaire sur le monde chinois et des cas ethnographiques d'inondation/formation de réservoir

Séance 17 mars - Table ronde avec invités
Susann Baez Ullberg (Uppsala University, Sweden) et Alexis Metzger (Université de Lausanne)
Watermarks - Memory and territorialization of flood marks. Mise en regard Argentine/France/Chine

Thème 3 - Destruction, disparition, reconstruction de sites
Séance 21 avril
Discussion sur le thème, accompagnée d'études de cas chinois :
en amont du barrage des Trois Gorges et dans la zone affectée par le séisme de Wenchuan (2008)

Séance 19 mai - Table ronde avec invités
Adeline Herrou (LESC, Nanterre) La destruction des temples est-elle dangereuse? Vers une anthropologie des phénomènes de table rase dans la Chine d'aujourd'hui et Florence Padovani (CRF, Beijing) à confirmer

Séance finale 16 juin
Bilan & discussion sur le thème : Perturbations des anthropotopies et géomancie

LECOLE DES HAUTES ETUDES DE BOISSESSON
Chine Centre Japon
CNRS

² Ehess (Paris) Seminar “Anthropology of affected space” (<https://cecmc.hypotheses.org/60569>)

Data show that feelings of a space being affected may come from a physical change visible with the naked eye (like a building collapse), or materially measurable (like nuclear contamination). They also can come from an event leaving no tangible trace, such as a site marked by death in the minds of people after a massacre or a suicide. Hence, it seems more appropriate to use the adjective “affected” rather than “changed” or “transformed”. Empirical data also show that people feeling concerned by the change in a space are not limited to the local population. It may even include people who never physically visited the space. This was the case for the Three Gorges landscape and, more recently, when the Cathedral Notre Dame burned in Paris.



Bridge on the Changjiang River (Yunyang) - Only some locals are aware it is a well-known place for suicide since it was finished in 2005.

In order to seize the complexity of a situation in which a space is considered affected it is important to take into account the various groups of people who are engaged in some kind of relationships with this space. These relationships may be very different from one another. For instance the significance, value, practices and affects attached to the Cathedral Notre Dame in Paris would likely be very different for a fervent Catholic, an anti-clerical reader of Victor Hugo, a tourist interested in French History, or a heritage professional. The characteristics of one specific space-human relationship inform us on some factors which make people think a space is being affected, and on what reaction (feeling and action) they may develop in such a case.

The *anthropotopy* approach was born from that concern : studying “affected space” by taking into account, from the start of the analysis, specific and (if appropriate) differential relationships people may have with one particular space.

***Anthropotopy*, or space from the perspective of people**

In that respect, I used a new concept, the word *anthropotopy*³, as a methodological tool. This word derives from the combining forms of two Greek words : *anthropo* which means “humans” and “*topos*” meaning “place/site/some kind of space”. One translation of *anthropotopy* in Chinese could be 人域.

Anthropotopy refers to a space from the perspective of one or several humans who are engaged in a relationship with this space. It refers to the specific ways in which a space is considered (and possibly used) by one or several humans. It can be your home, the place you go on holiday, the place you dream of visiting, the garden you played in as a kid, your daily subway station, etc. It is any of the spaces that you know, from having an image of them in your mind to practicing them regularly, inhabiting them or even claiming ownership over them. Each of these *anthropotopias* can be distinguished and identified according to its specific set of characteristics such as the way a people think, imagine, value, feel, practice this space.

Anthropotopy constitutes a language assistance to express an anthropological reality critical to this research project. In the few languages I speak there is not word to express this reality. Also, a new word has the advantage to be free from representations and prejudices which could interfere with the understanding. Like the *habitus* of Bourdieu, *anthropotopy* is a scientific concept. It is not reflecting a

³ A first description of this concept was published (in French) online in spring 2021 by *Terrain* (French Anthropology Academic Journal) : <https://blogterrain.hypotheses.org/17231>.

vernacular and emic notion. Nevertheless, empirical experience came before the thought of this concept since it was born from long term observation.



An *anthropotopy* designates a space from a singular perspective. Hence there only can be *anthropotopy* attached to one human, or a group of humans sharing a similar relationship with one specific space. Your *anthropotopy*, their *anthropotopy*. Each person has their own way to see one space/place : the way they name it and narrate its story, the affects it trigger, the values they associate with it, the practices considered prescribed and prohibited there, the sense of safety, the feeling of legitimacy to be there, feelings of attachment, belonging, as well as entities that should be accepted or not in this space (like “not dogs allowed”) and even entities that are considered present in this space. In some cases, only some people see a space as populated by a benevolent ghost, a nasty fairy, an almighty deity or a corona-virus.

One space can be constituted of a myriad of *anthropotopias*, when we consider the various people engaged in a relationship with it. The notion of *anthropotopy* allows us to distinguish layers of different relationships people maintain with a space, including any social actors with the feeling to be linked to a space and, when relevant, affected by a transformative event affecting this space and their relationship. This approach is particularly inclusive, taking into account as much as possible people feeling involved with a space and affected by what’s happening to it, including invisible actors sometimes underestimated or considered as having no social or legal legitimacy on this particular space.

3 - The implication of the *anthropotopy* approach for the Anthropology of space

I came to the notion of *anthropotopy* while exploring contexts of affected space but this conceptual tool can do much more. It is in fact a new comprehensive and inclusive way to consider relationships that our species - *Homo sapiens* - develops with its spaces. The notion of *anthropotopy* not only implies layers of human relationship with one space, it also implies that each human has a galaxy of *anthropotopias* throughout their life.

Galaxy of *anthropotopias*

This galaxy is constituted of all the spaces a person knows. An ethnographic portrait of a person could hence include a sketch of cartography of their *anthropotopias*. This cartography could be based on a

chronological manner (from birth to death), or based on categorisation of spaces: the ones we call “home”, the ones we go through but never stay, the ones we avoid, the ones considered important but unreachable (spatially or timely, such as the moon, the New York World Trade Center), etc.

Some *anthropotopias* are connected to each other, and some physically fit together like Russian dolls: planet, continent, country, ancestral land, hometown, neighbourhood, building, apartment, main room, office area, work table, secret drawer.



Among our *anthropotopias* are spaces from the physical reality : monuments, sites, territories with clear borders but also other “less delimited” spaces. For example the air we smell and breathe in a particular place. After the nuclear incident in Fukushima the air became a potentially contaminated space and triggered new representations, practices and affects, while the air was previously considered as unpolluted and healthy compared to the air in Tokyo. In Catania city, for generations local people know that the air regularly contains dust from the Etna volcano, and they may adjust their practices accordingly.

Imagined and dreamed spaces can also be part of a person’s life. For instance, a Sherpa who has never left the Himalaya may nurture an *anthropotopy* of the ocean. The spaces visited by a shaman on her travels in the invisible world constitute also an *anthropotopy* for her, in the same way do the virtual territories explored or even shaped by a player of *Genshin impact* 原神 during her regular online games.

All these spaces have in common the fact that people may engage in a specific relationship with them, through particular ways to think and talk about them as well as the ways they practice and shape them. Looking at *anthropotopias* allow us to study a person or a group’s relationship with the spaces they connect with through a transversal perspective.

Mapping people’s galaxy of *anthropotopias* can only be done at a specific time. Indeed, the way people think, feel and practice their spaces change over experiences, events and external constraints. These particular moments of changes are also interesting to study in a transversal manner.

Shared schemes of some categories of spaces

Although the relationships people have with their spaces are unique and sometimes very intimate (our secret hiding places just for us), the ways they relate to them are influenced by collective manners of practicing, of thinking, of categorizing spaces generally speaking : such as “work space”, “private

space”, “collective space”, “religious site”, “heritage area”, “protected area”, “polluted area”, “site marked by death”, etc. Collective schemes regarding spaces circulate in people’s living environments and are transmitted or imposed by different means, and in particular through practice. In some parts of the world, in some cultures, societies, communities, peer groups and families, one can learn to systematically remove one’s shoes when entering a home or to not step over the wooden frame of the front door of a Buddhist temple. One can learn to remain silent in a room or a library. One can learn to wear a helmet on a construction site, or how to put on a mask and coat hands with hydroalcoholic gel when entering a crowded supermarket. One can learn to bury a propitiatory stone and to perform a ceremony soothing the divinity of the territory before constructing a building. One can learn to identify what “landscape” is worth admiring, photographing and reproducing, but also to be attentive to the human and non-human entities present in a space, to listen and observe plants and birds or smile at the homeless person. In the same way, one can learn to ignore these entities. One can also learn the presence of invisible entities in some spaces and react accordingly, for instance have a respectful attitude - or to be afraid - when walking through a cemetery, or to wear a piece of red cloth in order to be protected from starving souls while visiting a place associated to death.

When exploring people’s *anthropotopias*, we can identify some of these collective framing and their level of spanning but also the creativity developed beyond.

Separate layers of *anthropotopias* and *biotopias*

Living in society, humans necessarily share some of the spaces they know with other living beings. Among them, there may be others humans carrying their own *anthropotopy*, but also sometimes other animals like birds, stray cats, domestic dogs and insects which each have their own ways to engage with this peculiar space, as do other living entities such as plants, bacteria, etc. Hence the *anthropotopy* approach can be expanded at a multidisciplinary level involving biologists, ethologists, entomologists, etc. who are each professionally equipped to study the way other living beings engage with a particular space (that we could call *ornitopy* for birds/*canitopy* for dogs/*feletopy* for cats/*apitopy* for bees, *phytopy* for plants, etc). This could be considered as the *biotopy* approach : a way to study a space from the perspective of the different and plural relationship of living (*bio*) entities involved in this specific space (*topos*). I won’t get into that topic today. My first focus and professional qualification deals with anthropology : what people think, say and do, to and with each-others.

When we consider a space shared by people, we can identify roughly two ideal-typical situations :

- 1) Their *anthropotopy* is shared when their relationship to a space is in resonance - or at least the main features of this relationship : what is considered meaningful. It may be the case when people have a similar way to think, name, evaluate and practice this space. It can be the case for members of a family in a house, a small community of monks in a specific Buddhist monastery or colleagues in their work place.
- 2) There are separate layers of *anthropotopias* when a space is understood differently by different groups of people who do not view, name, and practice this space in a similar manner, at least regarding the features that are considered meaningful for these people. A place that constitutes for one a space of risk or relegation (like the catacombs of Paris), can constitute for others (the cataphilists) a valued place, onto which positive affects and attachments are projected.

The layers of *anthropotopias* in a specific space can be more or less compatibles, or can be more or less in frictions that could lead to tension, or even conflicts. Urban renewals, construction of infrastructures, heritagization of sites, rebuilding after a damaging disaster ; countless studies related to contexts of space transformation have identified conflicts revealing different ways of thinking, saying and practicing in a single space. Disputes and arguments regarding any space, are evidence of separate layers of *anthropotopias*. Frictions of *anthropotopias* are observed on a daily basis, in micro-struggles of people trying to impose practice and patterns on others. For instance in a house between parents and teenagers : can this room be legitimately strewn with dirty socks, or not? Or in a city suburb : Should this laundry hang outside for the all neighbourhood to see?

4 - Research avenues

Research avenues for the *anthropotopy* approach are numerous and include both fundamental study in anthropology of space and applied - or even advocated/militant - research. When there are problems or conflicts in a space, this approach offers a perspective which can bring a new understanding of underestimated and invisible actors, taking into account as much as possible all entities involved, as well as bringing a renewed understanding of causes of frictions and ongoing processes. In French academia we tend to separate fundamental and applied/militant research. Though I am currently engaged in the former, I do not exclude exploration of the latter in the future.

Before concluding let me present few of the research avenues I am currently engaged in to show some possible uses of the *anthropotopy* approach.

To express a reality, facilitate description and analysis

First of all, at the very least, the notion of *anthropotopy* can be helpful in allowing the possibility to name a reality observed in the field : to express a relation people have with a space. For instance, we can say that the Cathedral Notre Dame fire made us realise to what extent this site constitutes an *anthropotopy* for people who had never been to France. This fact may have some implications to the multifaced effects of what can happened to this site.

The notion of *anthropotopy* also allows us to express with an anthropological conceptual category the variability in ways people see a space, point out resonance, compatibility or frictions. Having a notion to designate these realities can facilitate description, even analysis. It is currently helping me in that regard with different cases-study.



* I am working on ruins of familiar places in sites affected by the Three Gorges reservoir and the Wenchuan earthquake⁴. One specific ruin site can trigger various reactions which are linked to the relationship people had with the site before it was destroyed. Strangers carrying other *anthropotopias*, may view them very differently. Deconstruction workers may see a temporary work space associated

⁴ An article is currently in processing for a collective issue on ruins edited by Valentina Gamberi and Chiara Calzana at Berghahn Books, an issue following a panel at the EASA Belfast Conference on 2022. My study on ruins of familiar places was previously presented at the occasion of the *International Workshop Ruinscapes in Urban China* at the Chinese University (Hong Kong) in December 2018 and then at the *International Anthropology Workshop Materialities and Emotions in times of disasters* at Sciences PO/EHESS Paris in May 2019.

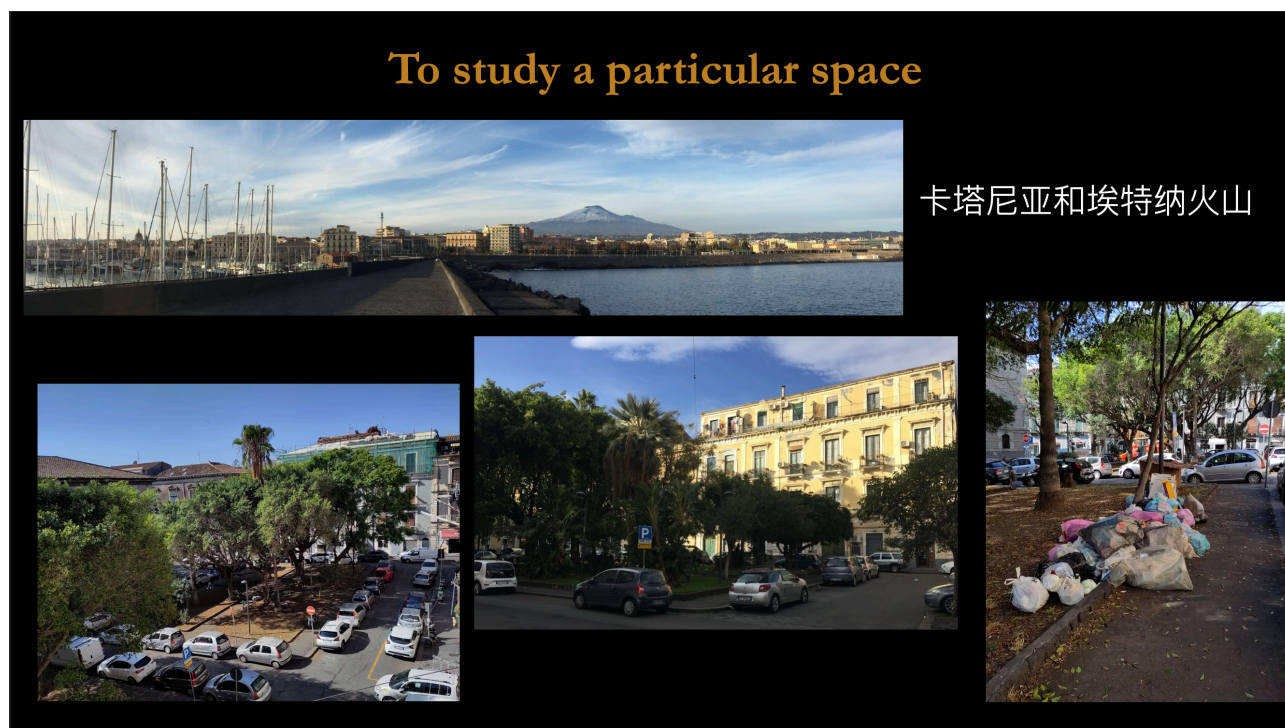
to professional protocols and consideration of specific materials to be dealt with ; an artist or urban-explorer passing by may find it to be an inspirational or thrilling site, while an entrepreneur may see mere rubble that should be quickly cleared out for juicy investments. Here we identify *anthropotopy* schemes, collective ways to see ruined space in a specific time and space. However, the familiarity some people had/still have with a space now in ruins allows them to go beyond general sociological categorisations.

* The notion of *anthropotopy* also helps me in a study on space associated to death and the dead in contexts of territorial upheavals⁵. The potential presence of ancestors, powerful predecessors' remains or dangerous ghosts implies specific ways to treat a space, ways which might be different when one knows the dead in question (familiarity also plays a role here). Associating a place to death only works for a person who recognized material signs (a tomb) or is aware that people died, or that people are or were buried in that place. In that case their *anthropotopy* includes death, which might not be the case of all the people engaged in a relationship with this space. We need to take into consideration that not all people's *anthropotopy* might recognise the presence of dead entities, whether they are considered passive or active, benevolent or malicious. It is the same logic with other entities invisible to the human eyes such as deities and viruses.

To study a particular space

The *anthropotopy* approach can be used as a protocol to examine a site, a territory, any space, through a focus on social actors engaged in a relationship with it. Who are they? What are the characteristics of their *anthropotopy*? Are there different layers of *anthropotopy* and what friction and resonance can be identified ? In which context do people feel this space is - or was - affected at some point?

This is precisely what I am doing now in the City of Catania, at the foot of the Etna Volcano in Sicily (Italy)⁶.



⁵ A paper is currently being written for a collective issue on the topic of *Lieux et espaces des morts en Asie*, following the May 2022 CCJ Workshop (<https://ccj.hypotheses.org/30800>) and a communication at the ANR Cortem Seminar (<https://ccj.hypotheses.org/30310>).

⁶ Since 1st November 2021 Katiana Le Mentec is part of the visiting scholar program of the Università degli Studi di Catania : <http://www.dsps.unict.it/it/dipartimento/visiting-scholar>.

I am beginning the study of a public space, the area of the Angelo Majorana square. I chose this location because the square, the garden at its center and the buildings surrounding it are used by various kinds of people. There are old Catanese families from a working class background, a gentrified population of Sicilian, Italian and foreigners coming here for work (including remote work), short term tourists, and also precarious workers from the global south (like Bangladesh) and recently arrived refugees from Africa who sometimes sleep on the benches in the square. This space is multi-purposed : some people live there, others come regularly, to eat or drink at the bar or the three restaurants, shop at the Sicilian butcher's and mini-market, park their car, walk their dog, feed stray cats, illegally leave trash, collect water from the public fountain, or bring their kids to play at a recently built playground. It is also a place of work for those in the shops and restaurants as well as the adjacent police barrack, not to mention the garbage collectors, mail distributors, and parking attendants.

Apart from the label “public space” there is no dominant scheme characterising this area. It is not recognised by some institution as a tourist or heritage site, nor it is protected as a religious or symbolic space. This situation allows for flexibility and makes it an interesting place to study using the *anthropotopy* approach. I am looking at the *anthropotopy* layers present there, observing, discussing and conducting interviews with people. With long term fieldwork and even collaboration with researchers from other disciplines we will be able to distinguished the different layers of *biotopies* and examine resonance and friction in presence. Past and current, big and small events (like the October 2021 flood of the city center, the recently added new playground, the regular garbage crises or the rehabilitation of the former Catholic Action and Spirituality Center in a terrasse for the nearby restaurant named “The Saints”) also allow an opportunity to explore the contexts in which this space is (and was) considered affected and what effects space-transformation have on the configuration of *anthropotopies* but also *biotopies* in presence.

To study an event viewed as affecting a space

Rather than examining a daily routine in a particular space, we can also use the *anthropotopy* approach to examine a space when it is in the process of being affected, changed, transformed. Data I collected in the Three Gorges Reservoir and the Wenchuan earthquake area provide plenty of data to explore such contexts. These events included a myriad of local and micro local situations of physically transformed urban and rural spaces and landscapes.



* For instance, I look at the Three Gorges landscape in relation to the effect of the rise of water upstream from the Dam, the layers of *anthropotopy* present and how various groups reacted in very different ways to this change, some even challenging the occurrence of a change⁷.

* I am using a similar perspective regarding the Zhang Fei temple, which was relocated to avoid submersion by the water reservoir⁸. The temple is a place of work for members of the local bureau of the culture, a site of worship for the local fishermen, a place for tourists to have fun (or die of boredom), a historical site to care for members of the national bureau of Heritage protection, etc. Different groups of people have different ways of considering this place.

⁷ This study-case was presented at the department of Political and Social Sciences of the University of Catania in December 2019, in a communication entitled *Disruption of Anthropotopia. Proposal for a renewed anthropological approach on territorial events and upheavals* ([https:// cecmc.hypotheses.org/55987](https://cecmc.hypotheses.org/55987))

⁸ My first article on the topic was published in 2006 : <http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/626>

Yunyang Zhang Fei Temple 云阳张飞庙



* The *anthropotopy* approach is also useful in my work on the tangible and intangible reshaping of the two county-seats of Yunyang and Beichuan, destroyed and entirely relocated 30km farther⁹. People from different towns were gathered in these new cities, they carried different *anthropotopias* of their former city and of the place where their new city was built. Identifying them helps to understand how they tangibly and intangibly settle in these new cities, and to identify what can ease or complicate this process.



⁹ This study follows a post-doctorat research project untitled *Les modes d'appropriation de l'espace dans des villes reconstruites après destruction* funded in 2014-2015 by the Germaine Tillion post-doc scholarship/HeSam.

Such case-studies allow us to examine more closely if specific configurations of *anthropotopies* are related to specific ways to react to a spatial change and to events considered as affecting a space. In such contexts, at least part of the people maintaining an *anthropotopy* of a space may engage in discussion, debate or action aimed at reparation, reconstitution, or rebuilding. These processes may be explored through the perspective of layers, friction and resonance of *anthropotopies* ; including looking at how these people thought, imagined, evaluated, felt and practiced this space before ; defining on what ground they consider their space affected and determining how these changes affected their *anthropotopy* afterwards.

Galaxy of anthropotopy

Beyond case-studies, this approach can help better capture human-space relationships and contexts of affected space. One path is to look at spaces in their daily routine or during a transformative event. Another path is to focus on people and their galaxy of *anthropotopies*. Life stories can bring precious qualitative data on the different ways humans enter into relationships with the spaces they imagine, and inhabit throughout their lives. In the long term, such an all-encompassing gaze could allow for the identification of links, patterns and witness the evolution of a whole set of space-human relationships through one's life path. Such a research avenue is about qualitatively exploring how humans may forge, maintain and abandon the spaces they are attached to and how they are affected by their changes. Academic work in the anthropology of space have already extensively studied how people think and talk about as well as do in a home, a worship site, or a site marked by death in certain socio-historico-cultural and geographic contexts. Yet, examining galaxies of *anthropotopy* of a people allow for an exploration of invested spaces in a transversal manner, balancing characteristics not in regard to one category of space but in regard to one life path, one individual's ways of connecting with their space, dealing with changes in their space, and engaging in small and big conflicts regarding their space. While cultural background and time periods would need to be taken into consideration, the idea is to go beyond general *anthropotopy* schemes in circulation at a time period and collectively sanctioned ways to engage in a particular space.

As a very cosmopolitan city, Catania is a great place to collect space-related life narratives with people from various cultural backgrounds and geographic mobility while also considering the various social classes present in the city. By speaking fluent French, English and Chinese, and having gained proficiency in Italian as well as having a base of Spanish, I have first-hand potential access to a wide spectrum of people to engage in this research avenue.