The Weatherhead East Asian Institute continued its 70th anniversary programming in November with three events spanning a diverse range of topics, from the 1980s reform era in China, to new directions in Japanese studies, and climate change on the Tibetan Plateau.

On October 31 and November 1, the Institute hosted a workshop, “Neng 能 (capacity/energy) and China’s Long 1980s: A Re-evaluation.” Over the course of the program, speakers explored the experiences and legacies of the “long 1980s” (1978-1992), the period when China experienced its state-led turn from central planning to a market approach to economic and social governance. Literary critic and novelist, Li Tuo, kicked off the event with a keynote lecture. Li’s talk drew on his personal experience as a participant in formative intellectual conversations in the 1980s, and asserted the importance of distinguishing between two distinct movements—new enlightenment and intellectual liberation—when examining the contradictions and shifts in China’s reform and opening. The following day, the workshop continued with four panels bringing together an interdisciplinary group of China scholars, including anthropologists, film and literature scholars, and historians. Topics of discussion included the afterlives of mining projects, environmental politics of Chinese religiousities, shifts in Chinese thinking on instincts and evolution, discussions of films concerned with mourning the death of Zhou Enlai, representations of linkages between the brain and human potentiality, and shifting understandings of nationalism and island utopias. The workshop concluded with a lively conversation exploring the intersections of the participants’ varied approaches.

Later that week, November 1-3, the Institute welcomed a group of distinguished scholars from six Japanese universities and hosted a workshop titled “New Directions in Japanese Studies.” The workshop began with the screening of a monochrome documentary film from the 1950s, Tsukinowa Tomb, likely marking the first time that the film has been shown in the United States. The second day of the workshop began with a keynote lecture by WEAI Senior Research Scholar, Harry Harootunian (Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago and New York University), “Reconsidering Historical Comparability.” The workshop’s afternoon panel was comprised of distinguished guests from Japan who shared their perspectives on new directions in Japanese Studies. Topics included representations of Karafuto after the Russo-Japanese War, the negotiation of identities by Japanese- and Korean-Americans during the Second World War, Nakagami Kenji in contemporary Japanese literature, and the challenges of “Reconciliation Studies” in contemporary Japan. On the final day of the workshop, a panel of graduate students presented their research. Professors Narita Ryūichi (Japan Women’s University), Toba Kōji (Waseda University), and Jordan Sand (Georgetown University) responded to the presentations and provided the students with feedback and advice.

Finally, the Institute’s Modern Tibetan Studies program (MTS) organized a panel discussion entitled “Understanding Climate Change on the Tibetan Plateau: Environmental Conservation Research and Climate Science Approaches,” on November 14. Recognizing that the Tibetan Plateau is both an enormously important source of water, biodiversity, and mineral resources for the Asian continent and one of the most sensitive areas to climate change due to its high altitude, the MTS program collaborated with Columbia University’s Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory to convene this timely discussion. The interdisciplinary event brought together social science researchers working with Tibetan pastoralist communities in China and climate scientists expert on the Himalayas and Asia to discuss their research and how interdisciplinary approaches might enrich understandings of climate change on the Tibetan Plateau and contribute to knowledge about global climate change.

For more details about these events and a complete list of past and upcoming programming please visit: http://weai.columbia.edu/.
Eugenia Lean (2014-2017, 2018-present)

Eugenia Lean is the 12th and current director of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute. She has served since 2014, taking a sabbatical during the 2017-2018 academic year before resuming her position.

As an expert on modern Chinese history, Professor Lean teaches China-related courses in the history of science, technology, and industry, as well as gender and affect, consumer culture, cultural theory, and historical methods. Professor Lean joined the Columbia faculty in 2002, after teaching at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She received her PhD from the University of California, Los Angeles in 2001 and her undergraduate degree from Stanford University.


Professor Lean has received wide support for her work, including fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies, Harvard University’s Fairbank Center, the Institute for Advanced Studies, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, and a National Endowment of the Humanities grant. She was featured in “Top Young Historians,” History News Network (fall 2008) and received the 2013-2014 Faculty Mentoring Award for faculty in Columbia’s Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. From 2015-2017 she was a Columbia University Provost Leadership Fellow.

During her directorship, Professor Lean oversaw the inauguration of the Dorothy Borg Research program at WEAI, which provides postdoctoral positions, collaborative grants, and graduate fellowships in the study of East Asia and US relations. She has led an ongoing initiative to increase the Institute’s support of Southeast Asian studies at Columbia, with notable recent gains in both university and Institute commitment to Vietnamese studies. While supervising numerous doctoral students and maintaining a busy international conference schedule, Professor Lean has also worked to develop new ties and collaborations between the WEAI and other entities on campus, such as the professional schools as well as Departments and Centers throughout the Arts and Sciences. Most recently she has presided over this year’s special 70th anniversary celebration of the Institute’s seven decades of scholarship and leadership in East Asian studies.

In addition to her position as director of the Institute, Professor Lean is a member of the East Asian Languages and Cultures Department and Columbia’s Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Executive Committee, co-director of the Heyman Center Fellows Seminar, cosponsor of the Global History of Science Cluster, a member of the Steering Committee at the Center for Science and Society, and a current mentor for the Presidential Scholars in Society and Neuroscience. She is also an advisory editor of the Journal for the History of Knowledge by the Dutch Society for the History of Science.
Thu Anh Le is a Vietnamese graduate student in the Oral History Master of Art Programs at Columbia University. She is working as an intern on the 70th year anniversary oral history project at the WEAI.
My journey to the Oral History program and Columbia was almost accidental. I had been doing some social advocacy work in my home country, Vietnam. The organization that I founded, Human Library Vietnam, sought to bring in people of marginalized identities and engage with the public as human “books.” My work there bore many resemblances to the practice of oral history, and when I found out that Columbia offers an Oral History Master’s degree (OHMA) in something that resonates deeply with my work and ethics, I was immediately captivated. The program is truly unique; in fact, it is the first of its kind in the US and offers interdisciplinary education and training that will help me move forward in my career and activism. Moreover, Columbia is situated in New York, a city of wonderful people and opportunities, making it the perfect choice for me as a recent college graduate.

I have had a deep interest in Vietnamese Studies since I first came to the US as a 16-year-old. At that point, I began to develop an interest in history, but I realized that there was little to no mention of Asian history in my high school’s curriculum. In college, I was a History major and East Asian Studies minor, yet I still felt like something was missing—there was only one seminar on Vietnamese history every two years, and the professor who taught that class was, in fact, an expert on Chinese history. This lack of representation and scholarly interest in Vietnam pushed me to focus on Vietnam for my graduate work in the Oral History Master’s program at Columbia, from a perspective that goes beyond the Sinosphere of influence and considers a postcolonial framework. I want to contribute to the growth of Vietnamese Studies however I can, and my work at the Weatherhead East Asian Institute, where I am helping to develop an oral history of the Institute, is a wonderful opportunity.

I knew about WEAI before I entered Columbia because of the Institute’s incredible scholarship on East Asia and other parts of Asia, including Vietnam. My work with the Institute is part of my academic program, which allows me to bring my knowledge of oral history into practice by designing a large-scale project.

The Institute has introduced me to great people, including Professor Lien-Hang Nguyen, an amazing subject for my own oral history project, and opened my eyes to different ways to expand Vietnamese studies. My time at the Institute has also convinced me that WEAI deserves its own oral history. There is such a wealth of stories from everyone who has been involved with it over the years, and each personal anecdote is a part of the fascinating larger memory that should be preserved for generations to come. While the public milestones of the Institute’s history are well documented, an oral history project will help fill in the gaps by preserving the unwritten, and by bringing years of individual and collaborative efforts to life.

I feel that I have a skill that is integral to both my academic work and my work here at WEAI—the ability to listen. I love to listen and believe that there is a crucial story within every single one of us.
FROM THE ARCHIVES

ON THIS MONTH IN 1988:

FOUNDING OF THE CENTER FOR KOREAN RESEARCH