Report on the workshop "The tree that hides the forest"

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On November 19 and 20, 2021 were held at the Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art (INHA), in Paris, two days of research organized by the Asia-Sorbonne Association on the theme of the tree in East and South Asia. The title of the event, "The tree that hides the forest", immediately evokes the multiplicity of periods, fields and thoughts that revolve around the idea of the tree. Offering a first clarification, the plenary conference by Georges Metailié opened the day with reflections on the conception of the tree in ancient Chinese thought, explaining that Asian cultures maintain a strong bond of proximity with plants. The latter are indeed considered as belonging to the same vital force as animals or men, an idea animals or men, an idea that the communications of the first session (F. Girard, J. Rols), devoted to the symbolism of the tree in the Middle Ages in Asia. It was also a question of the Han Dynasty in China, the prohibition of cutting down trees at certain times of the calendar for both practical reasons—relating to the quality of the wood—and for religious reasons. This prohibition is the gave, in writing, the very sign of the prohibition: 禁 (people familiar with sinograms will recognize the components of the tree and the altar).

The question of preservation in the present era arose at the beginning of the session entitled "How the past informs the present". Benoît Jacquet presented from Tokyo, via Zoom, the Kitayama cryptomers, classified as a Japanese landscape heritage site in the early 2000s. The value of these trees is strongly linked to the prestige surrounding the traditional character and the spiritual dimension of the ornamental columns for which they are used in used in architecture. Exceptional care is taken in the management of such a forest for which the most patient man would not be patient enough: it takes more than 150 years for these cryptomers to develop.

However, just as the tree crosses generations, artists choose to illuminate the present in the light of the past as explained in the communication of Mary Picone: Okabe Masao puts the irradiated forests of Fukushima in relation to the trees of Hiroshima. The incursion into the arts begun in this way was continued with the third session, "The tree as alter ego in Chinese painting and literature". It appears that in second part of the 17th century, the forest was perceived as a place of retreat for social life before the identification of men with trees reversed this position. From then on, analogies between men and trees dominated. In painting, the contribution by Yihzou Zhang the imagery of willows - willows in spring, willows in cold weather - sometimes associated with in cold weather - sometimes associated with hermits, sometimes with courtesans whose beauty is fleeting. In the presentation by Li Xhiahong we discovered the metonymic technique known as "the severed branch" (zhezhi 折枝), according to which the image of a branch is enough to suggest the whole tree, or the image of a single tree the whole forest: there is no need to represent the forest: there is no need to represent the whole because the whole is already in the part. As an element of this whole, man is put in relation with the trees which reveal a characteristic of its statute or of his psychology. Finally, reflecting on the human perception of the trees, the last communication of the day by Isabelle Davy honored the painter Zao Wou-Ki whose works evoke silhouettes of landscapes and trees that would have been diluted until it remains only a purely a purely sensitive presence. The intervention of Marie Laureillard, although having had to be postponed to Saturday, was part of the same cycle of presentations of the tree in the art of contemporary Chinese artists. Sensitive to environmental issues, they reveal through their works the visions and human actions to which trees are subjected.

The following day, the fourth session began with Giada Ricci's presentation on several Japanese museums integrating the natural environment in their scenography. The stimulating exchange that took place around a paradox generated by these museums, that of a
museums, that of a proximity with nature which is at the same time a distance, the most striking example is the Adachi Zenko Museum, which, like a painted scroll, unfolds the landscape through its windows without letting the visitor access it. It thus appears that the relationship between human space and natural space is a vast and ancient question which was central in China in the XVII-XVIIIth century as a whole, as pointed out by Hongyue Liu-Deguillaume.

Finally, the fifth and last session, "Narrative space as a virtual forest", focused on the seventh art. The attention was first focused on Japanese cinema of Kurosawa Akira and Teshigahara Hiroshi, cinema marked by the war in which the tree, solidly rooted, constitutes a point of anchorage facing the tumult of modern civilization, in Jacline Moriceau’s communication. Then, the spotlight turned to the films of Thai artist Apitchatpong Weerasethakul, whose forest, at once a sensitive, spiritual and metaphorical experience, seems to have been to offer a synthesis of these study days, as explained by Christine Vial Kayser.

These presentations ended and opened on the current ecological perspectives. The participants and listeners were able to meet the Taiwanese documentary filmmaker Ke Chinyuan who, through his films, contributes to raising awareness of the ecological emergency. At the end of this meeting, Nicolas Metro came to present his project Kinomé which aims at to act concretely to preserve the environment while improving the life of vulnerable populations.

I am delighted to have been able to contribute to the smooth running of these study days, which could have gone on for longer. If, caught by time, some speakers had to trim their presentations, there is no doubt that many paths of reflection have been traced in the minds of participants, inviting each and every one to continue the exploration of the forests on their own.