

## **Shit and civilisation – Western reports on nightsoil in 18th and 19th century China**

Jörg H. Hüseemann [Leipzig University]

**ABSTRACT:** Human excreta were sought-after and widely used fertilisers in Chinese agriculture, employed since antiquity and mentioned and discussed by agronomists since the Song Dynasty (960-1279). By the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) at the latest, the collection of nightsoil in urban areas and its transportation to the countryside had evolved into a well-organized business that would survive into modern times. In contrast, with the growing awareness of the importance of public health and hygiene in 18th- and 19th-century Western European countries and the development of agricultural chemistry, the importance of nightsoil as a fertiliser in European agriculture gradually declined; excreta were turned from a valuable substance into waste, from a resource into a nuisance.

This paper will show that this change in attitude is also reflected in the writings of European travellers and missionaries who visited China in the 18th and 19th centuries. Using accounts on Chinese agriculture, I will ask, what criteria contributed to the creation of categories such as waste and value? How did the treatment of waste in China foster othering and strengthen hierarchies? In my presentation, I will argue that European accounts on Chinese usage of human excreta show that their authors also took it as a measure of or as a means to emphasise European cultural as well as scientific and technological superiority.

### **CV:**

Joerg Henning Huesemann works as a lecturer for Chinese culture and history at Leipzig University. He received his PhD from Hamburg University for a dissertation on the 6th century Chinese geographical writing Shuijing zhu. Currently he is working on his second book, tentatively titled "A Matter Difficult to Handle – Soil, Fertilizers, and the Rise of Scientific Agriculture in Middle and Late Imperial China," a study in which he explores the historical development of scientific agriculture in China through the lens of fertilisers.

**E-mail:** [joerg\\_henning.huesemann@uni-leipzig.de](mailto:joerg_henning.huesemann@uni-leipzig.de)