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Dirt We Need – How Purity Chases Away the Rural

The lack of hygiene has been a label carried by the Chinese peasantry and the urban underclass. Ruth Rogaski speaks of ‘hygienic modernity’ whereby ‘Weisheng’ as a discourse of deficiency allowed Chinese elites to distance themselves from the peasantry during the Boxer Rebellion. Today, in the name of ‘hygiene’, the Hong Kong SAR government is installing a centralized sewerage system in Mui Wo, Lantau Island, replacing practices that have been in place for years.

Yet for Mary Douglas, dirt is a matter of out of place. Where there is dirt there is a system. This paper will discuss how the dominant system is chasing away elements that cannot be fitted into the prevalent order, and argue that filth can be enriching – to our experiences as well as to the soil. ‘Pollution’ reminds us that all cannot be neatly classified according to the dominant order, that there exist possibilities and alternatives.