

Experiments in the Anthropocene: Toward a Transformative Eco-Aesthetic in the Work of Four Contemporary Chinese Visual Artists

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Introduction

Reading non-Western cultural production into poststructural ecosophical paradigms, ecocriticism in China emerges as “being different *from* but simultaneously being a part *of* that from which one is different”¹ in that it must reconcile a distinctly Chinese ecological politics with the irreducibly transnational concept of the Anthropocene.² Drawing from Daoist texts that emphasize harmony between humankind and nature, Chinese ecocritical scholars reframe the problematic of environment crisis as requiring an “eco-ontological aesthetic” intervention.³ In the rush to globalize and modernize, Chinese society has accelerated the processes that facilitate environmental degradation throughout the course of the twentieth century. For decades now, such large-scale efforts have resulted in unlivable conditions for some of China’s most marginalized populations and rendered vast expanses of land unable to sustain any type of life. Though governmental investment in renewable energy technology and species conservation demonstrate a comparatively heightened sense of environmental consciousness over time, Chinese ecocriticism calls for a entirely different set of understandings on which to build a Chinese ecological politics in the Anthropocene that are lucidly articulated not in laws or scientific findings, but in literature, art, and other forms of media. Their focus on aesthetics, then, serves as a productive starting point for approaching China’s environment.

To that end, this paper examines four contemporary visual artists whose work engages with, complicates, and reinvents the relationship between humankind and nature in China. Their visualizations not only clarify the viewer's imagination of ecocritical theories that are often phrased in abstract language, but they also ground these ideas in a non-Eurocentric social and cultural history. These artists apply ecocritical thought in ways that expand the meanings of both environmental consciousness and contemporary Chinese art. In the first part of the paper, I argue that the environmentalism exhibited in Cai Guo-Qiang's *Heritage* and *The Ninth Wave* introduces an important emotional dimension to the conventional grammar of crisis, but ultimately falls short of coming to terms with the epistemic realities of the Anthropocene. Following this, I examine reimaginings of *shanshui* iconography in Yang Yongliang's *Phantom Landscape* and Yao Lu's *Ancient Springtime Fey*, both of which use the medium to interrupt conventional human/nature binaries. Finally, I turn to the contemporary woodcut artist Chen Qi, whose prints reflect upon a specific historical tradition that positions art as political and instructive, bringing to mind the extent to which the relationship between human and nonhuman agency has shaped the environment in China. Anticipatory yet withholding prescription, each artist disrupts conventional framings of the China ecological crisis in their creations, directing the viewer away from the strictly anthropocentric and instrumental understandings that dominate the present state of environmental affairs.

I. From Geopolitical to Ecocritical Visions

Both contemporary art and the environment in China invoke the state as a looming behemoth, wielding censorship as a potent instrument of control. It is

indisputable that the Communist Party has banned works of art and forced artists into exile as a result. Likewise, there have been instances of environmental activists persistently sidelined or detained for their work. In light of this governmental orientation across a number of social spheres, various loci of study pertaining to contemporary Chinese media and culture tend to fall on either side of what Xiaobing Tang describes as “the dissidence hypothesis.”⁴ The term refers to the dichotomous lens through which critics, typically of Western origin, understand the marginalization of a piece of art as an indication of its subversive quality, while popular acceptance within China signals its utility as state propaganda. Tang concludes that these characterizations are ultimately made along geopolitical lines, framing the Chinese state as paranoid and despotic in contrast to its liberal democratic counterparts.⁵ This paper intends to move away from geopolitical classifications in examining Chinese art, instead centering on ecocritical interpretations of these four artists. This is not to say that they do not produce subversive or provocative work. Indeed, these pieces certainly challenge a number of governmental narratives regarding environmental sustainability. These ecocriticisms, however, do more than merely decry the Communist Party. More crucially, they deconstruct how the environment conventionally figures in global governance and the inculcation of norms.

Despite limitations in environmental activism, ecocriticism as an academic discipline in Chinese universities has burgeoned since its postsocialist introduction. It has expanded beyond calls for the conservation of natural resources and living harmoniously, as those themes are more often critically scrutinized rather than wholeheartedly upheld in ecocritical art and literature. The “ecoambiguity” that Karen Thornber identifies as underscoring a perpetually contradictory relationship between Chinese cultural

appreciation for nature and China’s destructive environmental history comes across strikingly in the visual medium, in which a number of conflicting perspectives are laid out at a halt. It is quite evident that the concept of “ecoambiguity” probes issues that are not conventionally thought of as ecological. The moral quandaries constructed by ecoambiguous media, occasionally frustrating the reader or viewer with inconclusive endings, point to the impossibility of environmental crisis in a vacuum. Indeed, examining media through an ecocritical lens provides analytic avenues that shed light on how human interaction with the environment is fundamentally interrelated with issues of class, culture, and urbanization, among others. Writing about the particular utility of this approach in the Chinese case, Scott Slovic argues that a “strategic openness” to all forms of ecocritical thought involves an anticipatory idealism that constantly demands social change, especially as the state of the environment itself grows increasingly dire.⁶ It is through this lens of interpretive flexibility that viewers should approach the work of the following four artists.

II. A Paradise Lost in the Work of Cai Guo-Qiang



Figure 1. A photo of Cai’s *Heritage* installation.



Figure 2. A photo of Cai’s *The Ninth Wave* setting sail on the Bund.

There are unmistakable icons that go hand in hand with imaginations of Chinese environmentalism, such as videos of smog rolling into Beijing’s streets or a snapshot of

countryside residents washing clothes in polluted water. Although these realities affect millions of people, such images are nonetheless localized. On the global scale, as Mirzoeff discusses, the icon of environmental crisis is even more instantly recognizable: the isolated polar bear on ice, surrounded by rising waters.⁷ It is with the plight of the non-human animal that Cai Guo-Qiang articulates the most translatable commentary of the four artists discussed in this paper. His installation *Heritage*, one of many components comprising the 2014 *Falling Back to Earth* exhibition in Australia, and the titular *Ninth Wave* installation in that 2014 exhibition in Shanghai both feature an assortment of artificial creatures. In the former, a variety of animals circle a pristine pool of synthetic water, heads lowered as if drinking. In the latter, a collection of similar animals appear to be in their death throes on a battered fishing boat, which sailed along the Bund during the opening of the exhibition. Taken together, these two 2014 pieces read as a narrative of human development sabotaging an Edenic natural world when considering their respective locations. The Australian landscape, with its abundance of natural wonder not found elsewhere on earth, indeed seems like the last remnant of humankind's ecological heritage compared to the urban setting of Shanghai, in which these creatures cannot survive.

Although a number of the animals in these installations hold value in Chinese culture and mythology, their endangered status or extinction underscores the prevalent habitat destruction inherent to civilizational expansion. Both pieces lament the disappearance of these species by constituting these animals as emblematic of not just a human-induced environmental process, but a bygone era in human history as well. In *The Ninth Wave* especially, the menagerie of dying animals strikes the viewer as pitiable and

brings about an emotional reaction that usually is not prioritized in the rhetoric of environmental crisis. This connection resembles that of contemporary Chinese literature and art that depicts the degradation of the Yellow River, which holds not only environmental significance, but also cultural importance. Regarding that phenomenon, Lili Song comments, “pathos is ambiguous as to whether there is enough room for hope from restoration... which [is] disappointedly hindered by various elements such as the corrupted government and lack of financial support, the industrial expansion, and population explosion.”⁸ Along similar lines, the juxtaposition of *Heritage* and *The Ninth Wave* does not give the viewer much hope for the restoration of these species. While animals undoubtedly serve important ecological purposes with regard to biodiversity, the two works primarily tap into how individuals feel about the destruction of revered cultural symbols. Interjecting a moment of guilt or despair is a starting point in considering the environment outside of strictly utilitarian frameworks.

Analyzing visual art and studying the present-day environmental crisis in China may initially come across as two separate endeavors, methodologically at odds. Especially when it comes to Cai’s pieces, the critic ought to possess an eye for subtlety and interpreting abstraction. In contrast, environmental experts are typically in search of concrete, actionable solutions to an ever-impending catastrophe. While his installations do not prescribe policies, they engage with the environment through providing a rich site of visualization that clarifies the extent to which the extent of environmental degradation has unsettled the foundations of any potential collective or governmental proceeding. These ideas have a great deal of potential to alter the way that humans see and understand the diffuse locomotion of the Anthropocene. Environmental impacts are notoriously

difficult to see firsthand, as they occur over such a long stretch of time and affect differently across geographic areas. As Nicholas Mirzoeff details, the manner by which humankind *visualizes* the Anthropocene determines our day-to-day perceptions of the environment.⁹ In the status quo, the rhetoric of crisis and disaster pervades those perceptions, generating a tunnel vision that revolves around the demand for remedies: alternative energy, carbon taxes, UNESCO heritage sites, and the like. By introducing a more emotional attachment through awe or through despair, on the other hand, Cai compels viewers to reorient their approach to thinking about the environment and consider more critically the larger forces at work that piece together an image.

It is worth mentioning that these pieces are the most internationally recognized and, arguably, the most universally comprehensible version of a Chinese eco-aesthetic. While Cai draws from Chinese mythological imagery in his choice of animals, the logic of these works resembles the visual lingua franca of the polar bear on ice in that it is premised on existing attachments to human-led environmental stewardship. The focal point of the image may be the animals, but the onus of subjecthood rests on the human viewers whose resulting culpability may compel them to take up environmentalist causes. This is further compounded by the fact that in another one of the installations that made up *Falling Back to Earth*, viewers were encouraged to submit ideas for how to use the wood of a suspended 31-meter-long gumtree after the exhibition.¹⁰ Indeed, the pressure to act and to act justifiably in the environmental thinking of the present even pervades its aesthetic dimensions. In addition, Cai's celebrated status within the international art market cannot be ignored, particularly when considering its "depoliticization, professionalization, [and] commercialization"¹¹ as a system of art circulation, in contrast

to the history of disseminating art in China. What does it mean for an eco-aesthetic to be renowned on the international stage if that platform ultimately functions, to a significant extent, as the cultural apparatus of neoliberal globalization? The realities of the Anthropocene demand not only ecocritical thought outside of accustomed frameworks, but also unconventional standards for evaluating art.

III. Geosocial Formations in Yang Yongliang's *Phantom Landscape*



Figure 3. A still from Yang's *Phantom Landscape*.

In the present day, the Anthropocene as inextricably binding humankind with geologic processes in cultural imaginations further compounds the contradictions of parsing a coherent human relationship with nature. As Kathryn Yusoff elaborates, this rupture in environmental thinking “both names the specter of a fossil-fuelled geologic life that haunts the present...and opens up an epochal rift for speculative contemplation that extends well beyond industrialization and capitalism into evolutionary futures.”¹² Exhibiting this spectral quality, Yang Yongliang's 2010 video *Phantom Landscape* depicts the active and fundamental inconsistencies inherent in coming to terms with China's environmental crisis. A little over three minutes long, the video opens with classical Chinese music played over what appears to be a traditional Chinese *shanshui*¹³ ink painting. As the viewer physically looks closer, the dense clusters of skyscrapers

superimposed on a mountainous silhouette become evident, towering over roads populated by vehicles and advertisements. As an image, the piece captures the destructive outcome of environmental managerialism and the unmistakable natural aesthetic of classical Chinese landscape painting at the same time. So much depends, then, the depth of the viewer's investigation.

Trained in classical Chinese ink painting, Yang updates the *shanshui* genre in this portrayal of urban space as a type of modern ecology. In many ways, this approach is not dissimilar to the traditions of the medium itself. As Van Thi Diep explains, "A Chinese landscape painting is an assembly of recollected experiences of nature...[this] assembly is believed as the essence of the landscape portrayed."¹⁴ Rather than a recreating a single scene, landscape painters in dynastic China utilized elements in composition and layering to convey their sense of interwoven harmonious relations in nature. Though people did not feature prominently in these works as subjects, the deliberate arrangements of mountains and water expressed a distinctly agential quality. *Shanshui* as a genre provides a specifically Chinese foregrounding for the observation that "matter is theorized as an actively formative and productive agent that shapes discursive practices, which in turn shape the way we interact with the world showing their effects on materiality. In other words, discourse is always co-extensive with the material world."¹⁵ The "co-extensive" relationship captured by *Phantom Landscape* poses a fundamental question concerning the certainty of environmental knowledge. This cuts against the sedimented essentialism of an intrinsic Chinese appreciation for nature, as well as that of rampant civilizational expansion without regard for the natural world. Illustrated by the haze-haloed waterfalls

flowing above motorized traffic, ecologies of all kinds remain constantly in flux, changing and being changed by the impositions of human cognition.

As the traditional lute music fades after the first minute or so of the video, the sounds of car horns and wheezing motors grow audible. In the final moment, an airplane glides in and out of the frame. Even the mechanism by which one might attempt to physically exit this “man-made utopia” is ultimately its product. Refracting the Daoist doctrine of being in accordance with the flow of nature through the optic of urbanization, Yang’s piece underscores the argument that it is not the willpower of individual humans that determines environmental changes, but rather the larger and subsuming man-made processes, ever in perpetual motion. This characterization resembles Clark and Yusoff’s conception of “geosocial formations,” which emphasizes “the dual meaning of ‘formation’ as process and outcome...the emergence of the new is made possible by the compositions or orderings that have materialized at previous junctures.”¹⁶ Systems of capital accumulation, technological advancement, urban expansion and others that can be interpreted from *Phantom Landscape* are all geosocial in that they rely upon geologic and environmental activity as well as collective human forces for their self-perpetuating continuance. The “emergence” of today’s environmental crisis as a detectable harbinger of the Anthropocene, then, is no aberration but rather a result of these overarching methodic orderings.

On display, *Phantom Landscape* loops the same few moments over and over on a screen. Yang Yongliang’s application of the *shanshui* style speaks to the work’s genre not as short film, but as moving image. The distinction between the two in this case lies in the purposeful evocation of a form traditionally reserved for motionless depictions of

nature, now rendered as a teeming ecosystemic populated by inorganic components. Returning to the idea of “geosocial formations” as both process and outcome, the work clearly shows the dominantly technological and urban composition of the Chinese landscape as an outcome of development during the modern period. Interpreting eco-aesthetically, however, this moving image dynamically critiques the notion of linear, progressing social and environmental history by portraying the past as continually haunting the structuring of the present. Such a phenomenon brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s oft-cited conception of historical intelligibility:

“It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, an image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill.”¹⁷

As a “constellation” that integrates traditional aesthetic understandings of nature and the urban reality of contemporary China, *Phantom Landscape* dispels simple assessments of selecting a single Chinese orientation towards nature to be historically true. Instead, acknowledging the futility of settling on a final state of the environment or society, the viewer must turn their attention to the rift between aesthetic or cultural intentions and material construction of society. If that gap is to be bridged in the face of environmental crisis, what changes must be made in those untethered realms of environmental imagination in order to constellate?

Yang’s re-envisioning commentates not solely on the natural world, but rather the confluence of nature and culture as defining the contemporary cityscape. Notably, the

Chinese title of the work is *renzao xianjing*, which translates literally as “man-made utopia,”¹⁸ suggesting the image as a distillation of essence as mentioned above rather than a realistic likeness. The essence here is not a harmonious one in the Daoist sense, but nonetheless concerns a schema of interrelations that shape humans and the environment: the ongoing phenomenon of industrial development. Notably, Yang’s visualization of industrialization and urbanization, though imparts these forces as man-made, is decidedly non-anthropocentric. This speaks to Nigel Clark’s contention that while humankind constitutes a geologic force in the Anthropocene, “any ratcheting up of the influence of our own species relative to conventional geological forces plays to the disciplinary interests and political desires” of the status quo.¹⁹ In other words, a consideration of what is truly at stake in assessing the environment over time ought to precede a determination of what should be done by humankind. The use of *xianjing* prompts the viewer to step outside of an anthropocentric mindset and consider the scenery, whether skyscraper or sierra, as profoundly animate, while also inhuman.²⁰ Though the image itself would likely be described more as a dystopia, it prompts utopic thinking that is forward-oriented but not prescriptive along narrow geopolitical lines. Indeed, Yang’s work is not a condemnation of a single development project or Party decree, but rather a penetrating critique of the man-made telos that enables environmentally destructive industrialization that disrupts geologic existence.

IV. Encountering Illusions in Yao Lu's *Ancient Springtime Fey*



Figure 4. Yao's *Ancient Springtime Fey*.

Orthodox significations of the divide between the natural and unnatural often rely on observations made at first glance: one assumes that a photograph of mountains and rivers portrays unmediated natural beauty, whereas that of a city street tends to demonstrate either the peopled grittiness or the glossy futurity of an urban setting. However, in Yao Lu's *Ancient Springtime Fey*, one of the manipulated photographs in his *New Landscapes* series comprised of similar works, these two contrasting subjects fuse into a strikingly ambiguous whole. Presented to the viewer without context, the piece appears to depict mountains, or at least mountainous forms that pay homage to the distinctive blue-green of the Song Dynasty *shanshui* genre. It is only upon reading a description of the work that one realizes the alpine outlines are actually photographs of mounds of garbage covered in blue-green netting, carefully arranged with the help of photo-editing software. By Yao Lu's own account, piles of garbage constitute a ubiquitously visible environmental feature in and of themselves in the everyday lives of Chinese city dwellers.²¹ Through image fabrication, Yao Lu reinvents garbage as a symbol of civilizational excess into a natural phenomenon. This is done not through

brazen abstraction, but through informed, precise distortion. The medium itself is, as Chunchun Wang puts it, “re-establishing our existing method of apperception.”²² In other words, this piece offers a site through which the viewer might be able to deconstruct and reconstruct their perception of what nature means.

Both Yao Lu and Yang Yongliang, in medium and subject matter, reflect upon China’s environmental and art history in their work, bringing *shanshui* iconography from the past into a contemporary setting. But Yao Lu employs the classical Chinese aesthetic to a very different end compared to Yang Yongliang, despite similar reference matter. These contrasting appropriations underscore that the environment has not followed a singular progression over time and emphasize the value of metrics other than that of the linear passage of time as determining environmental outcomes. Both evocations bring to mind the study of ecocriticism in Chinese academic circles, which insist upon the applicability of non-anthropocentric perspectives in the present day. These observations underline interrelations, balance, and parallelisms between humans and nature, rather than furthering the managerial mindset of the status quo.²³ As mentioned above, however, visual art is not as clear-cut in making calls for action to return to the philosophies of traditional China, if such pronouncements are articulated at all. Whereas Yang Yongliang’s *Phantom Landscape* articulates a condemnation of imbalance endemic to the contemporary Chinese environment, Yao Lu’s *Ancient Springtime Fey* impresses upon the viewer a more meditative, less immediately intelligible interpretation of the relationship between humans and nature in Chinese culture.

In contrast to Yang Yongliang’s work, which conveys urbanization as imbalance in its bringing about a disturbance in nature, Yao Lu’s piece questions the conventional

desirability of perfect ecological harmony by unsettling the visual significations of a sound environment. Chinese art critics posit that Yao Lu's use of the distinctive blue-green hue immediately brings to mind classical *shanshui* paintings.²⁴ By concealing the reality of what the image depicts, Yao probes the reliability of how the viewer would even recognize what nature is outside of a particular textual or visual coding. Colors as visual cues that distinguish what is natural, green in particular, suggest a universality that no longer holds when considering how variable the contemporary environmental crisis has rendered geographic space. Imagining the refuse of a city against the platonic form of "green," it would appear categorically unnatural. But in thinking of the Anthropocene as both outcome and process, such static definitions are always already outmoded. As Timothy Morton phrases it:

"Ecological awareness means being unable to kid ourselves that there are realms unaffected by our existence. At the same time (and for the same reasons), it means that terms such as Nature have now begun to melt, along with the Arctic ice cap and the Antarctic Peninsula. Any attempt to rise above the melting conceptuality results in discovering another level of liquidity."²⁵

Environmental crises have been, for whom mounting piles of garbage have been so ubiquitous that they have become geologic, everyday realities much longer than conventional characterizations of the Anthropocene assume. By simultaneously referencing the *shanshui* aesthetic that placed significance in environmental features, yet also underscoring the illusory quality of nature as a concept, Yao extracts a relational

epistemic mode that “[melts] conceptuality” in favor of localized, specific, and diverse meanings of environment.

By concealing piles of garbage as verdant mountains, Yao Lu illustrates how connections between nature, beauty, and environmental health are socially constructed, often on the basis of appearances. This aesthetic coding is made especially powerful through his evocation of the *shanshui* style, one of the most oft-cited components of an assumed Chinese cultural appreciation for nature. *Ancient Springtime Fey* does not disrupt those associations as brazenly as *Phantom Landscape*, as the depicted garbage truly comes across as visually pleasing to the viewer, no matter how closely one looks. Instead, the role of garbage in this visualization can be described as a form of “geologic self-witnessing” in the Anthropocene, informed by “the specter of a fossil-fuelled geologic life that haunts the present...and opens up an epochal rift for speculative contemplation that extends well beyond industrialization and capitalism into evolutionary futures.”²⁶ In spite of innovation after innovation in green technologies or environmentalist thinking, garbage persistently stands as a physical manifestation of “the specter of a fossil-fuelled geologic life.” Interestingly, the garbage visualized holds a dual meaning of both specter and harbinger, the latter of post-capital in the most literal sense: an eventual future without humankind, populated only by the inorganic matter that biochemically outlasts it. Yao Lu’s disruption of calcified binaries is indeed speculative: he puts into perspective how functionless such beliefs would be outside of the epistemic engineering of neoliberalism and geopolitics.

Although *Ancient Springtime Fey* employs a surrealist technique of visualizing something as another,²⁷ it conceives of a materially grounded, proximate eco-aesthetic

that exercises a “critical acquiescence” towards traditional distinctions between nature and civilization. Thornber identifies this not as apathy in the face of the Anthropocene, but an critique of unyielding farsightedness in the ecological imaginary as “a fixation on distant vistas, temporal or spatial, at the conscious or unconscious expense of more immediate realities.”²⁸ There is also an important distinction to be made between farsighted decision-making that papers over China’s structural inequities and comparatively immediate issues of pollution, exploitative labor practices, and lax regulations for industries.²⁹ Yao Lu’s vision articulates that for city residents in China who see mountains of garbage more frequently than actual mountains, waste and civilizational excess exist permanently, even to the point of outlasting human life. Adopting such a perspective may seem counterintuitive at first, given that the level of pollution in China today is undoubtedly the result of short-sighted decisions made for the sake of economic or political profit over long-term considerations of environmental damage. But illusory prescriptions of how individuals ought to value nature or act to preserve nature when it has disappeared from their field of vision only cloud their true powerlessness within that intellectually and ethically bankrupt framework.

V. The Radical Tranquility of Chen Qi



Figure 5. Chen’s Rainwater.

In accordance with Slovic's suggestion of "strategic openness," it is important to understand eco-aesthetic not as a bounded classification, but rather as a method of viewing works of art with the intent of drawing out their environmental implications. As TJ Demos details, the aesthetics of political ecology "reaches a moment of politicization when conventional categories of and separations between the seen and heard versus the forgotten and overlooked are challenged and redistributed."³⁰ It is through this lens that the viewer should engage with Chen Qi's *Rainwater*, a representative water ink woodcut print from his *Twenty Four Solar Terms* series exhibited in the early 1990s. The black-and-white print depicts a square, manmade reservoir for collecting rainwater against shrubbery and a cloudless sky with a single tree at the edge of the structure. It does not explicitly portray degradation nor elicit shock in a manner that one might expect from Chinese visual art in the age of environmental crisis. The image does, however, highlight an uncommon subject in the visualization of the Chinese human/nature relationship: the socialist landscape. Undoubtedly, by historical accounts, this era was characterized by rapid human development and immense taxation of China's natural resources. But Chen is not endorsing a reiteration of those processes. Rather, his imagery employs the investigative power of memory, placing present-day ecological politics in an alternative structure of feeling, one made anticipatory by way of its status as "forgotten and overlooked" in ecocritical discussions.

Though he does not come up in the current discourse surrounding eco-aesthetics in China, observers have commented on Chen Qi's use of the water ink woodblock form as both technically impressive and an allusion to this medium's significance in twentieth-century Chinese art history. In particular, Chen's work strikes contemporary Chinese art

critics as ambiguous in its messaging, yet “as tranquil as water, as pure as ice” due to its precise realism and muted style.³¹³² These descriptions contrast greatly with the political function of socialist woodcuts, which were produced as an instrument of the political vanguard with the express intent of promulgating leftist ideology through depicting the everyday social ills faced by the most marginalized parts of the population. As Xiaobing Tang elucidates, “a commitment to represent the underrepresented, and a conviction in the exhortative power of a distinctly democratic artistic medium” characterized this period in Chinese visual culture. Juxtaposing *Rainwater* and a woodblock print exemplifying the degree of emotional intensity conveyed by socialist art such as Li Hua’s *Raging Tide I: Struggle*,³³ which depicts agonized laborers toiling across a field, it is clear that Chen is not simply restating those visualizations. Rather, he articulates a nuanced reference to the socialist period with cognizance of how it is understood today: as a tumultuous crisis that occurred on a vast scale – not unlike the contemporary Chinese environmental predicament. Rather than serving as a backdrop, the illustration of the socialist landscape as a subject in and of itself, calm and emptied of people, speaks to Chen’s reinvention of both the recollection of socialism and the conceptualization of China’s environment.

People are absent in *Rainwater*, yet the image centers on a manmade reservoir, a manifestation of human interaction with land and water. Chen Qi channels the aesthetic of the socialist period to convey a hollowed out, silent site of agricultural productivity as simultaneously constituting nature and culture. The reservoir is an instrument of relation between the two, at once integrated into the surface of the earth and a testament to the unprecedented shift in consciousness among the Chinese peasantry that drove

civilizational development during the twentieth century. It is a small monument to the history of Chinese collectivity cast in a non-anthropocentric light, which conjures a posthuman approach. Posthuman is not meant in a temporal sense, as in post-apocalyptic, but rather as a particular ecological politics that deconstructs the hierarchy of animate existence that places humankind at the top. As Rosi Braidotti construes it, “Living matter – including the flesh – is intelligent and self organizing, but it is so precisely because it is not disconnected from the rest of organic life.” Indeed, *Rainwater* places as its focal point a structure that connects forms of living matter, emphasizing the synchronic cultivation of land and human life as a dynamic operation encapsulated in the function of the reservoir. In doing so, the question of this eco-aesthetic moves away from a dichotomous choice between privileging humans or nature, instead probing the need for a reorientation that acknowledges the contingent, mutually constitutive quality of a new ecological politics in the face of environmental crisis. Against an anthropocentric managerial mindset, Braidotti elaborates, “one is the effect of irrepressible flows of encounters, interactions, affectivity and desire, which one is not in charge of.”

Based on a cursory survey of his exhibitions and the breadth of academic commentary surrounding his work outside of China, Chen Qi is the least internationally recognized of the four artists. In the few instances that he does enter those conversations, an environmental discussion is absent, despite his consistent depiction of landscapes and water. More common is praise for his meticulous technique or for his reinvigoration of woodcut as a medium, which is somewhat unusual given the more avant-garde, “dissident” avenues that other contemporary Chinese artists take. From an eco-aesthetic perspective, however, *Rainwater* and the accompanying series actually present a

sophisticated and critical reflection of contemporary state consumption in the name of continued economic development. Explaining this concealed mode of critique, Mary Bittner Wiseman elaborates that the government “uses its successful control of the waterways to foster the idea of its complicity with nature, whose power then arrogates to itself. ... [The] artists are...not so much protesting against the government usurpation of the water discourse as reclaiming it.”³⁴ Thinking of *Rainwater* as “reclamation” of the socialist realist style illuminates the epistemic loops that both translate ideology into state power, yet simultaneously “[reintegrate] art into the praxis of life.”³⁵ *Rainwater* requires a historically informed viewer to see beyond a hollow capitulation of twentieth-century socialism. Inherent in the mobilization of this medium and imagery in the present moment is a glimpse of ecological futurity that bends linear notions of geologic and human time.

Particularly with regard to an issue as abstract as the environmental crisis, the prospect of dissolving the individual self in concurrence with an encompassing system of relations, outside of conventional understandings of space and time, comes across as an imperative yet impossible dream. But as Karen Litfin specifies, that improbability of that idea is bound up in the existing parameters of consumerist and developmentalist societies. She further elaborates that outside of conventional Eurocentric frames of reference, “the root impulse behind sacrifice is a devotional movement...a recognition of cosmic or transcendental forces beyond the individual to which one is indebted for one’s very existence and to which one responds with spontaneous gratitude.”³⁶ The memory of Chinese socialism in *Rainwater*’s quotidian materialization presents a lucid example of sacrificial devotion to a broader societal mission. Specifically, nostalgic rhetoric of

embracing sacrifice and hardship is consistent throughout accounts of this period, especially in descriptions of the extent to which those maxims were embodied in everyday life.³⁷ Rather than proposing a return to that exact cultural milieu, however, the radical tranquility of the image makes a more indeterminate suggestion that positions certain aspects of socialism as possibility once again. Which is to say, that in the crafting of a Chinese ecological politics, it would be remiss to overlook China's social history of communalism and the scale at which it occurred. In the fabric of this particular eco-aesthetic, the only certain prescription is in which direction to begin: towards a far-reaching, systemic shift beyond the limitations of prevailing environmental approaches. Indeed, it is a tall order. But in the Chinese context, it is nothing new.

VI. Cohering a Contemporary Chinese Eco-Aesthetic

Each of the artists above engages with notions of utopia and futurity, though all of them parse these articulations through imagery from Chinese history. Furthermore, the four ecocritical visions presented de-center humankind as the utmost environmental priority, which conventional environmentalist rhetoric still struggles to do in the face of the profit-driven pressures of global capital. It is important to note that visualizing worlds without people does not mean that these artists celebrate the eventual extinction of the human species, which has indeed become a greater possibility than ever before in the geologic terms of the Anthropocene. Instead, these images have more to do with deconstructing current attachments to rigid ideas of human sustainability and environmental purpose, which are entrenched in instrumental understandings of development and civilizational progress. This strategy, as Claire Colebrook explicates, prompts the viewer to “imagine a viewing or reading in the absence of viewers or readers,

and we do this through images in the present that extinguish the dominance of the present.”³⁸ Unlike with a number of other social and political issues, including the narrative of dialectic advancement that characterized socialism in the twentieth century, it cannot be said that the earth’s environmental conditions have been improving as time has passed. By conceiving of a world without humans, and therefore a world absent of human advancement as universal advancement, as a utopia, the work of these four artists suggest a new imaginative basis for Chinese ecocriticism.

The human as civilizational subject designated as steward of the environment, however, has never encompassed all forms of human life. This is especially true now more than ever in the case of environmental consciousness in China, as exemplified by the urgency and level of government attention given to the air pollution crisis in cities compared with the systemic and more permanent ecological problems facing those outside of urban areas. As Cheng Li further explains, “mainland ecocritical scholarship presents an obvious middle-class, urban, Han Chinese status quo bias.”³⁹ De-centering the human as the focus of ecological politics, then, is not a move away from valuing human life in the face of environmental destruction. Rather, it illuminates and criticizes the social formations that posit this narrow reading of who constitutes a human. The works of these four artists, individually and each in a different manner, powerfully convey individual viewpoints that push the viewer to look outside of exclusively anthropocentric interests through the omission of the human image. Additionally, they come together to highlight the need for a more egalitarian Chinese ecological politics, undermining broad theoretical applications that overlook the historical and spatial dimensions of the Chinese environmental crisis. Li continues, “Chinese ecocritical

research also presents an obvious national bias in importing foreign ecocritical scholarship which reflects the worldwide ‘cultural hegemony’ of the American academy.”⁴⁰ Following this critique, the Chinese eco-aesthetic conceptualized in these four works reflects not a uniform global environmental crisis, but rather simultaneous, imbricated environmental crises – even within China itself.

Each artist returns to the past: Chen Qi to socialism, Yang Yongliang and Yao Lu to the dynastic peak of the *shanshui* aesthetic, Chen Qi to a more generalized period in history predating the notion of endangered species. Compared to scientific understandings of the environment today, previous beliefs regarding topics like soil erosion or deforestation from eras even as recent as the socialist period now read as outdated and inapplicable with the information available to scientists currently. The universality of environmental science, intrinsically bound up in liberal Western epistemologies, proves to be an obstacle in cultivating a heightened ecological consciousness outside of certain academic and social circles. As Lisa H. Sideris elaborates, “[It] is not altogether clear how exposure to the grand narrative of the universe will rectify the situation. ... There is something distinctly dislocating about the story’s all-encompassing scope.”⁴¹ The scientifically diagnosed global environmental crisis, then, fundamentally lacks a localized clarity necessary for its intelligibility in the everyday lives of individuals. In this age of “amnesia,”⁴² scientific findings in the environmental sciences and other disciplines have largely dispelled myths relating to the natural world in a number of cultures, including those of traditional and socialist China. As an eco-aesthetic, the evocation of these periods through visual motifs counters the conventional logic of civilizational and geologic time progressing in stages, with the sum

total of human knowledge contained in each one necessarily more sophisticated and closer to a greater truth than the ones preceding. Despite scientific invalidities in Daoist thought or socialist ideology, there are a number of other aspects to these philosophies that cannot simply be cast aside into the dustbin of history.

In the works of the latter three artists discussed, there is a striking sense of past and future fusing together, ranging from Yang's ultra-unreal⁴³ cityscape shaped like mountains to Chen Qi's depiction of a rainwater pool with a noticeable absence of builders. Returning to Colebrook's phrasing of imagining endings in the Anthropocene as not a fixation on an eventual human extinction, but rather de-centering the present, the Chinese eco-aesthetic cohered through examining these artists conveys a distinctly anticipatory quality. Their visualizations serve as starting points for reconfiguring ideas of how environmental vitality should look like without imposing a strict blueprint of any such social architecture. For the Chinese avant-garde in the twenty-first century, this position is not unfamiliar. As Aihwa Ong details:

Experimental Chinese art problematizes established notions of global civil society and avant-garde politics while proposing new ways of thinking that do not settle for predetermined resolutions or outcomes. Because anticipatory political art operates in the vector space that takes multiple sites as points of reference, it makes conflicts more visible and engages in a 'continuous criticism' (Foucault 1994: 457) of institutionalized relationships. It

crystallizes conditions for reenvisioning the world as heterogeneous and always in motion.⁴⁴

Speaking in visual terms, the “multiple sites as points of reference” that Ong discusses indicates the myriad of Chinese representations of the environment, rearticulated in the present. While the specific criticisms of certain “established notions of global civil society” differ between artists and even contradict at times, their assemblage into a cohering (but not rigidly coherent) eco-aesthetic exemplifies Clark and Yusoff’s phrasing of “dual meaning...of process and outcome.” This dynamic orientation is reminiscent of the social function of visual culture in twentieth-century China as explicitly involved in ongoing formations of political subjectivities. The visual introduction of that concept in the global ecocritical conversation accentuates the need for a directed, yet not prescriptive, divergence in how humans relate to the environment.

Conclusion

Whether through astonishing the viewer to see their relationship with the natural world differently or evoking a more ambiguous emotional response, each of the four visual artists discussed uniquely negotiates an affective and localized engagement with the environment. Their pieces extrapolate upon a definitively Chinese basis, unsettling conventional visualizations that only reflect either economic growth and resource extraction in China’s environmental history or an orientalist assumption of Chinese society’s inherent appreciation for nature. As these works convey ambiguities and materialize blind spots in processes of ecological narration, viewers must actively scrutinize their attachments not only to China as singularly oriented towards the environment, but also the validity of progressive human development. Taken together,

these artists demonstrate the necessity for a wider eco-aesthetic scope in interpretation, rather than more visibly environmental cultural production. Given the specific cultural grounding of each environmental crisis, a plural reality despite the overarching epoch of the Anthropocene, calls for uniformity in action merely exacerbate geopolitical fractures. It is therefore necessary to come to terms with a litany of ecocriticisms, even when limited to only examining China. This paper discusses certain forms of transnational ecocriticisms, Daoist ecocriticisms, and socialist ecocriticisms. Undoubtedly, there are further possibilities for enveloping visual art and other media into this frame of analysis.

If sentimentalism in contemporary Sinophone media is emblematic of, as Rey Chow argues, “an age-old moral apparatus for interpellating individuals into the hierarchy-conscious conduct of identifying with – and submitting to – whatever preexists them... as authoritative and thus beyond challenge,”⁴⁵ then an alteration or disruption of time-tested beliefs surrounding Chinese society’s relationship with nature constitutes a revision of that sociocultural formula. Following this, an ecological politics in the face of the Anthropocene must be nuanced, particularly in the Chinese case – anticipatory, but also mindful of past environmental orientations that survive anachronistically through cultural production. There is a great deal of ecocritical media originating from China that may be read as sentimental. In fact, all of the pieces studied in the paper could be said to simply harken back to traditional thinking in one way or another. The onus, then, is on the viewer to conceptualize eco-aesthetic not as a static observation, but components of a forward-moving discussion that will materialize in ways outside of conventional environmental frameworks. Indeed, each of these four artists brings about responses that undercut reductive understandings of the environment in China as either a resource to be

expended for the sake of national growth or a treasured reserve to be put on a pedestal through conservation. It is the comparisons between them and the larger ecocritical conversation that defines both their political and artistic potential. The transformations in how the viewer feels about nature when placed in contact with these images attests to their eco-aesthetic capacities.

Notes

¹ Berressem, Hanjo. "Ecology and Immanence," *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, ed. Hubert Zapf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016): 84.

² A term popularized by atmospheric chemist and Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen in 2000, the Anthropocene refers to the geologic age in which anthropogenic activity has altered the climatic and environmental makeup of the earth on a planetary scale. Common indications of this new geologic epoch include human-induced species extinction, pollution, and climate change. Though the official scientific validity of a new geologic era remains contested, it has been a fast-growing topic in a number of academic fields.

³ Wei, Qingqi. "Chinese Ecocriticism in the Last Ten Years," *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. Gary Garrard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015): 517.

⁴ Tang, Xiaobing. *Visual Culture in Contemporary China: Paradigms and Shifts*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015: 200.

⁵ The fact that many Chinese artists condemned by the state find refuge and a market in Western countries further accentuates this link. This is often viewed as an indicator of a benevolent liberal democracy protecting artistic freedoms, but implicit (or explicit) in that judgment is a geopolitical delineation of progressive and oppressive states.

⁶ Slovic, Scott. "The Future of Ecocriticism: Strategic Openness and Sustainability -- An Interview with Scott Slovic," interview by Ying-Yu Yang, *Tamkang Review* 41, No. 2 (2011): 71.

⁷ Mirzoeff, Nicholas. "The Clash of Visualizations: Counterinsurgency and Climate Change," *Social Research* 78, No. 4, (2011): 1185.

⁸ Song, Lili. "To Be or Not to Be: On the Pathos of Chinese Environmental: Writing about the Yellow River," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 21, No. 4 (2014): 777.

⁹ Mirzoeff, Nicholas. "Visualizing the Anthropocene," *Public Culture* 26, No. 6 (2014): 216.

¹⁰ Schell, Orville. "A Chinese Artist Confronts Environmental Disaster," *The New Yorker*, October 3, 2014. Accessed February 6, 2017.

<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/chinese-artist-confronts-environmental-disaster>.

¹¹ Tang, *Visual Culture in Contemporary China: Paradigms and Shifts*, 227.

¹² Yusoff, Kathryn. "Anthropogenesis: Origins and Endings in the Anthropocene," *Theory, Culture & Society* 33, No. 2 (2015): 4.

¹³ Literally translated as “mountain water,” this form of landscape painting rose to prominence during the Song Dynasty. Influenced by Confucian and Daoist thought, many *shanshui* painters integrated philosophical imagery in their work.

¹⁴ Diep, Van Thi. “The Landscape of the Void: Truth and Magic in Chinese Landscape Painting,” *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 16, No. 1 (2017): 83.

¹⁵ Iovino, Serenella and Serpil Oppermann. “Theorizing Material Ecocriticism: A Diptych,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19, No. 2 (2012): 467.

¹⁶ Clark, Nigel and Kathryn Yusoff. “Geosocial Formations and the Anthropocene” *Theory, Culture & Society* (2017): 4.

¹⁷ Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge, MA. & London: Belknap Press, 1999: 463.

¹⁸ *Xianjing* is often translated as “fairylad” or “wonderland,” but given the gravity of the piece and the more playful connotations of those terms in English, I chose to translate it as “utopia.”

¹⁹ Clark, Nigel. “Geo-politics and the Disaster of the Anthropocene,” *The Sociological Review* 62, No.1 (2014): 25.

²⁰ The 2006 documentary *Manufactured Landscapes* that examines the lives of factory workers in China also touches upon themes of man-made systems that have become all encompassing in their dictation of human lives, rather than being shaped by the choices of individuals. As Sheldon H. Lu describes in the introduction to *Chinese Ecocinema*, “Critics, artists, and cultural workers find their tools utterly inadequate to map out this monstrous totality, let alone effect change to the vast chain of mechanisms of production in the capitalist modern world” (9).

²¹ Yao, Lu. “New Mountain and Water: Artist’s Statement.” *Prix Pictet*.

<http://www.prixpictet.com/portfolios/earth-shortlist/yao-lu/statement/> (accessed March 1, 2017).

²² Wang, Chunchun. “Image-Fabrication and Contemporary Photography in China,” *Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Art*, ed. Mary Bittner Wiseman and Yuedi Liu. (Boston: Brill, 2011): 52.

²³ Luo, Zuwen. “Shi lun Zeng Fanren de shengtai shenmei jiaoyu sixiang,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 3, No. 6 (2012): 33-36.

²⁴ Li, Hongxia. “Concealment or Bareness: Yao Lu’s Chinese Landscapes,” *Zhongguo sheyingjia* No. 9 (2008): 58-62.

²⁵ Morton, Timothy. “Deconstruction and/as Ecology,” *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. Greg Garrard. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015: 302.

²⁶ Yusoff, Kathryn. “Anthropogenesis: Origins and Endings in the Anthropocene,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 33, No. 2 (2015): 4-5.

²⁷ In a manner comparable to Salvador Dali’s *Gala Contemplating the Mediterranean Sea*, given that the ostensible subject of the piece based on the title is not what it seems upon first glance.

²⁸ Thornber, Karen. *Ecoambiguity Environmental Crises and East Asian Literatures*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2012: 283.

²⁹ This reflects quite saliently in China’s rapidly growing alternative energy manufacturing sector, particularly its production of solar power equipment. The industry lays claim to long-term goals of energy independence and sustainability, but nevertheless employs the same unfair labor practices and shirking of regulations as other factories.

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- ³⁰ Demos, TJ. "Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology," *Third Text* 27, No. 1 (2013): 7.
- ³¹ Wang, Gaoxing. "Chen Qi de shuiyin muke banhua de yishu fengge ji chuangzuo sixiang fenxi," *Shuwei shishang* (xin shijue yishu), No. 1 (2013): 97.
- ³² Ai, Hongjun. "Anjing ru shui, titou ru bing -- Chen Qi banhua shanxi," *Qingchun suiye*, No. 21 (2012): 106-107.
- ³³ Li, Hua. *Nuchao zhiyi: Zhengzha (Raging Tide I: Struggle)*, 1947. Woodblock print, oil based ink on paper. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. <<http://metmuseum.org/exhibitions/view?exhibitionId=%7B57810fb6-c681-42ae-8781-f34c1165c275%7D&oid=77098>>, accessed April 20, 2017.
- ³⁴ Wiseman, Mary Bittner. "Water and Stone: On the Role of Expression in Chinese Art," *Subversive Strategies in Contemporary Chinese Art*, ed. Mary Bittner Wiseman and Yuedi Liu. (Boston: Brill, 2011): 232.
- ³⁵ Tang, Xiaobing. *Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008: 5.
- ³⁶ Litfin, Karen. "The Sacred and Profane in the Ecological Politics of Sacrifice," *The Environmental Politics of Sacrifice*, ed. Michael Maniates and John M. Meyer. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (2010): 127.
- ³⁷ Rofel, Lisa. *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings After Socialism*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1999: 131.
- ³⁸ Colebrook, Claire. "Framing the End of Species: Images Without Bodies," *symploke* 21, No. 1-2 (2013): 52.
- ³⁹ Li, Cheng. "Echoes from the Opposite Shore: Chinese Ecocritical Studies as a Transpacific Dialogue Delayed," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 21, No. 4 (2014): 831.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Sideris, Lisa H. "Science as Sacred Myth? Ecospirituality in the Anthropocene Age," *Ecology and Ethics* 1, (2013): 148.
- ⁴² In her discussion of how the current period of environmental crisis lacks an organizing spirituality that aids in the navigating of moral quandaries, Sideris references a term coined by Loyal D. Rue that describes "the [cultural] condition of being without a serviceable myth."
- ⁴³ A term recently used by Ning Ken to describe his own novels, as well as a broader genre of sorts that emphasizes abstract, absurd, and/or avant-garde realities of ordinary life in China.
- ⁴⁴ Ong, Aihwa. "Contemporary Chinese Art Reconfigures the Global," *Current Anthropology* 53, No. 4 (2012): 483.
- ⁴⁵ Chow, Rey. *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007: 22.

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