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**The Revindication of Environmental Subjectivity:
Chinese Landscape Aesthetics
between Crisis and Creativity**

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The Revindication of Environmental Subjectivity: Chinese Landscape Aesthetics between Crisis and Creativity

INTRODUCTION

In traditional Chinese culture, the network of rivers and mountains was considered to constitute the cosmological body and spiritual essence of the empire. Impenetrable, mountainous landscapes constituted a sacred geography where the life forces of renewal and reconstruction dwelled. (Li 2006; Sullivan 1980; Wu 1998) Religious, or more generally moral practice was connected with the most spectacular mountainscapes, making use of their sublimity partly in service of the ruling political power, partly in defiance of the same. It was widely believed that there was a link between the spiritual essence of inaccessible mountains and the magnitude of people who chose to cultivate themselves in such rigid environments. (Walton in W.-H. Yeh 1998, 23–51) Landscape painting and poetry occupied a privileged space in the cultural production of the educated elite, (Powers in W.-H. Yeh 1998) who also reproduced miniature images of the sacred wilderness in their urban gardens for aesthetic education and spiritual recreation. (Stein 1990; Murck and Fong 1991) In the wake of China's cultural modernization since the late 19th century, these values withered, although landscape symbolism continued to play an important role in its political ideology and cultural production. A major innovation was to separate the sacred from the real realms: a new territorial imaginary promoted the submission of national space to progress and linear time, thus economizing nature and bringing negative notions of rural backwardness or desolate wilderness to the fore. But despite the tragic failure of Mao Zedong's great leap approach to modernization, China's transition from revolutionary to reform society continued systematically to turn prosperous landscapes into wasteland due to harmful production modes and resource over-exploitation. Although of late there is high governmental investment into a program called environmental modernization, the effects are hazy (J. A. Shapiro 2012; E. T. Yeh 2009) and there is a likelihood that a number of serious problems still await disclosure. As the sinister flipside of China's heated economic development is becoming more and more visible and critical voices make their way into the public space via the social media, concerned writers and artists engage with this crisis by probing into the epistemes and paradigms of an environmental turn that is supposed to help reorient the present political economy of uneven development by quick profit extraction towards sustainability based on a moral reconstruction of the community.¹

One way of articulating environmental anxiety is to invoke the nation's cultural memory by relating the present to earlier periods of historical crisis. Exposing widely shared worries, the voices of this eco-aesthetic discourse agree with China's NGO activists, who envision an accountable political system that is different from the current regime of greening the nation. They speak out and maneuver from a marginal position, confronting a powerful interest group consisting of financial investors and their allies. While the former try to reinvigorate ancient notions of organic interaction between humans, species and landscapes, the latter still operate under the master narrative of scientific progress that defines ecological interests in a narrow, anthropocentric framework, thus tolerating unsustainable policies for economic benefit and frequently annulling the initial success of environmental NGO campaigns.² As will be demonstrated below, culturally encoded criticism of industrial landscape degradation interrogates the state project of environmental modernization on

¹ On this pursuit see Prasenjit Duara's forthcoming book, which he introduced in a lecture by the title of "Transcendence in a Secular World: Asian Traditions and Sustainable Modernity," delivered at the URPP Asia and Europe, University of Zurich, Dec.12, 2013.

² Influential environmental NGOs, or ENGOs, are Friends of Nature, Greenpeace, Green Age Volunteers, Greencamp, Greenforum etc. See (Ru and Ortolano 2009), 151 f.

historical, aesthetic and economic grounds. At the core of this discourse we discern dissatisfaction with the ideological distinction between a sovereign nation and its subordinate environmental other, which can be subjected to human exploitation or state protection, but is never allowed to speak for itself. The authors of such criticism may have divergent views on the practical details of an alternative to the current world order. Yet, their calls for a far-reaching re-orientation of collective human agency seem to turn away from the modern master narrative of civilizational progress while reactivating ancient cosmological ideas, such as the concept of “self-evidencing,” or “self-actualization” 自然 based on grass-roots creativity rather than hierarchical power exertion. (Ames 1986, 343–7)

In the following, aesthetic reflections of environmental problems will be explored in view of their legacies and connectivities. Their specific approach towards questions of ethics, aesthetics, pedagogy, history and political action shall tentatively be situated in the conceptual framework of an environmental turn in literature and the arts. In pursuing this, we will distinguish between a popular and an intellectual take on environmental issues. A survey of various forms of social critique shall demonstrate how a shift from the modern anthropocentric to a posthumanist, ecocentric world view takes place in lower-rungs fiction (diceng wenxue), in the bloggersphere, and in orally circulating comments on actual hazards or lingering ecological problems. Whether seen through the lens of subaltern fictional subjects, witty cartoons, or quotes and allusions from the classics, these popcultural forms serve as easily accessible vehicles for the dissemination of widely shared citizen expectations towards accountable governance. In a second step, an eco-critical discourse in aesthetic theory and representation will be studied by looking at intellectual engagements with ancient cosmological epistemes that are selectively retrieved as transposable paradigms of a modern environmental ethics. Both approaches draw from traditional literati culture while attempting to construct alternative sets of aesthetic values. Envisioning a new moral community, they put the regime's recent trajectory of environmental modernization to test and develop their own ideas about a sustainable future based on politically mature and empowered environmental subjects. In conclusion, those different kinds of environmental subjects that are seen to be involved most prominently in this discourse will be reviewed.³

RENDEZ-VOUS WITH THE CLASSICS: ODES TO THE FLOATING PIGS

“Nature is perhaps the most complex word in the language,” remarked Raymond Williams (Williams 1985, 219), and to this James Elkins added that of all the subjects tackled in his *Art Seminar* series, landscape “may be the most desperately confused.” (DeLue and Elkins 2008, vol. 6:88) This certainly holds true beyond the Euro-American construction of landscape aesthetics. Chinese intellectuals, too, noticed this complexity when they began to reflect the relationship between their nation's modernization, historical trauma and environmental degradation during the 1980s. Addressing the far-ranging damage of the Cultural Revolution, the Maoist assault on landscapes in the name of industrial modernization became a prominent metaphor for the violence inflicted upon the reconstructed revolutionary subject, as exemplified in rusticated youth narratives. Younger authors who grew up under Deng's regime of capitalist modernization are currently contributing to a thriving literature on the harmful consequences of consumerism for social life and the environment.

Focusing on the eco-critical aspects of this discourse, Wang Shudong mentions four different ways of relating to nature in contemporary literature: first, the violent assertion of one's own vital energy

³ I would like to thank Asia Research Institute at NUS Singapore for hosting me as a Visiting Senior Research Fellow in 2013. This paper results from the inspiration, generous support and critical comments offered in response to my project while I was there. Zhang Yuheng, PhD student at the UZH Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, has helped me to trace and access the cartoons discussed below.

against inimical forces in a Greek Dionysian spirit derived from western modernism – this is Mo Yan's 莫言 approach in his novel *Red Sorghum* 红高粱家族 (1987); second, the reenactment of a Daoist spirit of unobtrusive self-actualization from the perspective of irreversible civilizational damage, as a search for the lost paradise in the mode of Tao Yuanming's 陶渊明 (365-427) *Peach Blossom Spring* 桃花源记 – the tale of an idyllic peasant community dwelling in a remote mountain valley where history did not reach. It was rewritten during the 1980s by authors like Chi Zijian 迟子建, Jia Pingwa 贾平凹, or Wang Zengqi 汪曾祺; third, a focus on the female power of creation reconfigured in secularized narratives of mother goddesses – Mo Yan's novel *Big Breast and Wide Hips* 丰乳肥臀 (1995) is a well-known example; and fourth, a post-naturalist spirit that is concerned with the affirmative realization of one's natural disposition such as the fulfillment of sexual desires against the disciplining violence of high culture. According to Wang, this trend was initiated by the hooligan fiction of Wang Shuo 王朔 and continued in the so-called lower body poetry of authors like Nanren 南人, Shen Haobo 沈浩波 and Duo Yu 朵鱼. (S. Wang 2005) In a subsequent publication Wang highlights three main topics in this period's eco-writing: historical reflection, a critique of socialist modernization's reality construction, and emergent visions of social improvement based on ecological ideals. Identifying the unique phenomenon of Yunnan's rain forest as a leitmotif for early eco-critical writings, he discusses a short story by Sichuan woman writer Ding Xiaoqi 丁小琦 (b. 1957) as an example of critical intellectual engagement with its extermination in pursuit of a rubber plantation industry. Ah Cheng's 阿成 (b. 1949) *King of Trees* 树王 (1984) and Gao Xingjian's 高行健 (b. 1940) drama *Wild Man* 野人 (1985), too, argue for the protection of the nation's pristine forests, criticizing modern materialism in the context of Daoist ideas about vitality, spiritual rejuvenation and species transcendence. (S. Wang 2008, 47–80) These forerunners of an environmental discourse were joined by a growing group of intellectuals and writers during the 1990s, who broadened the scope of themes and genres. Since the turn of the millenium, the reflection on the connectivities between natural phenomena, history, religion and aesthetic performance has become a major concern in both literary and artistic creation.

The Nation Remains though Mountains and Rivers Are Destroyed

Nature symbolism and landscapes from classical poetry are finding renewed acceptance as sources of inspiration in contemporary environmental art and literature. Whereas bloggers additionally draw from popular culture to make their witty comments on the latest environmental hazards, concerned intellectuals express their feelings of sorrow contemplating historical precedences of today's crisis and even go so far as to compare the aggravating national situation to a defeat in war.⁴ For example, the lines from the Tang poem, “The nation destroyed though mountains and rivers remain. / Spring in the city, grass and trees lush” 国破山河在， 城春草木深, only required minimal editing to express concerns about the present ecological condition. The poem consequently was misquoted as: “the nation remains, though mountains and rivers are destroyed” 国在山河破. In spring 757, the famous Tang poet Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770) wrote the original poem on the shattering of the dynasty by the rebellious generals An Lushan 安禄山 and Shi Siming 史思明 bemoaning the destruction of its capital Chang'an:

⁴ As of 2010, agri-industrial pollution has surpassed the ratio of other major polluters, namely industries and transportation. See <http://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/5599-China-s-growing-appetite-for-pork-creates-new-pollution>; last viewed June 11, 2013. I thank Wu Keping for bringing this website to my knowledge.

Spring Scene

The country is broken, but mountains and rivers remain,
 The city enters spring, grass and trees have grown thick.
 Feeling the time, flowers shed tears,
 Hating separation, a bird startles the heart.
 Beacon fires span over three months,
 A family letter equals ten thousand taels of gold
 My white hairs, as I scratch them, grow more sparse,
 Simply becoming unable to hold hairpins.

(Cai 2008, 162)

An had originally been showered with imperial favors by the concubine Yang Guifei 杨贵妃, who enjoys a splendid afterlife in Chinese opera and literature on account of her talents in dance and music as well as her tragic death in the midst of this turmoil. (Riemenschnitter 2009) Du Fu himself was caught in flight and taken hostage for a while by the rebels. His poetry is commonly praised for its strong expression of sympathy with the ordinary people, but also offers inspiration on account of its articulation of human connectivity with non-human sensibilities. Cai suggests that the relationship between the realms of nature and the human mind in this poem can be read in three different keys: as a disheartening juxtaposition of suffering man and indifferent nature; as the poet's empathy with nature's presumed abandonment; and as mutual resonance, or a shared emotional state between man and nature. (Cai 2008, 167)

The reassembled version reverses the first and second variants: it is now indifferent man who causes nature to suffer and perish. This reshuffling of words within the first verse of Du Fu's poem did not originate from an insulated view on some local incident, but rather aligned contemporary experience with earlier man-made historical disasters, thereby exposing a pattern of recurring national crises. However, this time it is not a war between states or military armies, but the aftermath of a „War on Nature“ that was kicked off under Mao Zedong and continued under different euphemisms during the reform era.⁵ One politically sensitive aspect of these comments is their allusion, with a sense of premonition, to the most dreaded, recurring historical misfortune: rebellion and eventually the fall of a dynasty. The An Lushan rebellion is estimated to have caused a temporary decline of up to two thirds of the country's whole population, comprising a high number of casualties and large-scale southward migration. Will such a situation be met, or even surpassed by the consequences of an ecological collapse that pessimistic environmentalists claim is imminent?

Authors of *diceng wenxue* 底层文学 (literature of the lower rungs of society) are among the most exigent heralds of a pending crisis. In Chen Yingsong's 陈应松 (b. 1956) novella *Heavenly Peace Dog* 太平狗 (2005),⁶ migrant worker Cheng Dazhong's dog named Taiping stubbornly accompanies his master from their mountain hamlet to the city, and from there to a chemical plant in the outskirts of Wuhan. Although Taiping – by name and animalistic embodiment an allegory of the nation's disenfranchised, voiceless subjects – does not understand why he is led to this cold, violent urban wasteland, and why his master suddenly beats, kicks and even sells him to a dog butcher, his loyal

⁵ Yeh argues that “in China's west, the environmental protection programs that have been celebrated by both western observers and Chinese proponents of ecological modernization have in many cases had the effect of further marginalizing already politically and economically marginalized citizens, while also producing only questionable environmental benefits. In particular, multiple cases of the implementation of forestry and rangeland protection programs show that a key assumption of ecological modernization, that economic growth and ecological protection will feed each other in a virtuous, mutually sustaining circle, often does not hold.” (E. T. Yeh 2009, 892; see also: Goodman 2004).

⁶ First published in *Renmin wenxue* 2005 no. 10.

character forbids him to abandon Cheng even under the most dire circumstances. When the two of them end up in the plant, the master is forced into slavery and the dog narrowly escapes another assault on his life by swimming across a pungent tarn filled with the plant's toxic waste. The surrounding landscape is degraded to the point that the dog finds no other food than belligerent rats and the corpses of larger animals. Cheng Dazhong is made to process hazardous chemicals unprotected until he is too sick for further exploitation. Upon Cheng's death and cremation the badly weathered dog limps back to the village, spurred by its memory of the place where it had lived in comfort and dignity. Early on readers learn that this race is famous for its fearlessness even in front of tigers or bandits. Thus, before the dog was degraded to survive on sly nightly rummaging through urban waste, it had served as a dauntless hunter and guard in a poor yet solidly united village community of humans and domestic animals. Drawing on Cary Wolfe, Lily Hong Chen thinks that Chen Yingsong's story illustrates how institutional acceptance of the systematic exploitation of, and violence against other species also means to turn a blind eye to the availability of that same principle for the treatment of humans. Indeed, aspiring urbanite Cheng Dazhong at times treats his dog exactly the way he himself is treated by his new peers. Consequently, Chen reads the dog's perception of this brave new world as an indicator of an animal's independent, subjective voice, contending that the author's creation of the dog character by giving him a voice of his own is less a naïve act of anthropomorphism than an honest and posthumanist recognition of the animal and the human as not fundamentally different from each other. (Chen in Estok and Kim 2013, 218)

In western philosophy, a voice of one's own is a marker of modern subjectivity; the *diceng*, or lower rungs subjectivity is here rerouted to represent bare life pragmatism in accordance with the dog's discrimination between good and evil environments, although a poetics of landscape is also translucent in Taiping's nostalgic memories of the home village. This remote community still maintains a rhythm of seasonal cycles and is embedded within a world of pristine mountains and waterways. The distinction between an urban wasteland that depends on excessive resource extraction, an infernal border zone in-between city and countryside where pollution and degradation are rampant, and the affectionate warmth of a frugal rural community bears political overtones: its topography awkwardly connects a sanctuary of the poor and voiceless, recently subalternized human and non-human subjects with the nation's sacred space of timeless magnitude. Whereas modern nationalism had appropriated these landscapes as mythic signifiers of China's glorious origins for the better part of the 20th century, Chen Yingsong's story contends that in the wake of the twenty-first century the nation speeds head-on into a collective state of "never-ending sorrow": albeit no longer lamenting the transitoriness of imperial splendor and female youth and beauty, as in Bai Juyi's (772-846) famous poem on the untimely death of Yang Guifei, (Lo in Classe 2000, 1:96 f.) but for the irrevocable destruction of nature's regenerative power.

Strange Stories from Cathay

In March 2013, while Beijing suffered from the worst ever smog pollution, up to 16'000 dead pigs were sent floating down the Huangpu, Shanghai's main river, supposedly from the city of Jiaying in the western neighborhood of Shanghai. Only days later, more than a thousand dead ducks followed on the pigs' heels. The Huangpu River, after a prolonged period of serving as a domestic sewage and industrial waste receiver, today is considered sufficiently safe to be one source of Shanghai's drinking water. When worried citizens called the authorities they were told that there was no danger as the water quality showed no impact. Netizens were quick to offer their opinion,⁷ suggesting, among others, that a new romantic pattern had developed among pigs and ducks, who would love and follow each other beyond mortality; and that the government loves the people so much that in

7 <http://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2013/03/> 【组图】网民恶搞回应浙江死猪事件：少年 pig 的奇/；http://zhuanti.21cbh.com/2013_deadpig/ ; <http://baike.baidu.com/view/10497270.htm>; last viewed June 7, 2013.

Beijing you only need to open the window for free smoking and in Shanghai there is free pork soup from the tap. Other cartoons used the image of the - ritually improper - water burial in political mockery, by, for example, showing a fat pig who advises a skinny, poor and desperate-looking old man that he should take into consideration water as the cheapest available burial space, hinting at the fact that the fine for dumping (animal) corpses usually does not exceed 3000 Yuan. Yet another cartoon shows a modern Narcissus scrutinizing his porcine counterfeit in the river.⁸



Folklore easily transgresses the boundaries between human and non-human bodies, as the popular genre of ghost stories exemplifies. Thus, the turn towards traditional folklore in netizen youth culture, producing a great amount of narratives that combine the ancient genre of anomaly accounts with modern environmental issues, does not come as a surprise. Reflecting a returning sensibility towards the connectivities between human and non-human life, it mobilizes audiences to move away from Mao Zedong's paradigm of "people are masters of their own fate" 人定胜天 that was continued under the lead of scientific modernization and development theories legitimating violence in the short-term profit-oriented exploitation of bodies and natural resources. (J. Shapiro 2001; J. A. Shapiro 2012)

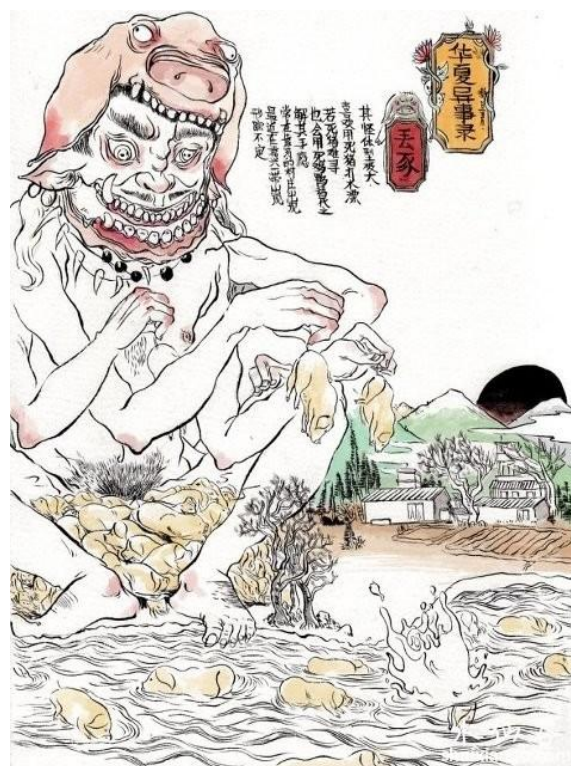
Despite effective campaigns against superstition conducted to wipe out feudal remnants in Maoist times, religious legends survived the modernist secularism. Popular narratives like the *Journey to the West* 西游记 with its countless transpositions in opera, literature and film continued to be acclaimed even by Mao Zedong. Zhang Guangyu's 张光宇 (1900-1965) Cartoon series *Journey to the West* 西游漫画 attacked the nationalist Guomindang party in 1945, and a famous poster showing Mao's fourth wife Jiang Qing 江青 as the White Bone Demon beaten in battle by the monkey god Sun Wukong 孙悟空 was published in the wake of the fall of the Gang of Four, dating from 1977.⁹ Porcine demon Zhu Bajie 猪八戒, a comic figure renowned for his physical power and martial spirit, but also for uncontrolled gluttony and lust, is another helper of west-bound pilgrim Monk Tripitaka 玄奘. He was banned from Heaven because he tried to seduce the Moon Goddess. One cartoon shows Zhu Bajie as a corrupt official who is heading south rather than west – the south with Shanghai as its civilizational center is the location of China's commercial culture – while his mistress urges him to

⁸ Da Shixiong, Fine of 3000 Yuan for disorderly disposal of pig corpses, see: <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/> 【图说天朝】一周网络漫画选摘-2013-3-24/大尸凶漫画: 乱抛猪尸罚款三千/; Meng Chenshang, A mirror, see: <http://t66x.com/?p=42>; both last viewed April 27, 2014.

⁹ <http://chineseposters.net/posters/e13-327.php>; last viewed April 27, 2014.

put on more clothes, because of late, she says, the south has turned cold.¹⁰ The cultural texts from which these cartoons draw allow for multiple perspectives and meanings. While criticizing the short-sighted profit orientation of politically protected agri-business with its mono-production and high rate of casualties, it also exposes the frowning of a cultural memory which has seen and recorded too many of such incidents over a long period of time. This memory today is itself subjected to homogenization, serial production and amnesia by commercial profit interests. However, its spirit of revolt still thrives in the social media, celebrating irony and diversity in applied aesthetic genres and styles.

Cartoonist Mr. Satan, for instance, continuously works on a story-book of allegorical cartoons related to crime, political malpractice and environmental issues under the title of *Strange Stories from Cathay*. His Pig-Dipper¹¹ looks like a Buddhist demon; maybe it was based on a Tibetan model, Yamantaka, who is a wrathful demon of the underworld with many arms. The cartoon blurb says that this strange demon, whose whereabouts are unknown, is addicted to dipping pigs, but when there is a dearth of the same, chicken and ducks may be used, too. The cartoon's narrative is arranged in the fashion of a traditional anomaly account, a hybrid form uniting ghost stories and spiritual geographies, which flourished as early as during the Han dynasty (206 BCE-200 CE) (Campany 1996) and continued doing very well in newspaper and magazine supplement literature throughout Republican times. (Huntington 2003)



¹⁰ Gou Ben, Don't freeze; see: <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2013/03/drawing-the-news-life-of-pig/> 勾犇漫画: 别冻着; last viewed April 27, 2014.

¹¹ Sadan Jun 撒旦君, Huaxia yishi lu 华夏异事录 (Mr. Satan, *Strange Stories from Cathay*), "The Pig Dipper," see: http://share.renren.com/305219600_15759459079/7110803516; last viewed April 20, 2014.

The modern Pig-Dipper is depicted as a liminal creature from the periphery encroaching upon the center, thereby signifying a crumbling cosmological order which cannot hold its monsters at bay, and possibly also an imminent shift of cosmic and cultural values - which is what anomaly accounts since the Six Dynasties period helped to usher in and disseminate.¹²

A River of Representatives Flows East

Another cartoon artist known by the English pseudonym of Crazy Crab drew a group of dead pigs floating towards the eastern ocean, while one lonely survivor with a crown and a name tag that identifies him as “Reform” leader frantically paddles upstream.¹³



The title of the cartoon is a pun on the 1947 movie *The Spring River Flows East* 一江春水向东流 (R Cai Chusheng, Zheng Junli), which in turn is derived from a classical poem written roughly two hundred years after Du Fu's times. It reads as follows:

When Will Spring Flowers and Autumn Moon End (To the Tune *Yu Meiren* 虞美人, *The Beautiful Lady Yu*)

Spring flowers, autumn moon – when will they end?
 Past affairs – who knows how many?
 Last night in the small pavilion the east wind came again.
 I dare not turn my head toward my homeland in the moonlight.
 The inlaid balustrade and jade stairs must still be there,
 - It's only the youthful faces that have changed.
 I ask you, how much sorrow can there be?
 As much as a river full of spring waters, flowing east.

(Cai 2008, 255)

¹² On one website it is described as a modern *Soushen ji* (搜神记 *Records of an Inquest into the Spirit Realm*); see: <http://baike.baidu.com/view/10497270.htm?fromTaglist>; last viewed April 29, 2014. See also: (Chiang 2005; Waldau and Patton 2013).

¹³ The cartoonist variously signs as Hexie Farm or Crazy Crab in English; in Chinese his pseudonym reads Xie Nongchang 蟹农场, or Crab Farm. See <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2013/03/> 【图说天朝】一周网络漫画选摘-2013-3-17/蟹农场漫画：一江代表向东流-2; last viewed April 20, 2014; see also: <http://hexiefarm.wordpress.com>.

The poem was written by the last (Southern) Tang emperor, Li Yu 李煜 (936-978), who followed his father on the exile throne in 961. In 975, his relocated capital Nanjing was seized by the Song forces and he was taken hostage and transferred to the Kaifeng court as nominal Marquis of Weiming. When he wrote the poem to lament his fallen empire – and possibly also the rape of his second wife by the victorious Song emperor – in 978, he was poisoned.

The imagery of water, moon and death relates to the cosmic yin force and bridges the different historical epochs. We may note that Lady Yu is another name for the poppy flower, which besides the disgraced empress symbolizes love and the death of war heroes and may also carry the connotation of violated nature in this framing. Moreover, as the leading representative's body displays the characters for reform, viewers may imagine to witness an imminent “water burial” of the regime's leading political orientation. By alluding to the 1947 movie, which shows a family ruined by moral corruption of its failed patriarch – he had started¹⁴ his family life as a virtuous communist – the cartoon suggests that a similar problem may lurk behind the pig dumping incident. Thus, the cartoonist likens the current situation to two of the most notorious epochs of leadership failure and dynastic crisis in Chinese history.

Life of Pig

In November 2012, Taiwan director Ang Lee's movie *Life of Pi* was released in China. Netizen cartoonists perceived a gap between the ethical appeal to redraw the boundaries between human, non-human and divine that is at the heart of Yann Martel's novel on the one hand, and an utterly insensitive, utilitarian attitude towards life which motivates irresponsible environmental agency like the cost-saving agri-industrial livestock farming under insufferable conditions on the other. A panoply of *Life of Pig* cartoons inundated the web, raising questions about human boastfulness and slippery morality, misunderstood secular liberty, the practice of self-blindfolding with respect to everything that consumers do not want to see, and modern civilization packaging spiritual death as physical comfort. (Mensch in: Painter and Lotz 2007, 135–147) In a variant showing gas-mask protected Pi and hungry Richard Parker surrounded by floating dead pigs, the tiger acts in a rather undignified way. He darts into the water screaming: There's meat! If I die, I will at least be a ghost who has eaten his fill!¹⁵

A second variant shows North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, a broadly smiling, well-dressed guy who looks very much like his companion on the boat, a healthy, fat pig. The originally rather covert idea of Richard Parker being an alter ego of Pi here is pushed to showcase a vulgar exhibitionism. We may wonder with this and another cartoonist, who stages North-Korean dictator Kim and South-Korean pop star Psy shouting in identical postures - one into two military girls' faces, the other at two sexy girls' barely covered backs: can these two Korean voices be considered as coextensive in the media, and what it is that brings Kim together with southern Chinese pig corpses?¹⁶ An announced “5D” mock DVD cover displays Papa and Mama Pig watching from the river bank, while a fisherman retrieves what looks like their dead offspring.¹⁷ The big question mark in this dystopian family romance leaves viewers wondering how the government can reintegrate into the fragmented nation

¹⁴ The husband remarries into a rich family of opportunistic collaborators with the Japanese. Back to Shanghai, he moreover secretly falls for another rich lover. When confronted with her husband's corruption, the shamed wife commits suicide by drowning herself. See (FitzGerald 2013, 170 f., FN 8)

¹⁵ Gou Ben, Youth of Pig (Shaonian of Pig), see: <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2013/03/> 【图说天朝】一周网络漫画选摘-2013-3-17/勾犇漫画：少年 pig 的漂流/; last viewed April 29, 2014.

¹⁶ <http://dailyoftheday.com/im-just-gonna-leave-this-right-here/>; last viewed April 29, 2014

¹⁷ <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2013/03/> 【组图】网民恶搞回应浙江死猪事件：少年 pig 的奇/; last viewed April 29, 2014.

those who have so far been left behind by the reform agenda. Such kinds of neoliberal capitalist dystopia remind viewers of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and can also be found in several recent Chinese documentaries and docu-style feature films. What power and capital less and less successfully gloss over is the growing gap between rich and poor social groups and the consequences of their short-term, profit-oriented exploitation of human as well as other bodies, such as animals, trees, mountains, or rivers. The surplus dimensions possibly hint at the ideological superstructure of this development, indicating an aesthetics of the sublime that continues to ground ideologies of modernization. Under both Mao and Deng the national future was painted larger than life, as in both contexts the regimes headed for monumental change.¹⁸

On a subliminal level, the river theme may also allude to the risky Three Gorges River Dam project, and thus link the dead pigs cartoons to the mythical, monumentalistic superstructure of the modern nation. It was first considered by Sun Yat-sen and other early 20th century Republicans and never stopped urging the imagination of China's leaders from Mao Zedong through Deng Xiaoping. Meanwhile it is operating, having drowned a large portion of China's cultural and landscape heritage, wiped out endangered species (such as the river dolphin 白鱀豚) and made millions of people homeless. Only recently, the technology has once again been declared unpredictable with respect to future disastrous flooding by one of its leading engineers. The dam's sublime effect of patriotic elation, now proudly sold to tourists, may eventually turn into a gigantic disaster.¹⁹ Here is a scenario with a related subtext to conclude our *Life of Pig* theme: Pi, turning his back to the viewer, is busy handling a shipload of dead pigs' bodies. It is left unclear in which direction his gesture is aiming: is he clearing pig corpses from the ship, or trying to retrieve the ones from the ocean? This moment of pause strikes as a comment on the current political situation, raising the question of where the fragile ship and its lonely captain are heading for: a continuation of the covering-up of daily incidents, or a heroic effort to confront the damage and work through its consequences?²⁰ There is literary precedence to the allegory of a shipwrecked Chinese nation. In his 1904 social satire *The Travels of Lao Can* 老残游记, novelist Liu E 刘鹗 (1857-1909) had first evoked the scene of a sinking ship with a crew and passengers who endlessly debate over ways to save their lives. Their solution is throwing overboard the only figure of hope. (Wang in Doleželová-Velingerová, Král, and Sanders 2001, 257–296)



¹⁸ The topic of an environmental reflection on the sublime in Chinese aesthetic discourse is subject matter of my forthcoming analysis in another context, see (Riemenschnitter forthcoming).

¹⁹ See, for instance, (Dai 1998) and (Chetham 2004).

²⁰ A cartoon by Da Shixiong 大尸兄, source <http://info.kankanews.com/c/2013-03-13/004728098.sht>; see also FN 17.

Stepping down from the symbolic level to the facts, there is much confusion about the background of the March 2013 mass disposal of corpses. Was it the H5N9 virus that during this season has killed an unusually high ratio of livestock? Or was the casualty a reaction to a recent change of laws? The 7.5 million pigs in Jiaxing were suddenly declared a source of health problems and a directive was communicated to the local authorities that the number of pigs was to be reduced to two million. Another directive simultaneously announced a more severe implementation of food safety laws, including legal measures against dealers of dead pig meat on the black market. As a consequence, there was a dramatic increase of animal corpse disposal into rivers.²¹ Some bloggers enthusiastically welcomed the floating pigs and ducks, saying that dumping dead pigs into rivers was good, because consumers would be less in danger of unknowingly eating their meat. It was thus seen as a sign of government action against corruption in agri-business.²²

FROM LANDSCAPE AESTHETICS TO ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Intellectual responses to environmental degradation are usually less immediate and not so carnivalesque, although some eminent writers of the 1980s root-searching movement did already experiment with a similar kind of black humor. Melancholia being not only the signature mood of the modern intellectual, but also having a long cultural history that reaches back to the first Chinese poet known by name, Qu Yuan 屈原 (343-278 BCE), it is not surprising to encounter so many quotations from the classics among intellectuals in response to the daily news. The educated elite's predicament has many roots, among them their participation in the destruction of the nation's scenic peripheries during the Cultural Revolution. Although much of their action was not designed and supervised by themselves, contemporary literature as well as oral history testify to lingering feelings of shame for the damage it yielded. (J. Shapiro 2001) Jiang Rong's 姜戎 bestselling novel *Wolf Totem* 狼图腾 (2004) for instance informs audiences about the *rusticated youth* 知青 generation's negative impact on Mongolian grassland regions then considered marginal and backward, which up to their arrival were owned and cultivated by nomad herders. The *rusticated youth* helped CCP cadres to modernize these regions in good faith, informing the herders that their animal allies and myth-mapped territories henceforth were to be considered solely as exploitable resources. In this way, formerly revered and thereby protected natural phenomena – wild animals, giant trees, caves, lakes and the like – were subjected to secularization, exploitation, pollution, demolishment, and extinction.

When the state in its recent greening policy subjected these regions to a new regime of ecological reconstruction, the re-environmentalized local inhabitants were losing again: land users were offered money and other benefits for their participation in reforestation or grassland reclaiming projects, but this policy, although hailed by external observers, was often accompanied by an enforced urban resettlement scheme. The reclamation scheme 退牧还草 aimed at an irreversible withdrawal of the local inhabitants from their land, thus turning it into state-owned property, where abuse by cadres was silently conceded. The project agents frequently coerced reluctant farmers into the program, pocketed money from the benefit scheme, or denounced the suddenly idle and impoverished urbanized settlers of uncivilized behavior. Moreover, these greening campaigns often did not even meet their immediate targets, as unexpected side effects sometimes went squarely against the desired results. (Harris 2007, 54 ff.; E. T. Yeh 2009; E. T. Yeh 2005)

²¹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/24/us-china-farming-pigs-idUSBRE93N1C720130424>; last viewed June 6, 2013; see also <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/mar/25/shanghai-dead-pig-story-upstream>; last viewed May 3, 2014.

²² <http://huati.weibo.com/29827?order=time>; last viewed April 27, 2014.

A concomitant trend of demolition, reconstruction and urban sprawl in cities was not met with much resistance, either. By and large only those citizens who were directly affected would constitute temporary activist groups. This urban inertia may historically be seen as a result of the changed relationship between elite subjects, the city and the countryside. Nowadays hardly any urban citizen plans to retire to his or her countryside home after the completion of their professional duties – perhaps because their homes were destroyed during Maoist times, but also due to the changed ideology that no longer accredits any value to rural life. Besides, land acquisition is not only expensive, but also still not sufficiently protected unless it is part of an institutional development scheme.²³ Therefore, after the Maoist land reforms the countryside has lost the investments and the aesthetic appeal that were traditionally accorded to it by the cultural elite. Modern literati like Lu Xun had still maintained a positive attitude towards the scenic gardens surrounding their city houses.²⁴ But by now landscapes outside protected nature reserves are singularly considered targets of either industrial and real estate development or touristic mass consumption. (Oakes 2011) The ideology of modernization spurred this trend, which discredited local folk belief as superstition and threw overboard everything that did not conform to scientific rationalism, including the philosophical traditions of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism. Equally unheard went Karl Marx' warnings concerning the growing metabolic rift between nature and modern societies:

“Man lives from nature, i.e., nature is his body, and he must maintain a continuing dialogue with it if he is not to die. To say that man’s physical and mental life is linked to nature simply means that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.”
(Elster 1986, 41)

An integrated Marxist system of thought with Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist elements, which endorses traditional wisdom claiming that humans constitute a privileged, but not isolated part of an integrated cosmic organism, could have helped to avoid the most destructive forms of industrial exploitation. As a matter of fact, ancient elite techniques of self-cultivation were based on the idea of a bodily connection with cosmic energies; they included disciplining exercises like meditation, special (vegetarian) diets and an overall ascetic attitude towards worldly temptations. Some of these ideas were rediscovered by present-day environmentalists outside China, observes Aat Vervoorn:

[T]he relevance of early Chinese hermits to the modern world is unexpectedly direct; the fascination they hold is to no small extent due to the fact that the problems they faced and their responses to them seem so familiar. Those who either have been tempted or have actually gone so far as to drop out of contemporary society, take up subsistence farming so as to minimize contact with a world gone crazy, ignore the demands of a State they regard as corrupt, or otherwise embrace civil disobedience in an effort to retain a belief in their own integrity, will find that their actions have been fully prefigured by the Chinese hermits of long ago.(Vervoorn 1990, vii f.)

This book was published in 1990, when China had a mere ten year-old history of reform capitalism, and hopes for a quick turn towards a clean and green economy were still alive. Meanwhile there are signs that some traits of ancient hermitism are resurrected in China, too, contributing to the diversification of urban middle-class eco-lifestyles, and circulating in new forms of nature writing. These narratives critically address the environmental consequences of the nation's ambitious

²³ There is a Mr. Satan cartoon on this issue, too, see FN 12.

²⁴ On this matter see my earlier work on the ethical and economic revaluations of the empire's landscapes based on recoded aesthetic principles during the late Ming political crisis and the ensuing Ming-Qing transition, where I focus on the literati construction of a prosperous, latently counter-imperial West Lake scenery in Hangzhou and new perceptions of the wilderness at the empire's peripheries: (Riemenschmitter 1998; Riemenschmitter 2003)

economic policies, or search for places where nature still seems more or less intact so that humans can turn to them in order to launch a less destructive attitude towards nature and landscapes (Han 2006). Relying on Walter Benjamin's critique of capitalist modernization and with an eye to Hong Kong's accelerated transformation since the 1970s, Ackbar Abbas had termed their attitude of looking at vanishing objects with sentiments of love at last sight an aesthetics of *déjà disparu*. (Abbas 1997) It is not difficult to draw a parallel on what is happening now in mainland China.

Encountering Sorrow: Disappearing Nature in the Poetry of Yu Jian

Wang Shudong's chapter on the anti-environmental, aggressive approach towards nature discusses narratives of the conquest, domination and extinction of so-called useless or dangerous species as romances of heroic modernization. They abound in the literary production of the Maoist years (1949-1976), but can also be encountered in later narratives disseminating anthropocentrism, consumerism and related capitalist values. (S. Wang 2008, 208–249) Countering these grand narratives of an omnipotent, rapidly transforming modernity, eco-critical authors eulogized the beauty and uniqueness of vanishing nature – encompassing species extinction as well as the demolition of cultural forms including landscapes – and argued for quick redress. Among the writers who frame the problem as a consequence of the indoctrination of peasant and minority communities in the name of the supremacy of scientific knowledge, advanced ideology and economic development is Kunming-based poet Yu Jian 于坚 (b. 1954). Invoking the shamanic spirit of the earliest transmitted cosmological songs – and by implication their representative author Qu Yuan (ca. 340-278 BCE) – Yu dedicated the poem *Mourning Lake Dian* 哀滇池 to the deceased spirit of a once scenic lake that had met with its biological death:

Woo	let me fly the flags at half mast in my soul country Let me run your funeral all by myself!
Woo ye Spirit	When I was born atheism was the current of the times I am not awestruck in front of eternity I took from you my animated being and wisdom But no awe or affection
Woo	Great Spirit in the Dark I put my hand into your foul water Let me rot as well. Please bestow me with affection awe I want to use my poems to build your shrine! In your big temple I want to redeem my crime!

(S. Wang 2008, 253 my translation)

This outlook dolefully reflects the consequences of a mechanical world view, suggesting that the impact of the “order of the machine”²⁵ on modernist aesthetic paradigms led to the production of a corresponding set of socially disruptive consumption habits. Inspired by Daoist ideas, Yu wrote other poems about the beauty of the useless, the functionalist irreverence towards natural phenomena,

²⁵ “The removal of animistic, organic assumptions about the cosmos constituted the death of nature – the most far-reaching effect of the Scientific Revolution. Because nature was now viewed as a system of dead, inert particles moved by external, rather than inherent forces, the mechanical framework itself could legitimate the manipulation of nature. Moreover, as a conceptual framework, the mechanical order had associated with it a framework of values based on power, fully compatible with the directions taken by commercial capitalism...The mechanical philosophies of Mersenne, Gassendi, and Descartes all exhibited a strong common reaction against naturalism, vitalism, and animistic magic, which in a world of social upheaval and religious conflict, could be seen as aiding and abetting disorder and chaos. ...The mechanists...transformed sympathies and antipathies into efficient causes. The resultant corpse was a mechanical system of dead corpuscles, set into motion by the Creator, so that each obeyed the law of inertia and moved only by external contact with another moving body.” (Merchant 1990, 193–195).

and the self-conscious retreat of seasons, scenic sites, trees, tigers, or birds of prey. In his poetological essays he bewails that modern civilization develops along with a total denial of rights to non-humans, which makes the poet “feel the fear of humankind in the natural world. Their only way of opposition is disappearance, vanishing, extinction or taking the shape of a frightening landslide.” (S. Wang 2008, 264)

Embracing Thirst: Landscape in the Poetry of Xi Chuan

Responding to Yu and other poets' calls for reforms regarding the modern aesthetics of nature, a number of contemporary art historians, painters and poets are currently revisiting traditional Chinese landscape art, probing into an ancient cultural vocabulary of wronged individuals' appeal for cosmic vindication, thus relocating their discontent with a regime of social and environmental devastation. Among them is Xi Chuan 西川 (b. 1960), who published three poems on Song literati landscape paintings.²⁶ In these poems he agrees with eco-critical intellectual voices who envision a legacy of sustainable religious, philosophical, moral and aesthetic values that could bring this once powerful cultural form to the fore of an emergent environmental turn. Contemplating the different world views and life conditions of landscape painters across time from the earliest creators of blueprints during the Five Dynasties to the last neotraditional representatives from the 1930s and 40s, Xi Chuan in an interview traces a tradition in which individuals strive to let go of all trivial pursuits in order to attune their life essence with the rhythm of nature. In his two poems on a landscape scroll by Fan Kuan 范宽 (fl. 990-1030), he measures the distance between human society with its mundane affairs and the sphere of the non-human, where natural phenomena absorbed in arduous self-cultivation can be observed:

In Fan Kuan's view, the homeland means landscapes: mountains and rivers; it means peaks, waterfalls, streams, tiny wooden bridges high above the streams, rocks, trees, temples, mountain paths, tiny little people on mountain paths, donkeys driven by tiny little people. The donkeys are tiny little birds who walk on their four legs. Each of the tall trees that they unhurriedly pass by has already attained the *dao*. Their coarse roots hold firmly to the vast Shaanxi region's stubborn perseverance.

And in this moment the Zhenzong Emperor in the Capital is busy balancing the profits of the bigwigs. And in this moment none of the bigwigs has appreciated this scroll and its “Travelers among mountains and streams.”²⁷

The idea of landscape subjectivity is brought to the fore even more explicitly in the second poem. Xi Chuan immerses himself into the scenery of Fan Kuan's picture and concludes that, in contradiction with the scroll's title, the human figures seem the least important protagonists:

The minuscule peddlers and travel-worn, antsy passersby in this quiet scenery aren't officials or landlords. And even if officials or landlords came to this mountain, they would be equally minuscule. This is not only Fan Kuan's conception, it is the conception of the local Earth God. This is a landscape

²⁶ See his “Dangdai shuimohua zhong de maodun yu wenti – cong songhua tan qi” 当代水墨画中的矛盾与问题 - 从宋画谈起 (The contradictions and problems in contemporary ink paintings – starting from a discussion of Song Dynasty paintings), in: Canghua 藏画 (Painting Collection) no. 3, 2013, pp. c1-c4; see also a revised version of this article on <http://baokun.blog.siyuefeng.com/blogArticle/show/8909#>; last viewed April 29, 2014.

²⁷ Xi Chuan, *On Fan Kuan's monumental landscape scroll “Travelers among mountains and streams”*, in Xi 2013, c4 (see FN 26).

painting where you can hardly spot the people. Yet it is called “Travelers among mountains and streams.”²⁸

The poet stresses the modest position of humankind with respect to both its material needs and spiritual achievements vis-à-vis nature, showing how their interaction is an intersection of those embodied individuals present at that moment and their communion via the local life energy *qi* 气 that animates both bodies and environment as a shared substance. Spiritual cultivation depends on absorbing this *qi* while forgetting the self: here, the non-human inhabitants of the landscapes are shown to be much more advanced in this practice and thus acting as superior teachers of the *dao*. An even stronger ethical statement is made in the observation of thirst as a divine gift to the mountain's trees, travelers and other bodies: it is seen as a prerogative of successful self-cultivation and distinguishes this realm from the futile desires of an over-supplied cultural center mentioned in the first poem:

The stinginess with water, I have seen it. The thread of a waterfall on the right side of the peak, I have seen it. I've tried to understand: this is not merely Fan Kuan's composition, it is the composition of the local Earth God, too. - It is thirsty nature itself. The thirsty travelers at the foot of the mountain drive their thirsty donkeys, passing by giant trees whose thirst made them stretch out their arms. (ibid.)

Thirst, or scarcity, is thus seen as the primordial condition for the development of resilient physical embodiments in terms of form, power and beauty. At the core of Xi's interest in the art of traditional ink wash landscape painting, as a resilient cultural form, are a philosophical and a technical issue: the technical momentum that interests him most is its origin in generic limitations. Different from the dominant, western techniques one cannot paint a number of things in ink wash. Industrial chimneys, high-speed trains and other insignia of modernity do not look right in the range of abstraction a Chinese ink brush allows for. The perceived inadequacy of this art contributed to its silencing and fall into oblivion in the contemporary aesthetic mainstream, which in Xi Chuan's view may paradoxically become its most promising potential when subjected to cultural revision. As painters could not aim at realism and did not wish to privilege visual over other forms of aesthetic perception, they looked elsewhere and found suitable brush stroke techniques for the artistic abstraction of lived experience on silk or paper. Philosophically, the poet stresses the long history of Chinese thinkers' engagement with a world in upheaval. Bringing together ancient wisdom and an aesthetics of restrictions as a formula for the liberating potential of this art, Xi Chuan suggests its further exploration in contemporary contexts. (Xi 2013, see FN 26) This approach is different from western modernist theories of alienation, which were built on a critique of Greek drama with its focus on mimesis and catharsis. This tradition promoted the reunion of self and the community (and by implication also the environment) based on affective excitement. Newer theories of drama suspected this cathartic function arguing that they bring about a suspension of the rational self that impedes humanist progress, but they sometimes went too far in denouncing it. (Auslander 1997, 13–27) Concomitantly, culture industry exploited the comfort zones of the newly liberated bodily self, undisturbed by the more recent intellectual experiments that strove to overcome the body-mind alienation without getting trapped in private emotions. Xi's idea of Song landscape art as harbinger of a shared experience of resilience with respect to disorder and resource scarcity acknowledges the different legacies of modern art production, identifies an hitherto overlooked, local cultural form for aesthetic renewal and attributes universal value to the performative act of reunification between the human self and the environment.²⁹

²⁸ Xi Chuan, *Once again on Fan Kuan's "Travelers among mountains and streams"*, ibid.

²⁹ Among the western artists that Xi Chuan finds particularly inspiring are Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Lucian Freud, Jan Saudek, Damien Hirst and Antony Gormley. See Xi 2013, p. C4.

Thus, Xi Chuan does not position himself as an environmentalist and keeps the sometimes superficial invocations of ancient Asian environmental wisdom in western eco-aesthetics at a safe distance. In his poems on landscape art as well as other recent poetry he engages with Chinese philosophical and aesthetic traditions by reconciling ancient values with contemporary moral problems, and asks questions about how they could help to build an alternative to the up-rooted aesthetics of a globalizing modernity. His penchant for paradoxical composition is well-known, but so far little has been said about the social life of Xi Chuan's thing-world. (Appadurai 1988) In poem no. 11 of the cycle *Flowers in the Mirror* 镜花水月 (2003-2004), a cookie hawker sells his merchandise accompanied by a tape deck playback of the revolutionary musical icon *Yellow River Cantata* 黄河大合唱 (Xian Xinghai, 1939). The lyrical I measures the distance between the Yellow River, into which one may throw the accumulated commodities of such a hawker's lifetime business without its even noticing, whereas the same amount of cookies piled up on the market street would bestow on him a great deal of lofty sentiments. The imagined (denied) response from the river to the gift of cookies is cast into the figure of its mythical ruler, the Dragon King. In this poetic assemblage, time measured by a day's trade under the regime of a redundant simulacrum of the revolutionary past's heroic music exposes the gap between the river's own, unhurried natural history, modern China's rapid transformation and the fleeting moment of a petty street hawker's eager participation in the theatre of capitalism with Chinese characteristics. (Xi 2006, 49 f.) Inspiration for this montage technique of assembling landscape, history and myth may have come from the most highly regarded classical poem on the obscure relationship between man and nature, Li Shangyin's 李商隐 (813-858) *Brocade Zither* 锦瑟. According to Robert Ashmore the poem can be read as a multiply encoded text centering on the "mysteries of transformation and of occult sympathy, that span the gap between human experience and the creatures and objects of the natural world." (Ashmore in Cai 2008, 196 f.) As a poem about the art of poetry it resists the practice of culturally inscribing objects and natural vistas by means of myth in order to facilitate the human subject's flights from reality, arguing instead for an alterity that invites affective and aesthetic engagement, but ultimately cannot be fully appropriated:

The brocade zither without reason has fifty strings;
 each string has its bridge; one longs for the flowering years.
 Master Zhuang, in dawn dream, is lost in a butterfly;
 Emperor Wang's springtime heart is entrusted to the cuckoo.
 On the gray sea, the moon shines bright, and the pearl has tears;
 At Indigo Field, the sun is warm, and jade gives off smoke.
 This feeling, one can wait for it to become a recollection;
 only at the time it was already bewildering.

(Cai 2008, 195 f.)

This veneration for aesthetic creation beyond human control was gradually gnawed away in history. Its disappearance culminates in the new thing-world's total silencing, appropriation and commodification. Xi Chuan repeatedly interrogates classical poetic images in *Jinse*-style paradoxical enactments in order to restore their autonomy and reconnect his modern art with the ancient aesthetic community. Read in this way, his work can be called in as an example for the cultural revindication of environmental subjectivity in times of unprecedented landscape demolition. In a more pedestrian way, and therefore useful as an eminently practical eco-aesthetical guideline, Beijing Tsinghua University visual arts professor Chen Anying offers a similar view:

Literati art is like Chinese gardens: it combines culture and nature within a restricted space. It is to be hoped that the modern study of literati art will not only enable us to reconnect with nature but that it will also enable us to reconcile modernity and tradition, modernism and culture. It is only by achieving this reconciliation that China can become a country that is pleasant, reliable, and an attractive place to visit and live in. (Huber and Zhao 2011, 70)

Shanghai-based artist Yang Yongliang 杨泳梁 (b. 1980) takes yet another route by merging traditional landscape ink art with photography, sound and digital animation techniques in order to produce series of ghostly urban mountainscapes deplete of vegetation or in fact non-human life, and of course with no sign of any spiritual pursuit. An empty, revolving Ferris wheel – as signifier of global modernity's covert religion – usually takes the place of a temple or cathedral in these videos. In his short clip *Landscape* 山水, viewers approach a seemingly traditional landscape painting, featuring a range of mountains from a distance. Upon coming closer it reveals its substitute scenic architecture and non-human life, consisting of cranes, energy plants and traffic. Like many of his other landscape videos or installations featuring skyscrapers, road constructions and the like, the background of deafening civilizational noise is rhythmically crisscrossed by sudden explosions, floods or the appearance of ruins. *Landscape* ends with the words: “Mountains aren't mountains, Waters aren't waters. Give us back our landscapes”.³⁰ The concluding phrase alludes to an inscription dedicated to a Song Dynasty hero, General Yue Fei (1103-1142), who had successfully fought against the Jin invaders until he was denounced and eventually brought to death by a corrupt court official. The tablet was written and attached to his shrine in Hangzhou by patriotic scholars in 1931 during the war of resistance against Japan. The modified wording in Yang's video hints at a formula of national crisis, where the nation's leaders wreak havoc on the homeland in the manner of the historical foreign invaders. It takes us full circle to the poem which started our journey through the cultural comments on China's environmental crisis: the nation remains, its mountains and rivers destroyed.

CONCLUSION: FIVE KINDS OF ENVIRONMENTAL SUBJECTS

Based on the above-mentioned comments and aesthetic projects, an emergent discursive space for a fundamental change in China's environmental governance can be discerned. In this context, five different kinds of environmental subjects seek recognition, claiming their interests in various cultural patterns: the fictional representation of human-animal alliances among the silenced lower bottom of society, political satire authored by urban bloggers and creative netizens, poetological explorations of the nation's cultural memory by intellectuals and artists, urban activist eco-movements, and the experimental resurrection of the stories and voices of the planet's non-human agents. The resistance of these agents addresses the project of environmental modernization as such, but more concretely those state institutions and investors who are supposedly the most powerful force for prompting change, but obviously do not fulfill the citizens' expectations. Currently, the state still very often tries to construct a marketable green facade, which conveniently hides its ongoing disregard for whatever external costs the current economic development causes. As Emily Yeh puts it,

China's own articulation of its ecological modernization path eliminates discussion of what are arguably the most promising parts of the ecological modernization framework, concerns about the changing nature of politics and the relationship between state and civil society. Instead, the focus is only on the greening of China through market logics and new plans and projects. (E. T. Yeh 2009)

³⁰ Yang cooperates with the Shanghai-based China Environment Protection Foundation (CEPF), initiated by the global advertising company JWT (J. Walther Thompson), which promotes leading international brands and recently drew much attention placing a controversial Ford Figo Ad.

On a less evident level, these environmental subjects have already begun subversively to constitute a Latourian “Parliament of Things,” where the once muted agents rise to speak up for themselves (Latour 1993, 142–145). The subaltern, displaced protesters from below, although still trapped in an awkward position as the nation's residual premodernity, seem to become more and more aware of this situation and promote their own speakers in the embodiment of migrant workers' literary careers.³¹ With their inherited environmental wisdom peasants could also play a significant role in this reorientation, but so far are not recognized as guardians and potential transmitters of any valuable knowledge, or offered participation in a multicultural, mature, responsible and vigilant civil society. Rather, they find themselves, via resettlement and reclamation programs, thrown into a pool of minor quality human resources awaiting their recycling in some future labor designation. (Yan in Anagnost 2013, 150–173)

China's bloggers, however, are fully articulate and media-savvy environmental subjects who are quick to intervene and interrogate the role of Beijing as well as of global powers in incidents like Shanghai's floating pigs scandal by means of carnival, satire, wit, and sometimes also spontaneous protest actions outside the cyberspace. (Herold and Marolt 2011) Their creative furor reaches beyond issues of pollution or food safety, as their cartoons equally draw from imperial history, cosmology, traditional elite aesthetics, popular legends, and modern mass cultural narratives. Their dissatisfaction sometimes culminates in strong emotions and challenges the legitimacy of a regime which allows such appalling things to happen on a daily base. Their disagreement more and more openly focuses on a political class with too much power that nevertheless cannot prevent the rampant violation of insufficiently implemented environmental laws, let alone enforce improvement, while investing the larger part of its pedagogic efforts into disciplining and subduing critical voices. However, their inclination to polarize might concomitantly gloss over an attitude of convenient loftiness among these urbanites: it is the others – the state, the Party, NGOs etc. – who are expected to act and take responsibility on their behalf. If these agents fail they are blamed. But is there a more active contribution to social change from this group? We would like to ask, for instance, about their consumption patterns: do they buy organic food, how are they saving on resources, are they collecting information on the production paths of the goods they buy? These are open questions that await to be studied together with these cyber protests.

The third group of environmental subjects, a growing group of eco-critical writers and artists, looks back plunging into ancient local traditions that advised to venerate and communicate with, rather than to plunder and exhaust nature. The academic intellectuals' moral concerns provide ideas and scenarios for change, but still refrain from actively supporting transformative projects. Yet more and more artists try, like Yang Yongliang, to overcome the conventional disciplinary boundaries with their multimedia art performances based on the involvement of sponsors from the spheres of business and finance. Taiwanese environmental artists Wu Mali and Vincent J. F. Huang, each in their own way, have gained global appreciation for their public events involving citizens in water cleaning, recycling, and energy saving. Huang's latest project for the Venice Biennale was designed to attract the world's attention for the first nation doomed to vanish on account of the rising sea level: the

³¹ See, for instance, Sheng Keyi 盛可以 (b. 1970s), who was a migrant laborer during the 1990s and published a successful novel based on her experience by the title of *Bei mei* 北妹 (translated as Northern Girls, 2004). See also her New York Times essay on the pollution of her homevillage river, published on April 4, 2014: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/05/opinion/chinas-poisonous-waterways.html?_r=0 ; last viewed July 21, 2014.

nearly zero-carbon producing Polynesian island of Tuvalu.³² In Renzhuang village near Beijing, a group of artists has reclaimed a traditional courtyard compound in order to build for themselves and their visitors a modern *Taohua yuan* style botanic garden that matches the aesthetic sophistication of their creative work. Both the quick-witted responses to environmental incidents by bloggers and cartoon producers and the less immediate intellectual reflection betray a deep dissatisfaction with the modern ideologies' devaluation of values – be they postsocialist or global capitalist.

Side by side with displaced peasants, cyber artists and urban nature writers, a growing number of grass roots activists and volunteers have begun to engage in landscape protection and nature conservation projects. Among the many shapes the agency of our fourth type of environmental subjects is currently taking, some are especially promising for citizen stewardship of sustainable lifestyles. For example, a global movement of urban farming has reached the Chinese metropolises. Organic farms offer parcels of land to urbanites to grow their own vegetables – they can choose the kind or amount of professional help they want³³ – and private urban gardeners are discovering their districts' empty rooftops.³⁴ Another grass roots engagement with environmental education is water calligraphy in urban parks. Retired citizens practice and teach calligraphy written in water with huge brushes on public ground. The purpose can be attained without using ink or paper: practicing perfection in the conjunction of one's bodily movements, a brush and the receiving surface.³⁵

The fifth kind of environmental subject is planet earth itself, including its forms of self-actualization and its culturally constructed landscapes. While most non-human agents were muted during earlier phases of modernization, the clashes between the planet's agency of growing, nurturing, flourishing and human military or civil interventions are now, in what has been termed the age of the Anthropocene, taken into account more seriously. A pattern of floods, droughts, tornadoes and other hazards induced by climate change is creating a discourse of crisis that highlights negative civilizational effects. The more subtle role of nature as a symbolic universe mediating the relationship between the realms of life and death, or animal, human and divine, was rejected and purged from the cultural production by political decree in China during the Maoist years as a counter-productive, irrational sphere of religious superstition. But at present nature is eloquently revindicated as a subject in the above-mentioned attempts to integrate the various cultural as well as bodily – religious, ritual, ethical, creative, reproductive, metabolic etc. – traditions of human interaction with natural and social environments in a realm of aesthetic immanence and dialogue. The same can be observed in the revival of religious traditions in some regions, where believers, sacred texts and their deities constitute an active, significant, and mediating part of the community. Their rituals offer different modernizing strategies and targets for the renegotiation of the realms of power, resources, as well as human material and spiritual desires. (Dean and Zheng 2010) To consider landscapes as participating agents in the construction of an alternative Chinese modernity

³² For a survey on western environmental art, strangely ignorant of what is going on elsewhere, see: Elaine A. King, *The Landscape in Art. Nature in the Crosshairs of an Age-old Debate*, <http://www.artesmagazine.com/2010/11/the-landscape-in-art-nature-in-the-crosshairs-of-an-age-old-debate/>. For a Shanghai initiative involving eco-landscape artist Yang Yongliang, see <http://theinspirationroom.com/daily/2009/shan-shui-environmental-art-from-china/>.

³³ On the web I found the Green Cow Farm in the Northeast, near the 6th Ring, <http://www.greencowfarm.com/>, which distributes weekly vegetable and meat baskets to their volunteering clients, and Green Dragonfly Family Farm in a new development zone east of Beijing, where people can rent their own parcel of land: <http://www.gdfamilyfarm.com/news.asp>; last viewed June 11, 2013. Other organic farms near Beijing, like 3fendi or Miyun, only take in online orders from customers, which they deliver to their homes.

³⁴ <http://vimeo.com/53600192>, last viewed 11 June, 2013.

³⁵ See Angela Zito's documentary *Writing in Water / China / USA / 2012*.

is to argue for environmental justice and to advocate a reformed aesthetic outlook. This implies that the planet's first cosmological principle, the reciprocity of giving and taking, must replace the present program of short-sighted, profit-oriented wealth extraction from whatever Other. (Berleant 2002) If this simple rule for collective survival is ignored, these voices warn, it will not only become more and more difficult to recite the ancient poems, but the sympathetic forest of tears, once a lush grove where disconsolate hero Jia Baoyu could hide to weep over his beloved Lin Daiyu's death in the popular Qing novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, will itself soon be remembered only as a specter.³⁶



³⁶ Bi Chuanguo 毕传国, "Ancient poems are hard to recite;" see: http://guancha.gmw.cn/2011-05/12/content_1952521.htm; "Forest of tears," see: http://pub.gdpcb.gov.cn/pub/culture/pub_comic_detail.jsp?ID=5bb0e43a-0138-1000-e000-00ac0a0a0a02&attKey=culture_comic; last viewed April 27, 2014.

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