Environmentality, Sustainability, and Chinese Storytelling

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Abstract: Environmentality teases out the multilayered human-environment contacts and connections in terms of human agency and governmentality, ecological objects and their (in)dependence, power/knowledge and environmental (in)justice. "Sustainable Development Goals" recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our environment. This paper outlines the scopes, scales, and methods of Chinese storytelling and multimedia exhibitions on deforestation and afforestation, pollution and purification, and wastelands and eco-systems in industrial, de-industrial, and post-industrial times. The author considers short stories, novels, reportages, nonfiction writings, and visual artworks, with specific focus on trees, forests, and plant writing. By reading Kong Jiesheng's "Forest Primeval," Ah Cheng's "King of Trees," Xu Gang's *Loggers, Wake Up!*, Yan Lianke's *Garden No. 711: The Ultimate Last Memo of Beijing*, and Chen Yingsong's *The Forest Is Silent*, the author aims to bring to light the awakening and formation of Chinese ecological consciousness, the token of marred humanity and ecocritical reflection, the manifestation of biophilia-biophobia experiences, as well as the structural transformation of private feelings and public emotions in modern and contemporary China.
Keywords: environmentality, sustainability, storytelling, ecological imagination.

INTRODUCTION

To envision a shared ecological and environmental blueprint for peace and prosperity for all people and the planet now and into the future, the United Nations proposes seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDF), which are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership. They recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations requires strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our environment. Goal 15, "Life on Land," "seeks to protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat

desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss"; Goal 11, "Sustainable Cities and Communities," aims to "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable (United Nations, 2015, n.p.).

This paper seeks to situate these Sustainable Development Goals into the contexts of environmentality, ide(c)ology, objects, and storytelling, in order to consider key issues in the recent material turn, affective turn, and environmental humanities in academia.

AN OUTLINE OF CRITICAL APPROACHES

Environmentality is a term used to describe an approach to understanding complex interplays of power, governance, and representations of human-environment interactions. In *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Lawrence Buell examines environmentality across the genre spectrum and argues that all literary texts encode a certain type of environmentality, consciously or unconsciously: "a text's environmental unconscious is more deeply embedded even than its 'the political unconscious'" (2005: 44). Buell's early work *Environmental Imagination* outlines the major characteristics of environmental texts as follows:

1. The nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history. 2. The human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest. 3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation. 4. Some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text (1995: 7-8).

Partially inspired by Michel Foucault's critical approaches to power, subjectivity, governmentality, biopolitics, and biopower, Arun Agrawal's *Environmentality* (2005) interprets two different yet related attitudes toward forests in terms of the technologies of governmentality, and the making of environmental subjects in Northern India and beyond: in the 1920s, the local people set fire to forests to resist colonial control; yet in the 1990s, they began to conserve forests and thus built new environmental identities combining political ecology and feminist environmentalism. I argue that environmentality teases out the multilayered human-environment contacts and connections in terms of human agency and governmentality,

ecological objects and their (in)dependency, power/knowledge and environmental (in)justice.

Ide(c)ology is a term I propose to combine ideology and ecology to address the ideological and ecological entanglements (Song 2018). Louis Althusser famously states that "in ideology the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that *expresses a will* (conservative, conformist, reformist or revolutionary), a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality" (1979: 234). The Ecological Society of America defines ecology as "the study of the relationships between living organisms, including humans, and their physical environment; it seeks to understand the vital connections between plants and animals and the world around them. Ecology also provides information about the benefits of ecosystems and how we can use Earth's resources in ways that leave the environment healthy for future generations" (ESA, nd: n.p.). Ecocriticism is a "broad way for literary and cultural scholars to investigate the global ecological crisis through the intersection of literature, culture, and the physical environment" (Gladwin 2017: n.p.). By the term ide(c)ology, I attempt to situate environmental objects into the nexus of materiality, reality, and mentality.

My conceptualization of ecological and environmental storytelling in this paper benefits from Rob Nixon's study of slow violence, environmentalism for the poor, and environmental storytelling, in which he raises the question of how can environmental writers craft emotionally involving stories from disasters that are slow-moving and attritional, rather than explosive and spectacular? He further lists the following strategies to plot and give shape to ecological threats and crises:

1. To confront slow violence requires, then, that we plot and give shape to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time.
2. Use striking visual imagery.
3. Reconfigure big stories on a human scale.
4. Tell stories no one else can tell.
5. Find powerful analogies that resonate.
6. Refuse conventional narrative frameworks. (Nixon 2011: n.p.)

Environmental storytelling showcases the world of things and objects and the surrounding living environment, on the one hand, and the aesthetic encounters, affective attachment, interdisciplinary knowing and

understanding, and human experiences and knowledge inside and outside the body, on the other.

Concerning the issues and methods of the material turn, I borrow Bill Brown's *Sense of Things* (2003) and focus on the social life and biography of environmental objects, trying to locate the trajectories of objects, humans, and identities, and to tease out the entanglements of objectivity and subjectivity. In other words, I understand environmental objects as both concrete things and abstract concepts. My sources of inspiration also include the affective turn, which is one of the main topics explored in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). As Eric Shouse succinctly summarizes, "feelings are personal and biographical, emotions are social, and affects are prepersonal" (2005, n.p.).

Environmental humanities, eco-criticism, and nature writing include (1) environmental philosophy, ecosophy, and environmental ethics in the 1970s; (2) environmental history in the 1980s; and (3) environmental literature, cultural studies, anthropology, geography, and political ecology since the 1980s … The three waves of environmental humanities shift the focuses and scopes of investigations from (1) nature and the non-human world to (2) the urban life and environmental justice, and to (3) transnational and multi-ethnic ecological crises and sustainable futures (Heise 2017; Buell 2005). We also need to pay more attention to a symptomatic ecoambiguity, "the complex, contradictory interactions between people and environments with a significant nonhuman presence" (Thornber 2012: 1).

ENVIRONMENTAL THINGS AND THOUGHTS

I explore the scopes, scales, and methods of ide(c)ological storytelling and multimedia exhibitions of deforestation and afforestation, pollution and purification, and wastelands and eco-systems in modern and contemporary China, ranging from literary imaginations to artistic expressions, from realist observations to modernist representations. I examine a few significant environmental objects, including waters, air and smog, plastics, smokestacks, and trees/forests in the planet.

Biographies of waters/rivers/oceans reveal the scarcity of water and the search for life-sustaning resources; water pollution and purification; ideological, ecological, and hygienic narratives about waters; and the

entanglements of water writing in the anthropocentrism and de-anthropocentism (Lu and Mi 2009, Gong and Lu 2020).

Air narratives and smog stories are unfolded and developed in the veins of Oriental aesthetics; literary writing, visual presentation and avant-garde art; the grassroots movement, the practice of daily life; the collective ecological unconsciousness; and biophilic and aesthetic impulse. Air, fog, smoke, and smog as environmental objects can also be related to geographical distribution, public health concerns, ecological crisis and propaganda; mainstream scientific discourse; official and personal concerns and warnings; new deal on traffic laws; and modification of economic development models (Chang 2021).

The trajectories of plastics, in the city and the country, can be traced and investigated from the perspectives of scale and dissemination of plastics; the exploitation of colonialism and global capitalism; the doomsday of human civilization and the ecosystem; and the mortality or finitude of life.

In an earlier article, I focused on smokestacks as the incarnation of modernization and industrial civilization; the crystallization of modernity anxiety; the gigantic signs and landmarks of post-war industrialization and urban development; the targets for the belated awakening of environmental and ecocritical awareness; and the materialization of (post)industrial sentiments related to individual and collective memory and nostalgia. I understand the imagery of smokestacks both as a concrete object and an abstract concept, which emerged in works ranging from early Chinese futurist eulogy to modernist allergy, from Maoist propaganda to post-socialist eco-critical reflections and the post-Fifth Generation requiem for Communism, and from literary imagination to artistic representation (Song, 2020).

PLANT WRITING AND STORYTELLING

Trees and forests can be understood as environmental objects that illuminate the relationship between humans and the natural world, and phytography (plant writing) as illustrating critical issues relevant to environmental humanities, ecocriticism, and a sustainable future. Phytography reflects on the entanglement of the humans and the plants (including trees), and of the human agency and plant independence

(including human writings about human-plant lives as well as plants' lives per se). With a focus on phytography, we can examine vegetal intelligence, human behaviors, the time-space continuum, and corporeal contacts between the humans and the plants in multilayered narratives and transmedia imaginations. Phytography investigates the complex worlds of plants and trees and brings to the limelight the changing and forming human-flora relationship.

I choose to focus on the storytelling of trees and forests, deforestation and afforestation, as well as the rise of environmental consciousness. My ecocritical concern aims to parse the complexity of the human-nature relationship as evidenced in a wide variety of literary and artistic works and their phytographic approaches from the 1980s to the 2020s.

In modern Chinese literature and art, trees are everywhere, appearing in multiple literary trends and genres (nature writing, eco-feminism, ethnic works, etc.) Flourishing in the 1980s, educated-youth literature refers to narratives that depict the lives of millions of urban junior high and high school students who were "sent down to the countryside" to settle as farmers and peasants during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Upon their return to the cities after the Cultural Revolution, these educated-youth writers focused on their village experiences, adventures, and discoveries, and the cultures of ethnic minorities situated in various 'sent down' localities across China. Early waves of educated-youth literature include scar literature, reform literature, and search-for roots literature in the 1980s, and later developed into the new stage of neo-realism with different variants after the 1990s.

Kong Jiesheng's groundbreaking novella "Forest Primeval" (1985) focuses on five educated youths, who are sent to a virgin forest to investigate the site so that a local company can open up the forest to grow rubber trees. Regarding the writing of "Forest Primeval," Kong once confessed, "When I walked alone in a forest, I easily became confused and disoriented. … It is unnecessary to burn the forest to make room for rubber trees" (Leung 1994: 77-78). In the novella, when the five educated youths get lost in the forest, four of them decide to return to the farm, giving up their task of conquering the nature. And one of the four young men has realized the task is futile, and will eventually cause environmental disaster. Yet the fifth one insists on marching forward; he regards this dangerous task as a chance for him to become a hero and feels he will

achieve greatness that no one has achieved before. Later, he is trapped in the labyrinth of the forest and loses his life.

Ah Cheng's pioneering novella "King of Trees" (1985; English 1990) explores trees, forests, bio-philia, and the awakening environmental and ecocritical consciousness. A group of educated youth plans to "cut down useless trees and replace them with useful ones," and laughs at the superstition that the King of Trees "has become a spirit. Anyone who fells it will be in trouble" (1990: 11). One educated youth member forcefully replies with "talking about eliminating superstition by chopping down the King of Trees … Once we chop down the King of Trees and it falls, a concept will be destroyed. … people's ideology should be totally renewed and cleansed" (1990: 41, 43). Yet the protagonist Knotty, a countryman from the mountains, replied that "this king of tree has to be spared. Even if the rest of them fall, this one will stand as witness … to the work of the Supreme God in Heaven" (1990: 46). In the heyday of the Cultural Revolution, the young leader of the educated youth burst out laughing in response: "Man will triumph over Heaven" (1990: 56). The later tree-cutting scene appealingly displays a double silence: "Finally the great tree hit the ground, sprang back up instantly, touched down again, bounced twice more, then roller over in the dark, finally coming to a rest. The whole world turned silent," and the educated youth "were stunned, unable to speak" (1990: 32). The shock and silence highlight a crucial moment to witness a passive epiphany and uneasy awakening of ecological and environmental consciousness.

At the end of the novella, Ah Cheng describes the double death of the great tree and the countryman Knotty with a hopeful ending:

Knotty's remains were buried in the original grave site. As time went by, a patch of grass with white flowers grew over it. People who understood these things told us that the plant was a kind of medicinal herb especially effective in healing wounds. As we continued our work on the mountain, we'd often stop and gaze across the landscape: we could see the huge trunk, scarred like a man who had fallen, and we could also see the patch of white flowers like bones exposed in dismembered limbs" (1990:56).

By challenging the human-centered perspective, this subtle yet striking ecoambiguity blurs the boundaries between the trees and the humans, and

demonstrates the human-nature entanglement or mutual embodiment in his groundbreaking phytographical storytelling.

If Ah Cheng provides a salient example of literary trope on the entanglements of trees and forest, spirit and superstition, ideology and ecology, then Xu Gang's bold and brave reportage, *Loggers, Wake Up!* (1988), hailed as a major ecological milestone and China's *Silent Spring*, pioneeringly deals with Chinese ecological crisis caused by deforestation and land abuse. Xu Gang understands that human beings are the branches of the trees. His recent environmental reflection, *The Great Forests* (2017), continues to cope with the ecological concerns and critiques of the excessive developmentalist appropriations. In the same genre and genealogy of reportage literature and nonfiction writing, Wang Zhian's apocalyptic *The Tragic Forests* (1999) also calls for preserving the forests and promotes nationwide afforestation. Thanks to the forming environmental consciousness and the unfailing efforts to preserve natural resources, a major change has happened: according to Carbon Brief, China planted the largest amount of new forest out of any country between 1990 and 2015, facilitated by the country's Grain for Green program started in 1999, which invested more than $100 billion in afforestation programs and planted more than 35 billion trees across 12 provinces. By 2015, the amount of planted forest in China covered 79 million hectares (Li and Liu 2020).

At the beginning of this article, I briefly mentioned the second wave of environmental humanities: the shift from the wilderness and the nature to the urban environment. Yan Lianke's *Garden No. 711: The Ultimate Last Memo of Beijing* (2012), a Beijing eco-story and a tribute to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), describes trees, flowers, eco-philia, and an ecotopia, and its destruction, in suburban Beijing. Yan's storytelling is colored by mythorealism that he coins: "Imaginations, metaphors, myths, legends, dreams, fantasy, demonization, and transplantation born from everyday life and social reality can all serve as mythorealist methods and channels" (Song, 2016: 645). *Garden No. 711* connects the objects to wildflowers, vegetables, plants, foodstuffs, and their magical and mythical prehistory and present story. The flowers and trees inside and outside of his courtyard creates a mythoreality in the botanical world: plants in possession of virtues, emotions, love, animosity, and even private hobbies. Yet the ecological utopia was ruined and destroyed in the winter of 2011

when the administrative authorities of the municipal and national governments decided to demolish the garden for a road-building project.

Garden No. 711 exhibits an ephemeral and microlevel ecotopia where the natural order might be temporarily reestablished, but is nevertheless destined to be deformed and destructed according to the blueprint of China and Beijing's crazy to insane economic development. The resistance strategy and dreamy ending of *Garden No. 711* provide a hopeful future for the author to rearrange the sequence of environmental objects, reconstruct the spatial order of the garden and courtyard, and reorient the connection between man and nature.

This bygone ecotopia may well relate to the later works in 2020. Hu Donglin's posthumous ecological and encyclopedic *Notebooks from Mountains and Forests* (2020) describes the wildlife in Changbai Mountain District in Northeast China. Chen Yingsong's ecocritical milestone *The Forest Is Silent* (2020) offers the most recent and salient example of phytography and the deep concern for ecological and environmental protection and justice in the Shennongjia forest and wildlife protection district. Chen Yingsong has been hailed as the king of forest writing. For him, trees and forests not only are closely connected with roots and uproots, but also trigger and cultivate healthy nostalgia and ecocritical consciousness. Trees and forests are dear friends and family members: they can provide cures and remedies for mental suffering and depression. Trees can also serve as local climatic wind indicators, display small natural features, provide homes for nestlings and promising livelihood, and traverse psychological distances. In *The Forest Is Silent*, Chen claims a forest position, attitude, manifesto, storytelling, and grand narrative. He covers dozens of species of trees, flowers, and animals. He also describes encounters between the shrinking forests and the threatening human conquests (digging tools, electronic saws, gigantic machines, etc.) so as to criticize the deforestation, desertification, and excessive development. Chen situates his storytelling at the nexus of shaman, superstition, reason, the savage mind, and the human-animal relationship as evidenced in the protagonists' biophilic and romantic liaison.

CONCLUSION

By briefly exploring the storytelling of deforestation and afforestation, the rise of ecological and ethical consciousness, and the complexity of human-nature relationship, I have examined trees as environmental objects and investigated contemporary Chinese multimedia phytography in terms of token of marred humanity, sign of ecocritical awakening, indicator of climate crisis, and illustration of the biophilia-biophobia entanglement.

The selected and distinctive tree stories, forest narratives, and phytography provide an illuminating entry point into the changing material trajectories and social life, the emerging environmental consciousness, and the structural transformation of private feelings and public emotions against the great backdrop of industrial, de-industrial, and post-industrial times and related ecological impacts in contemporary China.

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