

The Metamorphoses of Smokestacks

Wei jie SONG

Department of Asian Languages and Cultures

Rutgers University

New Brunswick, NJ 08901, USA

wjsong@alc.rutgers.edu

Abstract: This paper examines Chinese imagery of smokestacks both as a concrete object and an abstract concept emerging from early futurist eulogy to modernist allergy, and from Maoist propaganda to post-Fifth Generation environmental reflections. In the Republican era, writers from the Creation Society eulogize the smokes of steamboat smokestacks as beautified symbols of modern civilization. Yet members from the Beijing School convey their concerns about the Janus face of industrialization and environmental impairments (towering smokestacks as the target). After 1949, smokestacks are eulogized as an icon of socialist industrialization and pervade cinematic productions, literary imaginations, and artistic exhibitions. Since the 1980s, smokestacks have been gradually understood as vestiges of problematic socialist practice. The growing ecological deterioration in the 21st century propels public intellectuals and film directors to expose industrial pollution and to invoke environmental protection. Yet another type of representation arises in the post-Fifth Generation films, where smokestacks are visualized as a token of the “insulted and injured” working class, individual discovery, and collective sentiment worn out by the post Mao-Deng global developmentalism and social injustice. The metamorphoses of smokestacks in literary, cinematic, and artistic imaginations envision and exhibit the structural transformation of modern Chinese environmental and ecological consciousness.

Keywords: smokestack, eco-literature, eco-cinema, environmental imagination

INTRODUCTION

Confronting the growing environmental pollution and ecological crisis, the use and abuse of natural resources, and the visible and invisible climatic threats and harms in the age of Anthropocene, modern Chinese literary, cinematic, and artistic productions shed light on the relationship between humanity and nature, the tensions between local policies and global forces, the contradictions of bio-ethics in human development and economic modernization, as well as entanglements of eco-aesthetics and eco-politics evidenced in personal stories and public awareness, private records and collective discoveries.

In her phenomenal yet banned documentary *Under the Dome* (穹顶之下, 2015), a belated ecocritical epiphany and allergy, Chai Jing 柴静 compellingly calls our attention to towering factory smokestacks, which were once regarded as an overwhelming sign and dominant symbol of Chinese industrial development and Maoist modernization, now are observed as a source of air pollution and environmental health risks from Beijing to its neighboring regions and to China at large. In contrast, in his critically acclaimed film *The Piano in a Factory* (钢的琴, 2010), an elegy for a bygone working-class community and a revisit to the industrial past in Northeast China, Zhang Meng 张猛 presents a stunningly nostalgic eulogy of two gigantic smokestacks (now dysfunctional), regarding them as coordinates for going home and work units, memories of growing up, as well as a long forgotten old friend, at a time of tumultuous transition. This intriguing distinction between allergy to and eulogy of industrial smokestacks, in the beginning decades of the 21st century, provides an illuminating entry point into the awakening environmental and ecocritical consciousness, as well as the structural transformation of feelings and emotions against the great backdrop of Chinese industrial and de-industrial (post-industrial) modernization and its ecological impacts.

This paper aims at examining the imagery of smokestacks both as a concrete object and an abstract concept emerging in works from early Chinese futurist eulogy to modernist allergy, from Maoist propaganda to post-socialist ecocritical reflections and post-Fifth Generation requiem for Communism, and from literary imagination to artistic exhibition.

BETWEEN EULOGY AND ALLERGY

I would first briefly address the aesthetic and political encounter with the gigantic smokestacks in Republican China so as to contextualize the recent smokestack sentiments. As early as the 1920s, modern Chinese writers of the literary school, “Creation Society,” passionately embraced the advent of western science and technology. The Creation Society’s leading poet, Guo Moruo 郭沫若, eulogized the spectacles of a prosperous industrial metropolis using the metaphor of a “harmonious symphony and happy wedding between nature and human life”: he compared the smokes of steamboat smokestacks to “black peonies,” “noble flowers of the 20th Century,” and the “Strict Mother of Modern Civilization” (Guo,

1920/1982: 68). Such images, especially the “black peonies,” exert a powerful influence on popular perceptions of modernization and modernity. Smokestacks, together with steamboats, automobile vehicles, railway trains, among other eye-catching spectacles, emblemizes the advent of modern industrial civilization.

Nevertheless, some other writers hold different and critical attitudes toward smokestacks and local westernized industrialization. For instance, in 1926, Gao Changhong 高长虹 depicted modern Shanghai as follows,

People say that, seeing from afar, Shanghai is a smokestack. It is right in this smokestack, we can see scientific achievements, obese capitalists, imperialist iron heels, newest and highest artistic creations, and all others (Gao, 1926/1989: 116).¹

In the 1930s, Lin Huiyin 林徽因, a female poet, architect and core member of the literary group “The Beijing School,” conveyed her deep concerns about the Janus face of modernization, industrialization, and environmental impairments. She captured and displayed images of menacing, gigantic, and disturbing smokestacks emerging on the horizon of Beijing, an ancient city caught in the process of modernization. In her poetic work, the abstract modern times and industrial civilization are transformed into visible and tangible smokestacks, inharmoniously juxtaposed with another set of everyday objects of the old city: indigo curtains, old balusters, and ruby red candied hawthorns, among others. For Lin, these daily objects symbolize the deep-rooted and aesthetic urban experience. In spite of the sandstorms of the spring, a sweet old Beijing is like the fresh-red candied hawthorns, a small but radiantly utopian image, “still ablaze, stick upon stick, like aged coral - still unafraid of the new era’s dust” (Song, 2018: 127). Lin’s representation of smokestacks demonstrates her keen aesthetic and environmental awareness when confronting an increasingly polluted and vanishing ancient capital.

SMOKESTACKS AS AN ICON OF SOCIALIST INDUSTRIALIZATION

After 1949, at the beginning of the socialist regime, the smokestacks were eulogized as a symbolic icon of socialist industrial modernization. The Maoist vision of a modernized Beijing was best manifested in Mao’s conversation with Peng Zhen 彭真, the first mayor of Beijing in the new republic. Standing on top of the Gate of Heavenly Peace, Mao proudly pronounced, “We’ll see a forest of smokestacks from here!” For Lin Huiyin, this forest of smokestacks was the recurrence of the environmental

nightmare of modernity, in which Guo Moruo's "black peonies" and the dark "noble flowers" were blooming in the very heart of Beijing.

Another salient example of smokestack in this early stage of socialist China can be found in Xian Qun's 洗群 1952 film adaptation of Lao She's 老舍 1951 three-act play *Dragon Beard Ditch* 龙须沟. Yomi Braester calls our attention to the ending of the influential artwork: "the deep focus and the *mise-en-scène* guide the viewer toward the back, where a smokestack rises in the rear center" (Braester, 2010: 53). The cinema provides a socialist-realist scenario with an ending of a remote smokestack, point of pride of Chinese socialist industrialization and modernization. Both the cinema and the play show how the new socialist government transforms an infamous stinking ditch and slum into a happy and sanitary community, where the inhabitants are endowed with new class consciousness and released from the hygienic, ecological, and political morass. The remote smokestack in the cinematic adaptation, more or less, functions as a coordinate, or serves as a beacon, torch, or light tower, witnessing and illustrating the socialist construction and industrial development.²

By focusing on Fu Baoshi's 傅抱石 1958 masterpiece *Ode to Yuhuatai* (雨花台颂, ink and color on paper, horizontal scroll), Julia F. Andrews unveils Fu's aesthetic-political combination of landscape and industry, exhibition and commemoration, revolutionary realism and romanticism, and vividly illustrates that

(t)he painting is a highly romanticized view of the city of Nanjing, in which industrial images are used to extraordinary pictorial effect. The foreground is defined, somewhat photographically, by pine branches hanging down from the upper right corner. Less photogenic, but with a surprising abstract beauty, are the delicately rendered power lines sweeping across the lower right section of the picture. The middle ground, in which a memorial stele dominates a tree-covered hill, occupies the left side of the picture. A tiny file of Young Pioneers proceed along a hilltop path to pay respects to the heroes. In the distance we see the hazy city, its smokestacks emitting delicate strokes of gray ink. (Andrews, 1994: 257)

During the Maoist regime, the smokestacks, once criticized as a token of repressive industrialization and capitalism in Republican Chinese literature, film, and woodcut art before 1949, now reemerged and transformed into an icon of socialist construction in the high Cold War era: it pervaded literary texts, theatrical performances, cinematic productions, and socialist paintings—water, ink, or oil.

THE AWAKENING OF ECOCRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Nevertheless, since Mao passed away in 1976 and China entered the Reform Era, the smokestacks have been widely understood as vestiges of the problematic socialist practice, or signs of both utopian blueprints and dystopian ruins in the Maoist development and environmental conditions. From reportage to fiction and poetry, from cinematic representations to art exhibitions, the growing challenges of ecological deterioration propelled Chinese film directors, artists and writers to expose current industrial pollution and to call for environmental protection. For instances, Sha Qing's 沙青 *Beijing Out of Balance* (北京失去平衡, 1986) revealed the lack of water resources in Beijing, and warned people of the costs and dangers in the obsession with producing iron, steel, foundry cokes and plastics. Ye Guangcen 叶广岑's *Picking Mulberries* (采桑子, 1999) captured a scene that the ancestral grave is demolished and rebuilt as a cement factory where smokestacks spray gray dust, and crushing, grinding and dedusting equipment makes loud noise.

The most remarkable, controversial, yet “ephemeral” documentary is *Under the Dome*, a self-financed and TED-like artwork by the former CCTV host Chai Jing, who once agreed that “Coal brought warmth and energy, and that was significant. After 1980, Beijing had over 3,000 factories. For an agrarian nation that was eager to expand, smokestacks were a symbol of progress” (Chai, 2015: 20). Yet during the process of preparing a series of interviews and reports, Chai realized that the formless threats and harms posed by different types of pollutions were looming large, thus provocatively changed and redefined her role and strategies to confront the environmental predicament: “At the time, I was no longer a reporter, but an eyewitness” (Chai, 2015: 19). *Under the Dome* provides a scientific, multidisciplinary, personal and emotional investigation of the prolonged and severe smog haunting Beijing and China, and lists smokestacks and related industrial and chemical pollutants as the source of Chinese environmental and ecological crisis. This belated ecocritical epiphany compellingly responds to Lawrence Buell’s prophetic interpretation of toxic discourse:

The fear of a poisoned world is being increasingly pressed, debated, debunked, and reiterated from many disciplinary vantage points: medicine, political science, history, sociology, economics, and ethics among others. (Buell, 1998: 639)

In the same year of 2015, Jia Zhangke's *Smog Journeys* 人在霾途, a seven-minute, dialogue-free documentary made for Greenpeace, begins with smokestacks (cooling towers of thermal power plants) as an iconic and giant existence. Jia gives shape to "slow violence" (Rob Nixon), and presents coughing peasants in the countryside; a girl with sand-proof headscarf talking to her lover in front of smokestacks; a masked boy playing soccer in the city; a young couple of miners sending their baby to the doctor for respiratory diseases; urban inhabitants struggling in their everyday life besieged by smog, ... and in the end, a masked teenager sketching a beautiful sky on a dusty car to imagine a hopeful environmental future for the silent majority.

Zhao Liang's 赵亮 banned film *Behemoth* (悲兮魔兽, 2015) provides an artistic and documentary representation of the vast mining industry, ghost city, Mongolian prairies, air pollution and its catastrophic impact on coal miners' health. The long distance shots of many smokestacks (fires and black smokes), mid-distance shots of the piled-up trucks with coals and the working scenes, as well as the close ups of the working hands and exhausted faces, all in all, bring to the limelight the heavy breaths and painful coughs of sick miners, the juxtaposition of smokestacks and new tombs in the graveyard for the victims of reckless mining industry, as well as an ecological nightmare of developmentalism and backwardness, abused manpower and ruined environment. Even Stephen Chow's 周星驰 blockbuster film, *The Mermaid* (美人鱼, 2016), starts with the shocking scenes of polluted waters, slaughtered animals, uncontrolled deforestation, and piles of smokestacks and black smokes, among others, to exhibit the environmental and ecological dilemma and calamity in contemporary human societies.

SMOKESTACK MEMORY AND NOSTALGIA

Nevertheless, it is also worth noting that, years earlier than this transitioning time marked by the belated awakening of ecocritical concerns, another type of "structure of feeling" (coined by Raymond Williams) emerged and endured in the post-Maoist, post-Fifth Generation (the Sixth or the Underground Generation) film productions. Williams understands "structure of feeling" as "affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling

as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity” (1977: 132). The new representations showcase smokestacks (sometimes dysfunctional) with a symptomatic ecoambiguity, “the complex, contradictory interactions between people and environments with a significant nonhuman presence” (Thornber, 2012: 1).

Jiang Wen’s 姜文 *In the Heat of the Sun* (阳光灿烂的日子, 1994) captures a dysfunctional smokestack, a relic of Maoist industrial construction, which stands out as a vertical “rite of passage” to exhibit the protagonist’s courage, adventure, flirtation, romance, masculinity, and self-esteem among a gang of wild teenagers during the Cultural Revolution.³

Wang Bing’s 王兵 551-minute experimental documentary *Tiexi Qu: West of the Tracks* (铁西区, 2002) visualizes three smokestacks, one visible and the other two rather dim in a smoggy winter day, as a material token of the declining socialist industry in the rusty area of Northeast China, and “evokes an eerie and bleak tranquility except for the tiny human figures slowly traversing the space and the dense smoke coming from a smokestack on the right edge of the frame” (Zhang, 2009: 19-20).

Li Yang’s 李杨 *Blind Shaft* (盲井, 2003) ends with a striking shot of a smokestack of the crematorium contributed by Li’s “constant efforts of shooting from eye-level objective” (Berry, 2005: 224). The smokestack (crematorium) emits black smoke and provides a dark epiphany about fortune and misery, innocence and crime, for a young coal miner and survivor to ponder on his tragicomedy at the threshold of life and death in an uneven post-Maoist and developmentalist local society.

Eleven years before shooting his 7-minute ecocritical documentary *Smog Journeys*, Jia Zhangke’s *The World* (世界, 2004) ends with the death of the female protagonist and her boyfriend, against the reckless and repressing “image of a towering factory smokestack belching gas flames into the Beijing sky behind him” (Silbergeld, 2009: 114). Jia’s *24 City* (二十四城记, 2008) envisages a transient image of a gigantic smokestack above the deserted factory buildings with broken windows and glasses, and tells the story of post-Maoist new generation’s struggle and rebel: abandoning his parents’ profession, stepping out from the track designed by his father generation, and embarking on a new path with passion and expectation. One episode of Jia’s documentary *I wish I knew* (海上传奇, 2010) features Huang Baomei 黄宝妹, a historical figure and female model textile worker in the 1950s Shanghai. Jia incorporates excerpts from Xie Jin’s 谢晋 1958

black-and-white biographical film about Huang Baomei, showcasing the image of smokestacks twice from Xie's biopic to reiterate the collective past as well as the strength and pride of working class in the socialist metropolis.⁴

The most striking and representative illumination of the smokestack metamorphoses in this vein appears in Zhang Meng's *The Piano in a Factory*, where smokestacks are depicted as an abandoned emblem of the "insulted and injured" working class, a warped remnant of the bygone past of the Maoist era/economy/factory, as well as a haunting sign of early Chinese socialist ethics, proletarian sentiment, working class pride, individual discovery, and collective dignity worn out by the post Mao-Deng deindustrialization and globalization, developmentalism and social injustice. Zhang famously visualizes the ritual of bidding farewell to the two about-to-be demolished smokestacks with feelings of mourning and nostalgia:

For some, they represent memories of growing up. For some, they are signpost on the way home from work. For some, they are just two smokestacks. For me, they are like a long forgotten old friend. One day you hear that they are leaving, and it occurs to you that they have always been close to you. You don't know whether to persuade them to stay or silently watch them depart. Suddenly, you feel indescribably sad, as if there's something you should say, but you don't know what it is. Time passes imperceptibly. Society changes, and the current march to development requires them to go. But we should always try, and if we succeed, they will be transformed into a beautiful attraction. If we fail, they will become our most treasured memories. (Zhang, 2010: 76-77)

In a different yet relevant context, Jefferson R. Cowie and Joseph Heathcott examine the problematic smoke nostalgia, the industrial decline, environmental disaster, and "the dual symbolism of smokestack industries – part might, power, and prosperity; part pollution, waste, and toxicity ... The point of departure for any discussion of deindustrialization must be respect for the despair and betrayal felt by workers as their mines, factories, and mills were padlocked, abandoned, turned into artsy shopping spaces, or even dynamited" (2003: 1, 8). Another recent and nuanced study of photographic smokestacks and alternative mode of nostalgia for a bygone industrial past is vividly evidenced in Tim Strangleman's juxtapositions of smokestack nostalgia, ruin porn, working-class obituary, and deindustrial representation (2013: 23-37). Regarding *The Piano in a Factory*, Dai Jinhua 戴锦华, a prolific film and cultural critic, underlines

Zhang Meng's psychoanalytical understanding of the two smokestacks as "the phallus of the working class," and further responds with an insightful interpretation that "the blasting of the smokestacks not only extends and reiterates Chen Guilin's feelings of helplessness as he reluctantly gives up his daughter, but also provides a straightforward castration scene for the symbolic death of the worker as father" (Dai, 2018: 100). I would take a different approach, and argue that dysfunctional smokestacks lose their environmental jeopardy, and remain, or function, as a relic of the socialist and industrial past; a witness to the change of working community and class consciousness in post-Maoist cinematic representations; a token of nostalgia of the bygone era and collective awareness; a landmark/tower-like clock or time machine/signpost; and a precious friendship to be cherished in postindustrial memory and trauma at the beginning of the 21st century.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the metamorphoses of smokestacks have materialized and incarnated from modernist poetry to realist reportage, from art works to mainstream propaganda, and from underground documentary to "avant-garde" films. This large-scale environmental object and its illuminating "ecoambiguity" envisions and exhibits the changing notions and practices of modern Chinese environmentalism, the structural transformation of feelings and emotions, and the transition of cultural memories and ecological awareness at a time of crisis.

Notes

¹ The original Chinese is as follows: 人说，从远处看上海，是一个烟囱。便在这烟囱之中，活动着科学的成绩，胖的资本家，帝国主义的铁蹄，最新的最高的艺术创作，以及其他的一切 (Gao, 1989: 116). The English translation is mine.

² For a detailed study of Lin Huiyin's aesthetic and political encounter with smokestacks and Lao She's ideological representation of the Dragon Beard Ditch, see Weijie Song, *Mapping modern Beijing: Space, Emotion, Literary Topography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018 (2017), pp. 127-149, 60-70.

³ For instance, in *Queen of Sports* (体育皇后, 1934), a modern girl and the protagonist Lin Ying climbs "phallus-like smokestack" (Pickowicz, 1991: 51) to demonstrate her modern (*modeng* 摩登) characteristics: courage, innocence, and unruliness.

⁴ Acclaimed artist Liu Xiaodong 刘小东, the leading role of Jia Zhangke's biographical documentary *Dong* 东 (2006) and the thinker and cooperater in conceptually conceiving Jia's *Still Life* (2006), displays an extraordinary combination of smokestack, thick smoke, horses, nomads, barren land, rainbow, and cloudy sky on the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau in his famous oil painting *Qinghai-Tibet Railway* (2007).

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Bioprofile

Weijie SONG is an associate professor in the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures at Rutgers University. He is the author of *Mapping Modern Beijing: Space, Emotion, Literary Topography* (Oxford, 2017), *From Entertainment Activity to Utopian Impulse: Rereading Jin Yong's Martial Arts Fiction* (1999; revised and enlarged edition, forthcoming) and *China, Literature, and the United States: Images of China in American and Chinese-American Novel and Drama* (2003). His current research projects include "Ideology: Environmental Objects and Chinese Ecocriticism," "Chivalrous Psychogeography: Martial Arts, Avant-Gardes, Sinophone Cinema," and "Reviving Northeast China: 21st Century Literature and Film Beyond the Great Wall." He is the editor of *Selected Works of Xu Dishan* (1997, 2000, 2008, 2010), co-editor of *Environmental Humanities, Ecocriticism, Nature Writing* (with Yulin Lee, 2019) and *Northeast China Reader* (with David Der-wei Wang, work in progress), as well as the Chinese translator or co-translator of *Repressed Modernities* (2003, 2005, 2007, 2011), *Translingual Practice* (2002, 2008, 2014), *Comparative Poetics* (1998, 2004), *The Structural Transformation of Public Sphere* (1999, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2005), *Understanding Popular Culture* (2001, 2006), and *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (2010).