

judgements, cultural habits, and, of course, state governance intermingled. It began as a state-funded project and was a place of ideologies, to be sure, but it was a place of other practices too because planting vegetables always took growers outside the predictable world to continuously attune to the possibilities of human and non-human factors. This echoes recent concerns of anthropologists who have been interested in the ways a novel world of humans and plants support one another to solve many of the environmental problems humans have created under the logic of extracting profit from the exploitation of natural resources (e.g. Hartigan 2015; Ingold 2006; Marder 2013).

Other things happened as plants and people began to interlink. When the most mundane and deserted scenes were made buoyant again, a renewed sense of protecting and maintaining this ecology may have a direct impact upon villagers' identity. As the old lady said, 'I tend all of the species, and would pass them on to my children.' While the garden did not start off with the goal of initiating ecological consciousness among residents, in the end, it did show a promising way that ecological resuscitation in a neglected community can be linked with its agricultural past. Here, we saw clearly the importance of taking seriously local sensibilities and traditional agricultural nodes, and the bringing together of concrete objects, plants, engaged residents, and communal spirit in the implementation of grand and new environmental ideas.

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2.2 'Sometimes We Have Some Toxins': Eco-Anxiety in Chinese Female-Authored Writing and Cultural Activism

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In the 2010s, following the global virality of Chai Jing's 柴静 movie *Under the Dome* (穹顶之下 *Qiongdǐng zhi xia* (2015)), which addressed the impact of air

pollution on children's health from the perspective of a concerned mother, the independent documentary film became the artistic medium most associated with environmental citizen activism in the PRC. However, similar concerns have also long been voiced in other media forms less accessible to global audiences unfamiliar with the Chinese language, such as poetry.

When in 2007 I began my research on Chinese female-authored poetry, neither of the two authors I focused on, the acclaimed poet Zhai Yongming 翟永明 and the rising star of migrant workers' poetry Zheng Xiaoqiong 郑小琼, had yet to be discussed from an ecocritical perspective. In fact, their texts already displayed increasing eco-anxiety. For example, in her 1999 poem 'How to Take Care of a Baby?' (拿什么去关爱婴儿? *Na shenme qu guan'ai ying'er?*) Zhai Yongming questioned the impact of pollution on younger generations' health. In contrast to the deeply personal tone in Chai Jing's documentary, Zhai's text displays an affinity with the feminist ethics of caring, taking up notions of human vulnerability and dependence on human and non-human others. The poem comments on the unresolvable dilemma of mothers who have no alternative to feeding their babies contaminated food.¹ They are aware of the environmental drama they are witnessing when 'before [their] eyes milk turns into dioxin' and 'plastic turns into garbage' (Zhai 2011 [1999]: 314). However, years of intense industrialisation at the expense of the natural environment have deprived the lyrical 'we' of healthy ways to sustain and protect life on Earth:

Sometimes we have some toxins
We eat some rust
Some DDVP
(Zhai 2011 [1999]: 315)

They also realise that their minds have been contaminated by past toxic ideologies, such as an uncritical belief in progress, because sometimes their 'mouths ramble some industrial charms' (Zhai 2011 [1999]: 315). Nevertheless, these charms lack magical powers, nor do they grant preservation from destruction or failure. Zhai's poem lays bare the older generations' lack of agency in the face of the environmental crisis. The poet, who came of age in the Mao era, questions also her own responsibility for the condition in which they hand over the natural environment to the younger generations.

'How to Take Care of a Baby?' shows that roughly half a century after the last catastrophic famine in the PRC, and in a time of abundance of affordable food, the issue of malnutrition in children may, again, become acute. Indeed it happened in 2008, the year of the milk scandal, when contaminated infant formula led to cases of fatal kidney damage in babies. Zhai shared her grief over the incident in 'The Child's Dripping Song' (儿童的点滴之歌 *Ertong de diandi zhi ge*), which reads like a dark, disturbing lullaby. The first stanza of the poem describes a dying baby boy from the perspective of his mother, who sits next to him at the hospital bed: 'little Shi Jie has three tubes in his head' (Zhai 2013: 21).

His mother bemoans the calamity, and her pain amplifies with the realisation that she poisoned her baby with the infant formula.

The anonymous child from Zhai's 1999 poem becomes, in a ghostly manner, Shi Jie, the baby unintentionally fed to death by his mother. The 'Song' quotes from the morbid imagery of gothic tales when it compares the profit-driven managers of milk companies to bloodsucking vampires:

Some people drink the baby's blood some people share profits

...

2008's milk is vampires' saliva

2008's excess is the problem

(Zhai 2013 22)

2008 was not only the year of the milk scandal, but also the year of the devastating Sichuan earthquake and of the Beijing Summer Olympics. Thus, the word 'excess' in the quote may be referring to much more than the food safety incident alone.

The same year, Zheng Xiaoqiong wrote 'Pedestrian Overpass' (人行天桥 *Renxing tianqiao*), a long prose poem inspired by her work in factories in the manufacturing hub of the Pearl River Delta:

... plutonium replaces calcium in the production of saliva, soft silvery tin floats in the air, rushing into your lungs and blood vessels, arsenic eats up your sexual desire, mercury has killed the algae and fish in the rivers ...

Toxic petroleum shines on our diseased bodies, toxic fumes and waste have contaminated the semen of our men.

(Zheng 2008: 95, 99)

This is only one of many examples in Zhang's oeuvre that depict the transformation of matter by the chemical substances that penetrate it. Drawing upon her personal experience, the poet writes about the deleterious impact of industrial waste and pollution on workers' health. The daily contact with iron parts and tools in factories exposes them to the risk of accidents and injuries. Almost invisible, but no less dangerous, is the exposure to toxins that can lead to infertility.

Since 2007, environmental concerns have accompanied my research visits to the PRC. This was not only as a literary theme, but also due to the impact of pollution on my daily life. My academic friends based in Beijing have embraced vegetarianism because of worries over meat safety, and eating out has become increasingly challenging. When in 2019 I met the social scientist and labour activist Lü Tu 吕途, she told me that recurring incidents of food poisoning were a turning point in her career. Lü recalls the experience that changed her perception of the countryside:

In 2009 I began to organise the Workers' University in the village Pinggu ... When I had classes, I stayed overnight in Pinggu. One day, I bought tantalisingly fresh cucumbers from a vendor next door. That evening I suffered from severe food poisoning. When the pain became unbearable in the middle of the night, I had no other choice but to clean out my stomach. (Lü 2019)

Lü realised that the pastoral image of the countryside some of us cherish has long fallen out of sync with the reality of 'toxic insecticide and the smell of pesticide in the air when fruit is ripening' (Lü 2019).

Lü is mainly known for her new workers' trilogy (Lü 2012, 2014, 2017) and her work for the Picun-based NGO Migrant Workers' Home. In her texts she elaborates on the emotional homelessness and instability that endangers the existence of many migrant workers. Following the spike in eco-anxiety, Lü's attention shifted from a critique of urbanisation to rural reconstruction work. With her singer-songwriter husband, Sun Heng 孙恒, Lü began a new project that focuses on reviving the tradition of village songs. Since 2019 they have been organising workshops with villagers who write their own texts, such as those created by the inhabitants of the Stone City Village (石城之村 *Shicheng zhi cun*):

Stone wall, stone house, the small village made of stones
One stone, four ounces oil, otherwise the grain won't grow

Walnut scent, chestnut taste, old trees count a hundred years
Valleys filled with fresh air, and the stones smell sweet too
(quoted in Lü 2019)

Lü and Sun hope that the fostering of villagers' emotional connections with the countryside may be the first step toward creating a healthier living environment for those, mainly older women and children, left behind by urbanisation.

These examples illustrate a growing ecological awareness on the part of engaged citizens and activists. The state's agenda has also changed, and currently the PRC is affirming its commitment to green development. Concurrently, other globally known phenomena, such as greenwashing, have appeared. My last example comes from the short play *Ocean Hotpot* (海水火锅 *Haishui huoguo*) by Chen Si'an 陈思安. Her work was commissioned by the 2019 Edinburgh International Festival, which asked five writers to share their views on the global climate crisis. Chen's absurdist piece invites the audience to the Committee for Global Ecological Balance and Environmental Promotion, where the protagonist applies for an environmental grant. He plans to turn the warming sea around the Yong Le Island into a seawater hotpot and successfully sells his costly environmental project as an ecological start-up. The play pokes fun at the superficiality of much of environmental politics. One could wonder

if the playwright was targeting the organisers of the festival too? Environmental art sells and wins grants for funds, in the PRC and elsewhere.

Note

- ¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Chinese are by the author, J. Jagusick.

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2.3 Garbage Bins Are for Containing People Too

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Four categories of post-consumer waste: dry, wet, recyclable, and hazardous. In 2019, news stories about Shanghai residents being forced to sort and deposit their household waste according to these categories rippled through the international news media (Kuo 2019). The rules included limited times for dropping off waste and confusing categorical requirements, leading to complaints of inconvenience, unfair penalties, and state overreach. This effort to improve waste separation in urban China was rolled out in 46 pilot cities in 2020, including Kunming (CCTV 2020), where I engaged in waste fieldwork on and off throughout the 2010s.