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The Human and Non-human Interconnectedness in Three Chinese Contemporary Artists

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Today, we live in an era known as the Anthropocene. The interconnectedness between humans and other living entities and environments is an essential part of the theme of the Anthropocene and a central concern in contemporary culture and art. Through the emphasis of the role of non-human agents, new materialism and posthumanism radically problematize the binaries of subject/object, human/nonhuman, cultural/natural, and mind/body, and challenge the superiority of the human. Although both Chinese and Western scholars widely acknowledge that Chinese traditional culture and art are deeply based on less anthropocentric modes of thinking, the contemporary Chinese artists' expression of the interconnectedness between human and non-human in the context of the Anthropocene still deserve more academic attention. This essay is dedicated to revealing how Chinese contemporary artists perceive our complicated interconnectedness and interdependences with other co-beings and entities by examining the engagement of three artists with non-human agents – silkworm, stone, and plants.

Liang Shaoji: Pursuit of the Dao through Silkworm

The Chinese artist Liang Shaoji has been working intensively with silkworms for almost 30 years since he started to raise them and introduce living silkworms into his art-making in 1989. In his studio – which is actually a sericulture laboratory – the artist carefully observed, from a morphological perspective, silkworms' egg-laying, growing, spinning, cocooning and becoming moths, and he made a detailed record of the process. In ecological art, the materials and mediums often come from natural phenomena and processes. Through his working with living silkworms, the essence of Liang's art-making is to transform the life cycle of silkworms, such as their creeping state, their movement when spinning, the shape of the cocoons, and the scent and sound of the silkworm, into elements of art. He compares his method to ink splashing painting: starting from a rough idea, he makes adjustments according to circumstances after the silkworms begin to spin. For example, by controlling the humidity, temperature, and light in the shed, Liang can adjust the silkworm's biological clock, so that he may control the direction and speed of spinning and the shape of the cocoons. Over the course of a conversation about his work, Liang described his long-term observation of the silkworms and his mastery of the laws of their life cycle. He made clear, however, that he tries to avoid excessive intervention and makes the most of what he calls the 'factors' in natural ecology that can grow into art so as to achieve the effect that "though it is the work of a human being, it looks as if it is from heaven".[1]

His numerous art practices under the *Nature Series* have become a unique phenomenon in Chinese contemporary art. Among his many works, *Broken Landscape*, an installation he first displayed in 2008 may best reflect his attitude toward the living material and his approach towards silkworms.[2] Liang raised silkworms on a huge piece of silk, letting the larvae hatch from eggs, then grow, eat mulberry leaves, excrete, molt, pupate, develop into moths, copulate, lay eggs, and finally die. The countless yellow and black dots and stains that represent the traces of their life course remain intact on the silk roll and form natural textures and patterns, creating the effect of a Chinese landscape scroll. The artist juxtaposes the landscape scroll with camphor tree stumps. In the Chinese language, the pronunciation of the words translating 'silkworm' (蚕), 'broken' (残) and 'Zen' (禅) are very similar, so in a sense a landscape of 'silkworm' is a 'Zen' painting that depicts the contemporary 'broken' landscape. This work establishes a symbolic connection between the ephem-

erality of the silkworm's life and the fragility of the environment, trampled by contemporary humans.

Liang's work embodies the artist's deepest sympathy, appreciation, and respect for a non-human species. Employing the living predicament of silkworms as a metaphor for human society, he opens up the emotional barrier between human and non-human species. In his work, every small aspect of these humble little lives is expressed in a beautiful and poetic way. The discovery of the beauty and poetry of natural life prompts us to review the relationship with nature and other species, and only in this way can we find the right way to deal with nature.

Zhan Wang: Interaction between Human and Stone

Unlike Liang's engagement with living animals, Zhan Wang, a Beijing-based sculptor, chose to work with stone to express his philosophical thinking about the interrelationship between human and non-human. Zhan coined a neologism, *conceptual sculpture*, to describe his idea of concept-material combination. Inspired by Western conceptual art, the term 'conceptual sculpture', however, does not approach a pure conceptuality; it is deeply rooted in Chinese traditional philosophy, where idea and material are not as strictly separated as they are in Western philosophy.[3]

Zhan was first known for using stainless steel to copy traditional rockeries. Since ancient times, Chinese literati have put rocks resembling real mountains in their gardens and study rooms to create an illusion of living in nature. As rockeries are an imitation of 'real' mountains, which is the first layer of mimesis, stainless steel rockeries are an imitation of real rockeries – thus, an imitation of an imitation, creating a meta-mimesis.[4] Using human power to reproduce something is not unnatural but it is a way to let human power follow

Fig. 1. Liang Shaoji, *Broken Landscape*, 2008. Exhibition view: *Broken Landscape*, ShanghART Gallery Beijing (15 November-31 December 2008). © The artist and ShanghART. (Courtesy of the Artist).

nature, representing the saying in Daodejing according to which "human beings follow the law of earth, earth follows the law of heaven, heaven follows the law of the Way (Dao), and the Way follows the law of nature".[5] Employing the human ability to transform nature, while remaining in harmony with it instead of against it, should be of primary importance in modern science and technology, and that was also Zhan's focus during the conception and execution of his *Artificial Rock*. This work has therefore become a platform where art and technology meet.

The *Artificial Rock (Jiashanshi)* series determined Zhan's basic approach for reflecting the relationship between man and nature through the interaction between human labor and the conceptualized material of stone. For his 2010 performance at the Today Art Museum in Beijing, *One Hour Equals One Hundred Million Years: Suyuan Stone Generator*, he invented a machine that can imitate complex geological movements and natural forces. First, a mixed raw material that can be solidified in one hour is stirred and sent to the tempered glass box. After the operator switches on the machine and initiates the program, heavy rain starts to wash the dough of artificial material, gusts of wind blow over its surface and waves repeatedly crash into it. Then, an artificial earthquake causes an unexpected fracture on its surface and strong light and heat bake the stone hard. Finally, a rock with the characteristics of traditional rockeries, described as 'skinny, sturdy, transparent and wrinkly', is made. The whole process takes about an hour and the audience can watch it through tempered glass.

In the present day, an interpretation of the Anthropocene inextricably binds humankind with geologic processes in cultural imaginations. This work pushes his idea of *conceptual sculpture* forward by integrating the reflection on man's simulation and control of nature with the concept of geological time. On the one hand, this work reflects one of the main characteristics of contemporary society, that is, the increasingly dominant significance of 'speed'.[6] In fact, modern people consider speeding up – that is, the compression of time – as the purpose of technological inventions and the source of sensory stimuli. On the other hand, the artist has created the machine, and the man-made object has replaced the artist, and even replaced nature itself to imitate the millions of years of evolution. The machine, manipulated by the artists, creates a Taihu rock in one hour whereas nature takes hundreds of millions of years to form it, and the artificial rock looks no different from a genuine Taihu rock. In an ironic way, this work reveals the disturbing fact that the compressed sense of time is consistent with human beings' acceleration of the exploitation of the earth, as we consume in such a short time what the earth has created in hundreds of millions of years.

Zheng Bo: Plant-Politics Discourse

The Hong Kong based artist Zheng Bo is a fast-rising figure in contemporary Chinese art circles. Since 2013 he has been working with plants and made numerous installations, workshops, and videos. Echoing Latour's argument that there has been a breakdown in the distinction between the social and natural sciences,[7] Zheng believes that since the border between politics and nature does not exist, not only does politics concern the relationships within human communities, but also the relationships between humans and all coexisting living and nonliving things and environments. He has established a unique discourse of 'plant-politics' to explain the complicated entanglement between humans and plants. In his works, botanical research and the socio-political, community participation, pedagogy, and artistic imagination are integrated into one complex yet unified web of interrelations. Zheng's plant-politics discourse refers to the roles of plants in human history, their existence and predicaments in current political and social life, and the imagination of a new human-plant relationship for the Anthropocene. While a thorough analysis of the content and approach of his numerous works is beyond the scope of this essay, in the following paragraphs I will just discuss how politics and plants interact in *Kindred*, a work that combines on-site installation and workshop.

In the summer of 2017, Zheng was commissioned a work by the Ming Contemporary Art Museum in Shanghai (McaM) for the exhibition *Precariat's Meeting*. During his visit to the McaM, Zheng noticed that weeds were growing on the edge of the museum lobby. He removed the curtains and transplanted the weeds into five disused industrial lifts hanging outside the museum façade and added LED grow lights. He organized a workshop and invited residents to come write

and read letters to the weeds. In this work titled *Kindred*, he let weeds enter the art museum space and proclaim their existence to the museum and the public. The gap between social classes represented by the space was challenged, and possible communication with those outside the system created.[8] In addition to producing an allusion to the social stratification of contemporary China, this work leads to broader thinking about a potential communication between humans and weeds. Since the early 20th century, there have been several studies on the sentience and even intelligence of plants.[9] Scientific studies on their feelings and possible intelligence have generated more ethical and philosophical thinking concerning our relationship with and attitudes towards plants. Morton once pointed out that if non-human beings are capable of aesthetic contemplation and enjoying art, it would be essential to find out whether this contemplation was an advanced cognitive state or a simple one. So, the question to ask is whether we share this capacity of ours with non-human beings, as "these questions get to the heart of some of our cultural and political assumptions regarding non-human beings".[10] Zheng has expanded similar questions to plants: do weeds have consciousness and emotions? Can they respond to people's act of reading? If they can, how would they respond to us? The artist's witty irony reveals the similarity between social divisions and the gap between humans and plants and suggests a possibility to erase the gap between social groups as the gap between humans and non-humans.

Social ecologists used to emphasize that "the domination and exploitation of nature by society is but a facet of the domination and exploitation of some humans by others".[11] By projecting the exploitation, oppression, and inequality within human society on the human exploitation and oppression of plants, Zheng has established a connection between nature and society. His discursive plant-politics discourse creates a way to re-understand human history. He believes that the entire human history has been a continuous and accelerating process of manipulation and exploitation of other species. The invention of agriculture is regarded as the beginning of the Anthropocene; for Zheng, the essence of agriculture is the human exploitation of plants, with the energy that people get from plants exceeding the energy they expend, thereby creating a surplus value.

Fig. 2. Zheng Bo, *Kindred*, 2017. Exhibition view: *Precariat's Meeting*, Ming Contemporary Art Museum (McaM), Shanghai (8 November-7 January 2018). (Courtesy of the Artist).

Taking the above-mentioned *Kindred* as an example, herbaceous plants often appear in Zheng's works. Many of these herbs are alien species, humble but tenacious, growing everywhere in urban environments. Zheng called these marginalized plants 'weeds'. The definition of 'weeds' highlights the hierarchical divisions in human society. According to Zheng, on the one hand, weeds are the oppressed class in the kingdom of plants. On the other, the existence of weeds in Earth's history far outlasts that of humans, and their ability to survive is far greater than that of humans. Therefore, weeds are today's political avant-garde on Earth.[12] However, Zheng's analogy between the hierarchical relationship within human society and a human-imposed hierarchy in the natural ecosystem bears a plausible meaning from a socio-ecological perspective, as Murray Bookchin considers that ranking species within an ecosystem is "anthropomorphism at its crudest" and believes that it is problematic to describe natural ecosystems in hierarchical terms borrowed from human social hierarchies.[13] The juxtaposition and contradiction of anthropocentrism and anti-anthropocentrism in Zheng's 'plant-politics' discourse therefore produced a provocative yet interesting tension.

Conclusion

The three artists' conceptual and practical engagement with non-human entities challenges the ontologically distinct categories of human and non-human and the hierarchical dichotomy between nature and culture, materials and life. First, their work has revealed that non-humans, both living and non-living things, are no longer passive and inanimate. The study on the artists' engagement with silkworms, stone, and plants will lead to what Bennett called an aesthetic-affective openness to material vitality and will consequently develop an affective ethical engagement with others.[14] Furthermore, the artists' engagement with non-humans and the emphasis on the vitality of non-human things challenges the special status of human artists as the sole creators of art. In the age of the Anthropocene, it is necessary to further liberate art and aesthetics. This means to expand the inter-subjectivity to the cross-species inter-subjectivity, to include other non-human things into artistic creation and appreciation. As Zheng Bo points out, only if we change the belief that art-making is an exclusive human experience into an understanding that artistic creativity includes the creativity of

Fig. 3. *Kindred*, 2017.

all things, with art museums becoming a space for all things, will we be able to reach a good Anthropocene.[15] Last but not least, their work highlights the least anthropocentric modes of thinking that are rooted in Chinese traditional philosophy. As articulated by the Chinese philosopher Tu Wei-Ming, in traditional Chinese philosophy, regardless of Taoism or Confucianism, the appropriate metaphor for understanding the universe was biology rather than physics.[16] To say that the cosmos is a continuum and that all of its components are internally connected is also to say that it is an organismic unity, holistically integrated at each level of complexity. The study of the concepts of non-human things and the attitudes towards them in the discussed artworks, particularly in Zhan Wang and Liang Shaoji, reveals how ancient ecological wisdom still inspires contemporary Chinese artists to seek solutions to the problem of the Anthropocene.

Notes

[1] Liang Shaoji's conversation with the author on 7 August, 2017. See the interview transcript published by the Open Science Centre at the University of Jyväskylä. doi:10.17011/jyx/dataset/59988. In a large number of interviews and creative notes, Liang repeatedly talked about the enlightenment of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu's philosophy.

[2] *Broken Landscape* was first displayed in Liang's solo exhibition *Broken Landscape* at the ShanghART Gallery Beijing (15 November-31 December, 2008).

[3] B. Erickson, "Material Illusion: Adrift with the Conceptual Sculptor Zhan Wang", in D.A. Fan, ed., *Garden Utopia* (Beijing: National Art Museum, 2009), pp. 238-239. Garden Utopia was published on the occasion of Zhan Wang's solo exhibition *Garden Utopia* at the National Museum of China, May 11-May 21, 2008.

[4] M.A. Wang, *Double Imitation and Nature*, in *Zhan Wang: Garden Utopia*, p. 207.

[5] See Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 27, English translation by James Legge.

[6] H. Wu, *One Hour Equals One Hundred Million Years: Suyuan Stone Generator and Zhan Wang's art experiment*. http://www.zhanwangart.com/article/9. (Accessed 20 January, 2019).

[7] B. Latour, *Diplomacy in the Face of Gaia: Bruno Latour in conversation with Heather Davis*, in H. Davis, E. Turpin, eds., *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015), p. 44.

[8] In the Chinese context, the system, or authorial system *(体制 ti-zhi)*, has special meaning. The system means governmental institutions, state-owned enterprises, universities, and the permanent employees at these institutions are the so-called 'people inside the system'. On the other hand, private entrepreneurs, freelance workers, farmers, and assembly line workers are people outside the system. Being inside the system means more privilege and better welfare on the one hand, yet, on the other hand, stricter obedience to authority, especially that of the government.

[9] In 1900, the Bengali biophysicist and botanist Jagdish Chandra Bose found that plants have a nervous system that allows them to transmit electrical information among their roots, stems, leaves, and other parts, enabling them to explore their environments and adjusting their behavior with purpose. More recent studies reveal that plants have significantly developed abilities in experiencing sensations, awareness, integration of information, long-term memory, and adaptive learning, which suggest more similarities between animals and plants and lead to consider the possibility that plants might be intelligent, even more intelligent than we used to believe. See P. Calvo, et al., "Are plants sentient?", *Plant, Cell & Environment* 40, no. 11 (2017): pp. 2858-2869. Also: M. Marder, "Plant intentionality and the phenomenological framework of plant Intelligence", *Plant Signaling & Behavior* 7, no. 11 (November 2012): pp. 1365-1372.

[10] T. Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 13.

[11] D. Pepper, "Anarchism and the Green Society", in Id., *Eco-Socialism: From Deep Ecology to Social Justice* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 165.

[12] B. Zheng, "Weedparty: Kindred", Uncut Talks. https://soundcloud.com/uncuttalks/5zkoo8wygqk4. (Accessed 15 December, 2018).

[13] M. Bookchin, "The Concept of Social Ecology", in Id., *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Palo Alto, CA: Cheshire Books, 1982), p. 26.

[14] J. Bennett, "Preface", in Id., *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010): p. x.

[15] B. Zheng, "Ecological Art Practices in a Good Anthropocene", *New Arts: Journal of the National Academy of Art* 39, no. 6 (June 2018): pp. 5-9.

[16] Tu Wei-ming, "The Continuity of Being: Chinese Visions of Nature", in Id., *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985), p. 39.