Chinese Literary Landscapes of SARS and HIV/AIDS: On Hubris and Vulnerability

Karen Thornber
Department of Comparative Literature, Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, Harvard University
16 Quincy Street, Cambridge, MA02138, USA
Email: thornber@fas.harvard.edu

Abstract The year 2006 witnessed the publication of two landmark Chinese novels on global health crises: Hu Fayun's *Ru Yan@sars.come* on the SARS epidemic and Yan Lianke's *Dream of Ding Village* on the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Although the primary focus of these novels is exposing human and especially bureaucratic culpability for the rapid spread of fatal diseases, *Such Is This World* and *Dream of Ding Village* also interrogate relationships between human communities and the natural environment. At the same time that Hu Fayun's text exposes human destruction of the biotic and abiotic nonhuman, it ultimately dismisses the anthropogenic reshaping of landscapes brought about by human hubris by underlining human vulnerability in the face of both disease and nature. In contrast, Yan Lianke's work depicts human vulnerability to disease, in combination with hubris, as largely responsible for destroying the natural world.
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The year 2006 witnessed the publication of two landmark Chinese novels on global health crises: Hu Fayun's (胡發雲, 1959–) *Ru Yan@sars.come*(如焉@sars.come, Such Is This World@sars.come) on the SARS epidemic and Yan Lianke's (阎连科, 1958–) *Dream of Ding Village* (Ding zhuangmeng, 丁庄梦) on the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Although the primary focus of these novels is exposing human and especially bureaucratic culpability for the rapid spread of fatal diseases, *Such Is This World* and *Dream of Ding Village* also interrogate relationships between human communities and the natural environment. At the same time that Hu Fayun's text exposes human destruction of the biotic and abiotic nonhuman, it ultimately dismisses the anthropogenic reshaping of landscapes brought about by human hubris by underlining human vulnerability in the face of both disease and nature.[1] In contrast, Yan Lianke's work depicts human vulnerability to disease, in combination with

hubris, as largely responsible for destroying the natural world. That is to say, *Such Is This World* features certain landscapes as destroyed by human hubris but people as ultimately at the mercy of a dominant nonhuman (both disease and nature), while *Dream of Ding Village* portrays environments as destroyed by a combination of human hubris and human vulnerability to disease, people and landscapes given only the faintest hope of regeneration.

At first glance these two novels appear to be unusual choices for ecocritical examination; scholarship on the intersections among landscapes and illness has tended to focus on anthropogenic environmental diseases, and in particular on health conditions caused by exposure to toxic chemicals. But this is precisely the point: references to human destruction of the environment infiltrate much of Chinese literature, as they do most literatures, and analyzing their dynamics is essential to obtaining a fuller understanding of cultural production and indeed cultures themselves, especially how communities perceive the implications of their interactions with the natural world. SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) is a viral respiratory illness caused by the coronavirus SARS-CoV; it generally begins with influenza-like symptoms, followed by acute atypical pneumonia, which can lead to respiratory failure and death (Li 4211). The disease was first reported in China's Guangdong province in November 2002 and ultimately spread to nearly thirty countries in Asia, the Americas, and Europe before it was contained in the summer of 2003; altogether SARS infected 8000 people, claimed close to 800 lives, and impacted trade and travel worldwide.[2]Hu Fayun's *Such Is This World* — initially published on the internet (2004) and then, revised, as a book (2006) — provides a disturbing glimpse into life in China during the SARS incident.[3] The novel focuses on Ru Yan (茹嫣), a forty-something widow who after her son leaves to study abroad in France finds solace and then fame in the internet — writing essays under the screen name So It Was / Such Is This World (如焉 [Ru Yan], a homonym of her actual name). Ru Yan's postings and those of her online friends cover a variety of topics, revealing among other things the horrors of war and the Cultural Revolution; the novel is also a social history of the internet in China. When rumors begin to spread about SARS, Ru Yan does not shy away from writing about what is happening in her community and country, focusing not only on the disease but also on the official reaction to it. *Ru Yan* likewise puts SARS into global context, commenting at one point, "Even as the strange disease called *feidian* [非典 , SARS] was racing forward, spreading silently like fire in the underbrush, the Americans suddenly kindled the flames of war in Iraq, shocking the world" (190); the narrator later notes that the war in Iraq appeared to be moving in parallel with SARS, and he points to the similarities between China's abuse of citizens at home and the United States's crimes against peoples abroad.

Although much of *Such Is This World* centers on how people treat one another, the novel includes several important passages on human interactions with nonhuman animals and landscapes more generally. To begin with, Hu Fayun's text speaks of the widespread slaughter of both domesticated and stray dogs during the SARS epidemic; although there was no scientific evidence linking dogs to SARS, Chinese authorities and private citizens alike feared that the animals were at least partially responsible for the spread of the disease, and so, their panic stoked by the state news media, they killed canines on a large scale.[4]Shortly before he left for France, Ru Yan's son had entrusted her with his puppy Yang Yanping, which he had rescued from a life on the streets. Although Ru Yan initially had been repelled by animals, fearing infection, she rapidly warms to Yang Yanping; whenever she holds the puppy in her arms the animal reminds Ru Yan of her son when he was an infant, "light, soft, wonderful to the touch" (8); it soon becomes apparent that she speaks more with the dog than with people. *Such Is This World* depicts actual contact with an animal, as well as human need for physical and emotional comfort after the departure of a loved one, as dispelling phobias and in fact as increasing health; the narrator notes that Ru Yan has read on the internet that it is detrimental to women's well-being not to speak at least 5000 words each day and that she believes one reason her son left her his puppy was to "give her a reason to talk" (57). The novel also includes glimpses of domestic canine experiences before the advent of SARS, animals enjoying walks with their owners and especially encounters with other dogs; Yang Yanping, for her part, becomes attached to a local beagle and is devastated when Ru Yan keeps her away from her sweetheart.

But conditions change with the advent of SARS — cries of animals being beaten to death echo through the streets, and soon, the narrator notes, "it was as though on this earth there had never been anything known as a dog" (231). Ru Yan has taught a very distressed YangYanping to relieve herself indoors, and to remain silent at all costs. Yang Yanping was traumatized by the wails of her fellow canines and after an unfortunate incident with a security guard no longer barks or moves much at all, instead spending most of her days lying in Ru Yan's bedroom and expressing herself through groans. The narrator goes so far as to describe her as being as "terrified, forbearing, obedient and docile as a Jew" (它像一个犹太人一样恐惧着，隐忍着，驯服着 , 231). Ru Yan does her best to comfort the animal, holding her close. The narrator likens YangYanping's silence to that of the larger world — people too have been silenced and confined, even children and the elderly, and the streets are empty of people and animals yet replete with apprehension and unease. The World Health Organization rescinds its travel advisory for Beijing in late June of 2003. And, the narrator of *Such Is This World* declares in the novel's final pages, all rapidly returns to normal, at least on the surface. Once deserted roads now are gridlocked;

once abandoned malls, internet cafés, and dance halls now are thronged with people. Everything from the past few months — the catastrophe (灾难), panic (恐慌), anger (愤怒), loneliness (孤寂), and suffering (苦痛), not to mention all types of abuse — are said to have been transformed, in retrospect, among other things, into "beauty and enjoyment" (一种审美享受 , 267). But the focus remains on human anguish and alleged recovery. Nothing is said about the condition of the city's animals, save for a brief reference to Ru Yan caressing Yang Yanping's head after the puppy comes over to stare at her one morning, placing its paws on the edge of her bed and eager for a walk; Ru Yan promises her dog that they will go outside, declaring that today the two are going to make a fresh start. Whether Yang Yanping is one of the few dogs to have survived, or whether she is one of many that have been hidden indoors and now can resume their walks outdoors, remains unclear. Regardless, the novel's silence on the fate of the city's animals — victims of human vulnerability vis-à-vis disease (here manifesting as paranoia) — points to their likely relative insignificance in the eyes of Ru Yan, the narrator, and the community itself. People destroy one another, and animals, yet what ultimately happens to the latter is not seen as particularly important.

A similar dynamic is at play concerning perceptions of human interactions with landscapes writ large. Promising Yang Yanping a walk, Ru Yan tells her dog: "Let's go downstairs and get energy from walking on the ground" (踩 踩 地 气 去 , 449), pointing to the belief that floors do not transmit the *qi* of the earth, that living beings need to have direct contact with the soil. A month or two earlier, Ru Yan and her friend Damo had traveled far out of town, to a mountain retreat which prized itself on its "Green Tourism" (绿色旅游 , 261), a converted logging camp with electricity and comfortable cabins, but with few other signs of human presence. The narrator emphasizes the genuineness of the place: the greens gradually grow stronger (浓郁), things feel purer (纯 净) than in the fields below, the mountain forests and rivulets and rocks and even the flowers and grass, everything is unadulterated nature (都是自然本色 , 260-61). Sitting in the stillness, together, Ru Yan and Damo appear at peace.

Like Yang Yanping, nature itself is depicted as providing comfort or at least as helping people relax. It is also portrayed as relatively impervious to human behaviors. At the height of the SARS epidemic, Ru Yan thinks about her deceased husband and father, the impending death of her aging mother, and then the fate of her son, most of whose setbacks, humiliations, and pain would remain obscured from her, as hers are hidden from him. She tells herself that God made human beings suffer, that grief and pain are the foundation of life, with joy and pleasure nothing more than brief moments of respite. But then her thoughts turn to human reshaping of landscapes:

People brag that they're the pinnacles of the universe, they brag that they're the

> masters of the world, blasting mountains and diverting water, remaking heaven and earth [改 天 换 地], strong and proud, indomitable, but in fact people are like flowers and grass, mosquitoes and flies, unable to endure a single strike.... Those towering buildings that enter the clouds, those highways that stretch for thousands of miles, those exquisite ingenious tools, that resplendent, noble finery…in the face of certain forces, in fact are so fragile that they cannot endure a single strike. (204)

Ru Yan draws attention to the ephemerality of the built environment at the same time that she minimizes anthropogenic destruction of the natural world. Leveled mountains and redirected waterways, lofty towers and lengthy highways, these vertical and horizontal penetrations of ecosystems large and small are depicted as helping human societies prove to themselves, and to others, that they are the pinnacles of creation, the rulers of the world, without equal. In contrast, Ru Yan calls attention to human vulnerability vis-à-vis nature: all it takes is a relatively minor tremor in the earth's crust or an infinitesimal virus to wreak havoc on human communities and their manufactured landscapes. So in the battle between human and nonhuman, nature comes out on top; she implies that while mountains do not regenerate, nor do waterways (immediately) restore themselves, other forces vanquish the vanquishers. Ru Yan depicts people as far more fragile than the biotic and abiotic nonhuman, a point she explicitly emphasizes by declaring human suffering much greater than the sheep and cattle slaughtered by human hands. *Such Is This World* stresses human vulnerability, and although the novel calls attention to how animals and landscapes alike can comfort people, it also for the most part minimizes their destruction. People depend on their environments, with which they develop close ties, but they perceive their reshaping of these environments as inconsequential.

Late in Hu Fayun's *Such Is This World*, a medical researcher chastises the mayor of a city hit hard by the SARS epidemic for lamenting that medication to combat this disease will not be available for some time. She declares:

> You think that what we most need now truly is medicine? Think about it. From its beginning, how many lives has "SARS" taken? A hundred? A thousand? Worst case scenario, ten thousand? With China's hundreds of millions of people, is there anything that doesn't kill more people than SARS? Hepatitis, tumors, heart disease, poisonings, suicides, car accidents, occupational injuries, fires, mine disasters ... the newspapers are full of them, even the common cold kills more people than "SARS." What we most need now is not medicine, it is calming down the mood of the general population. We need to dispel the panic. This is

more important than medicine. (240)

The researcher astutely observes that shaping public opinion about a disease can be just as important as developing medications to combat that disease. But even more noteworthy about her remarks is the conspicuous absence of HIV/AIDS on her list of conditions that kill Chinese, despite the fact that by the turn of the twenty-first century HIV/AIDS had claimed the lives of far more people in China, not to mention the world, than SARS ever would. Subject to significant censorship, *Such Is This World* repeatedly condemns the deceitfulness of Chinese officialdom concerning the severity of SARS, together with the silences imposed on the Chinese people. But Hu Fayun's novel paradoxically contributes to the even more extreme silences surrounding an even more deadly disease, one that Yan Lianke takes up in *Dream of Ding Village.*

China's first reported HIV/AIDS case was that of an Argentine-American tourist who died in a Beijing hospital in 1985. In the years that followed, the disease, officially identified only in individuals who had traveled outside of China or used imported blood products, was deemed a foreign (capitalist) condition, one caused by "the corrupted Western bourgeois lifestyle," which allegedly promoted such social evils as drug use, homosexuality, and prostitution (Guo and Kleinman 240). The Chinese government remained for some time convinced, or at least continued to give the impression they were convinced, that HIV/AIDS came from abroad. Considerable attention was thus given to preventing the disease from entering China, rather than identifying local sources. But an outbreak of infections among intravenous drug users in Yunnan province (southwest China), on the border of Thailand and Burma, challenged these approaches.

So too did a blood selling scandal. In the 1990s, and particularly between 1992 and 1997, Henan Province was at the epicenter of an AIDS outbreak that affected seven provinces in central China. The area had been the site of numerous blood markets since the early twentieth century, when missionary hospitals introduced blood transfusion technology; missionaries took advantage of the Chinese cultural prejudice against donating blood, stemming from the belief that any loss of blood, central to the body's vitality, would harm the health of the donor. Blood merchants, who gradually took the place of missionaries, seldom tested blood, needles and syringes were not sterilized, and blood from multiple sellers was pooled into a single centrifuge with the extracted red cells re-injected into any number of people via contaminated infusion equipment, a procedure that almost guaranteed the rapid spread of the AIDS virus. Not only did patients receiving blood transfusions and hemophiliacs taking blood-clotting medication fall ill, so too did plasma sellers who were injected with pooled red blood cells (Jun 80-82).

Yan Lianke's *Dream of Ding Village* addresses the plight of a rural community decimated by this scandal. Unlike much creative writing on HIV/AIDS, it devotes considerable space to the plight of the nonhuman, interweaving descriptions of human death from AIDS with discourse on the human destruction of nature. In so doing, the novel emphasizes the interdependence of people and landscapes and not only how *readily* both can be obliterated but also *how* both can be obliterated so readily — largely as a result of human hubris.

Dream of Ding Village underlines how frequently hubris controls behavior, and ultimately destroys human lives. Early in the novel the narrator Ding Qiang describes how when everyone else was living in thatched, mud-brick cottages, his father Ding Hui built a single-story home of brick and tiles. And then, when others built similar homes, his father tore theirs down to build one with two floors; when the villagers again followed suit, they built a home with three stories; no other family was authorized to do the same, so it was in this house that they remained. The house itself was furnished not for comfort, but for display, the narrator noting that it was fitted with indoor plumbing but that his parents, unable to adapt to such facilities, built an outhouse, and that even though they had a washing machine, his mother preferred to do laundry by hand, out in the courtyard. Here mimicking others or mimicking an ideal is portrayed as having few consequences, and there is a safety net of sorts: indoor plumbing and a washing machine do not usurp the lives of the Ding family, and in fact are easily avoided even when installed.

HIV/AIDS is another story. Ding Hui's ravenous appetite for profit leads him to become the kingpin of a massive blood selling enterprise. Initially, everyone seems to benefit; securing a somewhat steady income by selling their own blood or that of others helps lift many in the village out of extreme poverty, while the narrator's father enjoys a considerable boost in his own wealth. And a concrete road is built that now links Ding Village to the outside world. But some years later the consequences of an unregulated blood market become apparent, and the town and its environs collapse. At first the nonhuman is invoked only as simile, the narrator likening people perishing of AIDS to dying ants and falling autumn leaves. Early in the novel city officials share with the narrator's grandfather Ding Shuiyang predictions that turn out to be all too accurate, introducing refrains that will appear throughout the novel:

> The fever would explode violently [大 爆] across the plain. It would explode violently [大　爆] upon Ding Village, Willow Village, Yellow Creek, Two-Li Village, and thousands of other hamlets like a flood. Like the Yellow River bursting through its dikes, it would surge through hundreds if not thousands of villages, and people would die like ants, people would die like falling leaves.

> Going out like lights [灯一灭], there would be no more people on the face of the earth, they would die like leaves floating down. At that time, Ding Village would disappear forever. Ding Village would vanish from the face of the earth. Like leaves atop an old tree, the people of Ding Village, first withering, then yellow, and then with a gurgle [哗哗啦啦], all would fall. After a gust of wind, the leaves, like the village, would go off somewhere unknown [不知哪去了]. (10-11)

The difference, of course, is that come spring the leaves will be replaced and provide a glorious canopy once again; human futures, on the other hand, are far from certain and changing seasons do not spontaneously bring with them new life.

Eventually, however, AIDS is revealed as a destroyer not only of human communities, but also of the landscapes by which they are surrounded. Initial transformations of the natural world are notable, but ultimately appear relatively benign. The narrator describes how Ding Village, when it was the site of twelve blood-collection stations sponsored by a plethora of government organizations, was littered with blood-filled plastic tubing, bottles of plasma, broken glass vials and syringes, discarded cotton balls, and used needles surrounded by splashes of red blood. Moreover, tree leaves in the village absorbed air "filled with the stench of fresh blood" and began to take on a faint reddish color (31). Even fresh verdure was affected: the narrator notes that in the past, the new leaves of the locust trees had all been thin and soft, and under the sunlight their color had been a pale yellow, with the threadlike ribs of the leaves appearing brownish, darkish green. But during the blood boom years, the new leaves of these trees were tinged with pink and their veins were a brownish purple. The locust tree by the veterinary hospital, beneath which had stood a particularly active blood bank, was especially affected; its yellow leaves became as red as those of persimmon trees in autumn and grew larger and thicker than in years past. Selling their blood also enables farmers to purchase chemical fertilizer, which allows them to grow plumper wheat than ever before.

Yet things change when people begin to die. Far from enjoying a resurgence, which often happens when human populations decline, the ecosystems of Ding Village and its environs appear to be destroyed just as readily as, and in fact even before, the human population; Yan Lianke's novel is replete with descriptions of a damaged and then decimated natural world. Most notably, demand for coffins, and the subsequent demand for wood for a variety of other purposes, depletes the village's wood supply, as residents receive permission to fell trees for any number of reasons, including but not limited to constructing coffins. Authorities so freely authorize people to fell trees for coffins both needed and anticipated that soon every tree is marked for destruction.

The narrator devotes part of volume four to describing, in bold characters, village ecosystems under siege. He reveals how one evening, as he walked toward the village, his grandfather gradually began to hear buzzing saws and chopping axes. Shuiyang arrived at the nearest lights only to find them illuminating a large cottonwood under attack.

When he questioned who gave the villagers permission to uproot this tree, they produced a letter on Ding Village party stationary. Shuiyang quickly discovered that authorities had authorized the felling of virtually every large tree in the village; the reader follows him through the hamlet as he surveys the extent of the (imminent) damage, remarking on the stark differences between the village now spreading before him and that of his dreams. He had envisioned Ding Village as a place of flowers (above) and gold (below). Instead, what he finds is a site of surreal destruction, trees being taken down no matter where in the village and its environs they are situated. The narrator observes, "Standing amid that torrential, unending [滔滔不绝] sound of trees being felled, Grandpa once again caught sight [in his imagination] of the fresh flowers on the surface of the flatlands and of the gold beneath" (158). But the next morning all the trees are gone; it has taken just a single night to render the village treeless. And the effects are immediate, the narrator noting that although the spring sun shone warm as usual, without foliage or shade to temper its rays it scorched the villagers' flesh. Later in *Dream of Ding Village* the narrator speaks again of trees being felled to house the dead:

> Because of the fever, on the plain people are dying just like lights going out, just like leaves floating down from trees [和灯灭一模样，和树叶飘落一模样]. The dead needed coffins and the living needed houses. Used for coffins, the paulownia trees were as scarce as silver, and the cedar, used for crosspieces, as scarce as gold. But the coffins my father had delivered were not made of paulownia or cedar, but instead of gingko. The entire coffin was gingko.... The entire coffin was made from planks, three inches thick, from a 1,000 year old gingko. (218)

Ding Qiang describes in detail the specifics of his Uncle's coffin — every surface of the casket is engraved with scenes of people and nature, including "trees in parks, with people below trees" (218). To be sure, most of the engravings are of material culture, everything from skyscrapers to overpasses to refrigerators, washing machines, and televisions. Yet nature remains an important part of material culture.

Noteworthy here is not only the refrain comparing human death with that of leaves and lights and the revelation that a particularly venerable tree, one that

has survived a millennium, has now been sacrificed for a coffin decorated in part by engravings of trees. Even more important is the comparison of the scarcity of paulownia trees with that of silver and the scarcity of cedars with that of gold. The narrator earlier had stated that all the trees had been felled, whereas here readers are informed that trees are as scarce as precious metals; it is not as though trees are now plentiful, and they are clearly difficult to obtain, but they are not entirely non-existent.

Moreover, the narrator describes his grandfather as dreaming about trees: "Conditions in the courtyard were the same as before Uncle and Lingling had moved in. The crowns of the paulownia trees shaded one third of the courtyard, and the radiant sunlight streamed through the thick tree leaves ... there wasn't anything that wasn't the same as before" (212). The emphasis here is on continuity. Not all is perfect, to be sure; Shuiyang also sees in his dream the two trees between which a washing line has been strung, and these have been "deeply scarred" by the metal wire that has been wrapped around them. But interestingly, the narrator seems to forget that the trees are alive (presumably) only in the dream. He has Shuiying wake up, tear himself away from his dream, and race toward Uncle's house, where, "The cries of cicadas were dropping from the courtyard's paulownia trees, like falling, overripe fruit" (213). In fact, reality is here more fecund than the dream: it is in reality that animal voices are as rich and full as succulent fruit.

These moments of resilience, however imagined, are few and far between, and circumstances deteriorate as the novel progresses. Nevertheless, people and plants continue to defy expectations. Whereas the narrator earlier had stated that fields were left fallow, here he speaks of crops damaged by drought, revealing that people do continue to plant, on however limited a scale. The narrator repeats his claim that the trees that once shaded the village are gone. But he also depicts trees as being attacked by swarms of insects. And he declares that, "The trees, those that still lived, could not support so many leaves, the leaves thinned out, so just the roots and the trunk still lived." And meanwhile, the cicadas hang from branches at night so that when the sun rises, "all the [cicada] shells emit a yellow light/ A golden yellow light." Trees can hardly be said to be thriving, but they continue to support a robust insect population. Interestingly, the narrator almost immediately goes on to claim that at sunset the plain turns to fire and that by nightfall "throughout the land there are just lively cinders/ lively cinders everywhere on earth" (只有遍地的红火烬 // 满天下的红火烬, 234). But if this truly were the case, if the earth truly were reduced to nothing but burning cinders, then the following day there would be nothing left to burn. The fires cannot be as destructive as the narrator here indicates. And so the pattern continues, the narrator speaking in the following chapter of the extreme, deadly heat, about how the wheat and grass are withering, the leaves curling up and dying (236). But this is

something these plants have been doing since the beginning of the novel, leaving the reader to question just how much has been, and how much remains to be, destroyed.

Indeed, at the same time that it underscores the vulnerability of both people and nature, Yan Lianke's novel also leaves space for different forms of survival, if not resilience.[5] On several occasions the narrator Ding Qiang speaks of landscapes being razed (most often in terms of trees having been felled), only to refer in a subsequent chapter to surviving if not thriving trees and other foliage. Similarly, the narrator refers regularly to people dying one after the other, of the town as disintegrating into oblivion, only to speak in a subsequent chapter about healthy survivors. And he comments repeatedly on the penetrating silences of both people and landscapes, only then occasionally to reveal the silence as shattered. This relative inconsistency can be attributed in part to the narrator's own positionality. But the novel's ambiguity signals to an even greater degree the possibility of both people and nature surviving, somehow, against incredible odds.

This dynamic comes to the fore in the eighth and final volume of *Dream of Ding Village*, a short chapter of just four pages, where devastated landscapes ultimately come alive, although in curious form. The narrator begins with a report on the drought, the worst the plain has experienced in nearly a century, and reveals that trees did survive the initial felling by reporting on their death in the drought: "The trees, trees that couldn't endure the drought, they also died. Like the paulownias, locust trees, chinaberries, elms, toons . . . they had all silently died./ The big trees had been chopped down, and the small trees could not endure the drought, they all died" (281). The reader is informed as well that ponds congeal, rivers stop, and wells run dry; mosquitoes disappear along with the water and only the sun, stars, planets, and wind remain. But in the second month of autumn the rains return, and sounds of life begin are heard across the land. And despite everything some grass still lives and even emits fresh green shoots; across the bright red skies an occasional bird takes flight. Returning to Ding Village, Shuiyang finds the streets deserted, no people or animals to be found save for several stray dogs, yet the road to the school is filled with the scent of the new grass growing on the plain, and grasshoppers, dragonflies, and moths are flitting through the air.

Exhausted Shuiyang dreams. He passes through all the villages he has known, walking hundreds of miles and visiting hundreds of villages, all of which are devoid of people, animals, and trees; people and animals have been obliterated, the plain barren. But at night onto this barren wasteland falls a torrential downpour, one that turns the parched soil into mud. A woman — one who closely resembles the legendary Chinese goddess Nüwa (女娲) — dips down into the mud with a willow branch, then lifts up the branch and swings it back and forth. With each swing there appear many

mud people (*niren*) on the earth (地上就有了好多泥人儿 , 285). Another dipping into the ground, another swing in the air, and on the ground there are hundreds, thousands of mud people. Touching and swinging again and again, never stopping, countless mud people leaping and jumping (蹦 蹦 和 跳 跳), as numerous as the bubbles the rain makes on the ground, such that Grandpa finds himself gazing upon a "new leaping jumping plain" (新的蹦蹦跳跳的平原了). The following sentence, in plain type, concludes the novel: "A new leaping and jumping world" (新的蹦蹦跳跳的世界了). Repeating three times in three lines the phrase "leaping [and] jumping" (*bengbeng*[*he*]*tiaotiao*, 蹦 蹦 [和] 跳 跳) the narrative highlights the liveliness of this new world. But no mention is made of plants and animals and their place in this imagined landscape. Without them, of course, people will not be able to leap and jump for long. Perhaps the nonhuman no longer appears in Shuiyang's dreams because its regeneration has already begun, albeit on a small scale. But its absence points both to human hubris and to human vulnerability: the envisioned new world is one inhabited solely by people, people with no means of survival.

Notes

1. The distinction between "disease" and "nature" is necessarily an artificial one. And the terms "nature" and "nonhuman" are not unproblematic. For more on the dynamics of speaking about such phenomena see Thornber.

2. SARS had a global spread, but China (particularly Hong Kong), Taiwan, and Singapore, as well as Canada (especially Toronto), were the most active sites of this disease, which had a mortality rate of about fifteen percent, much greater than that of influenza. SARS was contained by July 2003; it reemerged in Guangdong province in the winter of 2003-2004 affecting four individuals, all of whom recovered. (Li 4211) The Chinese government was harshly criticized by the international community for failing to report the outbreak of this disease more promptly. Much scholarship on SARS focuses on the social construction of the disease. See in particular Ali and Keil, Fidler, and Powers and Xiao. Powers explains how this first international health-related crisis of the twenty-first century was also the first international health communication crisis (1-13). SARS was an inspiration for Steven Soderbergh's (1963–) Hollywood film *Contagion* (2011). See also Sterlin for more on images of SARS.

3. The internet version was quickly taken down. In 2007 Hong Kong's WenhuaYishuChubanshe published a version of this novel that advertises itself in English and Chinese as the "uncensored edition" (一字不删 / 足版全本 , lit., not a single character left out/complete edition, unabridged edition). This version includes a brief biography of Hu Fayun and comments on the novel by noted scholars, critics, and artists. Another noteworthy novel from 2006 in this context is the Taiwanese writer Jiang Xun's (蒋勋) *Mimi jiaqi: Vacances Secretes* (秘密假期 : Vacances Secretes; Secret

Vacation: Vacances Secretes), which opens with a city under siege by an epidemic that resembles SARS, with viruses floating and spreading and killing. AIDS overshadows much of the text as well.

4. The immediate origin of SARS is believed to be exotic animals from a Guangdong marketplace, particularly Himalayan palm civets and raccoon dogs; raccoon dogs are a species native to Asia.

5. Resilience — best understood as the ability of a system to absorb shocks, and arguably more of a process than a characteristic — is an emergent and increasingly popular area of scholarly inquiry in a number of diverse fields. For a helpful summary, see "Resilience."

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