

The Narrative Dynamics of Contemporary Chinese Ecoliterature: A Review of *A Study of Eco-Narrative of Chinese Contemporary Novels from a Comparative Perspective*

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Abstract Eco-narrative in literature is now understood as an effective way to examine the problematic relationship between our postmodern landscape and mindscape. A case in point is Ji Xiuming's *A Study of Eco-Narrative of Chinese Contemporary Novels from a Comparative Perspective* which carries out a comparative analysis of both western and Chinese views in ecocriticism and literary expressions.

Key words Ji Xiuming; eco-narrative; Chinese contemporary novels; comparative perspective

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Actively participating in the fast global economic development, China like many other countries has been witnessing and suffering the deterioration of its own natural environment. Similar with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), contemporary Chinese ecoliterature started with narratives of caution and apocalypse. The conflicts between Chinese economic reforms and environmental protection have become extremely conspicuous in recent decades. Professor Ji has listed out many Chinese contemporary environmental disasters such the flood in the middle and

lower reaches of Yangtse River in 1998, the epidemic of SARS and the pollution of Huaihe and Yangtse rivers in 2003, the nation-wide freezing rain and snow disaster in 2008 (16). According to Professor Ji, experiencing the natural disasters Chinese began to realize the importance of environmental protection. Chinese literature acts correspondingly by addressing people's combat with nature and its negative consequences.

As for the genre of eco-novel, Professor Ji argues that there is not a clear distinction between eco-novels and non-eco-novels because ecological issues are also dealt with in non-ecological novels. According to Professor Ji, the analysis of eco-narrative in novels is an appropriate approach to deal with ecological issues in both kinds of novels.

In her book, Professor Ji has summarized the themes of the eco-narrative of Chinese contemporary novels, such as ecological crisis, anti-anthropocentrism, anti-materialism, criticism on science and technology, criticism on political culture, the ethical relationship between man and nature and the sense of loss of religious and spiritual home. Her book has a wide coverage of Chinese contemporary novels. Novels by Yu Jie, Du Guanghui, A Chen, Lao Gui, Zhe Fu, Li Cunbao, Guo Xuebo, Chi zijian, Wei An, Wang Men and Jian Rong have been used to exemplify those thematic concerns. In order to carry out a comparative study, Professor Ji has been engaged with critical ideas of a good number of distinguished Chinese and foreign scholars such as Wang Nuo, Lu Shuyuan, Wang Shudong, Shen Dan, Yang Jianlong, Zhou Xufeng, Zhou Xianglu, Jonathan Levin, Donald Worster, Albert Schweitzer, Martin Heidegger, Benedict Anderson and Mark Schorer.

Professor Ji argues that according to many Chinese contemporary writers science and technology has deified man but the selfish and self-centered man-god is killing wild animals around the world. Man will reap what he has sown. Du Guanghui raises an environmental ethical inquiry: "After the annihilation of animals, will man end up killing themselves?" (25) The deterioration of environment in China is not only the result of the fast development of economy and technology but also the result of its own historical problems including the collision between the culture of revolution and the traditional village or country culture with patriarchal clan system at its core.

The eco-narrative of Chinese writers has displayed a peculiar cultural consciousness. Eco-narrative provides a way in which Chinese writers can reflect upon and reconstruct national culture. Professor Ji focuses on the symbiotic relationship between wolf and man, nature and culture in Jia Pingwa's novel *Missing Wolves* and Jiang Rong's novel *Wolf Totem*. The wolf culture and the

philosophy of life inspire and complete modern people's cultural imagination. The images and concepts of wolf, threat and the invasion of Mongolian cavalry are closely interlocked within an eco-narrative which demonstrates the contribution of a nature-centered nomadic culture to Chinese civilization. The sustainability of Chinese culture depends on the inflow of the fresh blood of new cultures.

Through an emphasis on the cultural, political, national and international elements in Chinese eco-narratives, *A Study of Eco-Narrative of Chinese Contemporary Novels from a Comparative Perspective* proposes a new methodological direction for charting the trajectory of Chinese intellectual debates over ecological issues. Addressing the differences between western eco-narrative and Chinese eco-narrative, Mrs. Ji emphasizes the importance of literary examination and representation of national policy and national cultural imagination. She argues that compared with Chinese narrative of modernity focusing on the nation-state imagination and the fulfillment of a Chinese dream of abundance, strength and happiness, contemporary Chinese eco-narrative emphasizes the model of eco-national culture, the interlocked relationship between national-state system and national eco-policies (42). Within such a discursive context, Chinese Xun Gen literature (Search-for-Roots Literature) is considered extremely effective in dealing with ecological issues, because it reflects upon Chinese modernization process which has dramatically changed Chinese landscape and mindscape. The conflicts between the physical and spiritual spheres of Chinese modern life and the combat between nature's right of existence and man's right of existence have sparked a nationwide self-examination in literature.

Mrs. Ji points out that Chinese contemporary eco-narrative takes place in a complex cultural context within which pre-modern, modern and postmodern elements co-exist. Chinese eco-criticism thus develops a compromise formula. Affected by the formula, Chinese writers often take an ambivalent, ambiguous attitude toward certain ecological issues. The ethics of modernity and the ethics of environmental protection affect Chinese contemporary writers at the same time, as a result of which they quite often suffer from an ethical confusion which does not exist in western eco-narrative because anthropocentrism has been overthrown in western societies already. In China modernization is still an ongoing process and the tug of war between progress and protection continues. Deeply influenced by these social, economical and cultural factors, Chinese eco-narrative in general has weakened the classical western ecological perspectives whose core concepts are "anti-anthropocentrism" and "respect of life" (53).

Mrs. Ji devotes five of her study's eight chapters to critically reflecting upon

narrative patterns and motifs in contemporary Chinese eco-narrative. Importantly, she closely examines representative Western and Chinese literary texts and successfully draws paradigms of Chinese eco-narrative. She demonstrates the intersections between literary studies and other fields of inquiry: geo-political studies, culture studies and the study of ethics. Chapter 3 offers a profound discussion of the necessity of introducing the analysis of narrative strategies into the research of eco-literature. The shared eco-narrative motifs such as the beauty of the aboriginality of nature and people, the mysticism in religions, and the evilness of nature are clearly illustrated. A Lai's novel *Distant Hot Springs*, Chi Zijian's novel *Right bank of Eergu'Na River* and Du Guanghui's short fiction "Oh, My Kokohili" are put side by side with their western counterparts such as Aldous Huxley's novel *Brave New World*, Boris Livovich Vasilyev's novel *Do Not Shoot at White Swans* and Leonid Maksimovich Leonov's novel *The Russian Forest*.

Based upon textual analysis and Tzvetan Todorov's ideas on narrative sequence, Mrs. Ji has categorized two contemporary eco-narrative sequences: 1. mode of retrospection including aspects such as spiritual utopia, aboriginal beliefs, animal spirit and the magical power of nature; 2. mode of postmodern criticism which exhibits itself in the sequence "harmony — breach of harmony — regain of harmony — breach of harmony again — the possible victory over the destructive power — the possible reconstruction of a harmony?" The narrative point of views in contemporary Chinese eco-narrative such as children's perspective and animal's perspective are carefully examined by Mrs. Ji as ways through which narrative tensions are heightened and multi-dimensional debates are unfolded.

Chapter 4 entitled "narrative strategy: specific narrative features" focuses on national geo-political and cultural elements in contemporary Chinese eco-narrative. Drawing theoretical concepts from H. A. Taine and comparing with American national geo-political eco-narratives by Washington Irving, William Faulkner, Tony Morrison, Mrs. Ji studies the eco-narratives of Chinese minority writers such as Tibetan writer A Lai, Bai ethnic writer Zhang Chang, Mongolian writer Baugil Dhidhi, and Tujia ethnic writer Li Chuanfeng, etc. Mysticism and cultural uniqueness are narrative focuses and marks in minority writers' eco-narratives. Unnatural narrative is widely employed by these writers to create a mythic nature and helps people to develop a sense of awe at and a respect for the mysterious nature. The spiritual power and its personifications of nature take place in various forms. The images of utopia and dystopia in the eco-narrative of contemporary Chinese eco-narrative are compared with its western counterpart. Different from its western counterpart, Chinese depiction of dystopia mainly emphasizes the distorted

human desire, social and cultural aspects. As a result, the battle between technology, natural environment and human nature is not that significant.

What follows is an illuminating exploration of the achievements and problems in contemporary Chinese eco-narrative. According to Mrs. Ji, the evaluation of social, moral values in eco-narrative should be given more attention and the employment of diversified narrative techniques will help writers to extract those values and develop unique esthetics in Chinese eco-narrative. Mrs. Ji argues that localization in eco-narrative deals with the complexity of national issues: the conflicts between development and environment, the symbiotic relationship and tension between the ethics of nature and the ethics of living, people's ethical confusion caused by the clash between the modernization process and the seemingly static rural country life. The relationship between people and earth has to be addressed repeatedly.

Throughout the book, Mrs. Ji displays an impressively broad range of reference and expertise. Her undertaking draws as deftly on theories of eco-criticism as it does on the comparative history of western and Chinese eco-narrative. Juxtaposing her readings of both western and Chinese eco-literatures, Mrs. Ji has demonstrated their similarities and differences. Chinese eco-narrative is considered as a way in which contemporary Chinese writers address national economic, political and cultural problems and participate in the global cause of environmental protection. As a comprehensive and ground breaking study, *A Study of Eco-Narrative of Chinese Contemporary Novels from a Comparative Perspective* is just such a compelling read for refining our understanding of contemporary Chinese writers' perspectives, anxieties and wishes in their eco-narratives.

Work Cited

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