

Shared Sensibilities: Human-environment Relationship in Contemporary Chinese Poetry

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Abstract

In the middle of the long London 2020-21 Covid19 lockdown, the urban centres, regularly noisy, suddenly became natural spaces, in which birds' tweeting and foxes walking made all of us suddenly and acutely aware of the conflict between nature and the urban space. The fascination for the modern technological world which made of the machine a desired object of aesthetics during modern times cannot compare with the unwavering role of nature in all arts, through the centuries.

This essay will approach a few contemporary Chinese poems from the conceptual perspective of the two qualities of *qíng* (emotion) and *jìng* (environment) found in classical lyricism, to ascertain: the kinds of relationship established between the poetic persona and its environment, and whether the contemporary condition has not only undermined the basic connection with nature, but also changed the aesthetic sense about it.

In the first section, looking at primarily Yu Jian's poems, the essay discusses a performative *qíng-jìng* that conflates the human and non-human worlds. The main emotional *qíng* quality is awe and empathy within the environment, *jìng*. In the second section I look at poems that display a negative, often politically triggered *qíng*, which relates to a dystopian world, *jìng*, that devours human ambitions and contributes to an overall mood of loss, and existential crisis.

Keywords: *qing-jing*; nature and city; ecopoetics; body; metaphor

Introduction

As a classical conceptual pair, *qíng* 情 and *jìng* 境 has been subject to a dizzying degree of semantic flux that requires some introduction if we want to use it as a conceptual background against which discuss contemporary permutations. I'll therefore first look at each element of the binomen and then look at it again as a pair, before passing to an exploration of how traditional thought precipitated in these two qualities can illuminate a number of contemporary ecocritical poems. I rely on established scholarship on premodern Chinese aesthetics for a definition of *qíng* and *jìng*, but always reminding myself and the reader of the limitations of applying centuries-long aesthetics as a monolithic structure unproblematically absorbed by contemporary poets. There are in fact multiple traditions in "premodern Chinese tradition", and the terms *qíng* and *jìng*, both separately and as a compound, have through time received a variety of interpretations and translations in Eastern and Western scholarship alike.

Among the abundance of writings on the theme of *qíng*, I draw from Marks and Ames' *Emotions in Asian Thought* (1995), Eifring's *Love and Emotions in Traditional Chinese Literature* (2004), and Cai and Wu's *Emotion and Visuality in Chinese Literature and Culture* (2019), three monographs that attempt to articulate the term in a conclusive manner. In addition, the study by Martin W. Huang, "Sentiments of Desire", offers a useful overview of the historical underpinnings of this term. According to Huang (154), one of the earliest definitions of *qíng* is found in Xunzi 荀子 (ca. 313-230 B.C.):

The feelings of liking and disliking, of delight and anger, and of sorrow and joy that are inborn in our nature are called ‘emotions’, *qíng*.¹

Qíng has since received contrasting evaluations in philosophical texts,² up until the Ming dynasty when, in a turn of fate, scholars agree, *qíng* exhibited particular relevance in literature determining a “cult of *qíng*” (Struve 130). In poetry and poetry criticism, however, this notion has almost invariably been considered a core ingredient, without which writing would be reduced to a mere exercise. One of the renderings of *qíng* that I find particularly important for its combination with *jìng*, and for its later variants, is Chad Hansen’s “reality feedback” (196) or “reality input” (201). *Qíng* externalizes itself in the patterned sounds and words of the poem, giving rise to visual manifestations, images of the external worlds of man and nature.

The aesthetic concept *jìng* 境 (scene, environment) also appears to be one of the most discussed concepts in the study of classical lyricism. Its historical evolution has been well summarised by Lian Duan in his 2007 article “The Poetic World of *Jìng*”. Duan explains that in modern times scholars have paid attention to the interlocking play of subjectivity and objectivity of the *qíng-jìng* binomen. With reference to Kang-i Sun Chang, Duan reports on *jìng* as a poetic concept expressing an objective scene infused with the subjective feeling of the lyric writers, thus always allowing for innumerable “possibilities for innovation” of the poetic world (56) - what Yu-kung Kao calls “inscape” (57). In many instances, *jìng* becomes synonym of *jǐng* 景, an approximation that Duan considers somewhat depriving the concept of its subjective element (59), even though, as Pauline Yu concludes, the poetic world is “both external and internal, sensuous and intellectual, a fusion of mind and world” (60).

Scholars agree that, as a compound, *qíng-jìng/jǐng* (情境/景) found its fullest expression under Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619-1692), who wrote: “*qíng* and *jìng* are two in name, but inseparable in reality.”³

In this light, it’s understandable that the tight interdependence between the human and her environment in the *qíng-jìng* dual concept can provide an appropriate context for a reading of ecocritical concerns in contemporary Chinese poetry, especially when, in consonance with Yanmei Zhang and Jingming Wu, we define ecological literature (*shengtai wenxue* 生態文學) as depicting “the relationship between man and nature as harmonious, as a song that is jointly composed by the two sides”.⁴

One of the main contributors to Chinese ecological poetry, the poet Hua Hai 華海, emphasises his connections with traditional nature poetry in this way:

¹ Xunzi wrote: 好惡喜怒哀樂藏焉，夫是之謂天情， which is translated into modern Chinese as: 愛好與厭惡、高興與憤怒、悲哀與歡樂等蘊藏在人的形體和精神裡面，這些叫做天生的情感。

² In pre-Han text *qíng* and *xìng* 性 (translated as “nature”), were considered almost synonymous. However, by the Western Han dynasty (206 BC-24 AD), the difference between these two concepts began to receive more attention, and they were treated antithetically. Even more significantly, in this antithetical treatment *xìng* was often said to be good while *qíng* had negative connotations. See Huang 154.

³ In Duan (61). Wang Fuzhi original reads: “情、景名為二，而是不可離” (1). See also Cecile Sun (1995 and 2006) and Pauline Yu (1987), both providing similar conclusions on *qíng-jìng*.

⁴ Zhang and Wu also highlight the ethical aspect of ecological literature when they state “ecological literature is tightly linked to ecological problems and environmental protection; it condemns and criticizes the destruction of the ecosystem, [...]. In general, the perspective of the author of ecological literature is one of tolerance, love and respect for nature and life” (10).

In the writings of traditional poets, the natural object is often the “container” of the poet’s inner emotion, being employed for stirring emotions, as a metaphor, or symbol. At times the human being is central or even conquers and transforms nature. The poetry of Wang Wei and Li Bai is instead all indivisible from nature. The nature poems written by their pens convey their inner feelings in tandem with nature. Chinese traditional landscape and nature poetry constitutes a rich resource for contemporary ecopoetry. That said, contemporary ecopoetry is different from traditional nature poetry, because, after all, contemporary ecological poetry is primarily born out of the industrial age. (92)

But the *qíng-jìng* relationship does not necessarily equal nature poetry (even though in classical lyricism it often does): it is rather closer to what the Chinese American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan describes as the feeling-link between a person and her environment. It can relate to the natural landscape, as it can relate to the city, what “has distanced itself (escaped) from nature and its rhythms” (xii). My aim is then to explore *qíng-jìng* in contemporary Chinese poetry, by looking at the two often opposed, but actually often overlapping, environments (the natural and the urban) and the emotions they entail into the poetic persona.

A relational world of human and nature

Born in 1954, in Kunming, Yunnan, the poet Yu Jian 于堅 - who is also an essayist, photographer, documentary film director, editor, and academic - has been entertaining a sustained, albeit at times contradictory, dialogue with premodern poetics and thought. In particular, in his essay “Shi yan ti” 詩言體 (poetry puts body into words), Yu makes substantial reference to premodern Chinese poetics, discussing a number of renowned literary critics, poets and thinkers, such as the already mentioned Wang Fuzhi, Liu Xie 劉勰 (465-522), Lu Ji 陸機 (261-303), Laozi 老子 (ca. 571-471 BC), etc.⁵ By the phrase *shi yan ti*, Yu aims at conveying his vision of a kind of poetry writing that is of the body, sensuous, situated, evolving directly from the environment.⁶

Poetry is a linguistic metaphoric body of the world, it is a metaphor for the world, it is a fundamental thing, something beyond words. Instead “zhi” [志 mind] is something born from poetry, it is three, it is a number. The *dao* 道 gives birth to one, one generates poetry, poetry generates thousands. *Zhi* is just one out of ten thousand. (J. Yu, “Shi yan zhi” 67)

Yunnan poets do not find inspiration in ideas or books. We approach the gods of poetry from the earth and from listening to the world of our native place. (J. Yu, *Yu Jian ji* 55)

This approach to poetry links with his previous, much discussed, propositions on metaphor:

⁵ In fact, the very phrase *shi yan ti* is a manipulation of the classical expression *shi yan zhi* 詩言志 (poetry puts mind into words).

⁶ In *Ecopoetics: The Language of Nature, The Nature of Language*, Scott Knickerbocker defines a “sensuous poetics” as “the process of rematerializing language specifically as a response to nonhuman nature” (2). Like Yu Jian’s poetic project, Knickerbocker talks about environmental poetry that attempts to return to the world, and the world to language.

In the beginning things were named orally. [...] the first man who saw the sea, he sighed: *see!* [...] ⁷ A sound indicated a tree. That sound simply was that tree. *Tree!* What that sound said was: there is this tree. It didn't say *imposing, magnificent, grown up, luxuriant, straight...* or other metaphors of the kind. In our time, it has become difficult for a poet to say *tree*, which is already a metaphorical screen. If one says *big tree*, the first recipient understands it as the male reproductive organ. The second thinks the speaker is suggesting *shelter*, the third thinks he means *a place to perch...* the n-recipient, according to the degree of industrialization of the time, takes *tree* as the symbol for *nature...* the signifier and the signified have become separated. (J. Yu, *Zongpi shouji* 239; 241)

In ecopoetic fashion, Yu Jian is reacting here to modernist and postmodernist approaches to poetic language that resign to the impossibility of articulating the poet's "originary experience in nature" (Scigaj 29).⁸ For Yu, the way poetry puts body into words is through its proximity to orality and as far as possible removed from the intellect. Such views have been highlighted by the critic Wang Shudong ("Chuangtong shengtai" 140), who finds them in direct reference to Daoism, a philosophy that is considered as retreating from the workings of language and intellect, and, in proto ecological fashion, promotes a view of the universe and all beings in a tight relation of interdependence.⁹

"A Tree that Shelters from Rain" (J. Yu, *Yu Jian de shi* 25-27) can offer an instance of Yu's affiliations with Daoist thought, describing a tree as the mother of the myriad things, and that Wang considers the very representation of the *dao*. It presents an awe-inspiring tree, which is treated in a way that rejects anthropocentric attitudes, and shows a non-dualistic view of the human and nonhuman worlds. The tree is called in many ways, but all these different, discrete viewpoints only conclude that they can never compare to the tree itself:

It's tree, what we call spring in January
 firewood or crow's nest in November
 It's a type of water the water on the ground that doesn't hide from the water
 in the sky
 in summer we call it umbrella and in the city we call it landscape

The tree is further depicted as "the Guanyin with the thousand hands", who helps every sentient being on earth in the cycle of death and rebirth. Its branches connect the most varied range of living creatures, from the snake to the eagle, from the ants to the butterflies, all of which are granted equal status:¹⁰

⁷ The original pun has *hǎi* 海 (sea) and *hāi* 嗨 (an exclamation similar to *oh!*).

⁸ Philosophically, however, Yu's rejection of metaphor could point to two different directions. As the locus of a meaning break down, metaphor for Yu thwarts understanding, and further separates language from reality, or human from her environment. But if we consider tradition and language as a process, metaphor might as well be seen as a way of preserving freedom of meaning, and supporting relativity of point of view, against autocratic, or idealistic, attitudes toward language.

⁹ A lucid and very influential exploration of the connection between (Chinese classical and American modernist) poetry and Daoism is offered by poet and critic Yip Wai-lim. Under some aspects, Yu Jian's argument resembles Yip's.

¹⁰ Wang Shudong ("Chuangtong shengtai") quotes from *Zhuangzi* to substantiate his argument that Yu's musing on the smallest and insignificant animals confirm his Daoist affiliation: "To view things from

I see snakes moles ants and bird eggs of various species
all on one tree in the belly of a kangaroo
on its twenty-first arm I found a bunch of butterflies
they hang down like grapes embroiders beside the green leaves
higher in the section by the sky
I saw two eagles stationing in their black robe quiet and modest
under all the leaves little bugs lying in rows

Fabrications of language aside, this vibrant tree intertwines human and nonhuman spheres. Through it, Yu Jian reimagines a natural sensuous world with agency, attentive to biological, spiritual, relational growth. The image performs the interdependence of all living beings and the transformative power of nature. The human is only one among other beings, thus not in predominant position in relation to nature. Rather, the poet's ecological awareness allows for more sustainable interactions among all diverse life forms, always within a discourse of interdependence and collaboration, in which we can recognise the poet's gratitude to, even worship of, nature. In typical Daoist fashion, it is a tree, not a forest; it represents the transformative power of nature, where all beings are linked to each other by harmonious functional relationship. It stands for change, the principle of the whole cosmos that is notably found in the *Yijing* 易經 and in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, and reposed in a number of contemporary ecopoems, such as "Fertilizer" 肥料, by Pan Xichen 潘洗塵 (b. 1964):

I've planted twenty-three trees
in my yard
and countless shrubs—
flowering cherry trees, magnolia,
pomegranate, peach, Burmese osmanthus,
bauhinia, orchid cherries, and jacaranda.
The sound of their blooming
covers pretty much the four seasons.
Every day I go around them
making one or two circles
and then think about which
I would one day want to embrace,
becoming its fertilizer.

Leonard Scigaj's definition of "sustainable poem" comes apt to describe these poems' aesthetics:

The verbal record of an interactive encounter in the world of our sensuous experience between the human psyche and nature, where nature retains its autonomy – where nature is not dominated, reduced to immanence, or reduced to a reliably benign aesthetic backdrop for anthropocentric concerns. (80)

the Dao, nothing is noble and low; to view things from oneself, oneself is noble but low relative to each other" (115). I also recognise in it an attempt to elevate something that would otherwise be overlooked, challenging the idea of what counts as significant and thus demystifying the canon of poetic symbolism, as Maghiel van Crevel (2005) indicates. Indeed, even though classical poetry never shied away from less "noble" animals, these were mused upon in a negative light. Cf. Olivia Milburn's "The Chinese Mosquito: A literary theme".

The figure of the tree allows Yu Jian and Pan Xichen to emphasise relational identities. The bonds that link nature to human pluralise the aesthetic space, calling into question the authority of a single vision.

References to Daoism and classical lyricism are quite frequent in Yu Jian's work. Sometimes, famous lines by eminent classical poets are cited,¹¹ though embedded in a distinctly contemporary poem, with a distinctly contemporary aesthetic flavour. Some other times, Yu Jian directly invokes a more generic Tang lyrical sentiment – as in “Duanpian 114” 短篇 114 (Short 114), which starts with an ecocritical comment on a high-speed train “wounding” the earth and ends with a reference to the *xīnqíng* 心情, mood or feeling, of the Tang:

I like cooking dinner
Exclusively enjoying this sunset
Tang dynasty mood.

Yu's prominent sentiments of awe and gratitude towards the environment can often trigger nostalgia for a lost world, as in the lyrical essay “Guxiang” 故鄉 (Hometown), dedicated to his native city of Kunming:

The sky was blue like a stretch of homespun cloth, and butterflies were coming down from it in waves. The air was full of the scent of flowers. There were flowers all over the yard, on the flowerbed, on the table, on the windowsill, on the plinth stones... The scent of flowers even wafted down from the roof; the roof tiles were full of weeds with their yellow wildflowers, and a white cat looked out to the setting sun from the miniature savannah. In the courtyard was a well which contained the moon. This is the world I saw when I first opened my eyes. [...]

For local residents, Green Lake is like a church, but instead of worshipping God, they worship nature. What is nature? It is the virtue of heaven and earth, the land from which I was born, and upon which I will die. It's the land that for poet Li Bai “unfolds before me like prose.” This church extols you to follow nature, to be nature, to be calm, contented, brazen, cool, smooth, flowing, and everything else associated with nature.

In addition to such evocative, idyllic descriptions of his pastime hometown, Yu Jian also offers contrasting portrayals of current polluted places, which were once full of vitality, effortlessly embedded in the local people's life, but which are now dead and degraded.¹²

The devastated *jìng*

Contemporary Chinese poetry displays of course several emotional approaches towards the environment. Besides the one explored so far, which is in symmetry with lines of traditional thought and nature poetry, and which primarily performs positive emotions of harmony, gratitude and admiration, I explore in this section a number of poems which conversely express ecological concern through an acute sense of disharmony,

¹¹ See for example the poem “Scientific Demolition Statistics”, in which two lines by Tang poet Wang Wei are incorporated into the new poem.

¹² One of the most often cited examples of this other approach of Yu Jian's ecopoetics is “Ai Dian chi” (Mourning Lake Dian).

deformity and disgust for the contemporary environment. In these latter compositions, the settings of the shifting urban landscape, or that one of a devastated natural world, reflect the unprecedented fast economic and industrial changes that the Chinese territory has gone through in the last few decades. However, the aesthetic approach of the negative *qíng* and *jìng* qualities also finds symmetry with certain classical lyricism; in particular with the concept of *can* 殘, as notably initiated by Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770) in the aesthetics of the *canshan shengshui* 殘山剩水 (devastated/broken landscape). This kind of aesthetic attitude towards the environment, I argue, has much more evident political overtones, since it attempts to dispel the optimism in modernization, by way of infusing a sense of loss, displacement and destruction. *Can* implies the meaning of “broken soul”, “broken passages”, and “torn silk” (Cai and Wu 9). Situated in the ecologically compromised context of today’s China, poetry of devastated *jìng* can be understood as a form of resistance that seeks to direct attention to the urgency of reacting to the galloping destruction of the environment. As it was the case with the traditional lyricism of *canshan shengshui*, contemporary writers too extend such aesthetic quality to include rotting and mutilated bodies, shattered psyches, deformity in physical and spiritual terms, highlighting the visible and invisible aspects of life in the contemporary environment. The ravaged landscape is thus simultaneously an object of aesthetics and an ethical site that represents the physically and spiritually broken. Lamentations for a disappearing existence, places of captivity, scenes of destruction, feelings of grief and parasitism permeate this kind of poetry, as evidenced by the examples below.

The first is titled “This Age Has TB”, by the late poet Meng Lang 孟浪 (1961-2018), and presents us with an environmental decay that is fully “shadowed” by the human body:

Our epoch is sick:
wracked with diseases, my body shadows it.

I’m coughing.
My lungs are sick with love.

I am attacked repeatedly,
I am getting it so often, so loudly.

In “Qing shang de ren, zhong shang de chengshi” 輕傷的人，重傷的城市 (Lightly Injured People, Gravely Injured City), by Zhai Yongming 翟永明 (b. 1955) the urban setting is personified, and described as monstrous, erratic and diseased:

the heavily wounded city seethes with energy
its pulse its temperature rises and falls
faster than war
slower than terror
dispenses with artificial legs and bandages
now it bleeds a green secretion

In “Xiang Du Fu zhijing” 向杜甫致敬 (Homage to Du Fu), by Xiao Kaiyu’s 肖開愚 (b. 1960) the intertextual dialogue with Du Fu’s *canshan shengshui* poetry is made explicit already in the title:

The city we know is becoming
another one, those same
buildings are marked with
wounds (rotting blood runs along
the temporary banks of suburban streams

Pan Xichen's "Xue de miulun" 雪的謬論 (The Fallacy of Snow) features the often used poetic trope of snow in a undoubtedly negative way:

In the north, snow is grey
bearing nothing of purity.
Especially in the city, snow is pollution
twined with dust and
decaying to muddy water, which rots the city
in every street and
street corner.

In "Fulan" 腐爛 (Rot), by Fang Xianhai 方閑海 (b. 1971), again we encounter a dystopian representation of an urban environment constituted by rotting buildings as well as humans.

cities
rotting flesh
desk drawers
rotting secrets
sleeping tablets
rotting unspoken words in throats
everything is similar
when you feel despair
[...]

These descriptions anthropomorphise the temporal and spatial context, mainly the city, conveying details of a certain generalised human condition, which is diseased, rotting, wounded, and nevertheless worthy of aesthetic attention. By endowing the city with human qualities, the poets reveal something about the city, but also about the human: they grant human qualities to the environment, and thus emphasise the depersonalisation of the human, or of the human condition more generally. Wounds, artificial limbs, prosthesis, blood and secretions are obvious signs of decay, a precarious existence, or a condition of eternal survival.

For those who live in such a context, *can* has a political meaning, especially when it is accompanied by a decision not to participate, as in the descriptions of a posthuman or dehumanised world frequently found in "rubbish poetry", *laji shige*,¹³ which displays a remarkably anti-anthropogenic aesthetics. The human here is presented as the most vulgar, unrefined, coward, repellent, disgusting being, or s/he can be described in its prosthetic or altogether posthuman version. The *can* in their poetry is a pervasive

¹³ The *Laji pai* is a poetic school founded in 2003 by poet Lao Touzi (Old Man), and soon joined by Xu Xiangchou who became the most famous practitioner of what of the "piss and shit writing". For an exploration of the main tenets of the School of Rubbish, see Heather Inwood.

metamorphic element that intensifies and potentiates human failure in complementing the beauty of nature, or in the act of destroying it. A strong sense of existential anguish for being in the world, and for not being able to find a meaningful relationship with it; a precariousness that sinks its own roots and its own reason for existing into the fortuitous: you live and you die by chance. For these reasons, the social rules that have chosen to elevate and worship nature are now opposed with stun bodies that reveal themselves as unworthy, irregular and dispensable:

“just kill me and be done with it”

my head starts to rot
I shed so much hair and flakes of dry skin from my scalp
my five senses start to rot
ear wax and mucus from my eyes and nose secreted abundantly
my heart starts to rot
it remains aloof and indifferent even with the Four Modernisations supported
by the people
my bones start to rot
putrefaction gets into the bones and breeds maggots
my cock also starts to rot
I don't feel like penetrating this compelling world
no need to treat my condition
no need to educate us with sincere words and earnest wishes
just simply kill me and be done with it
the sun is shining upon me making me feel lazy and sleepy
this is the best opportunity to get rid of me

Such is the documentation of decay of the body in the urban condition. For some critics and readers at least, the display of the actual “low” condition seems to constitute an unacceptable violation of human dignity, but it can also represent a redefinition, by annihilation, of the human within consumer culture. In contrast with Yu Jian's poems discussed in the first section, as well as many contemporary ecocritical nature poems, such as those by Hua Hai, Shen He 沈河, or Hou Liangxue 侯良學, or by some poets from China's ethnic minorities, in which the poet sings praise of nature, *can* aesthetics emphasises the inhuman of the human-built environment.

Zheng Xiaoqiong's 鄭小瓊 “Gongye qu” 工業區 (Industrial Zone) presents us with an urban, industrial scene of blinding bright light, where workers are frail, emaciated, homesick, illuminated by the blank circle of the moon, and whose alienation is underscored by the cry of insects

Lamps burn bright, building burn bright, machines burn bright
[...]
the moon is a blank circle; in the lychee trees,
[...]
Silence in the evergreen weeds, insects cry out, the lamps of the whole city burn
bright
Inside the factories, so many dialects, so much homesickness,
So many frail and skinny workers dwell there, so much moonlight falls upon
Sunday's machines and blueprints. And now it is rising

Shining on my face. Slowly, I am losing my heart

Today the thought of the environment is tied to the thought of loss. If the environment lives in the nostalgic memories or in the idyllic portraiture that inspires awe and worship, the other side of this perception is degradation of the actual *jìng*. In both cases, the underlying implication is the need of preservation. What is lost is imagined to be completely destroyed—a marker of humanity’s destructive capacity, and of its historical development—or as requiring redress and recovery. This structuring problem of environmental consciousness sets a limit on what counts as environmental and what the conceivable relations to the environment might be. If the “environment,” is a term that holds space for the imagination of this paradox of irreversibility and recoverability, what happens when the reality of loss intensifies to such an extent that other conceptualizations of the environment are not possible?

Reading the contemporary uncanny aesthetics of the devastated *jìng* in the light of the *canshan shengshui* classical aesthetics suggests a shift in the way Chinese poets perceive the relationship between human and environment. If harmony can no longer be represented, contemporary poets convey their negative socio-political emotions, *qíng*, or sensibility, in settings that have shifted from natural to fabricated.

Conclusion: *qíng-jìng* and the new aesthetics

Ecology is a prominent constituent of the contemporary poetic scene. Within ecocritical concerns that are taking central stage in discourses all over the world, the *qíng-jìng* aesthetics is significantly complex and offers a valuable tool for inquiry into the links between human and environment, nature and culture. The phrase “shared sensibilities” used as title of this essay aims at conveying such a link: “the possibility of entering into a relation with entities that do not speak our language and that are composed of substance that differs from ours” (Birardi 171).

Well into the 1990s, when consumerism, industrial development, and market-oriented economy had defined a context of extensive exploitation of nature, writers, artists and general public all became acutely concerned about their environment. The landscape, the cityscape, the scene featured as undiscussed subject, bringing new interpretations of the traditional poetics of the indivisible relationship between the *jìng* and the experience of human life.

Extending the concept of *jìng* to include natural and fabricated landscapes, I have tried to bring together two emotional qualities of contemporary poetry, which embody all contradictions of China’s rapid modernisation, urbanization and spatial transformations: the contemporary discursive forms of the classical lyricism eulogising approach to nature, and those ones of the much more negative portrayal of loss and degradation of the *canshan shengshui* aesthetics. Discussing poems of Fang Xianhai, Meng Lang, Pan Xichen, Xiao Kaiyu, Xu Xiangshou, Yu Jian, Zhai Yongming and Zheng Xiaoqiong, with their local land- and city-scapes, the two opposing text-worlds can in fact reveal some overlapping. Think of the portrayal of Yu Jian’s old Kunming, or of Pan Xichen’s urban snow, or Zhen Xiaoqiong’s moon. These spaces are in tension: nature offers beauty and harmony; the city offers the opposite. But nature - degraded, confined, humiliated and inappropriate - is also in the city, to show disharmony.

The persona in Yu Jian’s nature poems is one that feels and experiences nature through the body and the senses. The persona in the city poems feels, but her body takes central stage in the negative aesthetics. As in typical dystopian literature, the urban environment shows stronger ecocritical and political tones: the city has lost its cohesiveness, and its subjects question its institutions and values, not necessarily

because these are oppressive but rather because the subjects are isolated, and the environment has been generated by other people, not by nature. The aggregate complexity and fragmentation of the city is beyond human comprehension and control. Divided, the urban human is no longer constituting part of the whole. The *qíng* in the city is distress, excessive isolation, and pain, and the material *jìng* itself provides suggestive cues, with its diseased, prosthetic and annihilated body.

So, beside the date of composition of the poems, what distinguished the contemporary *qíng-jìng* aesthetics? I can see at least two important elements. The first element is that contemporary *qíng-jìng* aesthetics resonates with aspects of contemporary ecological reasoning. While presenting a view of nature that is not inconsistent with proto ecological representations of the environment as an amalgamation of interdependent and reciprocal systems, the contemporary poet is probably more inclined to accept the possibility of environmental disintegration than the Tang poet was, given the threat, unique to the present time, of global devastation. The second element pertains to the assault on humanism, which represents a key element in the renunciation of homocentric values and the development of a more ecocentric orientation, an attitude that contends that natural creation is essentially nonhierarchical and centreless.

To my mind, the most valuable aspect of the *qíng-jìng* conceptual framework is however its implication that there is plurality of forms of knowing and/or understanding the environment. Such plurality is based on the axiom that there is not a single unified and complete account of the environment. In this light, the poetics of *qíng-jìng* is in direct opposition to the doctrine of naturalism and by extension to the theory of universals. Conversely - and in consonance with some tenets of neuroscience - *qíng-jìng* seems to affirm that cognition cannot be separated from emotion.

I have argued that these poets accurately register an environmental-historical phenomenon, but that their figurations derive their form and force from the manner in which they experience their position within the trope of nature to sublimate it or overwrite it as vanishing. In the process of high-speed modernization, elegy for the disappearing natural environment is the primary cultural form in which dispossession is expressed; in the aftermath of savage territorial exploitation, elegy for the human is the form in which dispossession is experienced.

The poetics unravelled and preserved in these works consists of the poet's subjective sensibility, or certain disposition or way of being in the world, that affects and reflects the environment. These poets' situated sensibility and sensitivity towards nature and the environment is a posture toward life, a way of inhabiting the world, or perhaps a way of "feeling the world". At its centre is the experiential quality. Once the culture that nurtured their sensibility is passed, the degraded *jìng* produces a sense of loneliness and desolation, of unnatural and even nonsensical life.

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