

Chinese Ecocinema: In the Age of Environmental Challenge. Edited by SHELDON H. LU and JIAYAN MI. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009. xiii, 370 pp. \$50.00 (cloth); \$27.95 (paper).
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This handy and informative collection of fourteen essays on Chinese ecocinema, the first of its kind, is eminently deserving of the word “timely.” It should be apparent to everyone that China is currently facing a mind-boggling array of environmental challenges. It is therefore natural and fitting that recent Chinese-language cinema, including much from Taiwan and Hong Kong, reflects this crisis from a variety of perspectives. Sheldon Lu and Jiayan Mi are to be lauded for offering this tightly edited volume that treats what they call “ecocinema,” mainly from the PRC but with some attention paid to Hong Kong and Taiwan as well. The task the editors set themselves and their collaborators is to discern how both feature and documentary films engage environmental and ecological issues, in some cases directly or consciously, in other cases indirectly or unconsciously. The book is divided into four sections of three to four chapters each, focusing on the themes of the relationship between water and politics; eco-aesthetics and the portrayal of landscape; changes in urban space; and bioeth(n)ics and the relationship between humans and animals. The essays are written by some of the best of the new generation of US-based Chinese cultural studies specialists, with a few senior scholars as well. Films considered include those by Jia Zhangke, Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, Fruit Chan, Wu Tianming, Tian Zhangzhuang, Tsai Mingliang, Zhang Ming, Ning Hao, Huo Jianqi, Wanmu Caidan (Pema Tsedan), Zhang Yang, Wang Xiaoshuai, Wang Bing, Dai Sijie, Lou Ye, Ning Hao, Zeng Zhangxiang, Wang Shaodi, and even Feng Xiaogang. The authors contextualize their insights with reference to three or four-dozen additional films. The breadth of the project is impressive. The book also contains a helpful Chinese character glossary, filmography, comprehensive bibliography, and index, making it useful for both experts and students.

Some aspects of the work stand out as particularly exemplary. In the well-organized introduction, Sheldon Lu dispassionately underscores the urgency of China's ecological crisis. Jiayan Mi's analysis of how water becomes a symbol of “ecoggedon,” where the rising watermark from the Yangtze River dam signifies the march of Chinese modernity to the authorities but the inexorable engulfment of home to the locals, evokes a feeling of “ambient *unheimlich*.” Nick Kaldis demonstrates how Zhang Ming's film on the river structurally communicates

psychological trauma and alienation through “paratactic cinematics.” Andrew Hageman explains how Lou Yes *Suzhou River* creates a “parallax view” in which the audience “sees ourselves” from the point of view of a denuded environment and hears it as a “flotsam of voices.” Mary Farquhar’s consideration of the scenery and on-site locations of classic martial arts films reveals a nature “improved upon” by high-tech digitization that better mimics nostalgic images of traditional Chinese art than real places today. She also muses on the empirical, but no less important, point that film productions create their own environmental damage in the form of the disturbed locations they leave behind after filming. Hongbin Zhang provides a new reading of Jia Zhangke’s films by noting that his characters are controlled by the *mise-en-scène*, dwarfed by its encroaching visual and auditory disruption. Ban Wang furthers this insight by arguing that the exploitation of nature is not set in opposition to human prosperity but is actually the result of the exploitation of humans. Xinmin Liu’s essay draws upon the Heideggerian notions of dwelling and belongingness to illustrate how the nexus of human interrelations can unfold amid the built habitats of rural China. Several of the chapters touch upon the 1988 Chinese documentary *Heshang* (*Death-song of the River* or *River Elegy*), but Liu is the only one who mounts a critique of the film, and by extension of the reform-minded Chinese intellectuals who produced it. In the final section, Chao-ju Chang’s essay accomplishes multiple goals at once: it addresses the issue of Taiwan, discusses the theme of “speciesism” and how domesticated animals fit into the ecological picture, and adds a discussion of Buddhist principles (as does Xiaopin Lin’s essay). And Donghui He concentrates on the often-overlooked representation of minorities within China, from the perspectives of a Han filmmaker and a Tibetan one.

None of the essays is excessively long, which ensures a large number of voices and perspectives under one cover and makes the work practical for undergraduates to read. Some of the essays do not fully follow through with the theoretical implications of the critical lenses they employ. Nevertheless, each piece furthers the English-language discussion on Chinese environmentalism and ecocriticism. There are minor editorial problems: some essays use Chinese characters in the text while most rely on the glossary in the back, with the result that a few crucial terms (such as *sanjingrou*) have no character gloss. Also, an inordinate amount of space in the book is devoted to the works of the (admittedly important) filmmaker Jia Zhangke. The volume would have been strengthened by balancing the coverage of Jia with more attention to documentaries. In spite of these quibbles, *Chinese Ecocinema* is the harbinger of a new subfield in modern Chinese cultural studies and is thus highly welcome and commendable.

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