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## China has a natural environment, too!

Consumerist and ideological eco-imaginaries in the cinema of Feng Xiaogang

Corrado NERI

### Intro: China, Nature and the Second Modernization

When discussing representations of nature on the Chinese cinematic screen, scholars and western public (via festival or DVDs) tend to underline the “rebellious” or critic awareness of environmental problems and ecology that (few, but internationally quoted) contemporary directors are rising to public’s consciousness. It is undeniably true that some Chinese film directors have indeed developed a specific, subtle discourse on nature and ecological development, and that they use their films to elevate an ecological consciousness in the local public, as well as to describe the fragile beauty of Chinese landscapes and transmit the memory of its menaced magnificence. But in the case of the majority of the contemporary market-oriented film makers, nature assumes the allure of a product to be consumed, an avatar for nationalistic ideology, or else it assumes the place of the national-identity consolidator *par excellence*, the “external” enemy/the threat against which the nation-people will fight together.

In a recent collection of articles entitled *Chinese Ecocinema* (Sheldon H. Lu and Jiayin Mi, 2009), most of the contributors do indeed utilize the “subversive” or challenging films to analyze the eco-attitudes of Chinese filmmakers. Commentators focus their attention on films by Jia Zhangke or Lou Ye that show a critique of government’s economic strategies, especially concerning environmental politics. These authors (among others), play with censorships in a continuous balance of underground and “commercial” films, proposing texts that can be read through an eco-critical lenses.

I’d like to underscore that representations of nature are also employed for more vulgar (in an etymological sense: popular) agendas. The scope of this article is not to criticize or diminish the importance of the over-mentioned “engaged” directors, who develop compelling discourses about progress and capitalism, ecology and consumerism. Rather, I’d like to focus my attention to the other aspect of contemporary Chinese cinema, the commercial one, the blockbuster that try to win Hollywood menacing supremacy on its own ground – star system, genre oriented, escapist movies, big budget, special effects and the like. I’ll focus my attention on one of the most important commercial directors of this new generation of commercial filmmakers: Feng Xiaogang. I’ll discuss here his strategy for representing nature, arguing that we can find a sensible shift from the concerns of the fifth generation “return” to nature seen as the cradle of classic aesthetics and sensibility as well as a traditional form to encode a political discourse via symbolic language, apparently

apolitical; instead, Feng seems to me a perfect product of the contemporary capitalist China, transforming and using images of nature for a completely different agenda – as it will be discussed in length later on, both an industrial appropriation where nature becomes a luxury object in a material world, as well as a federating and nation-binding Other.

### *The Return of Nature*

Already during the 1980's – the “opening of China” – a wave of directors and cinematographers seems more in phase with the aesthetic and ecofriendly sensibility than with the forthcoming capitalist pulse and/or the ideology laden Maoist past: I am referring to the groundbreaking first period of Fifth Generation film directors. Jean François Billeter points out that, from an ethnographic or religious point of view, Chinese culture has traditionally always been a centripetal one, where peripheral culture (the civilizations perceived as far from the political center) is (and has always been) ignored. The official histories were written by state-funded Confucian scholars. As a consequence, the population does not appear in its real diversity, but only as a population subject to the Emperor – and that was enough to define them. Revolutionaries of the 20th century transformed this administrative definition into an ethnical or racial definition. The *Han* ethnic group was the founding of their nationalism. The socialist state completed the idea of ethno-nationalist hegemony with the idea of national minorities. That is why today, when anthropologists go to remote areas they have the feeling they are discovering an unknown continent. Describing the return of interest in nature at the beginning of the 1980s, Billeter says:

During the Eighties a wide-spread need to return to origins and rediscover the traditions of small-town China emerged in cities. Writers and film directors expressed this in different forms. However they were too distant from this China and ignorant about it to be able to evoke other than a “dreamed China” (...). Most often, they settled for an idealization of the image that the regime had given them of peasant immaturity, conferring it a form of absurd timeless grandness (Billeter, 2006; translation by author of the paper).

The ignorant curiosity transformed these representations into a “dreamed tradition”, where nature was described with an absurd intemporal majesty. Films like *Huang tudi/Yellow Earth* (Chen Kaige, 1985), *Hong gaoliang/The Red Sorghum* (Zhang Yimou, 1987), or *Dao Ma zei/The Horse Thief* (Tian Zhuangzhuang, 1988) raised problems apparently forgotten in the Cultural Revolution era. They present a reflection on the mythical “sources” of Chinese culture, history and tradition; they develop the utopian retrospective look to the essence and past of China – both as an imagined intellectual construction, as well as a site of wild nature indomitable by men. It is a period of redemption after the excesses of the Cultural

Revolution: images of nature, deserts, rivers, colors and nuances, details and spaces (the “*Vide et plein*”, that François Cheng set as a pillar of pictorial imagination in China, 1979) abound in these films which tend to give predominance to images instead of discourse. This might appear anodyne to the contemporary audience, but it was not that obvious in a decade that was still recuperating under the shock of Maoism. If everything is politics, if the accent is always put on the human achievements and class struggle, an image of a tree standing alone on scorched earth (*Yellow Earth*), or an enigmatic landscape barely visible in the mist (*Haizi wang/King of Children*, Chen Kaige, 1989) can suggest the presence of something invisible, utterly unsayable, open to interpretation. The return of nature (as beauty, symbolic force, chromatic palette, obsession of directors who have been sent to the countryside to “learn from the working class”) has different meanings according to different directors and their public: a return of a religious meditation with a Taoist undertext, a search for “pure”, apolitical beauty, a meditation on forces stronger than humans, a non-ideological symbol. Or else, at least, something (an image, a suggestion, a hint, a symbol) capable of escaping the control of the Party. But, as it is well known, since all images and/or stories can be ideologically driven or a vehicle for embedded ideology, the shifts in the cultural paradigm let the images of nature be progressively appropriated both by critics of the regime as well as its spokespersons – and this came as an important change in China, where ideology used to be (and still is, of course, in some of the most explicit propaganda driven films) clear-cut and clearly identified. The search for roots of Chinese intellectuals in the beginning of the 1980s, when passing through natural imaginary, has had the important function of both giving preeminence to art as a free and plurisignificant reality, as well as to inscribe human beings in a philosophical, metaphysical or emotive context much bigger than their political or ideological struggles. The representational tradition of landscape literati brush painting is an evident anchor to link nature, tradition, and the possibility of a symbolic art that develops an implicit discourse comprehensible only to the educated few, delivering at the same time an aesthetic pleasure of a more trans-class nature.

The literary trend of the “search for roots” was accompanied by the ‘wound’ literature, an (auto) biographical trend that traced the suffering of people during the Cultural Revolution. This trend of engagement spurred later directors like Jia Zhangke or Lou Ye who, more or less undercover and more or less independently, produced images that can be interpreted as harsh criticism of the regime, or at the very least a cry for a regaining of ecological consciousness that has been sacrificed on the altar of economic development: the most representative examples are *Sanxia haoren/Still Life* (Jia Zhangke, 2006) and *Suzhou he/Suzhou River* (Lou Ye, 2000). The first one is an elegy of the Three Gorges landscape, destined to be submerged after the construction of the titanic dam – one sequence tellingly contrasts the landscape as it appears printed on the *renminbi* banknotes against the background of the actual contemporary landscape disfigured by works and building sites. *Suzhou River* is a modern noir set against the background of Shanghai, described as a polluted, grey town, its river dirty and smelling. If these films are particularly representative,

they are by no means unique: other directors, like Wang Bing, Ning Hao, Wang Xiaoshuai, Zhang Yang, Huo Jianqi among others have shown an environmental conscience and an acute attention to ecological problems in their work.

### Real Nature and the Politics of Globalization

In China too, we can, surely, see a contrast between an eco-conscience – that can acquire the dangerous nuance of a critique of the regime’s politics – and the drives of rampant capitalism. An eco-awareness is *de rigueur* for contemporary artists: omnipresent in cultural products, advertising and television, the aesthetics of a return to nature stems from a double source. *In primis*, the alleged “tradition” of Chinese art, supposedly in a holistic relationship with the forces of nature, remixed for the new millennium in a sexy and vaguely New Age frame (yin yang, traditional medicine/homeopathic treatments, five elements and reincarnation, color symbols and pleasure of gardens). The other source is the globalized frenzy for bio-products, pollution awareness, anxiety concerning the threat of global warming, and generally speaking the package of nature-sexy integralism wrapped up in a mixture of bio-consumption, keywords imposed by spin doctors of various multinationals, and the globalized fad of agritourism or sustainable tourism.

Yet China is (becoming?) one of the most polluted places on earth, especially (but not only) in the cities, and that various scandals related to contaminated ‘natural’ products periodically cover the front pages of newspapers. As we have seen, some (more or less “independent”) directors manifest an ecological consciousness in their work, denouncing human greed that destroys natural resources, as well as different ecocrimes thought shocking images of pollution, waste of natural resources, or human sickness due to exposure to some industrial venom.

But in popular movies, nature is presented more as an image to be appreciated or a symbol of national grandeur than a treasure that has to be protected. Environmental conscience is a mirror to sell rejuvenating shampoo smelling like the rain forest, made, of course, from the most natural ingredients. The danger inside this specific marketing strategy is, like in the West, the phenomenon of ‘eco-washing’: behind the façade of selling eco-friendly products and donating a percentage of the benefits to ecological projects, lures a marketing strategy that is, moreover, more expensive (and ultimately damaging) than the cost of the ecofriendly action.

Nature is, moreover, a selling drive for all kinds of products, designed ultimately for upper class leisure. If periodically the state censors or tries to reduce the influence of the “western” pernicious mentality (for example with campaigns against luxury goods and their magnification), it is evident that status and privilege are the drive *par excellence* of the recent (but virulent) capitalist frenzy as wealthy people drive silent sport cars through valleys and deserts, play golf in uncontaminated natural landscapes, eat and put on their skin the most refined natural fruits – and their byproducts.

Feng Xiaogang's films describe perfectly the shift of cultural paradigms of contemporary China, and via his representation of nature we can analyze the dominant discourse on nature sold in media-China. Feng Xiaogang, the "Chinese Spielberg", produces huge blockbusters and hilarious comedies directed at a broad audience. He is by no means the only market-oriented Chinese director, but he is probably the most representative of the shift in the politics of production, distribution and consumption of cinema in contemporary China – from here comes the definition, sketchy and imprecise, of the 'Chinese Spielberg', that stems also from a recurring desire to paragon and equate Chinese directors/actors (and cities – Suzhou/Venice, Shanghai/Paris; and so on...) to a western equivalent. Feng is indeed both a commercial success and a daring explorer of different genres, a star system based producer and a middle class poet, at ease both with huge production as well as with middle browse urban films. Feng started his career in the mid-1990s with the production of urban comedies aimed at a local audience. Surfing on the wave of fast commercialization of the Chinese market, and benefitting from the help of the government to increase the local affluence of film theaters, Feng proved his clever businessman skills, always keeping both an eye on the public and on new techniques of globalized – some might say, "westernized" – cinematic production. Feng's movies show how deep the influence of Hollywood, perceived both as a rival and as a model, is strong in China. I am referring to very immediate, visual characteristics. If the Fifth Generation films could claim for a "return" or "rediscovery" of ancient, traditional culture (stemming from historical visual representation, from painting to New Year's woodprint), new Chinese blockbuster are formally indebted to the Hollywood standard: "invisible editing", formulaic plot, Wagnerian score, construction of plots according to classic Hollywood narrative structure, star system überpower and the like. In addition to that, as we'll analyse later, Feng's films are also representative of a new vision of popular entertainment: aggressive marketing, placement product, strategic release date, "high concept" movie (the plot could be resumed in few lines), sexy protagonist displaying as idealized, purified, anti-age, forever young beauty ideal.

Having said that, his movies never really sold well in foreign markets; but his success with the Chinese audience is stable and enthusiastic. Feng shifts from comedies and satire (*Bujian busan/Be There or Be Square* 1994, *Shouji/Cell Phone* 2003) to action (*Tianxia wuzei/A World without Thieves*, 2004), from war (*Jijie hao/The Assembly* 2007) to costume drama (*Yeyan/The Banquet* 2006), from catastrophic historical films (*Tangshan da dizhen/Aftershock* 2010) to sentimental comedies again (*Feichang wurao/If You are the One 1&2* 2008 and 2010). He is a highly capable actors' director (having worked with stars like Zhang Ziyi, Andy Lau, Ge You, Shu Qi), as well as a daring risk-taker – often switching genres and styles. In this sense he can embody a "new", globalized but nationalistic China: self-confident, not in need of a western market for its cultural products (but aiming at a Pan Asian visibility), entertainment-oriented mass production, ideology embedded in the films far from explicit propaganda, chauvinistic messages with product placement in a vertiginous mingling of the market economy and state controlled art.

His work does not strictly deal with environmental issues, and it does not focus explicitly on transnational connectivity (with few exceptions like *Da wan/Big Shot's Funeral* 2001, starring Donald Sutherland). However, this is precisely the reason they provide a privileged perspective through which to analyze the discourses around the theme of nature and the politics of representation of nature. His environmental politics (or probably: *non*politics, or maybe, since this term may seem inaccurate, a politics that does not tell its name, embedded and hidden in an apparently apolitical entertainment) tells us of the ways the ruling class in China disseminates a message of blind consumerism and wider globalization – intended here as an assimilation and acceptance of transnational capitalist and consumerist system, even if “protected” by a discourse that stresses a nationalistic chauvinism. Paradoxically, globalization of China seems in fact, in my sense, always deeply nationalistic and, precisely because it is nationalistic, widely globalized – I use the term “paradoxically” because, while capitals, modes of production and consumption, lifestyles, architectures, clothes etc. are becoming more and more similar worldwide, politics are stressing the nationalistic framework to protect their unity and economics; this “empty” (adaptable) nationalism seems the only left ideology – to the point that could be described as post-ideological. I defined it “empty” because it looks more and more elusive and neutral: the clear cut, socialist emphasis on the international agenda of proletarian forces is faded out in favor of a transnational and adaptable ‘quest for happiness’ and/or harmony – strangely resonating both with state dirigisme and American constitution; in any case, based on a capitalist economy, normally in contrast with a socialist state. It’s no more the communist agenda against the evil forces of capitalism, but an ethnic-nationalistic entity call State that, while adopting the economical and – arguably – ethical rules of the ancient “imperialist power”, keeps stressing (and inventing) its specificities. In this post-ideology environment, in a context where religion is an everyday practice of apotropaic “superstition” (as the red guards would have put it) but not an ideology, China’s most successful films at the local box-office tell of a rhetoric of return to nature that does not hide very deeply the ultimate global superficial and cosmetic interest in environmental issues. The call for a return to nature or, at least, a respect for natural rhythms, is cast in a nation where the disparities between city and countryside are dramatic, where urbanization is endemic, where more and more consumers are going to be equipped with highly polluting cars and so on... but it’s far from unusual to walk in a Chinese big city (well, all Chinese cities are big) or surf the TV channels and see all kinds of advertisement that use a constructed idea of “pure” nature to sell products.

In my view, Feng’s films (which, *en passant*, I enjoy without shame) are the perfect incarnation of how the image of uncontaminated nature is used in a capitalist and consumerist world to sell products, or to be the correlative objective of human’s feelings and finally, when nature is described in its most wild and dangerous forms, as a catastrophe that needs a *political* reaction – a nation-builder crisis. We are no more in a fifth generation context where the plurisemic allegories described by images of nature helped a (re)newed

consciousness of the incommensurable depth of art (stretching far from the maoist all-politics, but reflecting on cycles of life and mysticism, death and beauty, growing old and transmission...); even if many images of nature are presented in Feng's film, we are not in a Jia Zhangke or Wang Bing's film, where viewers are requested to position themselves in a critical stance. We entered in an ultraliberal post-ideological entertainment society that communicates through entertainment its political (nationalist) directives. As reminded above, the guidelines of the Party evoke the 'harmony' of the society and, recently (2011), the legitimation of the search for 'happiness'. This new keyword could be compared with the Western postmodern legitimation of consumption – in any case, it's a strategy that aims at the creation of a more equilibrated society where more people would be able to consume and buy – cars, household appliances... - and reach the 'middle class' status.

In the following section I selected in Feng's films all images of nature that in my view are important, that hide a political agenda, that are embedded with state's strategies and that are used in a specific poetical/artistic way. The order is chronological – even if I don't think there is an 'evolution' in Feng's discourse around nature. Since these movies are all successful and trend-setting, it seems important to read the implicit agenda and ideological representation of nature that they subsume as relevant trends of entertainment cinema in contemporary China

### Nature as correlative objective

*A World Without Thieves* employs the natural image of Tibetan mountains as a symbol of searching for oneself and introspection. The story follows the thief-couple Andy Lau and Rene Liu in a long train journey; they meet an innocent boy who is threatened by being robbed of all his savings by a gang led by Ge You. The two main characters – she is, expectably, pregnant and wants to stop leading the life of a thief to grant the yet unborn child a respectable, honest life. This determination to purify her life, helping both the unknown boy and her man, finds an immediate echo in the images of Tibet. These natural images – mountain peaks, floating prayer flags against the breathtaking scenery of a greenish valley surrounded by rocks – are immediately inscribed in the human context: people dressed in the traditional Tibetan garments going to pray, shots of imposing and ancient temples that seem almost part of the natural landscape and earth – in terms of color and mass, the temples are inscribed in nature as if they were a component of it. The ideological discourse could not be more obvious: Tibet is represented as a pure land of Buddhism, an uncontaminated place where humans are in harmony with nature, where the craziness of global, modern, urban life has not arrived yet – it is indeed a cliché, but omnipresent in Chinese cultural sphere (which is even more striking if compared with the silence around political/social Tibetan issues). The roaring car driven by the two protagonists



makes a stark contrast with the peace surrounding them. But exactly their being out of context creates the starting point of the story: the two thieves are no longer in harmony with one another and with life. They need to accomplish a long journey, both physical and spiritual, to attain illumination and renounce stealing – this redemptive ending resonates with the ambiguous poetics of Feng always in balance between the exaltation of the new upper class and a critique of the cynicism of the parvenu: the director is used to a satire of the nouveaux riche, but at the same time, staging the life and miseries of this new upper class, contributes to create a desired model of a-ideological wealth. Furthermore the long train journey, which is the main section of the film, symbolically links Tibet to China, abiding by the official dictation and setting aside the political troubles that regularly hit the region. Grandiose images of Tibet's "uncontaminated" nature open the movie and echo the coming to consciousness of the protagonist played by Andy Lau.

Tibet – Tibetan nature – is an already packed symbol of redemption, of return to sources of spirituality (anti-consumerist Buddhism), and purification from earthly desires. As previously discussed, many Fifth Generation directors from the 1980s have already explored the "savage" nature of Chinese lands, being desert or high mountains, forest or barren landscapes. These images remind us of the reeducation to be carried out far from the cities, in the countryside, and of the discovery of a "primitive" (in the sense described by Rey Chow, 1995) culture that is part of the canon of representations of Chinese civilization, but has something inside it that keeps its mysteries from the secular world. For the urban city dwellers, these images of Tibet (seen so often in television broadcasts, both news and advertisements) represent a defamiliarization, a way to escape from daily life and eroticize/sensualize their "own" national culture. There is no question of Tibet possibly not being China, or of political independence tensions in the region. No politics, just nature – as if it were possible!

Images of nature inserted in a film are a way to contextualize the plot, but also to call out for the sensibility of the spectator to the representational doxa of tradition, in the form of landscape painting which is by no means the only pictorial genre in China, but for sure was one of the most practiced, rated and symbolically charged. Many directors work on the (vague) symbolism of colors and their interrelations with the theory of the five elements and the holistic conception of the universe – see for example the discussion on the semantics of colors in Zhang Yimou's *Yingxiong/Hero* (2002) and his technique of filming as creating *yijing*, a nebulous but evocative concept taken from classic painting. *Yijing* means "idea-image":

The power of the concept lies in the acknowledgement that neither the cinematic nor painterly image is real. It is an idea-image that is not only rendered visible on-screen and improved by digital technologies: the image also carries an introspective aura, an emotional register, and a cultural heritage. It reveals a landscape of the heart and mind (Farquhar, 2009, p.100).

The concept of “idea-image”, here discussed in the context of Zhang Yimou and martial arts cinema, can be used for the images of nature that pop up in chromatic magnificence in Feng’s *A World Without Thieves*, helping to tell the stories behind the main plot, reactivating in the viewer suggestions and *correspondences*: the mountain and valleys that the train is crossing immediately situate the journey in a (perceived as) traditional landscape, that brings the viewer to a context of transcendence, of hermitage, of spiritual search and inner journey. In Feng’s film, as in many other contemporary Chinese mainstream films, nature representation is an aesthetic value and a form of control – intimate and nationalistic control of wilderness that contributes to create an idea of national identity as constituted by a vast, omnicomprehensive variety. Outside the city, there is a mystical force that is part of *our* nation, as well. Discussing *Shijie/The World* (Jia Zhangke, 2004), Silbergeld argues:

As in conjuring, voodoo, and Chinese alchemy, the role of replication, miniaturization, and substitution, are tied to the achievement of mastery, the accumulation of power, and for the individual, clan or dynasty especially, the attainment of longevity. The Qin emperor Shihuangdi, the Han emperor Wudi, the Qing emperor Qianlong all had the same thing in mind when constructing their parks and that thing is, in a word, control (Silbergeld, 2009, p. 126).

This idea of control makes me think of Jean-Luc Godard’s monumental *Histoire(s) du cinéma*. Its fourth chapter is called precisely “the control of universe”, and it states that the great directors achieved what Napoleon and Hitler never could, the control of (their) universe. Stretching to Feng Xiaogang, and combining the idea of control to the concept of idea-image, we can see how his representation of nature is far from any environmental politics, while approaching at the same time the control of his audience – manipulation of emotion and transmission of hidden ideology – and the figurative control of nature that is there to lead the illumination of his characters.

This does not appear to me as unique to Feng, but part of a vast program of New-Age wave of an international scope. The oeuvre of Terrence Malick is heavily utilizing grandiose images of (National Geographic-like) nature to contextualize humans suffering in a wider metaphysical scheme, especially in *The Tree of Life*, but already in *The Thin Red Line* (1998) or *The New World* (2005); Lars Von Trier (especially in *Antichrist*, 2009 and *Melancholia*, 2011) constructs lyrical plastic symphonies where nature is represented as a sublime, mysterious and terrible correlative objective of human’s (specifically: feminine) more deeply rooted anguishes and secrets; we could think of other films like *127 hours* (Danny Boyle, 2010) or *Into the Wild* (Sean Penn, 2007) where nature manifests a hard façade, but it also helps the solitary human being to escape civilization and go inside his soul and seek for hidden truths and forgotten wisdom; the ‘primitive’ wisdom is to be found in Pandora, where natives live in a USB-like plug-in with Mother Nature (*Avatar*, James Cameron, 2009); the TV show *Terra Nova*, somehow surfing on the success of *Lost* but also immediately connected to the *Jurassic Park* franchise, depict an ‘ancient’, pristine nature (literary:

humans go back in time to the dinosaur age in order to save human race from ecological disaster) that is both a new beginning (completely uncontaminated and unspoiled) and awe-inspiring (dinosaurs and fierce beast running wild). Italian and French romanticized landscapes are wildly used in Hollywood movies as images of pure and uncontaminated existence – where American stars can retrieve their lost serenity (during the war, after a divorce, caught in a middle life crisis and so on).

In the Chinese context we can mention *Guanyin shan/Buddha Mountain* (Li Yu, 2010): as it will be the case of a later film by Feng (*Aftershock*), the plot links personal suffering (the mourning of a son/daughter) to the national tragedy of the great 2008 Sichuan earthquake. In *Buddha Mountain* the protagonists – a bunch of stylish disheveled and smoking calvinklein-like young idols and the star Sylvia Chang – help rebuild a temple in a green forest on a mountain and they manage to come to terms with personal grief and questions about life. Again, the film draws a path of redemption. Nature is a vehicle for enlightenment and wisdom: the last images show Sylvia Chang on a cliff, and then she disappears. We will never know if she committed suicide or not (she tried already, failing), but the message is that she merged with the cycle of nature, which can be pitiless, but can also elevate the human soul to a higher level of consciousness.

### Nature as Status symbol

Nature is depicted as a commodity in the two installments of the megahit *If You are the One*, a romantic love comedy with stars Shu Qi and Ge You indefinitely postponing their marriage ceremony. The stunning landscapes in *If You are the One* remind us of the importance of nature, bucolic surroundings, and the absence of human intervention within the changing of seasons, hinting at the same time at the dangers of losing such natural richness. Simultaneously these "built-up", symbolic images refer to dreams of capitalist possession where nature turns into nothing but a marketing tool, a status symbol, a showcase of wealth and vanity parade. Ge You plays a hyper-rich contemporary businessman that does indeed embody a critique of the capitalist society, its tics and neurosis. At the same time, he indulges in every possible pleasure and luxury, lives in villas mounted as gems in a majestic forest, travels in private jets and attends the most exclusive social events. What I find striking about the representation of nature in these films is that it is at the same time omnipresent and strangely elusive. During their long honeymoon, the protagonists travel to astonishing regions (he is incredibly rich, she is a fly attendant), and are supposed to be in contact with nature. However they are never alone in nature: there is visibly always a screen protecting them from nature (and possibly, protecting nature from them). Feng chose to systematically adopt a frame: a window, a television, a form of architecture. Examples: nature is seen from inside a hyper-stylish bungalow, inside which the couple drink a cocktail; the natural surroundings are seen on the screen of a television (which transmits the gala Shu

Qi is attending), or through the window of a luxury car or first class on a plane. In *If You Are the One 2* the absolute unconcern for environmental politics is even more striking: at one point, she says that she prefers a shower because she has an environmental conscience and wants to “protect the environment”, only to be seen, five minutes later, enjoying a bubbly bath inside the resort. Still in the same resort, Ge You is shown diving into a swimming pool: the pool is filmed from a high angle, we can see the clean water of the artificial swimming pool enclosed by its borders, and in the background, the immensity of the sea. But the high class is, of course, bathing in an artificial pool, comfortably framed and separated from “real” nature. The only moment when Shu Qi goes into the ocean, she is drunk and in despair. To me, this form of representation parallels environment to a commodity: nature is a luxury item, to be enjoyed from a secure, privileged point of view, even better when idly sipping a colorful cocktail. Nature is luxury, the possibility to travel to exotic destinations, the opportunity to enjoy grandiose scenarios, and possibly let friends know that we are enjoying it. As suggested by Pietari Kaapa and Tommy Gustafsson (personal communication, for which I am grateful – as well as for all suggestions and attentive readings), nature could be intended here as a “simulacra”, where its “realness” has to be constantly denied so as not to disrupt this illusionism. Another ironic example of nature-becoming-merchandise can be found in the mordant *Juezhan Shama zhen/Welcome to Shama Town* (Li Weiran, 2010), where a desert region becomes, with a Zhang Yimou-like marketing operation (Zhang is openly addressed in the film), a tourist attraction.

Feng’s story of the *nouveaux riche*, of “social climbers”, does not avoid talking about their weaknesses and vulgarity; but at the same time, such a representation, like the Bollywood standards of lush scenography and European Alps ballets, shapes the object of consumerist desire, creates a chimera that represents the aim and wish that common people should crave for. The showing-off of wealth is often presented as a critique: see the Italian “*cinepanettone*” (every year for Christmas a bunch of stereotypical Italians leave national reassuring ground for some exotic destination, just to postcard a background for their never-ending love affairs); see the “girls” of *Sex and the City* that leave New York to visit, on high heels, some desert exotic Arab and Orientalized country; see the dream in the dream in (yes, another) dream in the *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010) fantasy, where rich and beautiful protagonists, from *inside* a supposedly eco-unfriendly plane, virtually travel in luxurious Jamesbondian exotic and wild landscapes.

*If you are the One* displays such a spectacle of nature, that reflects the show-off vulgarity of Beijing’s new wealthy upper class, the need to frame and control nature. We could read here (if we caution the idea of Feng as a social critique, as tends to do Zhang Rui, 2008) a strategy to condemn the globalized television culture of appearance: empty, greedy and manipulative. Still, even if we can appreciate the irony displayed by Feng, the very representation of luxury, star-system and wealth creates its own target: the spectacle of richness attracts the mass public that “needs” to dream of an unattainable life. This sort of

*mise en spectacle* helps create a greedy, capitalist-oriented, ideological and remissive society that feigns to despise the high class but ultimately models itself on the high class illusion, its way of dressing, of loving, of talking, of traveling, of knowing, of participating in politics and social life. These films are far from being neutral: they do indirectly manufacture a social ideal and an aesthetic value – not by chance, modeled on an anonymous, transcultural, globalized oligarchy. Again, *If You are the One* (1&2) are “just” comedies – there is even a sequence where Feng mocks the Chinese underdeveloped environmental awareness (he stages a ridiculous TV-gala event to raise funds to protect penguins): but yet, these movies clearly embody the national pride and the political direction advocated by the Party.

To take this argument further, Feng is also known as one of the film directors who devote much space in their works to the *product placement*, a connection which creates a close link between the consumerist politics of a privileged and "natural" tourism and the liberal circle that China entered about twenty years ago. *If You are the One* in particular had already recuperated its initial budget before even being screened, thanks to the commercial strategy of placing indirect advertisement in key sequences. Nature itself becomes an actor that advertises all sorts of products, as it becomes an object of consumption, to be preserved, yes, but even more to be possessed, framed, displaced – symbolically, ideologically, materially. Emmanuel Paris puts forward an interesting reading of the contemporary creation by the creative industries of the myth of a remote, savage, spectacular nature:

Turning nature into spectacle, is (...) the means for the creative class to be recognized as guarantor of the correct social order, and arbitrator of individual and collective life in the form it should exist in. (...). Around the world, virgin territories are also redesigned following such good practices; "ethical tourism" is a burden for the lives of the Amazon or Nepal mountains populations. The tourist appetite for these populations and territories is so strong that the creative industries somehow perpetuate the rumor of a persisting wild state, and of naturally spectacular nature. The "*mise en spectacle*" of nature by the creative class makes in other words invisible those cultural practices carried out by human societies living in natural spaces – including the most traditional and ancient ones (Paris, 2010, pp. 26-27; translation by author of the paper).

Paris here points out the importance of the “creative class”, of the spin doctors, of the image of the new, globalized world in which China resembles in many aspects, the Hollywood image of the west. Worldwide upper class is never in touch with nature, and never really concerned by environmental politics – which would imply a political/social engagement; but, via their luxury travels, galas, golf playing and organic restaurants and the like they are always artificially immersed in a construction of “wild” uncontaminated nature.

As a counter example, we could point at the pictorial work of Yang Yongliang: the painter draws huge landscapes that, from a distance, resemble the traditional, monochrome ink brush literati compositions. But if observed closely, it is possible to see that the texture of the mountain, rivers and forests is no more biological but has been substituted by a web of machines, excavators, cables and cranes. Here the illusion of uncontaminated nature is mirrored in a deformed glass, and reveals the ecological catastrophe of the contemporary world. In Feng's films we can see a nature that seems to be there to please the exotic desires of the new Chinese upper class; we cannot see the ruins or the ecological problem, but only a magnificent representation where the proud of Chinese economics can be staged. On the contrary, and similarly with the works of Jia Zhangke or Wang Bing, in the pictorial work of Yang Yongliang we can perceive, *behind* a trompe-l'oeil "traditional" landscape, the disasters and the destructions caused by rapid industrial growth, too often disrespectful of eco-sustainability – and here is no a 'reading between the lines', but an explicit, foregrounded stance.

### Nature as enemy

Finally, we turn to *Aftershock* (2010), where blatant Nationalism and entertainment mingle together more clearly. Initially, the film was supposed to be dedicated to the memory of the victims of the devastating earthquake that in 1976 destroyed the city of Tangshan; to be noted, the same year Mao Zedong passed away. The mourning for the victims of Tangshan was forgotten to leave the entire nation to cry for their leader. Superstitiously, it was also possible to see the awakening of Mother Earth as a sign that the heavenly mandate was over for the Communist dynasty – and of course, the rumors of that sort were put into silence. During the shooting of the disaster movie, another catastrophe occurred, the huge earthquake of Sichuan in 2008. Feng feared that the project would come to an end, but instead he managed to link the two stories and create one of the most successful Chinese films ever. A family is destroyed by the 1976 earthquake; father dies, and the mother has to choose which one of her children to save, the girl or the boy. She chooses the latter and spends all her life in remorse. The boy grows up and, even if he lost an arm during the earthquake, he embodies the young China able to make money and ensure a pathway towards modernization, capitalism and wealth. The girl, unsurprisingly, was not dead, but lived with the memory of her mother choosing her brother over her. She marries a rich Canadian and emigrates to the west; but when she sees on the television the images of the terrible 2008 earthquake she comes back to China, finds her brother, and reconciles with her mother in a deluge of tears.

As Brice Pedroletti puts it, the catastrophe movie triumphs on the screen in a moment when the country is ravaged by natural disasters (Pedroletti, 2010): floods, earthquakes, typhoons. *Aftershock* touches an open nerve, an extremely sensible point in Chinese consciousness. As

we can infer, all “natural” disasters can be more or less devastating according to how men managed their co-existence with nature – indiscriminate constructions, nuclear plants build on tectonic plates and the like do not create natural disaster, but increase their dramatic impact on human and nature. This film does not ever take into consideration the idea of criticizing or questioning the sanity of the constructions (notably, of the schools that went down as if they were made of clay) nor the possibility of a sustainable urban development. It does, on the other side, create or enhance a strong feeling of national identity, of national pride and collective mourning. The Tangshan earthquake, so near (maybe foretelling) the death of the Great Helmsman, was silenced by the government. Now, times have changed and public mourning is a part of national identity construction. The authorities handled the catastrophe very well: they were very fast to run to the disaster zones, the Prime Minister was filmed cask on his head bringing comfort to the victims, television and institutions organized countless fund-raising events and ceremonies to help and to commemorate the victims. In another context, we could think of the political documentary *Draquila*, by the Italian filmmaker Sabina Guzzanti (2010), which tells about how the L’Aquila earthquake was a god-sent chance for the Prime Minister Berlusconi. Suffocating under the pressure of several scandals, during the catastrophe Berlusconi could make himself visible as a savior as the attention shifted from the scandals. “The exercise of mourning has become an ardent obligation in the case of catastrophe in China” (Pedroletti, 2010; translation by author of the paper), where all media are summoned to participate in the nationwide catharsis.

In *Aftershock*, human responsibility (no security norms, no urban plans, fast-paced progress that tears apart natural rhythms...) is never confronted by the film. Humans are all good-hearted people, ready to relieve victims and help the innocent. Tragedies, it is well known, unite the nations and help construct a sense of imagined community, especially in the present day mediatic world where communication and representation are the vehicles of ideology. National sentiment is inflamed, piety unites and gathers the citizens, all critiques are easily silenced by the necessity to do and help and reconstruct.

Discussing the Hollywood catastrophe-movie *2012* (Roland Emmerich, 2009), Charles-Antoine Courcoux points out how:

Cataclysm is a sharing force through which the narrative distinguishes, within the framework of beneficial rebalancing, between what must disappear and what can be saved. (...) On the level of locations and objects, the film contrasts with the destruction of the sites that, in the collective imaginary of the United States, are considered the quintessence of greed and materialism (Los Angeles, Las Vegas, a supermarket, sports cars, a luxury cruise), with the destruction of heavenly nature (Yellowstone and Hawaii) that carries basic values of this culture. This way the narrative pushes us to understand that consumerism, covetousness or technological dependence are never controllable nor limited practices, but instead a wide-spread threat that eludes its instigators, a disposition that affects even the foundations of a

strong, prosperous and virtuous society (Courcoux, 2010, p.162-163; translation by author of the paper).

Nothing of the sort in China: the two earthquakes do not represent a critique of over-capitalism nor of destruction of nature's rhythm. There are no more enemies to fight, class struggle has been achieved, the USA and the West represent fierce adversaries, but it would be farfetched to assess that they still represent an "enemy" in Chinese popular discourse (like they used to be during the cold war) maybe economic rivals at the most – except when periodically a US president accepts a visit by the Dalai Lama, which unfailingly provokes harsh reaction from Chinese government. The construction of the enemy is one of the very bases of nationalism and national identity: here nature plays very well the role of a fierce, unpredictable enemy. Human society is unable to fight with nature, but can evoke and stimulate the human values that help to get stronger and overcome difficulties - and indeed we are shown that is exactly what is happening in China. It is about catastrophe politics, and the good use of human needs to unite and help each other. This political vision of *Aftershock* does not want to be disrespectful of the real sufferings of the victims and their families, but it is important to stress that, in a very direct and unsubtle way, the film embodies a nationalism that touched the heart of the public, and contributed to guide the population according to the keyword of the Party: "harmony" (recently complemented by happiness, as could be inferred by the above discussion about *If You are the One*). We can see how Feng's film, through the weapons of entertainment, manages to wrap up important ideologies, conveyed through tears and conventions of high-concept blockbusters.

Courcoux underlines another characteristic of the Hollywood disaster movie which also remains very different from its Chinese epigone. Through a close analysis of *2012*, Courcoux shows how the movie gives shape to a mythology of individual reconstruction, and in particular, a reconstruction of masculinity:

We could conclude that if the natural catastrophes put on screen by *2012*, following the example of the rest of this genre, draw on an environmental construct, it is that of a form of eco-masculinity, of a nature that, in times of technological development and social change, is led to play an elective and essentialist role in order to remind us of the innate superiority of the white middle-class man, and simultaneously underscore the need of making him into the figurehead within a new transnational order (Courcoux, 2010, p.168; translation by author of the paper).

This "hegemonic masculinity" is not present in the Chinese context, or at least not in these contemporary blockbusters. Unsurprisingly, the hegemony that can save the world and



society in a holistic embrace is family. The tragedy occurs, in the 1976 earthquake, because the mother has to choose; and any wealth and social status that her son could give her are not enough, not until she finally has the chance to ask forgiveness to her daughter and recompose the mutilated family. From a Confucian perspective, this family-centered ideology is both personal and political: the greater family is the Nation, the equilibrium of the nation stems from harmony in the family, the “rectification of the names” inside the familial context (the father must be father, brother must play the role of brother and so on) will eventually lead to the harmony of the virtuous society. It is well acknowledge that family is a pivotal theme in Hollywood (and Western) cinema (we think of Spielberg, among many); what is striking about contemporary Chinese discourse, is that Confucian style family/ideology is perceived and described as *specific* of China – base and source of national unity, strength, stability and, possibly, superiority. The adaptation to suffering within the traditional Chinese family is a token of political stability, social harmony, and civic strength even in front of catastrophe – which cynically can and are instrumentally used not to reflect upon environmental issues but to reignite the fable of a strong China, of the unity of the people, and the mythical progress of the Chinese civilization.

At the same time forms of symbolic power imposed on the collective imagination and symptoms of the ever-growing need to be aware of the fragility of nature and the dangers of an uncontrolled development, these movies (if read ‘against the grain’) bring into play several contradictory discourses that seemingly cannot be ignored in the future development of China and, besides, not only of China. Like every great producer of popular cinema (for the audience/consumer, and loved by its audience), Feng Xiaogang produces narratives governed by the populist and consumerist doxa, from which nevertheless potentially subversive - or, to say the least, reformist - apprehensions emerge. After the tears and the catharsis, a viewer might want to ask further questions – which are left unanswered by the movie: why such a long silence after the 1976 earthquake, and why such a public display of grief in 2008? What happened to the school that fell down killing hundreds while government buildings are still standing? Is there something that government and politicians could do if not to prevent a natural catastrophe at least to minimize its disasters? And so on...

The forces of an environmental conscience that can be in tune with a severe authority controlling media discourses will have to find a subtle, and presumably necessary, balance between growth and sustainability.

End

The landscapes in Feng’s films are taken over as consumer goods by a new ruling class, the season cycle is modified to convey a formulaic love language, and beauty is worked upon to

face Hollywood's control over the collective imagination - until *Aftershock*, where two earthquakes take place in order to depict the image of the ultimate enemy around which to gather socially and spiritually.

Feng Xiaogang's cinema is not intentionally ecologist. It does not provide a denunciation of human exploitation over nature, nor accuses the rapid economic growth as a source of global pollution and warming. Feng's works are not explicitly environmental-friendly, nor do they advocate a return to nature or a deeper respect for its rhythms. They do however implicitly address the contradictions and different anxieties linked to China's economic and environmental development. In the background, Feng Xiaogang's narrative gives away several discourses and policies more or less connected to the theme of nature and its difficult relationship with a society which is undergoing unprecedented economic development.

We could attempt here a summary classification – simplified, indeed, but that tends to demonstrate the ultimate global nature of Feng's representation of nature – meaning that if we are focusing here on Chinese box-office hits, we can see how similar discourses could be found in and has often been molded by Hollywood standards going global, and how the recent production of Chinese blockbuster is both resisting and assimilating them.

First of all, we can find a representation of nature as mystical/mythical Other. Nature is what globalized, urbanized, transcultural population lacks: a distant image of spirituality, of roots, or enlightenment (*A World without Thieves*). These attributes are often attributed to any critique of capitalism since questioning conspicuous consumption; Feng is both a critic and a spokesperson of the new upper class. In his movies we could find, intriguingly contradictory but also commonly globalized, both a critique and a praise of rich people's way of life and consumption.

Secondly, nature can be perceived as a form of luxury (*If You are the One*). The proletarian class (it is such a nasty incorrect world, especially in one-child policy China, but I still think it is appropriate) lives in a modernized, industrial megalopolis, while the upper class can afford to inhabit ecofriendly cottages in the hills and to eat organic food, and to visit remote uncontaminated settings. Using this vague categories, I mean to point out that we could witness a growing disparities between the poor and the rich, between the *mingong* (irregular workers) coming from countryside to build up the megalopolis's skyscrapers and the ruling class, the happy few how can afford to live a luxury and healthy life – example: recently, a telling scandal has burst on the media: many party officials got their food from exclusive and secret bio-farm, avoiding to eat the (more and more) dangerous products (the most famous and tragic: milk) that are regularly contaminated by indiscriminate and illegal use of chemicals components. If this is by no means specific to China, but happening in other Asian countries as well as in the West, the public awareness about these increasing disparities is coming back to the public attention both in the official channels and the Internet based popular discourse. Again, I'll argue that Feng's films offer a plain critique of vulgar consumptions and obvious social disparities, but at the same time, via the alluring

representations of nouveau riche way of life, they create a desire, a model, a normative implicit encouragement to get rich, and to get rich as fast as possible.

Thirdly, nature is the ultimate enemy (*Aftershock*): apolitical, federating, and consensual. National identity needs enemy and nature can incarnate a fierce power that (apparently) escapes ideology and politics.

These categories can and will for sure overlap; they indeed represent both a specificity of a new vision of Chinese popular culture on nature and environment as well as show a national cultural system intimately interrelated with the globalized flow of production. China is integrated in the global flux of capital, and it will become more and more significant in global economic and ecological strategies. Some films explicitly denounce the lack of scruples of tycoons ready to destroy natural resources and beauty only to make more money, unconcerned by eco-sustainability. Popular films can both tell us of a growing concern about nature as well as signify its commercialization. Feng's film tells us on an immediate level that China is becoming modern and globalized – enjoying the capitalist way of life, being more consumerist than the consumerist nations, adapting its own cultural industry to resemble the western dominant entertainment (music, editing, genres...) and to allure outside world (Asia in primis). But at the same time, with a critical lens, I argue that it is possible to see behind the spectacular and aesthetic frame and read different patterns, independently from the agenda of the director and producers: nature is an enemy – but why? As I argued before, the changes in post-Cold War World had taken away to China (and to other countries as well) an immediate, clear cut, stereotyped enemy. Mother Nature can be represented as the uncanny force that threatens the world as we know it, against which the community of men can and has to unite. Besides that, nature can and often is perceived as a mythical other, a force that has been forgotten by modern human communities and that must be recovered in order to survive first, but also to retrieve a mythological, ancient wisdom related to a “primitive”, original holistic union between human beings and the other inhabitants of the planet. The catastrophic genre is relatively new in China – and I argue that is coming to the foreground now exactly because nature could be perceived as a post-ideological enemy (that was not the case since the end of the 1970's).

Feng's movies do not nor are they intended to answer these (transnational) questions. But they can help to pose them – even if this is done in an indirect way.

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#### MetaDATA

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Abstract:

Nature and cinema: Feng Xiaogang

Feng Xiaogang, the "Chinese Spielberg", produces huge blockbusters and hilarious comedies directed at a broad audience. Although his work does not strictly deal with environmental issues, it provides us with a privileged perspective through which to analyze the discourses around the theme of nature. The landscapes in his movies are taken over as consumer goods by a new ruling class, the season cycle is modified to convey a new love language, and beauty is worked upon to face Hollywood's control over the collective imagination - until his last opus, *Aftershock*, where two earthquakes take place in order to depict the image of the ultimate enemy around which to gather socially and spiritually.

Feng Xiaogang's works are not explicitly environmental, nor do they advocate a return to nature. They do however implicitly address the contradictions and differing anxieties linked to China's economic and environmental development. In the background, Feng Xiaogang's narrative gives away several discourses and policies more or less connected to the theme of nature and its difficult relationship with a society which is undergoing unprecedented economic development. *A World Without Thieves* employs the natural image of Tibetan mountains as a symbol of search for oneself and introspection. Furthermore the long train journey, which is the main section of the movie, symbolically links Tibet to China, following the official representation and setting aside the political troubles that regularly hit the region. Likewise the stunning landscapes in *If You are the One* remind us of the importance of nature, rural surroundings, and the absence of human intervention within the changing of seasons, hinting at the same time at the dangers of losing such natural richness. Simultaneously these "built-up", symbolic images refer to dreams of capitalist possession where nature turns into nothing but a marketing tool, a status symbol, a showcase of wealth and vanity parade. Feng is also known as one of the film directors who devote much space in their works to the *Placement Product*, creating therefore a close link in between the consumerist politics of a privileged and "natural" tourism and the ultraliberal circle that China entered about twenty years ago.

Both forms of symbolic power imposed on the collective imagination and symptoms of the ever-growing need to be aware of the fragility of nature and the dangers of an uncontrolled development, these movies bring into play several contradictory discourses that seemingly cannot be ignored in the future development of China and, besides, not only of China. Like every great producer of popular cinema (for the audience/consumer, and loved by its audience), Feng Xiaogang produces narratives governed by the public and consumerist doxa, from which nevertheless potentially subversive - or, to say the least, reformist - apprehensions emerge. The forces of an environmental conscience that can be in tune with a severe authority controlling media and discourses will have to find a subtle, and presumably necessary, balance.

Keywords: Chinese cinema; Feng Xiaogang; nature; ideology; catastrophe; politics.