

ISSN 1560-6325 ISBN 978-3-901989-44-5 € 16,-

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45 2021

ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR INTERKULTURELLES PHILOSOPHIEREN

## Mensch & Tier

Mit Beiträgen von HUAIYU CHEN, KAI HORSTHEMKE, DAFNI TOKAS, XIE CHAO,  
MARTA TAFALLA, JAN BROUSEK und anderen

SONDERDRUCK

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XIE CHAO

# The Human-Animal Hybrid and the Anti-Modernity Narrative in Contemporary Chinese Animal Fictions<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** The human-animal hybrid, or the transformation between humans and animals, has a long root in Chinese culture, and has recurred throughout Chinese literature. As a burgeoning genre in current China, contemporary Chinese animal fictions have increasingly featured the human-animal hybrid to disclose environmental degradations and the interdependence between humans and nonhuman animals. This article aims at investigating the human-animal hybrid represented in contemporary Chinese animal fictions in the context of the anti-modernity narrative and realistic ecological crises in China. Through referencing ancient Chinese philosophy and literature that are related to the human-animal hybrid, this article takes Ye Guangqin's »The Snake Erchan« and Jia Pingwa's *Remembering Wolves* as two case studies to argue that contemporary Chinese animal fiction writers employ the mythical human-animal hybrid as both a reminder of the inseparability between humans and animals, and a warning to critique detrimental effects brought by the idea of modernity. The traditional holistic and non-binary Chinese belief towards the human-animal relationship embedded in these animal fictions opens up an intercultural thinking about modernity as such.

**KEYWORDS:** *human-animal hybrid; Chinese philosophy; animal fictions; anti-modernity; environmental crises.*

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<sup>1</sup> I give my thanks to Professor Chang Chia-ju from the City College of New York who has come up with insightful suggestions after reading the draft of this article. All the Chinese names in this article follow the Chinese order, namely, surname first, followed by first name. This article is sponsored by National Social Science Fund of China (19CWW020) and The Major Project of the Key Research Base on Humanities of Chinese Education Ministry (19JJD750005).

XIE CHAO is a lecturer teaching in the School of Foreign Languages at Zhejiang Gongshang University in China. His interest lies in British poetry, ecocriticism, and comparative literature.



Different from the Western Judeo-Christian belief that the transgression of the line between humans and animals is against sacred order and therefore blasphemous, ancient Chinese people regard the world as an organic and continual whole in which humans and non-human beings can communicate with and transform into each other.

Animal studies in literature have now gained increasing currency in China, thanks to the ever-deepening environmental crises that threaten the lives of the animals and the popularity of ecocriticism in the new millennium. A great deal of work has been done on the topics of animal suffering, keeping pets, and animal fiction narratives in China.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the issue of the human-animal hybrid has long been overlooked.<sup>3</sup> The human-animal transformation as well as »cross-species changes« has a long root in Chinese culture.<sup>4</sup> As Mang Ping correctly notices in her influential book *The World of the Interrelated Self and Others: Chinese Beliefs, Lives and Views of Animals*: Among all the accounts and imaginations of animals and human-animal relationships in ancient China, the most impressive is the human-animal hybrid, that is, the mutual transformations between humans and animals in both bodies and spirits.<sup>5</sup> As the critic continues to argue, the human-animal hybrid is an indispensable part of the great tradition of Chinese

beliefs towards nature, which has been significantly undermined by the overwhelming process of modernization. Many contemporary Chinese writers, such as Zhang Wei (张炜), Guo Xuebo (郭雪波), Yu Jian (于坚), and Wei An (苇岸), bemoan in their works how industrial modernization in China, which tends to ignore or even reject traditional Chinese cultures, exerts damaging effects on humans, animals, and other nonhuman elements. My observation is that contemporary Chinese writers inherit the legacy of human-animal hybrid and employ it in their fictions to disclose the detrimental effects of modernization, creating an anti-modernity narrative. Perhaps, nowhere is this more evident than in Ye Guangqin's »The Snake Erchan« and Jia Pingwa's *Remembering Wolves*.

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#### THE REPRESENTATION OF THE HUMAN-ANIMAL HYBRID IN ANCIENT CHINESE CULTURE

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Different from the Western Judeo-Christian belief that the transgression of the line between humans and animals is against sacred order and therefore blasphemous,<sup>6</sup> ancient Chinese people regard the world as an organic and continual whole in which humans and non-human beings can communicate with and transform into each other. Daoism views humans and nonhuman beings as essentially equal, and foregrounds the continuity between humans and animals. As the Daoist Zhuang Zhou

2 See Xie: *Animal Suffering*; Chen: *Plight of Dogs*; Tang: *Animal Narrative*.

3 Although the issue does not attain its due attention at home, it has aroused interest from the overseas. An example is Roel Sterckx's *Animals and the Daemon in Early China*, in which the author dedicates a chapter to an in-depth study on human-animal transformation in early China (from pre-Qin to Han dynasty).

4 I borrow the expression »cross-species changes« from Roel Sterckx, which refers to both the mutual transformations and hybrids between different species. Sterckx: *Animals and the Daemon*, 165.

5 Mang: *Interrelated Self and Other*, 67.

6 Ohnuki-Tierny: *The Monkey as Mirror*, 21.



(庄周) famously argues: »Heaven, Earth, and I were produced together, and all things and I are one« (天地与我并生, 而万物与我为一).<sup>7</sup> Buddhism, which believes in *karma* and reincarnation, has consolidated the idea of the »cross-species changes« together with Daoism.<sup>8</sup> The representation of the human-animal hybrid also abounds in ancient Chinese literature, including *The Book of Mountains and Seas* (《山海经》), compiled between early Warring States Period (475 BC–221 BC) and early Han Dynasty (202 BC–220 AD), and the Supernatural Fiction (志怪小说) which flourished in the Six Dynasties Period (420 AD–589 AD). These human-animal hybrids reflect the Chinese idea of *zìrán* (自然), which is a metaphysical manifestation of *qì* (气) that can be interpreted as an »all-inclusive whole, the spontaneously self-generating life process«.<sup>9</sup>

As we can see from the above, different from ancient Western philosophy and culture (consider *Bible* and Aristotle's Chain of Being), which position a human existence separate from the animal world as well as superior to it, pre-modern Chinese cosmology challenges

the fixed line between humans and animals, implying that any attempts to differentiate the two is false and undesirable.<sup>10</sup> As Roel Sterckx perceptively notices, in ancient Chinese peoples' beliefs, »animals were viewed as part of an organic whole in which the mutual relationships among the species were characterized as contingent, continuous, and interdependent«.<sup>11</sup> This ancient Chinese belief of viewing humans and nonhuman animals as inseparable and interdependence is vital to understanding Ye's and Jia's animal fictions.

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#### HUMAN-ANIMAL HYBRIDS IN »THE SNAKE ERCHAN« AND REMEMBERING WOLVES

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Both »*The Snake Erchan*« and *Remembering Wolves* depict human-animal hybrids, which are closely related to traditional Chinese culture, to defy the easy distinction between humans and animals. Included in Ye's animal stories collection *The Tiger Dafu* published in 2004,<sup>12</sup> »*The Snake Erchan*« features a human-snake hybrid that immensely dismantles the hu-

7 Zhuang: *Zhuangzi*, online.

8 Taking non-violence (*ahimsa*) as one of its Five Precepts, Buddhism treats every being on the earth equally and regards that to kill any living being, including animals, will bring *karma*. In the Buddhist idea of reincarnation, animals occupy a certain position in the Wheel of Life which also houses gods, humans, asura, hell beings, and ghosts. These six different forms of life can transform into each other under certain circumstances.

9 Tu: *The Continuity of Being*, 71.

10 A brief discussion on the distinction between Chinese and Western ideas towards the human-animal divide can also be seen in Schäfer/Siebert/Sterckx: *Animals through Chinese History*, 6.

11 Sterckx: *Animals and the Daemon*, 5.

12 Ye is deeply concerned about animal issues in contemporary China. Many of her works, such as *The Old Town* (《老县城》), foreground the suffering afflicted on animals in a realistic tone. Based on her working experience, *The Tiger Dafu* includes many animal stories which Ye witnessed and heard when she worked in Shanxi Province, Northwest of China.



man-animal boundary. Widely believed by the local villagers to be the descendant of a snake and a woman, the protagonist Erchan resembles a snake in both appearance and mentality. The figure is an embodiment of the local villagers' belief that humans and snakes are historically and spiritually intertwined. Ye has creatively integrated in the story topographical references, invocations of figures from Chi-



Fig. 1. People in the country of Xuanyuan have a human's face and a snake's body with its tail coiling on the head.

nese history, and folklores to delineate the historical and emotional bond between snakes and the local people. The villagers believe that their ancestors served royal palace in Qing Dynasty (1636 AD–1912 AD) as imperial doctors who used the local snake gallbladder as an invaluable medication. However, instead of killing snakes, the animals were released back to nature after their gallbladders were removed. Due to their appreciation of the animal, the villagers regard snakes as creatures with spirits to which humans should treat with great sympathy and gratitude. What is more, in the eyes of the villagers, snakes are companions of their ancestors and therefore should be perceived with awe. Bearing these traditional beliefs in our mind, we can understand without difficulty that why Erchan is viewed by the villagers with friendliness and respect.

A hybrid figure like Erchan can easily strike a chord within the Chinese readership. The human-snake hybrid is a recurrent image in Chinese mythology, folklores and literature. *The Book of Mountains and Seas*, which illustrates the mythical figures, rituals, and natural history of ancient China, offers a good example of the human-snake hybrid (Fig. 1<sup>13</sup>).

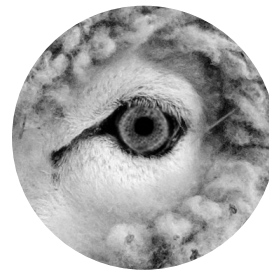
In fact, this human-snake hybrid image is closely related to the origin of Chinese culture. Instead of being a demonic creature in the biblical story, snake is a very important animal in Chinese cosmogony (also known as creation myth).<sup>14</sup> Both Fu Xi (伏羲) and Nü Wa (女娲), the mythical founders of Chinese civilization,<sup>15</sup> are portrayed as were-snake deities that have human heads and snake bodies in premodern Chinese visual arts. Archaeological findings in the tombs of Han Dynasty show Fu Xi and Nü Wa with human heads and entwined snake tails, which symbolize mating. Through using this age-old hybrid figure in her story, Ye is successful in evoking a national tradition that many a Chinese would identify with. More importantly, the novelist intends to remind readers that humans and animals are inseparable, both physically and spiritually.

Similarly, Jia's *Remembering Wolves* draws our attention to the mutual transformations across humans and animals. In order to protect the local wildlife, Ziming, Fushan, and

<sup>13</sup> Ma: *The Book of Mountains and Seas*, 447.

<sup>14</sup> Cai: *The Image of Snakes*, 17.

<sup>15</sup> In Chinese creation myth, Fu Xi is venerated as the god of hunting, and Nü Wa is worshipped as the mother goddess, who impregnates all human lives.



Lantou embark on a journey to take photos for the last 15 wolves in Shangzhou. During their journey, they witness different forms of transformations between wolves, humans, monkeys, and plants, which profoundly destabilize species boundaries. Different from Ye who represents Erchan and snakes as morphologically and spiritually identical, Jia in his work foregrounds a dialectic human-wolf relation; that is, humans and wolves are simultaneously interdependent and antagonistic to each other. In the fiction, wolves can change into humans to evade hunters or to steal food from local villages. By transforming into old men, children, and women, the animals demonstrate human-like capacities like communication, intelligence, and perseverance. Accordingly, humans are able to metamorphose into werewolves after the animal disappear in the town.

This dialectic relationship between humans and animals is best illustrated in Fushan. As a heroic hunter, Fushan is deeply engaged with wolves. He learns how to skin wolves at a very early age and understands wolves' languages. In Fushan's mind, wolves are ferocious, evil, and can transform into a human figure in order to deceive and harm people. While escorting Ziming to photograph the 15 wolves, Fushan cannot help killing all of the animals, because his identity as a hunter defines the animal as adversarial to humans. However, when the wolf population in Shangzhou sharply decreases, Fushan, as with other hunters, suffer a strange »soft bone disease«,<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Jia: *Remembering Wolves*, 9. All the English translations of »The Snake Erchan« and *Remembering Wolves* in

becoming weak, fragile, and sexually impotent. More outrageously, Fushan and other hunters transform into grumpy were-wolves with long hairs sprouting in their faces, after wolves die out in Shangzhou. The mutual transformations between humans and wolves here indicate a dialectic equilibrium between humans and animals; that is, the two coexist but also conflict with each other.

Analogous to Ye, Jia also employs the human-animal hybrid, which is closely related to traditional Chinese culture, to challenge the fixed line between humans and animals. Many a critic has noticed that Jia appropriates traditional Chinese beliefs to represent an equal human-animal relationship in *Remembering Wolves*.<sup>17</sup> He Weihua argues that the transformations between different species in the fiction actually mirror Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. The dialectic relationship between humans and animals, as He points out, indicates the ancient Chinese philosophy of *xiangsheng xiangke* (相生相克), which means everything in the world reinforce and neutralize each other. Through weaving into the fiction different strands of traditional Chinese ecological wisdom, Jia demonstrates a distinctive »portrayal of the interactions between man and nature«. <sup>18</sup> I would like to add here that the »cross-species changes« reflecting traditional Chinese beliefs

this article are mine.

<sup>17</sup> In many interviews, Jia himself acknowledges his intellectual indebtedness to Chinese cultural traditions, including Buddhism, Daoism, etc. Wang: *Narrating China*, 232; Liao: *An Interview*, 89.

<sup>18</sup> He: *The Last »Hero«*, 765.



in *Remembering Wolves*, as in »*The Snake Erchan*«, serve another function, which is to disclose and critique undesirable effects resulting from the concept of modernity.

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THE ANTI-MODERNITY NARRATIVE IN  
»THE SNAKE ERCHAN« AND REMEM-  
BERING WOLVES

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As an important genre of Chinese environmental writings, Chinese animal fictions, particularly those written since 1990s, form an integral part of the anti-modernity narratives in contemporary Chinese literature, ...

Both Ye and Jia use the human-animal hybrid in their fictions to reveal the detrimental effects resulting from the Chinese modernization, and the two fictions can be categorized as anti-modernity narratives. As Wang Shudong points out, postmodernism, of which contemporary Chinese environmental writings are an essential part, together with cultural conservatism, aesthetical modernism, revolutionary ideology and transcending spirits, constitute five elemental forms of anti-modernity narratives in contemporary Chinese literature.<sup>19</sup> These five anti-modernity narratives, as Wang elaborates, all attempt to reevaluate, reassess, and critique the idea of modernity. As an important genre of Chinese environmental writings, Chinese animal fictions, particularly those written since 1990s, form an integral part of the anti-modernity narratives in contemporary Chinese literature, as these works have endeavored to draw readers' attention to the miserable lives of non-human animals and the ever-intensifying human-animal relationship against the background of Chinese modernization.

The European modernity, which takes rationalism and instrumentalism as its core concepts, was originated from Renaissance period and reached its climax in the 19th century before continuing to evolve in the 21st century. Modernity in China is more complicated, as the idea was firstly imported from the West in the mid-19th century when China was forced to open its doors to the outside world. In less than 200 years, China has made great progresses in the journey of pursuing modernity, which is mainly characterized by modernization or Westernization.<sup>20</sup> However, this irreversible process of modernization in China, similar to its Western counterpart, has inevitably led to environmental problems, prominent in large-scale air pollution and animal extinction. For China, the modernization has also resulted in the loss of traditional beliefs. There was a long period when Chinese people were keen to shake off traditional cultures which we assumed as feudalistic remnants and a stumbling block to move forward.<sup>21</sup> This indiscriminate denial of traditional beliefs and uncritical embrace of modern Western ide-

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20 I align myself with Cyril Edwin Black who asserts that »modernity« refers to »the characteristics common to countries that are most advanced in technological, political, economic, and social development«, whereas »modernization« is employed to describe the process of acquiring these characteristics. Black: *The Dynamics of Modernization*, 6.

21 For example, the New Culture Movement, launched by Lu Xun (鲁迅), Hu Shi (胡适), and Li Dazhao (李大钊) at the turn of the twentieth century, aimed to attack traditional Chinese culture and exalt Western ideas, particularly science and democracy.



as, however, further intensified the conflicts between humans and animals. The encroachments of wildlife habitats, poaching, overuse of chemicals, together with the replacement of ethic-based value by profit-oriented mindset, have caused great animal suffering and biodiversity depletion.<sup>22</sup>

As Mang observantly notices, the Chinese tradition to view animals as inseparable from humans, has largely been forgotten, if not all abandoned, in the rapid process of modernization.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Chinese modernization, which is characterized by urbanization, industrialization, and consumerism, has split the traditional intimate connection between humans and animals, for it has largely reduced and objectified animals to resources to be exploited. In the 1990s, with the increasing awareness of environmental protection, Chinese literature has witnessed a proliferation of works in which writers began to reflect on the negative impacts of modernization on non-human beings.<sup>24</sup> It is against this backdrop that contemporary Chinese writers, such as Ye and Jia bring to the forefront in their works the hu-

man-animal conflict dramatically intensified by the process of modernization.

Ye depicts in her fiction a character who represents the idea of modernity and is deeply skeptical of the villagers' traditional beliefs. As a cook who earns his living by killing and cooking snakes, She Zhenlong perceives the animal as merely resources to be taken advantage of. Different from the villagers who view snakes as a sacred animal, She considers himself as a city man and defies the traditional beliefs in regard to snakes as sheer superstition. Upon realizing that the villagers refuse to eat snakes which he elaborately prepares, She comments with great sarcasm: »These rustics are so stubborn. The wind of the Reform and Open has not blown into this village«. <sup>25</sup> Undoubtedly, She views eating novel food, such as snakes, as a modern behavior, and those who refuse to do so is backward and out-of-date.

A contextual explanation is necessary here for us to better understand She's comments. It is widely believed that, after years of incessant wars and political turmoil, Chinese modernization did not earnestly unfold until 1970s when an array of policies concerning economies, politics, and cultures were implemented. The Third Plenary Session of the 11th CPC Central Committee held in 1978 established Reform and Open as the basic state policy. Thanks to the Reform and Open, Chinese economy has been greatly boosted and China's international influence has been profoundly enhanced. However, this influential policy, which is char-

There was a long period when Chinese people were keen to shake off traditional cultures which we assumed as feudalistic remnants and a stumbling block to move forward. This indiscriminate denial of traditional beliefs and uncritical embrace of modern Western ideas, however, further intensified the conflict between humans and animals.

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22 South China tiger is a good example to illustrate this point. It is estimated that there were approximately 4,000 South China tigers before 1950s in China. Due to consistent deforestation, poaching, and nationwide »Pest Eradication Movement«, the species number plunged to about 60 in the 1980s. It is widely believed that South China tigers are now extinct in the wild. Xu: *South China Tiger*, 24.

23 Mang: *Interrelated Self and Other*, 18.

24 Wang: *Ecological Awareness*, 169.

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25 Ye: *The Tiger Dafu*, 162.



acterized by industrialization, urbanization, marketization, and globalization, has wreaked large-scale environmental havoc. The urbanization rate in China increased from 17% in 1978 to 30% in 1996,<sup>26</sup> and the figure jumped to 43.9% by the end of 2006.<sup>27</sup> This high-speed development has resulted in wide-range deforestation, water pollution, as well as species loss.<sup>28</sup> What is more, under the influence of the unbridled process of urbanization, Chinese rural areas were largely viewed as backward and full of superstitious ideas that are at odds with progress. As a result, traditional Chinese pro-environmental beliefs gradually gave way to interest-oriented mindset and over-consumption, which added fuel to environmental problems. As Mang rightly points out, since the Reform and Open and the ensuing waves of commercialism, the relationship between humans and animals in China has been unprecedentedly intensified.<sup>29</sup> The suffering inflicted on Erchan and local villagers depicted in Ye's fiction clearly illustrates this point.

Within a framework of the antagonism between country and city, Ye opposes She, who prioritizes benefits over conscience, to local villagers who represent a tradition that refuses distinctions between humans and animals. She boasts himself as a modern man and develops a

strong hatred towards Erchan who he thinks is a dumb and deformed monster. Different from the villagers who regard snakes as a mythical and totemic animal, She only cares about the high price of snakes on the city market, asserting that »legend is always legend, and you can never make money out of it.«<sup>30</sup> Apparently, the human-snake figure in this story is isomorphic with traditional legend, both are aphasic, marginalized and rejected by the enlightenment ideology. Ye creates the hybrid figure Erchan in the story to demonstrate that how a tradition that views humans and animals as interwoven has been vehemently threatened by the idea of modernity. When She kills an old snake—whose name is also Erchan—that is believed by the villagers to have lived for two thousand years, the human Erchan suddenly drops dead. Through merging a human and a snake in terms of appearance, character, suffering, as well as mortality in a village that is consistently menaced by the exploitative mindset, the author intends to raise the alarm against the idea of modernity.

Analogous to Ye, Jia calls into question the money-oriented mindset brought by the modernization through human-animal hybrid figures. A typical case in point is the golden monkey which metamorphoses into a woman to return her favor to Fushan. Fushan once sets free the monkey which is captured by his friend Cheng Yi, who intends to sell the animal's fur to smugglers in order to make big money. This plot does not grow out of Jia's

26 Lu: *Institutional Innovations and Challenges*, 9.

27 National Bureau of Statistics: *The Yearbook*.

28 Detailed statistics and examples of environmental issues resulting from the Reform and Open can be read in Sun: *Evolution of Ecological Environment*, 153–207.

29 Mang: *Interrelated Self and Other*, 273.

30 Ye: *The Tiger Dafu*, 169.



imagination, since smuggling animals abroad in order to make money was once a trend in China, particularly after the implementation of market economy. With the rapid development of marketization and Reform and Open, utilitarianism has become a prevalent mentality in Chinese society. As a result, animals, by and large, have fallen into living commodities waiting to be used both at home and abroad. Tibetan antelopes can serve as a typical example. Due to their high-priced wool for making shahtoosh,<sup>31</sup> from the end of 1980s, the population of Tibetan antelopes witnessed a sharp fall due to poaching. It is estimated that around 4,000 antelopes were poached for their fur every year in the 1990s in Tibet.<sup>32</sup> Considering the fact that China does not have the tradition to use shahtoosh, most of the antelopes were illegally killed to meet the needs from the international luxury goods market.<sup>33</sup> As we can see, in the fiction, the plot of smuggling golden monkey's fur is

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31 Derived from Persian, the word shahtoosh refers to »the king of wool«. Tibetan antelopes have to be killed and skinned in order to acquire their inner coat which is regarded as the finest wool for making shahtoosh.

32 The number of Chinese Tibetan antelopes has now dramatically rebounded after Chinese government's consistent efforts on cracking down poaching and establishing nature reserves in the Northwest. In 1997, there were no more than 50,000 antelopes in Tibet. Increasing at a rate of 7.9% annually, the number has tripled by the year of 2006. Qiu/Yan: *Tibetan Antelopes*, online.

33 State Forestry Administration: *Chinese Tibetan Antelopes*, 2.

an epitome of trading endangered animals for money which was once popular in China. Jia intends to accentuate the actual threat posed by the global market economy on animals. The human-animal boundary and the reductionist view towards animals are dramatically challenged by the monkey-turned-woman. This human-monkey hybrid indicates that, animals are not humans' property, but are living subjects that have memory and sense of gratitude, the qualities usually known as human privileges.

One should also notice that the critique of the process of modernization serves as an important theme in the fiction that runs parallel to the human-animal hybridity. In one episode of the fiction, a Mr. Ma complains to Ziming that modernization brings nothing but the shallowness of life, notably in interpersonal indifference, wasteful way of living, so on and so forth. In another episode, a character named Jiao Cai (literally meaning focusing on money) deliberately pushed his adopted daughter to running vehicles for many times only to blackmail the drivers. In sharp contrast to the monkey-turned-woman who values integrity and gratitude, Jiao allows himself to be carried away by the modern idea that negates honesty and uprightness. From the above two examples we can see that, under the overwhelming influence of the utilitarian and market-driven mindset, humans are both alienated from the external nature and the internal kindness. Hence, in *Remembering Wolves*, Jia elucidates that, the ecological degradation caused by modernization in the name

One should also notice that the critique of the process of modernization serves as an important theme in the fiction that runs parallel to the human-animal hybridity.



When discussing *Remembering Wolves* in an interview, Jia reiterates that he regards everything on the earth as equal and maintains that the mutual transformation between humans and wolves in the work underscores a self-transformation, which is to get close to the essence of things.

of development, including species loss and ever-increasing pollution, can and will lead to the moral decline which will in turn aggravate the existing environmental problems. This idea is in accordance with »social ecology« proposed by Murray Bookchin who believes a »deep-seated continuity between nature and society«. <sup>34</sup> Through depicting human-animal hybrids, the author aims at revealing how the concept of modernity has posed a grave threat to the actual living conditions of both animals and humans; he also endeavors to remind us that humans and animals can never be separated both physically and spiritually. When discussing *Remembering Wolves* in an interview, Jia reiterates that he regards everything on the earth as equal and maintains that the mutual transformation between humans and wolves in the work underscores a self-transformation, which is to get close to the essence of things. <sup>35</sup> This self-transformation, undeniably, encompasses a self-reflection towards the human-animal relationship in a society which is overwhelmed by the idea of modernity.

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#### THE LIMIT OF THE ANTI-MODERNITY NARRATIVE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE ANIMAL FICTIONS

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The anti-modernity narrative in both »The Snake Erchan« and *Remembering Wolves* is not without its problems. With clear environmental consciousness, Ye and Jia draw our atten-

tion to the precarious situations of animals and the damaging effects brought by the idea of modernity in contemporary China. The hybrid figures in their works radically doubt the uncritical embrace of modern ideology and the espousal of individual wealth. Despite that Ye and Jia tremendously dissolve the human-animal boundaries in terms of body and spirit in their works, both the writers have fallen into another dualistic fallacy which opposes tradition to modernity, implying that the process of modernization is a Pandora's box that gives birth to all kinds of evils. The two writers idealize and romanticize the past through narrating the human-animal hybrids in a nostalgic, if not all pessimistic tone, as if the past was a golden age which we should imitate or even go back to. This directly leads us to the limit of the anti-modernity narrative in contemporary Chinese literature.

According to Wang,<sup>e</sup> in light of the fact that China lags behind the Global North in launching modernization and Chinese modernization has not yet been solidly established now, the anti-modernity narrative actually runs the risk of being anachronistic and nihilistic. <sup>36</sup> As the critic further argues, the anti-modernity narrative in Chinese literature raises the alarm against the side effects brought by the process of modernization, prominent in ecological problems and materialism. However, this narrative should not direct people to the utter denial of modernity; rather, it ought to encourage people to devote to build-

34 Biehl: *Murray Bookchin*, 42.

35 Liao: *An Interview*, 89.

36 Wang: *A Study on the Anti-modernity*, 317.



ing and optimizing modernity.<sup>37</sup> Wang has recognized the values as well as the limit of anti-modernity narratives in contemporary Chinese literature; however, the critic does not provide a clear solution to the limit which seems to be inherent in this kind of narrative. To address this problem, we need to go back to the idea of human-animal hybrid in ancient Chinese culture, which advocates for a holistic and non-binary mode of thinking. In the famous story »Zhuang Zhou Dreams of a Butterfly«<sup>38</sup>, not only the species boundary between a human and a butterfly is dramatically erased, but also the line between the material world and the dream world is profoundly challenged. The »Transformation of Things« (物化), which acknowledges mutual changes in both body and spirit, collapses the distinction between different times and spaces, calling into question the progressive and linear way of perceiving and knowing the world. This traditional holistic and non-linear Chinese philosophy towards the human-animal relationship provides a potential antidote to the pessimistic notion that modernity has

37 Ibid, 320.

38 The story recorded in the Daoist classic *Zhuangzi* (《庄子》) is as follows: Zhuang Zhou once dreamt of being a butterfly. When he awoke, the Daoist asked: »I did not know whether it had formerly been Zhou dreaming that he was a butterfly, or it was now a butterfly dreaming that it was Zhou«. Zhuang Zhou's puzzle has problematized the subject-object dualism through disrupting the border between the material world and the dream world, and that between animals and humans. Zhuang: *Zhuangzi*, online.

caused and will continue to lead to global ecological degradations.

The human-animal hybrids depicted in contemporary Chinese animal fictions, which mirror the deep-rooted ancient Chinese continual and cyclic cosmology, on the other hand, invites an intercultural perspective to investigating modernity as such. For one thing, ancient Chinese philosophies advocate for a non-dualistic worldview that considers humans and animals are of the same source and are of no radical differences. This Chinese legacy challenges a logocentric development which tends to objectify non-human beings and deny their intrinsic values. For another, these human-animal hybrids prompt us to reconsider through a Chinese lens what on earth is modernity, if non-human animals—our kindred species—are declining and disappearing. Against the backdrop of the Anthropocene when human beings have caused unprecedented damages to nonhuman animals, and by extension, to the global ecosystem, it is crucial to bear in mind Bruno Latour's phrase, »we have never been modern.« It is also a good chance to reevaluate what and how ancient Chinese beliefs of the human-animal relationship can contribute to ongoing eco-disasters across different cultures. Despite their limits, contemporary Chinese animal fictions, in which the human-animal hybrid plays a crucial role, are successful in conveying a strong and useful message: There is no categorical divide between humans and animals, and anyone who attempts to separate the two is bound to fail.

This self-transformation, undeniably, encompasses a self-reflection towards the human-animal relationship in a society which is overwhelmed by the idea of modernity.



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