Nature and Critique of Modernity in Shen Congwen
An Ecocritical Reading

ABSTRACT Contemporary environmental crises have their origin in the anthropocentric view of humans as separable from and superior to the natural world. Anthropocentrism also marks the realist author of modern Chinese fiction. Departing from that human-centered view, Shen Congwen’s work evinces a biological perspective and affirms an ecological understanding of life in which the writing self must trace its roots to and reciprocate with other organisms and all-encompassing nature. The animistic language of Shen’s writing delves into the ecological and bodily foundation of beauty and arts. Shen’s notion of the longue durée of biology and evolution debunks the transient zeitgeist of modern transformation and accelerations, propelled by the human domination of nature and alienation of the human body. Shen’s portrayal of sexuality reasserts the reciprocity and entwinement of inner nature with outer nature.

KEYWORDS anthropocentrism, nature, beauty, ecology, sexuality

Ecocriticism has targeted anthropocentrism as the intellectual culprit for the human domination of nature. Seen as the root cause for contemporary ecological crises and environmental degradation, anthropocentrism takes the human as the center of reference in apprehending human-nature relations and holds human reason as an instrument to treat nature as economic resources and means for human construction. An anthropocentric view also undergirds modern Chinese literature with the humanist agenda. Take the example of the familiar authorial stance in realist fiction. As a dominant legacy of China’s May Fourth New Culture, realism, according to Marston Anderson, is “anchored in the capacity of human beings to free themselves from superstition and prejudice through the exercise of their faculty of reason.” In approaching human reality and the non-human world of nature, “the mind assimilates external reality to the linguistic structures.” These linguistic codes authorize the observing mind and enable it to aspire to a privileged platform from which to register and document slices of reality—with an objective distance. In doing so the mind discovers its independence and freedom, yet its exercise of freedom is made possible “only when it sets itself in opposition to tradition.” Anderson’s insight suggests the underlying link
of anthropocentrism to literary realism. Rooted in the secular Enlightenment belief in the power of human reason, both discourses take a critical stance and seek freedom from dependence in traditions and prejudice and from limits set by nature and biology. A product of the liberal humanist tradition, the writing self, as Timothy Clark puts it, is endowed with “seemingly pre-given, personal, unique identity, a realm of unshakable privacy, center of its own world of values, perceptions, beliefs, commitments and feelings.”

Realist writing may dramatize disturbances of historical reality and natural disasters to shake up the existing cultural norms or linguistic codes, but it is the mind that wields the objectifying power. The realist author arrogates himself to an idealistic, disembodied spirit, “an ahistorical higher consciousness.” This stripped-down subjectivity overshots not only its biological body but also the body writ large in entrenched, long-enduring traditions, customs, and rituals, which are embedded in humans’ biological, primordial, and evolutionary existence. Yet, as Anderson notes in his critique of May Fourth realism, this disembodied stance runs into the limits set by the tenacious natural environment.

Ecocriticism in Chinese studies has focused on contemporary environmental despoliation; environmental injustice linked to social injustice, public policy, neoliberal production, and consumerism; and romantic traditions of human-nature bonds. Faced with looming calamities, ecocritics tend to focus on recent works of literature and film that grapple explicitly with environmental crises. The May Fourth literary canon, with its express goals of modernity, progress, and science, has not been adequately tapped for ecocriticism. Shen Congwen (1902–88) is an exception. Mainland Chinese scholars are beginning to pay attention to Shen’s protoecological consciousness, but few works appear in English. This article attempts to retrieve the motifs of Shen’s work that are prescient about ecological issues. Unaware of the intensity of today’s environmental problems, Shen is nevertheless able to discern the seeds of the crisis in a long perspective by critiquing the way in which modern civilization severs humanity’s ecological roots in nature. Though a modernist writer, Shen offers the conviction that human life on Earth remains part and parcel of ecosystems and humanity can never pull itself from planet Earth by its bootstraps.

Studies have portrayed Shen Congwen as deeply rooted in the rural soil, in a lifeworld and labor entwined with nature, in primordial strata of folk traditions, and in the relation between people and the ecosystem of climate, rivers, mountains, trees, and animals. Jeffrey Kinkley has appraised in Shen’s writing the raw vitality of folks in western Hunan and the Miao minority and their uninhibited sensuality. Peng Hsiao-yen’s *Antithesis Overcome* delves into Shen’s primitivism in a modernist garb. David Der-wei Wang’s comprehensive and insightful study of Shen identifies a lyrical vision with the power to bring forth primeval energy and imagination inhibited by modern civilization. Rather than subordinate “the
subject of passion to the rhetoric of hard-core realism,”9 the lyrical vision allows hidden passions, desire, and vitality to burst through the established moral codes and social norms imposed by modern transformations. By preserving a place for the supernatural and the uncanny, Wang writes, Shen held that “moral codes of a community should not be predicated on pre-established grounds but should evolve as a result of the harmonious associations of things in their phenomenal state.”9 The “phenomenal state” gestures toward an aesthetic of poetic language linked to an ecological sensibility. This poetic sensibility entails a deeply resonant and intertwined relation between humans and the natural world. The term \textit{phenomenal} recalls phenomenology, an aesthetic inquiry into humans’ experiential, sensuous, and vital affinity with the world. Aesthetics probes into how “the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our most banal, biological insertion into the world.”10 In focusing on human sensuality in conviviality with myriad living things, Shen marks a departure from the disembodied, realistic subject of modern literature. Shen’s writing evinces a refusal to elevate the human subject above animals, plants, landscapes, and climate.

In this article I explore the question of human-nature relations and seek to extend the study of Shen in an ecological direction. I go beyond the portrayals of Shen as a nature writer, a painter of rural folk manners, and a curator of West Hunan local colors. Natural and ecological motifs in Shen’s work are taking on renewed significance in the current worldwide critique of anthropocentrism. As a prominent writer of the May Fourth culture, Shen drew inspiration and resources from romanticism, modernism, Freudianism, and anthropology. While he contributed to the formation of the humanist subject in search of freedom and modernity, Shen did as much to disperse the human self by grounding it in an ecological context and by recovering human roots in the nonhuman environment. Chinese traditions of thought also fed into Shen’s protoecological thinking. Shen’s favorite classics include essays by Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819), who pondered humans’ resonance with the heavens and earth. Karen Thornber has referenced Liu Zhongyuan’s \textit{Tian shuo 天說} (Theory of Heaven) to advance the theory of ecoambiguity.11 Li Daoyuan’s 齊道元 (472–527) \textit{Shui jing zhu 水經注} (A Commentary on the Classic of the Waterways) and Taoist writer Zhuangzi 莊子 (ca. 369–286 BCE) might have shaped Shen’s thoughts about humans in the cosmos. A rich repertoire of ideas about humans’ relation with nature, these references converge into a critical resource for rethinking how modern civilization rationalizes, represses, and reifies nature as well as inner human nature.

Modern environmental crises have their cultural and philosophical origins in the Enlightenment view that humanity is separable from and superior to the natural world. By reading Shen’s essays and stories, I argue that Shen affirms an ecological “understanding of life in which the thinking of the self must already
include other organisms” and all that sustains them, entailing “an ever-widening circle of identification with other living things.”

**Natural Beauty, Language, and Modern Civilization**

Invocations of nature are problematic in this age of built environments and digitized nature. David Der-wei Wang has claimed that natural landscapes in Shen appeal to an imaginary nostalgia for a lost home in terms of a transhistorical overview. Ecocritics fret that natural images and landscapes often serve as spectacles for aesthetic and tourist consumption by jaded urbanites. I contend that natural images in Shen prompt us to rethink the relations between humans and their deep ties to nonhuman nature. I will elaborate on Kinkley’s point that Shen “loved nature above artificiality.”

The place of nature in modern civilization has been on the wane in the midst of accelerated technological advances. Alert to the way modern civilization assaults the intimate relations between rural people and the natural environment, Shen inquires into how urban consumerism, print technology, politics, and fashions inflict on nature. He probes into how human imagination and artifice relate to the idea of natural beauty and searches for a natural vision not yet codified and reified as second nature. In his writing, descriptions of nature—trees, rivers, mountains, and animals—are a powerful and ubiquitous presence. Shen’s fictional characters live in the midst of nature and make a living out of it. We may cite an oft-quoted scene in *Bian cheng* (Border Town). Describing human abodes along the river Yuan, the narrator dwells on the high mountains close to the river bank, which are “covered with delicate, thin bamboos” and display “in all seasons such a deep emerald color as to transfixed the eyes. Households near the water appeared among peach and apricot blossoms. . . . Whenever there were peach blossoms there was sure to be a home, and wherever there were people, one could stop for a drink.” The cottages, on the cliffs and the riverbanks, are in harmonious order and in tune with their surroundings. A poetic feeling arises from this panorama, marveling at the bold craftsmanship of nature. This landscape intimates a deep ecological sensibility, suggesting that human dwellings, rather than constructed, seem to rise organically from the soil, the rivers, and the mountains. Human activity, while centered on human interest and survival, cannot cut itself off from nature; it blends into vegetation, plants, and natural terrains. The novel’s protagonist, Cuicui, is evidently a child of nature: “Cuicui grew up under the sun and the wind, which turned her skin black as could be. The azure mountains and green brooks that met her eyes turned them clear and bright as crystal. Nature had brought her up and educated her, making her innocent and spirited, in every way like a little wild animal. Yet she was as docile and unspoiled as a mountain fawn, wholly unacquainted with cruelty, never worried, and never angry.”
The image of human abodes on the river pervades Shen’s narratives. At the ecological level, this signals a fluid interflow and interdependence between humans and nature. Ecocritics have used the motif of water to describe this intimacy and unity. Freud’s notion of the child’s oceanic immersion in the primordial surrounding of maternal presence marks a world where, in the words of Georges Bataille, “the animal is in the world like water in water.”\textsuperscript{[19]} As Shen’s favorite natural image, water—rain, waterways, stream, and river—flows into his writing as a significant stream of his creativity. In the essay titled “Wode xiezuo yu shui de guanxi” 我的寫作與水的關係 (The Relation of My Writing to Water), Shen writes, “That I can think at all with my little brain depends on water. If I have a deeper understanding of the cosmos, it is thanks to water.”\textsuperscript{[20]} The local waters never cease to inspire him and form the setting of many of his stories. To him, the sea, rivers, and rains inform human moods and nurture human life. Readily associated with living natural forms such as trees, vegetation, clouds, and sunshine, the waters are more than a physical setting for human action; they embody a lifeline linking nature to human desires, hopes, and sensuous affinity with other organisms. The mirage between the sky and the sea, veiled in watery mist, gives a feeling of light-heartedness, sofness, music, and eroticism. The blue sky is a “magic picture, evocative of youthful signs, triggering fantasies and dreams.”\textsuperscript{[21]}

By locating origins of creativity in vibrant, fluid nonhuman elements, Shen addresses the natural foundation for the ideal of the beautiful in human artworks. Aesthetic thinkers Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868–1940) and Zhu Guanqian 朱光潛 (1897–1986), writing around the same time as Shen, believed that the beauty of artworks originated from the primitive conditions of hunters and gatherers living in and engaging closely with nature.\textsuperscript{[22]} Comparing Chinese aesthetics with Western ideas, Zhu wrote that Western thinkers tend to “view nature as something in opposition to humans” and treat the whole nonhuman realm as nature.\textsuperscript{[23]} The Chinese veneration of nature seems different but is a late development: the nature cult did not become a dominant motif until the Jin and Tang dynasties, under the influence of Taoism and Buddhism. The poems of \textit{Shijing} 詩經 (Book of Songs) treat nature as a backdrop that provokes the inner feelings of the poet, who deploys nature for expressive purposes. What sets the Chinese attitude apart from the anthropocentric view, according to Zhu, is that Chinese seem to be content with Heaven and Earth 樂天知足 (letian zhizu) and are inclined to “immerse themselves in nature, believing in the intimacy and cozy coexistence of humans and nature.”\textsuperscript{[24]}

Human-nature intimacy is not just a Chinese concept but is also a strong motif in Western aesthetics. Theodor Adorno gives primacy to nature as the genuine source of beauty over human reason and artifice. The aesthetics of the Enlightenment, represented by Hegel and Kant, privileges human-made artworks and artifice as the source of the beautiful, thus privileging rational design over the
nonhuman world of nature. As human artifice expunges the rawness of nature and transcends its otherness, a human-centered aesthetic took hold and evolved in the modern age, signaling the triumph of the idealist, rational subject setting itself from the object. A sign of the human domination of nature, the human-centered aesthetic is, Adorno wrote, “culpable of elevating the human animal above the animal.” Destructive and violent, this aesthetic runs roughshod over everything that does not fit into an identity of the anthropocentric subject.

Looking for an alternative notion of natural beauty, Adorno seeks to restore nature to its rightful place in aesthetic thought. Evoking the hawthorn hedge in Marcel Proust, he sees the natural image as a sign of the urge to step out of the stuffy house to seek a breath of fresh air. A genuine aesthetic experience is to be had by fleeing the house of second nature to embrace primal nature brimming with health and vitality. Citing Rousseau, Adorno observes that even the individual with refined taste and aesthetic judgment may find tremendous relief when he or she steps into the open air out of a gallery packed with beautiful paintings and artifacts. Moving away from those artworks that “minister to vanity and social joys,” the viewer would fall in love with “the beautiful in nature” and appreciate “a voluptuousness for the mind in a train of thought that he can never unravel.”

Adorno’s insight is helpful for understanding Shen’s critique of the erosion of nature, alienation of inner nature, and destruction of rural communities in China’s drives for modernity. This reading, however, should not lead to a leveling of humans and nonhumans. Cognizant of nature’s menace to humans, Shen recognizes human agency and courage in the conflicted attempt to maintain a fragile equilibrium between humans and nature. While works of beauty result from human design, human beings, though not the sole makers, are the prime agents. On the ecological level, humans are one organism involved with all other organisms. However, on the aesthetic level, the artists take the lead in creating beauty. Treating humans as a prime agent in maintaining ecological balance is not anthropocentrism, but a process of give-and-take. Shen wrote, “All flowers and fruits receive from the sun their life and fragrance. In the order of nature, humans are also one life-form and need to receive nourishment and wisdom from the sun.” But while “the sky, trees, and sea merge into my solitary soul . . . I feel the robust wisdom of life. From the rhythmic beat of my heart arises a refreshing and graceful poem and cooing songs honoring youthful energy.”

Kinkley observes that Shen often conveys the romantic lovers’ conversation in a metaphorical language that “resonated with the climate and nature scene.” I suggest that Shen’s language is animistic rather than metaphorical. The metaphor assumes that the sign system treats natural imagery as an external means of representing human feelings and intent, deploying nature as lengthened shadows of humanity. In contrast, Shen’s writing makes sense in terms of animistic language. His nature imagery does not treat natural scenes, sights, and sounds in a sole
attempt to articulate human desire, emotion, and intent, and much less to impose human schemes and categories. It is a stream of signals, sounds, and gestures that organically arises from yet remains embedded in nature as if it were the voice of nature. His style does not define and shape human characters’ experience of nature but is open-ended and coexists with other “languages of nature.”

Defining animistic language in his influential ecological work *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abrams claims that the sources of animistic language lie in a realm that knows no distinction between human and nonhuman. Animistic language reveals the deeper conditions of language that allows humans to experience and access the world directly in a bodily and incarnate medium. Instead of setting the human apart from nature, it allows human bodies to experience immediate sensations, sights, and sounds from nature. More than a means to human ends, the sensuous medium involves humans, plants, rocks, and all animate forms in a ceaseless conversation, in constant beckoning and responding, forging a wordless conversation in the “common field of our lives and other lives, with which ours are entwined.” Animistic language allows humans to have delicate reciprocity with myriad textures, sounds, and shapes of the earth and to carry on “a sort of silent conversation,” a continuous dialogue that unfolds far below human linguistic and conceptual awareness.

The folk characters in Shen seem equipped with this animistic language. As Kinkley rightly observes, the country folks in Shen’s works “are able to communicate their moods and feelings without much recourse to speech.” In communication, their intuitions, sensitivity, sensuous alertness to gestures and remarks, and their “imaginative ability to enter each other’s mind are sufficient.” This sensuous language can be an erotic folk song for flirtation and courting or a natural atmosphere complete with botanic, animal, and cosmic images. The short story “Yu hou” (After Rain) illustrates the gap between elegant poetry and animistic language. Set in a mountainous enclave after a rain shower, the male character Fourth Dog seduces a girl and has sex with her. They approach each other as if driven by the most auspicious and compelling forces of nature. The bucolic setting extends to a cosmic space between Heaven and Earth: the reemergence of the sun after the rain, the clouds that rush like wild hogs, and the ceaseless humming of insects and bugs. The boy attempts to caress the girl and feel her breast while singing a customary courting song. The girl is coy at first. Schooled in classical poetry, she warns that she will soon fade away, for classical poems of nature always lament the transience of female beauty like the withering of flowers. When her recitation of poetic lines threatens to block the spontaneous outburst of love, the narrator complains that poetic literacy is to blame for the girl’s hesitancy. The poetic canon laments the transience of floral bloom and ignores bodily, sensuous spontaneity, blocking the moment of pleasure as incomplete and unsatisfactory. Fortunately, Fourth Dog is illiterate and immune to the cliché poetic foreboding
of fading of girls/flowers. He simply follows his natural instinct, which is “his poetry.”

His plunge into passion suggests an animistic poem, invocative of the sensuous and spontaneous outburst of libido in conjunction with nature. The sounds of big and small insects, the grasshoppers flying around the lovers, the raindrops falling from the trees and leaping around on the ground, and the audible heartbeat of the girl next to him—all these converge into a polyphonic chorus, which is exquisite poetry to this illiterate country boy. He feels that “maple leaves are her beddng, and he her quilt, and he will frolic with her like a dog” in a way that “cannot be explained by any language.”

Instead of imitating nature and deploying natural images from the anthropocentric height, Shen’s animistic language immerses bodily sensations, pleasure, and feelings in nature. Human language is not a construct deemed more expressive than sounds, cries, buzzes, and a wide spectrum of sensations, perceptions, and shapes from nature. Engulfing subject and object, animistic language is one voice in a web of sounds and signals in communication, reciprocity, and circulation with other living organisms. Birds have their chirping languages; the trees beckon and answer with their signals, just as humans communicate with other living bodies and forms.

The story “Sāngè nüxing” 三個女性 (Three Girls) contrasts literary language, of both classical and modern traditions, with the language of nature. As three girls go sightseeing on the seashore during summer vacation, two younger girls, overwhelmed by the blue sky, clouds, pine trees, and the ocean, rack their brains for lines of poetry in response to the intoxicating natural environs. But Pu Jing, the mature one among them, deems it silly to search for poetic lines and romantic aura when one is enveloped, body and soul, by a refreshing ambiance. Waxing poetic and rhetorical, the two other girls lose their way in the winding path. To correct this habit of imposing lines of poetry on such a rich and diverse scene, Pu Jing urges the girls to lie flat on the rocks and feels their residual warmth. “If you want to be poet, you should get closer to nature, to lie down in the embrace of nature.” As all three proceed to lie down on a big slab at the cliff overlooking the ocean, one girl exclaims in an epiphany: “The sky is right over my head!” When asked for a song to sing of their being in thrall to nature, this girl, now converted to animistic faith, remarks that songs, like poetry, are ineffective and inadequate. “Can we string together sounds and language to identify and capture what we are feeling?” Silence, she concludes, is the only appropriate response. Songs crafted by humans, like poetry, are all very simplistic and poor; they sing of superficial gain and loss, happiness and sadness. Pu Jing, the theorist of natural beauty, claims that it is not enough to preserve our amazing experience of nature by means of song or poetry. Instead, the main point of poetry is to “forget ourselves,” to have “our soul melt into intricate lights and subtle colors of nature.” Thus, if we approach nature through the educated poetic sensibility, we will fail to
appreciate what is naturally beautiful. She goes on to philosophize: “The beautiful is ubiquitous and fluid. The fewer poets we have, the more likely it would be for humans to access and enjoy beauty.”39 Human-centered literature stands in the way of natural beauty, and lettered poetry, instead of making people wiser and perceptive, only makes for decoration, vanity, and the social status of the Philistines.40

Shen pits the image of nature against the ideas of progress in urbanization, industrialization, and consumerism. His valorization of nature targets the way human construction in the city erodes the simplicity, multiplicity, and vitality of rural life. The story “Deng” 燈 (The Lamp) explores the tension between an authentic way of life and the alienating environment of the modern university in Shanghai. Urban life appears to be one of uncertainty and spiritual hollowness for the narrator/professor, who is obviously Shen’s alter ego. The supply of electricity is unreliable; the professor is constantly stressed out with meaningless teaching duties; his housekeeper is dishonest and deceptive; students write about love in the melodramatic style of “love has broken my heart” five times in the first paragraph of their essays. Conversations with colleagues are “idle chatter”; knowledge of literature is little more than a display of vanity and gossips of a writer’s private romance. As a “village product,” the narrator feels wronged and becomes weary of city life, and weary of life itself. In spite of all urban amenities, he yearns to return to the home village and to do a simple job. There he would enjoy a simple life by listening to the “frogs croaking in the rainwater puddles in the yard, and practicing calligraphy.”41 Under the misty lamplight, this romantic nostalgia leads to a divide between Western modernity and the traditional, natural lifeworld unique to “the Eastern race.” The old soldier, the story’s main protagonist, the narrator discerns a paragon of rural and natural virtue. The soldier has echoes of “so many of his rural fellow-countrymen, all uneducated, but at the same time all so good and honest.”42 Modern times “have uprooted the peace-loving soul of an old eastern race, and thrust it into a world of wars with which it had no empathy.”43

Tearful and melancholy, this yearning for the lost rural life reveals the gap between natural beauty and the artwork’s attempt to heal the wounded soul of the “village product.” Urban life suffocates spontaneous life, inflicts wounds on nature and inner life. “The concept of natural beauty rubs on a wound,” Adorno wrote.44 The primacy of artificiality in aesthetics and the instrumental rationality of modern civilization inflict wounds on nature. Modernity, along with its bureaucracy, markets, technology, consumerism, and a whole slew of alienating mechanisms, represses the spontaneity, multiplicity, and naturalness of the rural lifeworld. Unlike the sunny images of natural beauty we saw earlier, “Deng” conjures up a form of beauty derived from nature but scarred with wounds and losses.

Along a similar critique of modern alienation, Shen formulates a more nuanced theory of natural beauty in the essay “Shui Yun” 水雲 (Water and
Clouds). Positing water and clouds as the ultimate fountainhead, Shen repeats his insight that all artistic originality and creativity stem from the obsessive image of water. Beautiful works of art draw energy and inspiration from nature and from deep engagement with all living organisms. When artificial conventions, consumerist taste, and fashions hold sway, images of nature become infrequent and flash up only by chance (ou ran 偶然). Impulses of nature are always waiting in the wings to burst forth with sparks and flourishes. What goes by the name society, with its new trends, cultural industry, technologies of writing, media, fashions, and consumerism, amounts to the narrow “hypocritical manners and behavior that distort and repress human nature.”45 The alienation suppresses spontaneous desires of boys and girls, locks middle-age individuals in the anxiety about the loss of power, and confines the elderly to declining health.46 Urban dwellers busily and mindlessly throng in and out of stores and banks, and everything is driven by money. The iconic modern buildings, such as the city hall and churches, only remind one of the power struggles and conflict in the past—a record of bygone victories and defeats, successes and failures. Modern culture has created the orthodox canons of literature and art and used bricks and woods to build ugly buildings. These material and cultural constructions only perpetuate received opinions of some authorities and routinely provide a means of livelihood for later docile generations. The ossified superstructures are becoming “cartoonist, shadowy, sham and vulgar.” Humans are reified: we get much from things, but we lose ourselves.47 The essay echoes William Wordsworth’s famous lines:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;—
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune.48

Yet for all the seamless human, artificial constructs, natural beauty may crop up by chance through the cracks. Shen registers an epiphany at the dawning of beauty. When he sees how delicately dressmakers and hairdressers wield the beautician’s skills on young female bodies, he comments that these skills do little more than enhance stylistic effects and the looks of an average person. But penetrating through the artificialities, one is able to discern, by default and by contrast, the perfection and exquisiteness that nature has conferred on a young and healthy female body. The irruption of lost natural beauty, glaringly absent from the stylized female body—a mere mannequin—entails genuine artistic imagina-
tion and penetrating insight linked to primeval nature. “I am entirely in a position of art connoisseur,” Shen notes. By seeing through artificiality, Shen is able to detect a natural life-form that blends into art, one that projects a broader natural moral vision and that transcends fissures between aesthetic form and natural body.  

Sexuality, Biology, and Nature

Shen attempts to find a way to bridge inner and outer nature by addressing the gap between culture and nature. The gap drives a wedge between human norms, which are time specific as the zeitgeist, and the longue durée of biology and evolution. The advent of modernity, dominated by the zeitgeist of the Anthropocene, has widened the gap between the two time spans. On the surface runs a fast human-centered narrative—one that makes epoch-making changes in the human mind and on the earth. Lagging and submerged flows a long evolutionary stream, with humans enmeshed with nonhuman ecosystems and embedded in naturally evolved habits, customs, myth, and folklore. This evolutionary process testifies to a sense of temporality so slow and imperceptible that it takes on the quality of timelessness. The longue durée intimates a close affinity and entwinement between the human and nonhuman worlds, implying the idea of social ecology embedded in natural ecology.

Romantic critics tend to favor this “timeless” nature and forget what David Wang calls “naturalization,” referring to a writing strategy to remove “things and ideas from historical contingencies” by “fitting them into an ideology of Nature.” But rather than viewing nature as a retreat to Nature, we may identify in Shen’s work an ecological pace of change involving landscapes, climate, customs, and prehistorical lifeworlds—changes that have never cut humans’ umbilical cord from Mother Earth. This subterranean, ecological stratum exerts a shaping force on the human world. Sensitive to this ecological temporality, Shen probes into a “timeless nature” beneath the vicissitudes of human fate, political changes, and social transformations—swift mutations under the teleology of modern history.

The telling “Ren yu di” (Humans and Soil) chapter opens the novel Changhe (The Long River). A long-range view and slow description of landscape draw us into a geological timeline. The narrator delves into a submerged natural history entwined with the life conditions of local folk. Thanks to the fertility of the soil and proper climate, there has been an overproduction of oranges along the Yuan River in West Hunan. The oranges hark back to the deep and long kinship between human inhabitants and natural conditions. Two thousand years ago, when Qu Yuan (ca. 343–278 BCE), the exiled official of the Chu state, took a boat up upstream, he must have been struck by these brilliant orange groves. The natural elegance and colors inspired him to write the “Ju Song” (Ode to Oranges). Over two millennia, while things have changed somewhat, the
same people still live in the area and trees still draw nourishment from the soil on
the riverbanks. Throughout the sun, rains, and snows, throughout all the climate
changes, the old passed away; the young grew up as if springing up from the soil.51

This image of the perennially flowing river provokes a critique of historical
and anthropocentric constructs as fleeting bubbles on the surface:

Written history, besides telling us stories of mutual killing among certain
groups of people in certain places on earth, will never sufficiently tell us what
we should know. But this river has told me the sadness and happiness of some
people in an era of time. The little gay fishing boats . . . the half-naked, bend-
ing boat-pullers, walking on the pebble beach. These things have nothing to do
with history, and they remain the same, in the last or next hundred years.52

This “unwritten life” sinks its roots in the millennial entwinement of the
local folk’s archaic ways of living with the soil, landscape, and the earth. Human
labor and behavior, instead of transcending the biological needs of survival, are
deeply in tune with and embedded in the nonhuman world of climate, clouds,
plants, animals, rivers, and mountains. Human characters are portrayed as not
yet weaned from an all-encompassing Mother Nature.

Speaking of human constructs in art, literature, and philosophy, Shen cau-
tions that our rational examinations of life require a distancing from our true
self and our body. Detached from biological life as an integral part of nature, our
reflection entails an estrangement from “human nature as inherent in biological
nature” (shengwu zhong ren de benxing 生物中人的本性).53 Rather than shedding
the animal traits and roots, the sense of human biology ensures that the species
and blood ties persist and continue to survive by connecting with other organ-
isms. Compared with this deeper ecosystem, pains and joys in human-centered
life and society seem petty, and human efforts are motivated mostly from the
pursuit of trivial gains and losses, from paybacks and adjustments. When philoso-
phers and artists busily search for abstract designs, they tend to alienate humans
from nature, even if they do not inflict wounds on it. But human abstractions
neglect and repress the complexity, richness, and life-shaping forces of nature.54

Nature has far broader horizons than human-centered schemes. Nature’s
timeline is much longer than the anthropocentric subject—the agent of history.
As we saw earlier, beautiful things created by human beings cannot be attributed
to humans’ unique endeavors but reflect an ecological relation in which “humans
submit to nature’s order with joy” and yield to its disciplines. All human wisdom
draws inspiration and substance from nature’s influence.55

Bound up with natural ecology, the biological concept of human nature
accounts for Shen’s sympathetic and nonjudgmental depictions of sensuality
and sexuality. Kinkley observes that among Shen’s mountain folk, sensuous love
is innocent and naïve, and their passionate nature knows “no tormented desires and affects expressible through simple nature metaphors.” Although he sees the depiction of innocent sexuality as more a product of a mediating work rather than a spontaneous outpouring of libido, David Wang has drawn attention to the child-like innocence and indulgence regarding sexual transgression. In sexual acts, lovers in Shen’s stories evince a naïve life force unconstrained by moral qualms.

Take a look at the famous story “Xiaoxiao” 蕭蕭. A child bride engaged at age twelve with a two-year-old boy, Xiaoxiao has a sexual affair with a farmhand and becomes pregnant. Instead of being condemned and punished, she is absolved from her transgression. Now, becoming a child bride and laboring as a little nanny for the in-law family would have been the prime subject matter for the May Fourth attack on the oppression of women in traditional China. Xiang Lin’s wife in Lu Xun’s “Zhufu” 祝福 (New Year’s Sacrifice) is a well-known example of women victimized by the patriarchal family. Yet far from deploring Xiaoxiao’s servitude and hardship, the narrative takes on a sympathetic tone and even cheers her on. The child bride appears to take great strides in her hard life. She enjoys playing with her child husband; she dreams the dream of the girls her age and embraces whatever life has to offer. A vibrant and irresistible force of nature is throbbing within her, which the hard labor can barely dampen. After a sleepless night due to the exhausting care of the baby husband, she would “flick her eyes open and shut to see the yellow-and-purple sunflowers outdoors shifting forms before her very eyes.” Growing a little older, the little wife “is not the worse for wear”; one look at her figure shows that “she was like an unnoticed sapling at a corner of the garden, sprouting forth big leaves and branches after days of wind and rain” (228). “She grew and blossomed” and “flourished in the clean country air, undaunted by any trial and ordeal” (232). The climatic moments fall on the seduction scene, her sexual transgression, and the resolution. As the farm hand Motley is seducing her, the attraction is mutual and reciprocal. The impartial narrator conveys a sense that Xiaoxiao yields willingly and naturally to the charms of Motley’s male body: she cannot help looking at his brawny arms and is drawn to his erotic folk songs, with which Motley sings his way into her heart. Like many love scenes in Shen, the sexual act happens in the mountains, amid lush foliage and among wild fruits and trees, adding a pastoral, innocent flavor to the lovemaking.

Although Xiaoxiao’s sex and pregnancy are a case of transgression and dishonor the family, the lack of Confucian education among the family elders spares her from the potentially harsh penalty. “By rights, she should have been drowned, but only heads of families who have read their Confucius would do such a thing to serve the family’s honor” (235). Xiaoxiao’s “sin” is thus absolved, not on moral grounds but through an appeal to economic benefits and compensation. The in-law family tries to sell her, but there are no takers. Meanwhile, the affectionate bond between Xiaoxiao and her baby-husband keeps her at home. In time, the
birth of the illicit baby turns out to be a blessing. Promising added labor power, the child gives Xiaoxiao a legitimate place in the family.

In a departure from Confucian moral strictures, “Xiaoxiao” points to a practical consideration premised on economic necessity and species survival. By depicting Xiaoxiao’s vitality and sexuality, the libidinal impulses of puberty, the urges of inner nature enveloped by a lush landscape, the courting ritual through erotic songs, and finally the economic gain in labor power, the author not only mitigates and pardons the sin of Xiaoxiao but, more important, gives her experience a force of justification and legitimacy, affirming the principles of biological nature and species survival.

Shen portrays sexuality as an unbridled and nonethical expression of an inner nature consonant with primal natural environments. Both inner and outer natures are charged with restless impulses, vigor, and conviviality, with human libidinal drives blending with the fluid vitality of trees, plants, and animals.

The claims of nature and biological survival also account for Shen’s descriptions of prostitution, which are disturbing to moralistic and ideological readers. These episodes evince a consistent refusal to raise any moral concerns regarding the female body. The female body was a main bone of contention in the May Fourth culture between progressives and conservatives. The New Culture embraced the modern ideas of woman’s self-consciousness and autonomy and decried the treatment of women as commodity and property by the traditional mores and family. On the other hand, the Confucian moralists condemned the sin of prostitution while many of them indulged in sexual license. Shen’s work on sexuality gestures toward the biological realm beyond the pale of humanist or Confucian morality. Sexual intercourse, as Kinkley rightly puts it, “is described with surprising moral neutrality.”59 However, the neutral tone is not so surprising throughout Shen’s stories. It implies an understanding of the organic unity of human biological nature and outer nature.

The story “Zhangfu” 丈夫 (The Husband) illustrates the same justification of sexual behavior on the same practical and amoral grounds as in “Xiaoxiao.” In the story, the peasant women leave their husbands behind in the village and go to work as prostitutes on the boats in a small town. These women and their husbands “call this activity by the same name as it is known elsewhere: business. Business is what they’ve all come for. It holds the same status as any other work, being neither offensive to morality nor harmful to health” (30). There is little hint of immorality, infidelity, and depravity. The peasant women turned prostitutes remit their earnings to their husbands and provide their families with a better life. The husband “keeps the rights to his wife and the profits, too” (30). So the couple does business, one in the field and the other in the city. This, the narrator comments, matter-of-factly and without irony, is “all so simple” and “happens all the time” (31), suggesting that it is the oldest trade in the world.
This casual remark about the man's ownership of the woman and her labor seems disturbing and “patriarchal.” Premised on a gender hierarchy, it runs counter to the vaunted equality among humans consistent with the ecological resonance between humans and other organisms. But even an equalitarian social ecology cannot dispense with hierarchy. The question is whether the hierarchy is dominant or whether it allows a space of reciprocity and mutuality. In “Zhangfú,” the wife acts like a mother to coax her husband out of his jealousy. Is this a sign of her subordination or an initiative to smooth over the friction? Hierarchy, often embodied in Shen’s fiction by an authoritative yet caring figure, is a necessary glue of the community. It is to maintain the social ecology and keep members in mutual belonging and solidarity. The same is true of the ecological family, where humans, though a member of the ecosystem, must take the lead, as the head of the household, in managing the coexistence and conflict between humans and nonhuman organisms. The hierarchy so created is one of leadership and coordination, and although this benign hierarchy degenerates time again into tyranny or barbarism, its essence is far from the “might is right” logic of the jungle. Though human-centered, the human role in ecosystems should be the locus for coordinating the balance and reciprocity of all living things.

While this is no place to explore the possibility of a benign hierarchy, Shen’s approach to the sex trade is remarkably free from moral qualms in favor of survival, livelihood, mutual care, and emotion. As the narrator of Bian cheng observes, “little dames” were brought in from the countryside and the army camps to meet the needs of locals. When night fell, “they'd take their turns serving the merchants and the boatmen, earnestly doing all that it was a prostitute's duty to do.” On the other hand, the prostitutes are romantic lovers and passionately committed to their loved ones. They “retained their long lasting virtues of honesty and simplicity” (17). Serving customers and remaining devoted to their lovers go hand in hand and do not clash. They could kill the lovers or take their own lives if they discover their unfaithfulness and betrayal. “Short-term commitments, long-term engagements, one-night stands—these transactions with women's bodies, given the simplicity of local mores, did not feel degrading or shameful to those who did business with their bodies, nor did those on the outside use the concepts of the educated to censure them or look down on them” (18).

But the educated, urban outsiders do censure them. The moral or rather moralistic censure, integral to the May Fourth culture and Confucian morality, misses the bioevolutionary bonds of human sexual life and nature. Shen frequently describes sexual acts between men and women not as individualistic, heterosexual intercourse but as an occurrence propelled by external forces beyond human will, social expectations, and decorum. The story “Fufu” (The Lovers) offers a compelling description of how forces of nature inspire and compel sexual acts, which offend the moral sensibility of a rural community. The two lovers
are caught red-handed while they are having sex in broad daylight and a natural setting. A crowd gathers, and people taunt and humiliate the “criminals.” The peasants project their sexual frustration and fantasy on the lovers with sadistic pleasure. Mr. Huang, an educated gentleman from the city who is visiting the village, intervenes and manages to stop the rush to judgment and punishment by the lynch mob. In his interrogation, the lovers turn out to be newlyweds on their way to the girl’s parents residing in a nearby village. The critical moment of their sexual act is paradigmatic of Shen’s description of sexuality prompted by natural surroundings: “When they arrived here, the fine weather persuaded them to rest on a haystack of freshly mown rice straw, to view the wonderful scenery and all the mountain wildflowers. The sweet fragrances in the breeze, the hypnotic chatter of the birds, reminded them of what young people were here for.” A spur-of-the-moment tryst, “the very fact that they are married and had done their thing in broad daylight without covering themselves” is more a welcome voice from inner and outer nature than an offense. The passage renders the sexual act to be an innocent fulfillment of libidinal drives in rhythm with the primordial call of the wild.

This vignette of “sex in the haystack” in broad daylight recalls the exuberant scene of yehe 性交 (sex in the wild) in Zhang Yimou’s 張藝謀 (1950–) film Honggaoliang 紅高粱 (Red Sorghum). As the only character perceptual enough to share the narrator’s sympathy, Huang discerns the significance of the sex act. He defends the couple and rejects all the suggestions of punishment. More important, he salutes their act and endows it with dignity and sacredness. In parting with the couple, Huang escorts them up the mountain path and asks them if they are hungry. The husband answers that they will soon arrive at the father-in-law’s house for dinner and that they can find their way there by starlight. “At that, all three of them looked up into the heavens. Stars twinkled above the purple mass of mountains in the distance. It was a beautiful night” (64). As Huang sees them off, he catches “the fragrance of wildflowers in the breeze” and feels the urge to ask for a memento of the occasion, which is a wreath of flowers that the young woman still holds. The story ends with a poetic elevation that turns libidinal and natural vitality onto a sacred plane. Seeing them disappear into a thicket of bamboo, Huang sits down by the bridge, admiring the handful of half-withered flowers whose name he does not even know. “As he smells these blossoms that have been through such a strange experience in the woman’s hair, vague pangs of desire unaccountable stirred in his heart” (65). He realizes how narrow his world is and how narrow-minded the country people are, unaware and unworthy of the beautiful landscape in which a beautiful love event has just happened.

The story “Sange nanren he yige nüren” 三個男人和一個女人 (Three Men and One Woman) also treats sexuality as rooted in humans’ animalistic nature driven by nonhuman and mythical forces of a supernatural sort. Like “Fufu,” the story elevates sexuality to the realm of the mythical and the divine. The plot traces
how, in a village, two soldiers and a tofu seller harbor a secret love for a local girl and pursue their impossible dreams. Beginning with a drawn-out description of the rain, the narrator hints at the ways the persistent rains forge emotional bonds between the soldiers and local women and facilitate camaraderie between the rank and file and the commanders. Staying at a house in a village, the soldiers can joke with a local woman, “laugh a bit, and ask her for a few palm peelings with which we could wrap our feet.” The foot soldiers get a chance to wash their feet “in the same basin as the battalion commander,” a liberty against military discipline (253). The love narrative begins when the two soldiers spot the local girl who is “an angel on earth.” Their animalistic desire associated with her dogs gives rise to love at first sight. The dogs initially “call forth murderous impulses” (253) hard to suppress but lead to the delicate voice of the beautiful girl. Later when the soldiers hang out with the tofu seller and install themselves for months on end across the street from the girl’s house, they set their eyes on those two white dogs and their mistress by following their “instinctive desires” (256).

More rational and level-headed than his buddy, the narrator/soldier realizes that three men’s devotion to the girl is a case of “a toad with scabies wishing to eat the meat of the heavenly goose” (256). Yet even this level-headed soldier, overpowered by desire, finds himself at a loss as to why all three men devote themselves so intensely to impossible love. One barrier is class hierarchy, as the girl’s family is the top ruling house of the village town. But that is not a problem for the tofu seller. Coming from a mountain village, the seller has set up his business right in front of the girl’s house. Mysterious, solid, and smart, he fits into Shen’s archetype of the peasant imbued with honesty, simplicity, and primitive passion—a noble savage. A good man rooted in rural virtues, the seller believes in his masculine qualities as a hardworking and smart breadwinner. When the girl steps out and glances at him, he would start to “lift the millstone to inspect the axle, thus showing his handsome, muscular forearms” (260). Time and again, “this youthful, honest, and simple man inspected his millstone in exactly the same manner” (26). The hidden truth is that the seller, out of nowhere, has set up and runs the tofu store across the street from the girl’s house in order to win her hand. This gambit speaks to the religious intensity of his love-faith.

This love-faith remains hidden from the soldiers until the story’s ending. Toward the end, the girl commits suicide by swallowing a piece of gold, a motif from the classical Dream of the Red Chamber and probably an act of defiance against the arranged marriage. The story leaps from the psychological narrative to rise to a nonhuman, supernatural realm. The tofu seller takes action to realize his dream and, by transcending the boundary between life and death, turns the “obscene to the divine” (265).

Although all three men are traumatized at the news of the girl’s death, the disabled bugler tries to reconnect with the dead girl by acting on a local myth that
the “female victim of suicide by swallowing gold could come back to life if she were hugged and loved by a man within seven days of death” (264). His desire to bring the dead to life is “humanly uncontrollable, but when translated into real action it would still be inadmissible in this world” (264). Well aware of the human norms, the bugler toys with the idea of stealing the corpse but wavers between rational norms and irrational impulses. The second time he goes to the grave, he finds it robbed.

The news of the robbed grave and stolen corpse spreads and strikes fear. However, the supernatural motif intrudes and overturns the human story. “Somebody found the girl’s body in a cave about half a li away from the grave. She lay completely naked on a stone ledge. Wild blue chrysanthemums were scattered all over her body and on the ground” (265). From the human and rational perspective, this seems to be superstitious nonsense and a fantastic piece of gossip that embellishes the horrendous event. But unbelievable as it is, the two soldiers know, deep down in their hearts, “what our other friend had done” (265). Instead of disparaging the tofu seller, the narrator visualizes, in a tone of awe and fascination, the girl’s naked body on the stone, enshrined and surrounded by abundant chrysanthemums, “turning the obscene to the divine.”

Conclusion
With its prescient critique of modern culture, urbanization, and alienation, Shen Congwen’s work takes on new ecological significance. Sensitive to how modern culture severs humans’ ties to nature and premodern lifeworlds, Shen affirms an ecological understanding of life in which the writing self must trace its roots to nature and reconnect with other organisms. His animistic language immerses bodily sensations, pleasure, and feelings in nonhuman environs. Pitting nature against the historical teleology of progress, modernization, and consumerism, he reconnects humans to the millennial entwinement of the archaic ways of living with the soil, landscape, and the earth and targets the modern city’s erosion of the simplicity, multiplicity, and vitality of rural life.

Shen’s ecological insight reveals the deep bonds that unite inner human nature and outer nature. Human labor and behavior are described as deeply embedded in the nonhuman world of climate, clouds, plants, animals, rivers, and mountains. This sheds new light on the sympathetic and nonjudgmental depictions of sensuality and sexuality. Shen’s love scenes affirm the biological and ecological union between inner nature and outer nature and testify to the intimacy and conviviality between humans and nonhumans.

Rather than espousing social norms, artificial conventions, fashions, and mainstream literary language, Shen’s work delves into vibrant nature in its restless potential for regeneration and ceaseless renewal. Nature emerges as the primal source of creativity and imagination. Human sexuality, vitality, and sensuality

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resonate and interact organically with the pulsating life of external environments. In turning the human into the divine, his work does not elevate the human but gestures toward a religious realm of meaning beyond the pale of anthropocentrism.

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Notes
1 Anderson, Limits of Realism, 11.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Clark, Literature and the Environment, 65.
5 Anderson, Limits of Realism, 11.
6 See Berman, “Chinese Ecocriticism,” 396–403; and Lu and Mi, Chinese Ecocinema.
7 Karen Thornber writes that May Fourth writers like Lu Xun and Shen Congwen address “environments that are not grievously harmed by human behaviors.” Thornber, Ecoambiguity, 49. The ecocritical study of Shen is gaining momentum in China. By my limited estimate, a dozen or so students have written MA theses on Shen since 2005. She Aichun’s “Study of Shen Congwen from the Eco-critical Perspective” is probably the first ecocritical study on Shen. My essay examines the overlooked issues of Shen’s animistic language, the long duration of time versus modern history, and ecological and amoral treatments of sexuality.
8 Wang, Fictional Realism, 242.
9 Ibid.
10 Eagleton, Ideology of the Aesthetic, 13.
11 Thornber, Ecoambiguity, 32.
12 Clark, Literature and the Environment, 23.
13 Wang, Fictional Realism, 253.
14 Clark, Literature and the Environment, 39.
15 Kinkley, Odyssey, 113.
16 Shen, Border Town, 11.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 5.
19 Quoted in Campbell, “From ‘Unity of Life’ to the Critique of Domination,” 144.
20 Shen, Piping wen jì, 277.
21 Ibid., 284.
22 Cai, Meixue wenlun, 86.
23 Zhu, Meixue wenji, 132.
24 Ibid., 133.
25 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 62.
26 Ibid., 63.
27 Shen, Piping wenji, 280, 282.
28 Kinkley, Odyssey, 139.
30 Ibid., 89.
31 Ibid., 40.
32 Ibid., 52–53.
33 Kinkley, Odyssey, 180.
34 Shen, Shen Congwen wenji, 2:93.
36 Shen, Shen Congwen quanji, 7:362.
37 Ibid., 7:363.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 7:365.
40 Ibid.
41 Lau, Hsia, and Lee, Modern Chinese Stories, 239.
42 Ibid., 240.
43 Ibid.
44 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, 62.
45 Shen, Piping wen ji, 283.
46 Ibid., 283.
47 Ibid., 290.
49 Shen, Piping wen ji, 300–301.
50 Wang, Fictional Realism, 239.
51 Shen, Shen Congwen quanji, 10:12.
52 Quoted in Wang, Fictional Realism, 226.
53 Shen, Shen Congwen quanji, 12:42–43.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., 12:23.
56 Kinkley, Odyssey, 139.
57 Wang, Fictional Realism, 243.
58 Lau, Hsia, and Lee, Modern Chinese Stories, 228. Further references to “Xiaoxiao” and other stories taken from this volume are given in parentheses in the text.
59 Kinkley, translator’s introduction in Shen, Imperfect Paradise, 29. Further references to this work are given in parentheses in the text.
60 This view is most remarkable in Shen’s nostalgic description of communal and military life. Shunshun, the community leader in Border Town, an “elder of tested virtue” (20), is a case in point. In “Sange nanren he yige nüren” 穀纜 men he 一答 women (Three Men and a Women) the military commander is the superior but is level with the foot soldiers.
61 Shen, Border Town, 17. Further references to this text are given in parentheses in the text.
62 I distinguish between moral and moralistic. Ecological relations are moral in that humans could be sympathetic with and obliged to nonhumans, whereas the moralistic entails the absolutism and rigidity of a specific code of conduct detrimental to humans as well as nonhumans. In “Xiaoxiao,” for instance, the girl’s sexual vitality and her reunion with the little husband could be read as moral, whereas the Confucian penalty is moralistic and inhuman.
63 Shen, Imperfect Paradise, 62. Further references to this text are given in parentheses in the text.
64 Lau, Hsia, and Lee, Modern Chinese Stories, 253. Further references to the text are given in parentheses in the text.
References


