Of Lice and Men
A Parasitic Reading of Jia Pingwa’s *The Lantern Bearer*

**ABSTRACT** Taking Jia Pingwa’s 2013 novel *Daideng* (The Lantern Bearer) as its focal point, this article considers a series of allusions to insects in this and other works. The article takes these references to insects in Jia’s literary publications as a starting point for reflecting on a set of parasitic or supplementary relationships as they relate to an interrelated set of sociopolitical, ecological, and literary concerns. Through this attention to parasitic relationships, the article uses Jia Pingwa’s works to pursue a critical reassessment of the relationship between individual entities and the sociopolitical, ecological, and literary collectives they inhabit.

**KEYWORDS** Jia Pingwa, parasitism, petitioning, insects, Jacques Derrida

The bottom line of my scenario is this: be careful with pesticides. Do not give thought to diminishing the insect world. It would be a serious mistake to let even one species out of the millions on Earth go extinct. That is, let me add quickly, with an extremely few exceptions. I’d vote for the eradication of the aforementioned lice (the gravamen against them: limited to humans, serious skin pests, threats to quality of life, carriers of disease).

—E. O. Wilson, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*

Insects are the most diverse group of organisms on Earth, with the total number of species potentially exceeding ten million (by comparison, the total number of vertebrate species is less than 70,000), and collectively insects have the greatest biomass of all terrestrial animals. Although some species of insects, such as butterflies, are treasured, the vast majority tend to be regarded as pests or else are virtually ignored—to the point that only a fraction of the world’s insect species have even been identified. Despite their relative invisibility, however, insects nevertheless occupy a critical position within the global ecosystem, offering nourishment for other organisms, facilitating pollination, and contributing to the decomposition of organic matter. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that life as we know it is predicated on the existence of these myriad insects.
The famed etymologist and ecologist E. O. Wilson opens his book *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* by noting that, although humans devote considerable energy to attempting to control insect populations (to promote agriculture, public hygiene, etc.), we must nevertheless recognize that “people need insects to survive, but insects do not need us.” Indeed, Wilson points out that if all insects were suddenly to be erased from the face of the earth, this would unleash a cataclysmic chain of events that would threaten the very survival of humanity; conversely, however, if all humans were to disappear, virtually no species of insects would be threatened with extinction—with the exception of three species of head and body lice that have adapted to live only on human hosts. Wilson proceeds to underscore the importance of preserving the world's biodiversity, and particularly with respect to insect populations, though he notes that he would make an exception for the three species of human lice mentioned above (as well as seven closely interrelated species of mosquito that help spread malaria).

Lice, meanwhile, occupy a prominent and similarly paradoxical position in Jia Pingwa’s 賈平凹 (1952–) 2013 novel, *The Lantern Bearer 帶燈 (Daideng).* Although the novel, which is set in the remote township of Cherry Town, in southern Shaanxi Province, nominally focuses on the protagonist Daideng’s work as director of Cherry Town’s newly established Office of Comprehensive Social Management, a recurrent concern in the narrative involves the lice that plague the townspeople. Although a persistent object of annoyance for the locals, these lice consistently resist efforts to eradicate them and instead become a constant part of townspeople’s daily existence, ever present, though often positioned just below the level of the townspeople’s conscious awareness. Similarly, although readers are periodically reminded of the presence of these lice, for long stretches of the narrative the insects fade into the background of the narrative proper.

In this article, I use the novel’s treatment of lice as my entry point into a broader engagement with the work itself and its underlying logics. In particular, taking inspiration from the parasitic relationship that lice enjoy with the town’s residents, I consider three types of parasitic relationships relating to sociopolitical, ecological, and literary concerns, respectively; and although each of these three sets of parasitic relationships involve distinct sets of issues, I nevertheless suggest that they are all predicated on a deconstructive logic wherein nominally marginal elements are revealed to play a crucial role in the constitution of their corresponding structures.

In his wide-ranging oeuvre, Jacques Derrida uses a variety of metaphors to articulate this sort of deconstructive logic, but one of the most prominent is that of the parasite, and particularly the virus. As Derrida summarizes his approach in an interview, “All I have done . . . is dominated by the thought of a virus, what could be called a parasitology, a virology, the virus being many things.” This metaphor of the virus is particularly apt given that, in biological terms, viruses are
paradigmatic parasites that rely on their hosts for survival and lack many of the basic biological capabilities that are often identified as essential conditions for life, though at the same time viruses, consisting of little more than a strand of DNA or RNA encased in a proteinaceous shell, constitute a virtually pure distillation of the genetic substratum on which life as we know it is grounded. In fact, it turns out that a significant portion of the noncoding DNA (so-called junk DNA) of other organisms is viral in origin, leading some microbiologists to speculate that many of the critical evolutionary advances that have generated the current diversity of the world’s organisms are the result of a steady accretion of viral infections that, over time, leave their mark on the host organism’s genome. The implication, in other words, is that even as viruses are positioned on the “edge of life” as we know it, they may very well have helped provide the foundation on which life itself is grounded. The result is a suggestive illustration, at the biological realm, of the same deconstructive logic that Derrida repeatedly identifies within cultural and intellectual phenomena, wherein it is precisely marginal, unstable elements like viruses that come to play a crucial role in constituting the systems at the margins of which they appear to be positioned.

In considering the broader implications of the various parasitic relationships in Jia Pingwa’s The Lantern Bearer, I myself deploy what I would call a parasitic mode of analysis. That is to say, whereas many discussions of Jia’s novels tend to focus either on the works’ characters, plotlines, and social tableaux or on the underlying issues with which the novels themselves engage, my primary interest here lies not with the work’s surface content or with the issues with which it engages directly but, rather, with a set of constitutive logics on which the narrative and its attendant concerns are implicitly grounded. In other words, I am interested not in issues that are the explicit concern of the novel itself but, rather, in a set of constitutive logics on which the work’s narrative is itself predicated.

**Infest and Protest**

The Lantern Bearer is framed by descriptions of two massive waves of lice that descend on Cherry Town roughly twenty years apart. First, the novel opens with a description of how, around 1990, the mayor of Cherry Town organizes a mass protest to block the construction of a mountain tunnel for a new highway that would run right through the town, and as the protest is under way a cloud of lice suddenly blankets the town’s streets. The tunnel construction is subsequently called off, the protests conclude, and the mayor is imprisoned and then dies shortly after being released from prison about six months later—but the lice nevertheless become a permanent part of the town’s ecosystem. The main body of the work, meanwhile, is set approximately two decades later and focuses on Daideng’s activities as director of Cherry Town’s newly established Office of Comprehensive Social Management, but after she is dismissed from her position several months...
later, a second cloud of lice descends on the town, even as Daideng herself comes to be infected by the same lice.

Although these two waves of lice are regarded by the townspeople as major events in their own right, the narrative nevertheless makes clear that the parasites were actually a continual presence in the town before and after each of these mass infestations. For instance, before the first wave of black lice arrived the town was already plagued by a population of white lice, and the new black ones simply interbred with the white ones to yield a new hybrid population of gray lice. Similarly, the narrative notes that one of Daideng's first activities upon arriving in Cherry Town two decades later is to initiate a campaign to distribute lice-fighting agents such as soap and sulfur water to the town's residents while also promoting more hygienic practices, and although the campaign is ultimately unsuccessful it nevertheless helps strengthen Daideng's ties to these rural communities and their impoverished residents. The fact that she herself finally becomes infested by lice shortly after being dismissed from office aptly symbolizes her reintegration into the same community over which she had previously had administrative oversight.

Apart from their impact on the townspeople's daily lives, the lice also offer a compelling counterpoint to the local practices of protesting and petitioning for redress with which they are juxtaposed. To begin with, the 1990s wave of lice coincides with the town's protests of the highway tunnel construction, and just as the lice function as a relatively innocuous irritant for the townspeople, the corresponding tunnel protests similarly pose but a temporary inconvenience to the state's construction plans—ultimately having minimal impact on underlying developmental forces that drive the construction in the first place (i.e., although the town successfully blocks the construction of this particular tunnel, the state responds by simply building the tunnel elsewhere and rerouting the proposed highway). Similarly, just as Daideng's tenure as director of the town's Office of Comprehensive Social Management is framed by two engagements with lice (from her initial attempt to eradicate the lice shortly after taking up her position, to the new wave of lice that descends on the town shortly after she is dismissed from office), her primary responsibility while in office involves dealing with the locals who come to the town government to petition for redress—a practice that is presented as being an annoyance for the local government, even if the petitions ultimately have little hope of succeeding. Like Cherry Town's lice, in other words, protests and petitions for redress are a nearly ubiquitous phenomenon in contemporary China, even if their ability to catalyze genuine change is far from assured.

Building on a long tradition in imperial China of commoners submitting memorials to the emperor, in this modern petition system private citizens use a semiofficial appeal process to lodge complaints about the police, the courts, the government, and even their fellow citizens. There are specially designated

Downloaded from https://read.dukeupress.edu/prism/article-pdf/16/1/19/686519/19rojas.pdf
bureaus of letters and petitions at every level of government, from the local village all the way up to the national government, set up to address these petitions, and petitioners who fail to obtain redress at one administrative level may appeal again at a higher administrative level, sometimes working their way up the political chain of command until they reach Zhongnanhai, the Beijing compound where the nation’s highest leaders are based. The scale of this phenomenon in contemporary China is vast; for instance, in 2004 alone, approximately 10 million separate petitions were filed. The number of petitions has continued to surge since it represents one of the few avenues whereby ordinary citizens can legally challenge perceived injustices, even though as few as 1 percent of petitions ever result in a successful resolution for the petitioner.7

Many of the complaints that Daideng addresses in the novel appear comparatively mundane, such as a long-running dispute between two neighbors over the ownership of a path that runs between their respective properties and an argument between two families fighting over the rights to the walnuts from a tree that straddles their respective properties. Others, however, are more consequential, such as the efforts by a group of seventeen women to secure compensation and support for their husbands, each of whom contracted silicosis while working in the mines outside Cherry Town. The women, who live in one of the township’s poorest villages, discover that they need formal documentation confirming both their husbands’ illness and the fact that the men were originally in good health before working in the mines. Daideng helps the women negotiate these bureaucratic challenges and even assists them in finding work, since many of them have struggled financially following their husband’s illness. The status of this newly constituted Office of Comprehensive Social Management, accordingly, is rather curious: it simultaneously is an arm of the local government and often functions as an advocate for the petitioners themselves. Moreover, unlike the corresponding county- and provincial-level bureaus of letters and petitions, which are responsible for responding to petitions after they have been submitted, Cherry Town’s Office of Comprehensive Social Management frequently intervenes with potential petitioners before the petitions have even been filed.

Contemporary China’s petition system overlaps with a variety of practices by which citizens may attempt to pursue justice, including filing formal lawsuits, engaging in public demonstrations, organizing strikes and other forms of collective action, and the use of social media to organize grassroots protests. Each of these practices carries different connotations, positioning the individuals in a somewhat different relationship with the sociopolitical system that they are challenging. Through its own focus on this practice of petitioning for redress, The Lantern Bearer underscores one specific facet of this dynamic, wherein protesters strategically ally themselves with the central authority even as they challenge specific actions carried out in the name of that same authority.8 The result is that,
like the lice that infest the townspeople's bodies and homes, the petition system appears to be located at the outer margins of existing social order (offering citizens a last opportunity to pursue justice when they lack other formal options), though in fact the practice is an actually an integral component of that same social order (in that it channels discontent into a semiformalized arena and encourages petitioners to rhetorically affirm that state's authority even as they are expressing their grievances). By illustrating the parasitic status of this petition system, moreover, the novel reflects not only on the structural significance of the petitioners themselves but also on their relationship to their "host" community. In other words, the work invites readers to view the petition system both from the institutionalized point of view of the town's Office of Comprehensive Social Management and from the more localized perspective of the petitioners themselves, illustrating how the petition system marks the inevitable limits of the contemporary sociojuridical order while simultaneously underscoring the ability of that same order to reassimilate sites of potential disruption.

Development and Degradation

A considerable portion of Daideng's work as director of the Office of Comprehensive Social Management involves negotiating issues relating to a new factory being constructed on the outskirts of town. The town government hopes that the factory will bring the sort of economic stimulus that the highway would have brought had it not been blocked two decades earlier, and two of the town's rival clans—including five brothers who are all nephews of the former mayor responsible for blocking the highway project, and another two brothers and a brother-in-law from a different family—actively compete to capitalize on the economic opportunities they hope the factory will bring. For instance, both clans open rival sand-dredging plants along the river that runs through the town, while also attempting to buy up residences along the town's main street, so as to later resell them after the street is converted into a business center. Daideng attempts to mediate this increasingly vicious rivalry while simultaneously affirming the town government's right to lay claim to the developmental initiatives created by the factory's anticipated completion.

At one point, a local by the name of Wang Housheng (who has long been a thorn in the town government's side, repeatedly petitioning over a wide range of issues) reports rumors that the reason that Cherry Town was able to secure the rights to build the factory in the first place is actually because other nearby communities that had been offered the opportunity had all declined due to concerns with the factory's potential environmental impact. In particular, Wang explains that the factory will produce batteries that rely on a highly pollutive production process. When the town's party secretary hears these charges, he retorts that actually the factory will use environmentally sound recycling technology and therefore
does not pose a threat to the local ecosystem. The party secretary then accuses Wang of spreading false rumors and insists that Wang post flyers throughout the village retracting the allegations. Wang Housheng, therefore, has no choice but to comply, but despite his nominal retraction of the charges, a broader set of environmental concerns nevertheless continues to circulate through the novel—including concerns with the impact of the new sand-dredging plants on the local river, the health consequences of the nearby mining district, and so forth. Fears about how the factory will transform the town’s delicate sociopolitical ecology thus directly parallel concerns with how it will impact the natural ecosystem within which the remote township is positioned, and attempts to address one set of concerns run the risk of exacerbating the other.

Just as the town’s petitioners are nominally positioned at the margins of the existing sociopolitical order while playing a crucial role in helping maintain that same order, the environmental concerns represented by the perennial petitioner Wang Housheng occupy a similarly parasitic position within the town’s dominant discourse while simultaneously illustrating a structural logic that underpins that dominant discourse itself. In particular, regardless of how strongly environmental considerations are affirmed and validated (either at the national, local, or grassroots level), the emphasis is almost invariably not on ecological integrity on its own terms (in other words, promoting an ecological balance as it would exist in the complete absence of human influence) but, rather, on ecological stability combined with an attention to society’s current developmental imperatives. That is, environmental activism almost by necessity takes the form of trying to promote a healthy ecological balance that will facilitate the possibility of future growth, and conversely, developmental discourses almost invariably include an interest in maintaining the conditions for continued future progress. In this respect, the environmental concerns articulated by Wang Housheng are in fact not strictly opposed to—or even positioned at the margins of—the developmental objectives emblematized by Cherry Town’s new battery factory; rather, they illustrate the underlying logic of those same developmental objectives themselves. Just as environmental discourses are almost invariably grounded on a need to promote sustainable development, developmental discourses (such as the ones surrounding the drive to construct the town’s battery factory itself) are almost invariably grounded on a set of “environmental” considerations with how best to promote a sociocultural and sociopolitical environment conducive to future development.

A broader implication of these intertwined logics of environmentalism and economic development is that humanity’s relationship with the environment is itself fundamentally parasitic. Just as parasites have evolved to pursue a delicate balance between exploiting their host’s resources while at the same time encouraging the host’s own survival (since the death or extinction of the host species can threaten the survival of the parasite), contemporary discourses of sustainable
development articulate a similarly parasitic logic wherein humanity attempts to maximize its ability to use the earth’s resources in order to facilitate its (humanity’s) pursuit of economic progress while at the same time promoting the survival of the environment as an exploitable resource.

**Genre and Language**

Anxieties about how Cherry Town’s new battery factory will affect the town’s delicate ecological and economic balance come to a head when the rivalry between the two clans—who up to this point have been jockeying with each other in an attempt to capitalize on the economic opportunities they hope the new factory will bring—devolves into an almost comically violent free-for-all in which they attack one another with knives, cleavers, and steel pipes. As summarized in the official report subsequently written up on the incident, “In the riot that occurred in Cherry Town, one person was killed, five were disabled, and three more were injured. For this act of horrific violence, the key representatives from the town party committee and the town government must reflect carefully.”

After Daideng is dismissed from office, she begins sleepwalking. This, combined with a series of increasingly odd remarks that she begins making to her assistant, Zhuzi, leads Zhuzi to suspect that Daideng may be suffering from some sort of mental illness or brain injury. Although the precise details of Daideng’s condition are never confirmed, the narrative nevertheless points to several different sets of factors that may have contributed to her symptoms. First, the narrative suggests that Daideng may be suffering from either a psychotic episode as a result of having been dismissed from her job (Zhuzi notes that Daideng’s somnambulism did not begin until she was dismissed from her position) or from neurological trauma resulting from a blow to the head that she received while trying to stop the brawl that led to her dismissal from office. On the other hand, Zhuzi’s suspicions about Daideng’s state of mind appear to be directly triggered by a set of remarks that Daideng suddenly makes about an illustrious Cherry Town resident named Yuan Tianliang. The nephew of the former mayor of Cherry Town who organized the protest against the proposed highway development twenty years earlier, Yuan is the town’s first college graduate and is also an accomplished author. He is appointed to serve as the deputy secretary general of the provincial government, and it is in that capacity that he arranges for the new factory to be
constructed in Cherry Town. Zhuzi informs the town's deputy mayor of her concerns about Daideng's state of mind immediately after Daideng tells Zhuzi that Yuan appeared before her in a dream. In the dream, Daideng recalls, she used an elaborate literary metaphor to tell Yuan her feelings for him:

I have a general sense of the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, but I haven't really read it—it's as though I've walked past an orchard and caught a glimpse of the trees and a few sniffs of their fragrance, but haven't been assailed by the flowers' aroma or pierced by their thorns. However, I remember a saying, that if I had not had this extraordinary fate, how could I have met you; and conversely, if there was this extraordinary destiny, why is it that it has all come to nothing? Previously I was sorrowful, but this morning I once again have come to realize that emptiness is best—empty clouds, empty petal, and empty tears are all rainy skies, rainy blossoms, and rainy tears. I hope that my tear drops may become my life spring and that they won't refuse outside influence. I always hoped you would block my mountain pass like a boulder, thereby allowing me to form a lake for you—and perhaps if you drink from my waters, a lotus blossom might sprout from your heart and emerge through your lips and brow. You are a patient fisherman, even though the rapid currents of my shallow mountain stream cannot breed fish that could take your bait... I am mountaintop vegetation, and it is as though I had the moonlight imprinted on heart and hugged tight to my chest, while at the same time raising the moon above the mountain top and shaking out countless smiling stars.

The novel's account of Daideng's dream encounter with Yuan (as recounted to Zhuzi) continues for several more paragraphs, with the language and tone of the account remaining similarly romantic and florid. The irony, however, is that although Daideng's job loss and the blow to her head are both very recent occurrences, her (fantasized?) relationship with Yuan has actually been developing for quite some time, albeit without Zhuzi's knowledge.

In particular, not long after assuming her post as director of the Office of Comprehensive Social Management, Daideng decides to send a text message to...
Yuan Tianliang, whom at that point she has never met but has admired from a distance. To Daideng’s surprise, he promptly replies, and they proceed to enter into a long-running correspondence conducted entirely via text messages, though we see only Daideng’s side of the exchange, the language of which becomes increasingly florid. Full of elaborate anthropomorphisms, Buddhist imagery, and heartfelt expressions of respect and adoration, these messages stand in stark contrast to the more straightforward language used in the novel’s primary narrative plane. The result is that the novel comes to acquire a distinctly schizophrenic quality as it alternates between two thematically and linguistically disparate narrative frames, consisting of the primary narrative, on one hand, and Daideng’s epistolary exchange with Yuan, on the other.

In Daideng’s first message to Yuan, she describes how she idolizes him: “You are a successful and spiritual man—a man whom I love and respect, and even dream about” 你是有出息的男人，有靈性的人，是我的愛我夢的夢想; but at the same time she notes that she is frustrated by the fact that someone like her is never mentioned in his writings: “I should also resent the fact that you have spilled so much ink writing about your hometown but never mentioned a woman like myself, who is infatuated with you. To vent my anger, I took this affection, which had persisted for many years, and wrapped it in a stone, which I then hurled at you” 我也得怨你如何的墨水把家鄉連底漂進你心裏怎麼就沒有一投瞥愛你如我的女人.¹¹ She concludes by referring back to her original text message to him (which is not reproduced in the novel directly but is only alluded to):

> You complimented the text I sent you, and said it had given you a lot of inspiration. This pleased me, but it also made me feel that there wasn’t anything else I could say—the same way that, after you eat an apple, your face appears square and you can no longer say that it resembles an apple. It is ideal when an apple is eaten by someone with a radiant face, but when it is eaten by a pig, can you still describe the face as radiant?

You讚譽我的短信，並說給你了許多啟發和想象，這讓我高興，可也覺得不能再說了，好比吃蘋果後臉光了是方方面面的因素，不能給臉叫蘋果。蘋果被能光臉的人吃是圓滿，蘋果不幸被豬吃了叫它光去？！¹²

The resulting correspondence is maintained in private throughout much of the novel, until at one point near the end of the work Daideng accidentally sends one of these messages, originally intended for Yuan Tianliang, to Zhuzi’s cell phone. Realizing that the message in question must have been intended for someone else, Zhuzi concludes that Daideng must be carrying on an affair. She eagerly waits for Daideng to share the details with her but is surprised when Daideng instead surreptitiously erases the message from Zhuzi’s phone and never mentions the
matter to Zhuzi. It is not long after this that Daideng is dismissed from office and subsequently tells Zhuzi her dream about Yuan, thereby triggering Zhuzi’s concerns about Daideng’s mental health.

Daideng’s messages to Yuan Tianliang, by whom she is enthralled as a result of his social status and his position as a prominent author, closely mirrors a similar series of letters and stories that the fictional Li Yidou, a PhD candidate in liquor studies at the Brewer’s College in Liquorland in Mo Yan’s 莫言 (1955–) 1992 novel The Republic of Wine 酒國 (Jiuguo), writes to the fictionalized character named Mo Yan, a protagonist of that same work. Li Yidou aspires to be an author and hopes that the fictional Mo Yan can help him get his work published, but the stories that Li Yidou sends to Mo Yan are so inchoate that the latter finds himself at a loss as to how to respond. In Jia Pingwa’s Daideng, although it is true that Daideng is not explicitly hoping that Yuan Tianliang will help her get published, her texts to Yuan resemble the letters Li Yidou sends the fictional Mo Yan: they similarly feature an almost unbounded respect for the recipient’s literary stature combined with an almost exaggeratedly florid language. In strictly literary terms, the language in Daideng’s text messages offers a sharp counterpoint to that of the novel’s primary narrative plane, and just as Li Yidou takes Lu Xun and the fictional Mo Yan as his model, Daideng’s final message makes clear she is taking Dream of the Red Chamber and Yuan Tianliang’s own writings as her sources of literary inspiration.

Like Mo Yan’s 1992 novel, accordingly, Jia Pingwa’s The Lantern Bearer contains an implicit commentary on the same sorts of literary canon formation with which the authors themselves are engaged. By foregrounding a set of respected literary figures (both real, like Cao Xueqin and Lu Xun, and fictional, like Yuan Tianliang and the fictional Mo Yan) and incorporating a series of embedded texts (letters and text messages) that attempt to mimic the literary style of those same respected literary figures, both novels reflect on the social and institutional processes by which literary canons are established in the first place. In particular, the novels illustrate how texts positioned at the margins of the literary establishment enjoy a parasitic relationship with the canon, insofar as their perceived quality and value are predicated on their proximity to the institutionally validated canonical works. Conversely, however, the literary canon itself is structurally reliant on the existence of these sorts of peripheral or noncanonical texts, given that the very possibility of this sort of aesthetic canon is predicated on an exclusionary process wherein nominally canonical works are viewed in opposition to a larger set of texts that are considered to be noncanonical.

Coda

Shortly after being removed from office, Daideng discovers that she has contracted lice from the rural women with whom she had been working, and although she is initially disgusted by this discovery, she nevertheless quickly becomes inured
to the parasites, just like the townspeople themselves. At around this same time, however, Cherry Town is blanketed by its second massive wave of lice, this one originating from the demolition of a cluster of old houses to make room for the new factory. Shortly afterward, the narrative focus shifts to a mysterious swarm of fireflies that suddenly appear by the river that runs past the town:

Unexpectedly, fireflies appeared in Cherry Town. Of course, one firefly is not unusual, nor is it out of the ordinary to see eight or ten of them flying together. But at the bend in the river below Pine Cloud Temple, there was a shallow lake near to the riverside, and every evening an enormous swarm of fireflies would gather between the reeds and cattails—forming nothing short of a firefly battalion. Yang Ermao and Wang Caicai’s son built several rafts, and visitors who were willing to pay three or four yuan could sit on the rafts and navigate through the reeds and cattails along the riverside, then enter and find a miraculous world inside.

The townspeople are bewildered by the appearance of this vast swarm of fireflies, and they come to view this as an auspicious and almost magical development. In the work’s final line, one character concludes, “If we hadn’t suddenly had this swarm of fireflies, Cherry Town might never have known that there was such a thing. This is an omen and foretells that Cherry Town will enjoy good fortune, and certainly won’t meet its end on account of a single catastrophe!”

To the extent that lice in the novel function as a metaphor for the local petitioners whose concerns Daideng attempts to address in her capacity as director of the Office of Comprehensive Social Management, it is surely no coincidence that it is precisely after Daideng is removed from office that she finally finds herself infested with lice. By a similar logic, Daideng’s personal reversal of fortune, whereby she—the figurative firefly—finally becomes infected with lice, parallels the narrative’s suggestive juxtaposition of the cloud of lice that descends upon the town at the end of the novel, on one hand, and the mysterious swarm of fireflies that appears by the river and from which the villagers derive hope and inspiration, on the other. In juxtaposing these allusions to lice and fireflies, at both an individual and a collective level, Daideng uses these two species of insects
to reflect on the constitution and structural dynamics of the human communities with which they are juxtaposed. In particular, although the novel as a whole underscores the parasitic status of the lice and the valorized, almost fetishized status of the fireflies, these explicit parallels between the two species at the end of the work suggest how the nominally parasitic lice may, in fact, play a structurally constitutive role, just as the idealized figure of the firefly (both real and metaphorical) embodies an elaborate set of parasitic processes in its own right.

CARLOS ROJAS
Duke University

Notes
1 Stork et al., “New Approaches”; Wilson, Creation, 32.
2 Wilson, Creation, 33.
3 Derrida, Positions, 95–96.
5 Rybicki, “Classification of Organisms at the Edge of Life”
6 See Ocko, “I’ll Take It All the Way to Beijing.”
7 Ma, “Petition Reforms a Bid to Ease Social Tensions.” Many petitions are submitted more than once, so the number of actual petitions is greater than the total number of individual cases. On the other hand, given that many petitions are filed on behalf of groups of petitioners, the total number of individuals represented by these petitions is much higher than the number of petitions themselves.
8 For an analysis of this political logic of rhetorically using the authority of the state to critique the actions of a lower-level government organ, see Xiang, “‘You’ve Got to Rely on Yourself . . . and the State!’”
13 Jia, Daideng, 482; Jia, Lantern Bearer, 513.
14 Jia, Daideng, 484; Jia, Lantern Bearer, 516.

References


