



Eco-media Events in China

From Yellow Eco-peril to Media Materialism

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Abstract This article brings together recent writing on eco-media, media materialism, and racialized Otherness to rethink the place of China and Asia in debates about the Anthropocene. We begin by examining the nonwhite postapocalyptic futures imagined in Bong Joon-ho's sci-fi film *Snowpiercer* and argue that the film problematizes a persistent Western-centric bias in both the environmental humanities and the literature on media materialism. Inspired by the metaphoric power of Kronon, the industrial-waste-turned-explosive in *Snowpiercer*, we theorize the instantaneously mediated and circulated chemical dust explosions in Kunshan and Tianjin in 2014–15 as *eco-media events*—that is, spectacular and ephemeral moments in which the material processes of digital production link the old forms of resource extraction with our new lives of electronic gadgetry and media tool dependency. Writing against the discourse of Yellow Eco-peril, which depicts such events (in both academic and journalistic writings) through a racialized Eco-Otherness, we offer a counter-politics to reconnect mainland China to the very systems of globalized production and consumption—the deep earth mining, the slow violence of black lung disease, the factory work, the digital consumption practices—that have propelled and intensified the country's stupendous development as well as its ecological challenges. We find new work on eco-media and media materialism most productive, as it sheds light on three closely intertwined dimensions of eco-media events: time, body, and matter. Probing the deep entanglements between the human and the nonhuman, a critical engagement with these events presents new possibilities to think anew environmental humanities in China, across Asia, and globally.

Keywords Yellow Eco-peril, eco-media, digital capitalism, media materialism, global capitalism, China

Introduction

In the opening of Bong Joon-ho's 2013 sci-fi film *Snowpiercer* we are told that technological capitalism destroyed the planet twice. It first destabilized the earth's climate by making it dangerously warm. Then, a corporation in the global north, against the

objections of environmentalists in the global south, decided to release the chemical CW-7 to cool down the planet. Instead, it freezes. The earth becomes uninhabitable. However, we soon discover that a small fragment of human life persists on a single long train. The train is divided into closed compartments, each guarded by heavily armed security forces. As the train encircles the frozen orb of the Earth, the last remnants of humanity are divided into the wealthy and the poor, unmistakably mirroring the gross inequalities and ravages of global capitalism today.

The drama quickly heightens. A man named Curtis organizes a rebellion, only to learn in the end that the entire uprising has been masterminded to get rid of excess adult bodies that are disrupting the closed and fragile ecosystem on board. However, Namgoong, a Korean engineer who once designed the train's security gates, uses an industrial waste by-product called Kronon that he has been collecting to blow through a door to the outside. The explosion triggers a massive avalanche, which, in turn, destroys the train and almost everyone in it. At the end of the film, the only two survivors, Namgoong's daughter Yoni and a mixed-race boy named Timmy, walk away from the wreckage into a world of snow and ice, watched over by a lone polar bear moving cautiously along a mountain ridge.

Adapted from a best-selling graphic novel in France (*Le Transperceneige*, written by Jean-Marc Rochette) *Snowpiercer* easily lends itself to a reading through the lens of commodity fetishism, particularly in a perpetually accelerating digital age. Only by demystifying the commodity represented by the train—an epistemological “blowing up,” as it were—can one begin to engage the object's deep history and ultimately destroy the system of exploitation that produces it.¹ Yet the ending of *Snowpiercer* is instructive in other ways as well. The spectacle of explosion it stages to dismantle the violent and dehumanizing remnants of the industrial, fossil-fuel and chemical dependent capitalist system is strikingly a story about climate-based racial injustice and nonwhite multispecies postapocalyptic futures. For the destruction of the train leaves behind two people of color, the sole survivors set against the backdrop of an almost blinding nonhuman whiteness, in the form of ice, snow, and a lone polar bear. We are invited to ponder a cautionary tale about the entanglements between the human and the nonhuman, and, at the same time, to bear witness to a vision of a possible multispecies future in which white people cease to exist.

We open this essay with these ruminations on *Snowpiercer* to advance a wider discussion about the relationship between China, seen by many as both a threat to the ecological health of the planet, and eco-media and digital capitalism research in the environmental humanities. In particular we draw on new work in the emerging field of media materialism studies. Although *Snowpiercer* is not about China specifically, we

1. Commodity fetishism and the possibilities and limits of revolutionary resistance have indeed been the two dominant tropes in leftist readings of the film. See, for example, Bady, “Snowpiercer Thinkpiece”; Canavan, “If the Engine Ever Stops.”

argue that it problematizes a persistent Western-centric bias in both the environmental humanities and the literature on media materialism. As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, perhaps more so than any Western nations, China has generated a growing visual archive of industrially produced catastrophes, caused by dramatic chemical and industrial explosions. These are not cinematic fantasies, though they are densely mediated, most often by digital technologies and social media sharing platforms. While they do not directly address the ambiguous possibilities of multispecies nonwhite futures we see in the end of *Snowpiercer* they have been just as violent and deadly, and are often deeply racialized. This visual archive of images has opened up spaces for debate among scholars, journalists, and bloggers about China's often ecologically deleterious role in global economies of production, consumption, and resource extraction, in short, its role in the future of the planet itself.

To unpack these issues, we explore two fairly recent chemical explosions, one that took place in Kunshan (2014) outside of Shanghai, the other in a newly developed residential area in the city of Tianjin (2015). These explosions flooded the Chinese and global news media with gruesome images of humans and nonhuman debris, scattered across a haunting landscape of dust, death, and destruction. As we reflected on these explosions and how knowledge of them was enabled by digital platforms and social media disseminations it seemed to us that the catastrophe fantasy of the *Snowpiercer* film, which itself ends on an explosion made possible by our dependency on chemicals to fuel dreams of endless capitalist growth, appears to be all too alive in the People's Republic of China. In Western media reporting, for example, these chemical catastrophes are routinely depicted as somehow solely China's problem.² They point to the failure of nondemocratic government regulation. Or to the corruption that persists between capital and an authoritarian state. We rarely encounter discussions about what these explosions tell us about China's role in the global economy as a key manufacturing and recycling site for global consumer goods, including media gadgets.³

2. A representative example of this view is found in Economy, *The River Runs Black*. See also Counsel on Foreign Relations, "China's Environmental Crisis," which features a lead image, shared widely throughout the journalistic world, of two older men pulling a cart of coal in the dead of winter in Shanxi Province with ominous coal towers spewing pollution into air thick with smog.

3. The "Made in China" development model has been thoroughly documented in policy, scholarly, and journalistic circles. Only in recent years have we seen critical work on global waste imports to China. Since the 1980s, China has been the world's largest importer of waste. In 2012, for example, up to 56 percent of global exported plastic waste ended up in China. Imported plastic waste alone reached a peak of almost 9 million tons in 2012. Proactively seeking to rectify this situation, in July 2017 the Chinese government announced a new policy banning twenty-four types of waste under four categories: certain types of mining slag, household waste plastics, unsorted waste paper, and waste textiles. The policy went into force on January 1, 2018. This has sent shockwaves through the global trade in waste recycling. For an early report, see Greenpeace East Asia, "China's Ban on Imports of Twenty-Four Types of Waste." The best filmic treatment of waste in China is found in Wang Jiuliang's 2016 masterpiece, "Plastic China." See www.plasticchina.org. One of the first studies on recycling and the global circulation of waste in China is found in Minter, *Junkyard Planet*. For an excellent more recent

We call this genre of representation Yellow Eco-peril.⁴ Invariably and perhaps predictably in a geopolitical landscape that will not let the Cold War end, it depicts China as a polluting and polluted Other slowly destroying the planet. The excessive and prolific circulation of images and almost obsessive media coverage in recent years documenting the “airpocalypse” smog of Beijing is another representative example. We argue that these images, like the smog itself, reveal as much as they obscure. Captured, shared on social media, circulated and commented on again and again, they are both ideological distortions and discursive productions of a racialized Eco-Otherness. For us, they problematically disconnect China’s air pollution from the very systems of globalized production and consumption—the deep earth mining, the factory work, the digital consumption practices—that have propelled and intensified both China’s stupendous development and its ecological challenges. We aim in this essay to offer a counter-politics to this discourse of Yellow Eco-peril.

We approach these real-world explosive scenarios as *eco-media events*. This concept, we argue, offers a possible new perspective for thinking about not just the life, death, and destruction in ecological catastrophes, but also issues of environmental justice in China, across Asia, and globally. Spectacular and ephemeral, eco-media events are instantaneously mediated and circulated occurrences that enact the ecological footprints of the Anthropocene. They are moments in which the material processes of digital production link the old forms of resource extraction with our new lives of electronic gadgetry and media tool dependency. For us, China, and the Asia Pacific more broadly, constitutes what Alain Badiou calls an “evental site,” a locality where certain elements previously excluded from dominant representation can be brought into view during specific occurrences.⁵ Eco-media events are precisely these occurrences that defy the dominant representational lens of Yellow Eco-peril with regard to China by “blasting open,” as it were, the unequal and uneven experiences of climate change under the new and changing configurations of digital capitalism.⁶

Eco-media Events

We begin in a world of explosive dust.

At 7:37 a.m. on Saturday, August 2, 2014, a massive aluminum dust explosion occurred at the Zhongrong Metal Products polishing factory in the city of Kunshan, just outside of Shanghai. At least 64 migrant workers, working unmasked and in an

ethnographic discussion on rural pollution, including e-waste in China, see Lora-Wainwright’s groundbreaking, *Resigned Activism*.

4. We see Yellow Eco-peril as part of the long-standing racist narratives regarding China (and Asia more broadly) primarily produced and propagated by the West. More recently, thanks to China’s economic rise, these narratives have proliferated in diverging ways in a global context, leading Franck Billé to pluralize the term as *Yellow Perils*. See Billé, “Introduction,” 5.

5. Badiou, *Being and Event*.

6. Schiller, *Digital Capitalism*.

improperly ventilated room, were polishing the interior wheel and brake frames for GM cars. All were killed. Another 187 people in and around the factory site were hospitalized with serious injuries. The entire building was gone in a moment. All of the destruction, the mangled bodies and body parts, the mourning relatives, those who rushed to the scene to give blood for the few survivors, all of this was caught on mobile phone cameras and shared almost immediately through social media, until the government called for a stop to online image sharing and commentary.

The labor activist community in China went to work almost immediately, but mostly online, publishing reports, distributing and signing petitions, trying to get people to the scene. These early reports, prepared within days, argued that there was a total lack of regard for workers' safety at the Zhongrong workshop.⁷ One enterprising reporter found out that daily aluminum dust concentrations were so high that by noon the day of the explosion work surfaces were covered in a layer of dust "as thick as a coin," and that each worker could sweep up a paint bucket full of dust. These reports were widely circulated on social media sites.⁸ They argued angrily that workers were given useless low-quality masks and gloves once a week, and that long-term exposure to aluminum dust left many workers suffering from black lung disease (尘肺病), or pneumoconiosis. Another report stated how workers exhausted themselves by taking on repeated overtime shifts, greatly exceeding the statutory limit set in the labor law. The explosion occurred during a statutory nonworking time; workers were supposed to be resting, surrounded by families and friends. And yet 261 people signed in to work that day, seemingly attracted by the promise of double-time wages on the weekend. During earlier interviews done at this factory, researchers were alarmed to discover that the Zhongrong migrants worked from 7 a.m. to 10 or 11 p.m. daily, with no weekends off and just one or two days rest each month.

Both of us witnessed the Kunshan explosion on social media. Like many people in China and around the world who followed this deadly dust explosion and its grisly aftermath of death and destruction, neither of us imagined that something even more horrific would occur just a year later. On August 12, 2015, a great fireball shot into the night sky in the large and prosperous port city of Tianjin, in northeastern China. A privately run warehouse complex containing dangerous chemicals, mostly used in the mining and refinement of gold, exploded, claiming over 160 lives and injuring hundreds of others. Most of the residents living in the area had no idea they had bought apartments within kilometers of warehouses that stored some of the most deadly and explosive chemicals in the world. These chemicals are not only used to extract gold and other minerals from deep within the strata of the earth. They are also used to charge and fire

7. See, for example, *China Labour Bulletin*, "Tragedy of the Village that Built Kunshan Zhongrong"; and *China Labour Bulletin*, "Survivors of the Kunshan Disaster Face Grim Future."

8. A plethora of Chinese-language reports appeared on social media platforms in China, but these were quickly removed by the government.

the very media technologies that were used to document, in the very moment of their occurrence, such destructive industrial and chemical explosions.⁹

These tragic industrial explosions are not, of course, accidents. As one labor activist in China put it in a private conversation on WeChat, “To call them ‘accidents’ is an insult to the dead.” Nor can they be written off as aberrations in China’s quest for economic development, as official government statements often claim. There are many scholars and activists who want to see the total dismantling of the capitalist system and an end to the global economy’s continuing modes of deep-earth resource extraction. What we want to highlight, however, is how the material and chemical processes of capitalist production and consumption are linked to older forms of resource extraction (long histories of mining, for example) and to our new digital lives, our fascination with slick polished aluminum surfaces, our willing submission to corporate planned obsolescence of consumer electronics, and our complex form of media saturation. To reiterate our point above, the migrant workers, citizens, journalists, and expats who captured the explosions and their aftermath shared the images almost instantaneously using smartphones, mostly produced in China, that were made possible by the very same processes of mineral extraction that caused these deadly explosions in the first place.

These instantaneously mediated events are intimately connected to the extractive processes and material resource needs of China’s industrialization, and to its rise as a global economic power. They are also about the production and circulation of technologies that have produced new ways of living with and through digital media—the selfie, Instagram, Facebook, Weixin, and Weibo. Not only are they forming an emergent archive of China’s purportedly imminent eco-apocalypse, they also point us to long histories of resource extraction that have brought us to our current moment of climate change crisis. More important in our view, what links these events together is their capacity to provoke an understanding of “our entanglement with media not just on a sociocultural but also on a biological level.”¹⁰ Like Kronon in *Snowpiercer*, the dust and debris from the Kunshan and Tianjin explosions can be mobilized to rethink the relationship between media, event, and the environment. Media, in these instances, are no longer merely tools used by humans to document and visualize ecologically implicated events. Rather, they engage humans in co-constitutive processes of *mediation* that break down distinctions between nature and culture, the human and the nonhuman, the social and the geologic.

Media as Mediation

Our conception of *eco-media events* is indebted to a range of recent scholarship rethinking standard film studies approaches that see media as an inert object for textual

9. Drone footage of the immediate aftermath of the explosion can be found on many YouTube sites. For two examples uploaded by New China TV on August 14, 2015, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=NBjbqnAt1BI and www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5GsQXPOcPA.

10. Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, xviii.

criticism, or which approach eco-critical work in the humanities simply in terms of the ethics of representation. Mediation is a key theme in much of this work. In his book *Eco-Media*, for example, Sean Cubitt has argued for mediation “as a core concept for understanding the ways in which the physical, technological and political worlds evolve inextricably together.”¹¹ Likewise, for Kember and Zylinska, writing in their book, *Life after New Media*, “mediation becomes a key trope for understanding and articulating our being in, and becoming with, the technological world.”¹² It is through the reframing of media as mediation, what Cubitt describes in his more recent book, *Finite Media*, as “the material processes connecting human and nonhuman events,”¹³ that we have in part developed the concept of the eco-media event to make sense of the imbrication of the human and the nonhuman, the physical, the technological, and the political, and to challenge the discourse of Yellow Eco-Peril, which racializes China as a polluting Other.

As visualizations of industrial catastrophes, eco-media events are perhaps best understood as what Andreas Hepp and Nick Couldry call “media events in a global age”—that is, transcultural phenomena that are “produced not only by the mass media (television, radio) but also by the Internet and other digital media,”¹⁴ involving multiple forms of mediated communication that transcend national boundaries. These events also differ from grand-scale disasters that occur in nature. Yet just as the rising frequency of natural catastrophes cannot be dissociated from human actions, the explosiveness of eco-media events is enabled simultaneously by the affective surplus generated by lost human lives and the instantaneous transmission via communication networks. In this sense, eco-media events share with those ceremonial or live media events of ritual order—what Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz refer to as “high holidays of mass communication”¹⁵—a sense of interruptions of everyday routines.¹⁶ Much like Kronon’s stopping of the train in *Snowpiercer*, they provide occasions to contest the representationalism typifying the Yellow Eco-peril discourse.

For our purposes, as we indicated at the outset of this section, we understand representationalism as the reductive understanding and use of media as mere instruments of representation. As Karen Michelle Barad puts it, “representationalism marks a failure to take account of the practices through which representations are produced.”¹⁷ This failure characterizes much of Western journalistic coverage of China’s environmental crisis. An iconic image of these accounts of Yellow Eco-peril, for instance, is Chinese people wearing face masks to survive Beijing’s “airmageddon.”¹⁸ Captured by the

11. Cubitt, *Eco Media*, 5.

12. Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, xv.

13. Cubitt, *Finite Media*, 3.

14. Hepp and Couldry, “Introduction,” 11.

15. Dayan and Katz, *Media Events*, 1.

16. Dayan and Katz, *Media Events*, 5.

17. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 53.

18. See the images included in, for example, Wainwright, “Inside Beijing’s Airpocalypse.”

journalistic lens, images of this kind often visualize China in a manner akin to a post-apocalyptic Hollywood film. Emphasized are the terror (i.e., air quality) and the technicality of solutions (i.e., masks), not unlike the narrative that opens *Snowpiercer* about the release of CM-7 as a geo-engineering intervention to treat global warming. What is left out of these representations of a China slowly devouring itself is any mention of the material production of global capitalism, and China's key role in this process, both as a destination for outsourced manufacturing and a location for waste recycling. A polluted China, in other words, appears as a distant *object* to be represented, rather than as a *subject* shaping the material conditions that make this representation possible.

The problem of representationalism is arguably enacted in *Snowpiercer* by way of the relationship between the passengers in the front and back of the train. The first world in the film, as Aaron Bady argues, seemingly “works less to provide its citizens with pleasure than to shape their desire by constructing others through their pain, lack, and death.”¹⁹ The lack of clean air in China, in this sense, serves to remind journalistic audiences in the developed West of their fortune of inhabiting the part of the earth in which air pollution is not (or no longer) part of everyday reality. As David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu point out, “the rhetoric of ‘pollution’” shared by media representations of major Asian economies, including China, often implies that “even as Asia has finally reached modernity, it does so irresponsibly, without regard for the supposed lessons learned by the West during its periods of rapid industrialization over the course of the twentieth century.”²⁰ Yellow Eco-peril discourses of this kind thus function ideologically, much like the hallucinating drug of Kronon, to assuage the latent anxiety among denizens in the West toward environmental crisis by presenting it as more relevant to their lesser-blessed Asian Others. They also work to perpetuate the long-standing Western view that Asian countries such as China are “behaving like recalcitrant children, refusing to abide by its tutelage, insisting on growing up too quickly, and thus warranting its constant surveillance.”²¹

If *Snowpiercer* presents a poetics and politics devoid of place, of specific global situations and struggles,²² the industrial and chemical explosions at Kunshan and Tianjin are catastrophic occurrences in *real places* and in *real time*. Taking place on Chinese soil, these are events created in part by the migrant workers, citizens, journalists, and expats who captured them, using smartphones assembled in China. As such, they defy the representationalist framing of Western journalism precisely because during these events, *China* and *environment* can no longer be understood as preformed objects that are in turn mediated. Instead, images of China herein emerge as “stabilizations of the media flow,” temporarily fixing the “originary process” of mediation.²³ This is a process

19. Bady, “A Snowpiercer Thinkpiece.”

20. Roh, Huang, and Niu, “Desiring Machines,” 226.

21. Roh, Huang, and Niu, “Desiring Machines,” 226.

22. Wilson, “Snowpiercer as Anthropoetics.”

23. Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 21.

that involves not only the people who produce and use the digital tools, in China and beyond—what Jack Linchuan Qiu calls manufacturing and manufactured “iSlaves”²⁴—but also those participating in the generation of energy that powers these tools in places like China.

To further develop these ideas, we turn in the next section to the emerging literature on media materialism as a critical framework that allows us to better discern how eco-media events disrupt the representationalism of Yellow Eco-peril. What gives shape to eco-media events, we argue, is no longer the various representational apparatuses that sustain them, but rather the materiality of media. To reiterate our point again, this materiality provides a methodological intervention that differs from conventional humanities approaches of close reading and textual analysis, as previously demonstrated in works on eco-media in China, such as Sheldon Lu and Jiayan Mi’s pioneering *Chinese Ecocinema*. In Lu’s introduction to the volume, for instance, he suggests that as “cinema with an ecological consciousness,” Chinese eco-cinema “articulates the relationship of human beings to the physical environment, earth, nature, and animals from a biocentric, non-anthropocentric point of view.”²⁵ While we believe this articulation remains important to unpack, as may be seen in our reading of *Snowpiercer*, we also wish to explore the cultural and political implications of eco-media events not just as preformed media products (like films) that partake in the “re-imagination of locale, place, and space”²⁶ but as explosive moments that bring into visibility the deep entanglements between human bodies and nonhuman matters.

Media Materialism: Time, Body, and Matter

Media materialism is, in our usage, a reorientation in the study of media that attends to the materiality of media technologies. As Jussi Parikka has put it, it “refers to the necessity to analyze media technologies as something that are irreducible to what we think of them or even how we use them.”²⁷ Media materialism draws attention to the dynamic involvement of the human and the nonhuman in the production, consumption, and recycling of media devices. It also encourages a rethinking of humans and media as co-constitutive of one another, as entangled processes of becoming.²⁸

While its roots may be traced to works by German media theorists such as Friedrich Kittler, media materialism can be said to share a set of concerns with the constellation of theoretical interventions now grouped under the name “new materialisms.” As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost state in their introduction to one of the first edited collections on the subject, new materialisms defy binary and oppositional modes of

24. Qiu, *Goodbye iSlave*.

25. Lu, “Introduction,” 2.

26. Lu, “Introduction,” 1.

27. Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, 1.

28. Kember and Zylińska, *Life after New Media*, xvi.

thought, such as the distinctions between the organic and the inorganic, the inanimate and the lively, the human and the nonhuman. Instead, they push us “to recognize that phenomena are caught in a multitude of interlocking systems and forces and to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency.”²⁹

New materialists therefore turn to nascent developments in natural sciences to rethink the vitality of matter while mobilizing breakthroughs in biology to reconsider the conditions of life and death. They also revisit the long-standing tradition of historical materialism to demand a “critical and non-dogmatic reengagement with political economy.”³⁰ In other words, new materialists are concerned as much with embodiment as with decentering the human, at once challenging the nature-culture divide while promoting a more rigorous investigation into the relationships between power, corporeality, and the agentic forces of substantive and nonsubstantive matter. In Jane Bennett’s words, they call for “a willingness to theorize events . . . as encounters between ontologically diverse actants, some human, some not, though all thoroughly material.”³¹

The recent ecological turn in media and communication studies reflects precisely this effort to radically remap the materiality of media. This is exemplified in works such as John Durham Peters’s *Marvelous Clouds*, Jussi Parikka’s *A Geology of Media*, and Sean Cubitt’s *Finite Media*. Peters, for one, reverses the conventional claim that media are environments to argue that environments, be it fire, water, sky, or earth, are also media.³² For Parikka, an emphasis on geology “leads us to track the importance of the nonorganic in constructing media before they become media: the literal deep times and deep places of media in mines and rare earth minerals.”³³ Cubitt likewise links media to energy and matter to argue that “eco-politics must begin in the assertion that our environments are not only capable of communication, but are constantly communicating.”³⁴ All three situate the study of media technologies and digital culture within broader discussions of political economy, proposing a radical reimagination of politics through the materiality of media in light of the risk and reality of ecological crises.

Despite the attention paid to decolonization and indigenous populations in works such as Cubitt’s, media materialism has not resonated with postcolonial studies scholars concerned with the persisting uneven power relations between the West and the rest. Works such as Brian Larkins’s *Signal and Noise*, Ravi Sundaram’s *Pirate Modernity*, and Weihong Bao’s *Firey Cinema*, to be sure, have engaged media materiality in non-Western settings that challenge the Euro-American-centric paradigm of media studies. But media materialism, like new materialism, has tended to disavow the ideological perpetuation of racial and other inequalities in a global context. “Interpreting and

29. Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” 9.

30. Coole and Frost, “Introducing the New Materialisms,” 7.

31. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xiii–xiv.

32. Peters, *Marvelous Clouds*, 3.

33. Parikka, *Geology of Media*, 5.

34. Cubitt, *Finite Media*, 177.

describing our entanglements with non-human, materialist forces,” as Diana Leong argues, “are not enough to account for, much less dislodge attachments to, social categories and representational arrangements.”³⁵ This need to address racial difference when attending to the nonhuman is the lesson we find in the ending of *Snowpiercer*, when two persons of color survive the train crash, only to find themselves at the behest of nonhuman whiteness. The film is seemingly cautioning us not to fetishize materiality as “a transcendental signified that merely replaces language or culture as an organizing principle.”³⁶ Instead, it is necessary to more carefully unpack how nonhuman forces are entangled with racialized discursive or psychic formations³⁷ that undermine the global vision of eco-politics.

To sum up our argument to this point, we have analyzed Yellow Eco-peril as one such discursive formation that positions China as an Other—a major polluter destroying the planet—which effaces the material connections between economic globalization and “Chinese” pollution. We have argued that the eco-media events that take place in China are prime opportunities to establish these otherwise obscured material linkages. It is to this end that we find media materialism a particularly useful analytical framework. We now want to show how it can shed light on three closely intertwined dimensions of eco-media events: time, body, and matter.

First and foremost, media materialism draws attention to the *temporal*—and not just representational—aspect of an eco-media event’s making. To be sure, the instantaneous capturing and sharing of the Kunshan and Tianjin explosions easily invoke the trope of speed often associated with digital media. But what makes these events distinct from other picture-worthy spectacles prone to virality is their ability to bring into view what Parikka terms an “alternative deep-time strata of our media culture.”³⁸ Rather than blindly celebrating the instantaneous transmission capacity of Internet-equipped smartphones that make these events visible, media materialism asks us to consider the geological conditions of possibility for such transmission. After all, both the chemicals that caused the explosions and the metals within the digital gadgets that were used to document them rely on extractions of minerals from deep within the strata of the earth. Moreover, such explosive events often cut into the sped-up cycles of planned obsolescence championed by global tech giants such as Apple, whose iPhone 6 production in China, for example, was halted by governmental investigations into dust control in all factories after the Kunshan incident. Examining these events from this time-based perspective, then, allows us to uncover the shared origins between the objects *and* instruments of representation of eco-media events deep in the geological history of the planet.

35. Leong, “Mattering of Black Lives,” 11.

36. Leong, “Mattering of Black Lives,” 10.

37. Leong, “Mattering of Black Lives,” 11.

38. Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, 42.

Media materialism's attention to geological deep time also opens itself out to a more critical engagement with two other interlinked dimensions of eco-media events: body and matter. The explosions are intense catastrophic events marked by a sense of temporal presence. Yet these moments of quick deaths, once grasped through the time-frame of geology, also evoke what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence."³⁹ Despite their spectacular qualities, these events result from an accumulation process akin to what Nicolas Shapiro describes as the "chemical sublime." Contrasting with Enlightenment ideas of the sublime that celebrate the triumph of human reason over nature, Shapiro's notion of the chemical sublime "elevates minor enfeebling encounters into events that stir ethical consideration and potential intervention."⁴⁰ This is precisely what we observed during the Kunshan explosion, when the same dust that caused the explosion also enters the lungs of miners and causes illnesses such as black lung disease. And yet, stunningly, almost all of the mainstream media coverage, in both China and in the West, seemed to miss the connections between the dust that blows up a factory and the dust that enters the lungs of China's miners, factory workers, and construction workers, the occupations most susceptible to black lung. Both the aluminum dust in an improperly ventilated factory in Kunshan and the dust that enters the lungs of a coal or gold miner, or someone blasting concrete, accumulates into yet another kind of eco-media event, revealing not just the connection between dust in a mine underground and dust floating in the air of a polishing factory, but the deep entanglements between body and matter.⁴¹ It was only when former miners and labor activists in China began to make these connections visible through petitions and online reporting, which was quickly censored, that we began to see the emergence of an eco-media event that, in Shapiro's words again, both connected the Kunshan explosion to black lung and stirred deeper ethical and political considerations about the deadly potentialities of dust.

Though black lung has been known in China since the early 1930s, it was only recognized as an occupational disease among China's mining communities in the post-1949 period, and then noted as a national health emergency beginning in the 1980s. The China Coal Miner Pneumoconiosis Treatment Foundation (中国煤矿肺病防治基金会), a foundation overseen by the State Administration of Work Safety Supervision (国家安全生产监督管理总局), created in the 1980s, reported in June 2015 some 720,000 patients. These figures are contested. According to the studies conducted by social organizations such as Love Save[s] Pneumoconiosis (大爱清尘), which provides care and raises funds for sick miners, there are likely more than six million people in China suffering from the illness and probably even more, given the long gestation period of the disease

39. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.

40. Shapiro, "Attuning to the Chemosphere," 369.

41. This section of the essay draws on a range of work on black lung. In English, see *China Labour Bulletin*, "Deadly Dust," and "Hard Road." On this history of silicosis and pneumoconiosis in Appalachia and the US since the Great Depression, see Rosner and Markowitz, *Deadly Dust*. The best study in the UK context is found in McIvor and Johnston, *Miner's Lung*.

and the fact that there is great stigma attached to a worker marked by black lung. Whatever the numbers, black lung constitutes something like an astonishing 90 percent of the occupational disease population in China.⁴² Worse yet, there is no known cure. Depending on the stage of the disease, a patient's life can be prolonged by anywhere from months to decades with adequate care and medication, though many workers, especially those without labor contracts or working in mines outside of the state enterprise system, never receive the care they need because their former employers simply deny any responsibility. Black lung is so personally and socially debilitating in China because those workers not protected by legal forms of compensation know their bodies as disposable, their labor power no longer needed.

With black lung, we are into the dark world of Rob Nixon's slow violence, as the dust and debris of mining and polishing in factories slowly eats away at the lungs and makes breathing almost unbearable. Despite the prevalence of the disease among miners, many of the treatments and medications for black lung are not covered by public health insurance. For instance, the most effective drugs are inhaled medications and lung washing (洗肺), which are still not covered by public insurance, despite protests and petition efforts on the parts of miners, their families, and social organizations. Without health insurance, it is nearly impossible for patients to gain access to these kinds of treatments, as the cost of one lung washing or lavage treatment averages around 10,000 RMB, about 3–5 months of salary for an average miner. The situation is further exacerbated by the fact that many miners lack an understanding of and confidence in the existing public health insurance systems; but it is also a consequence of the mining boss's often intentional failure to insure, protect against, and compensate for their employees' work hazards.

These linkages between mining, pneumoconiosis, and China's long-standing labor struggles are poignantly illustrated in photographer-turned-filmmaker Zhao Liang's 2015 film *Behemoth* (悲兮魔兽). With a title inspired by the Old Testament and a voice-over narrative drawing on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Zhao's cinematography takes us through a lyrical yet heart-wrenching journey—from the open cast mines on the steppes of Inner Mongolia to the miners' residencies, from the hospital rooms where workers undergo lung washing treatments to the graveyard of those who died from pneumoconiosis, from the factories that turn raw metals into building material, to Ordos, a ghost city filled with empty high-rises. In a brief but perhaps not unimportant scene shot in a miner's dormitory, a young worker is seen carefully plugging his mobile phone into an adapter to charge the battery before retiring in his bunk bed.

Moments like this encapsulate the kinds of contradictions we seek to bring to the forefront in our engagement with media materialism. In *Behemoth*, the electricity that powers the communication technology comes from none other than the coal mine at which the worker labors. As the dust and debris of mining devours the workers' bodies,

42. "Daaqingchen" ("Charity Fund of Love Save[s] Pneumoconiosis").

rendering them the same damaged matter as natural landscapes,⁴³ Zhao's narration, that "this is who we are—we are that monster—the monster's minions" at the end of the film, takes on a new level of meaning. While the critique of China's rampant developmentalism and unfettered urbanization is unmistakable, what becomes salient here is the ways in which new digital lives have come to implicate *all of us* reliant on information communication technology, or ICT, to stay connected.

To be sure, a cinematic text like *Behemoth* is well positioned to represent ecological crises in a manner similar to anthropological inquiries into the social life of things and objects. But eco-media events like the Kunshan explosion implore us to attend more critically to the "matter-energy"⁴⁴ of dust and debris. This is because such an explosion directly enacts the agentive force of an inert matter like aluminum dust. As a form of inconspicuous waste,⁴⁵ dust does not in itself contribute to the composition of a media object such as the mobile phone, whose social relations and meanings can be delineated. Yet its making is inseparable from the production process of media (and other) commodities. Dust, therefore, "takes us—and our thinking—to different places and opens up multiple agendas."⁴⁶ One such agenda is precisely to investigate "a materiality that is itself heterogeneous, itself a differential of intensities, itself *a life*."⁴⁷ This is a kind of vital materialism⁴⁸ that urges us to connect dust with the workers who make their livings in the production process that generates dust as a by-product and therefore know and experience it "in their senses and their cells."⁴⁹ The explosion, in other words, can be seen as an instance in which nonhuman matter has found a way to communicate its presence. It has staged a hyper-visible theatrical moment that condenses the extended temporality of black lung disease as a form of unseen "cellular dramas of mutation."⁵⁰

As for the Tianjin incident, the proximity of the warehouse to residential areas meant that many living in the vicinity were in a prime location to document the multi-part explosion before evacuating their homes. In many of these amateur videos now available on YouTube, the mobile-phone-users-turned-documentarians can be heard screaming and cursing repeatedly while urging their fellow spectators to run for safety.⁵¹ One survivor Daniel Van Duran, an American living in a building nearby who had captured the blasts on his cell phone camera before fleeing the scene, found his

43. Sorace, "Paradise under Construction."

44. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 57.

45. Cubitt, *Finite Media*, 119.

46. Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, 87.

47. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 57.

48. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 57.

49. Cubitt, *Finite Media*, 119.

50. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 6.

51. See, for example, *2015 Tianjin Port China Huge Explosion, HD Every Angle Synced*, 2015. www.youtube.com/watch?v=dgurTdk0PTA.

home devastated upon return.⁵² Viewing the footage that emerged from the explosion, one can not only sense the handheld devices reverberating with the spectacles captured on screen but also feel the awe in the inadvertent voiceovers of the videographers. In one collage of videos that garnered over two million views on YouTube, a few of the clips end abruptly by cutting to blank screens, leading several viewers to wonder if the people who shot these videos had died on the spot. This is a concern shared by viewers on the Chinese forum Zhihu, one of whom felt that people were “taking videos with their lives (用生命在拍视频).”⁵³

Our use of media materialism enables us to highlight that neither the camera phones nor the media event they have captured can be reduced to “a discrete entity that can be said to have one-way ‘effects’ on other entities.”⁵⁴ Instead, what the event enacts is an environment or a field of forces that links the media artifacts—be it texts or technologies—with “the acts and processes of producing and temporarily stabilizing the world into media, agents, relations, and networks.”⁵⁵ While the debris from the explosion is rarely calculated as a raw material in ICT production, it has manifested itself in spectacular forms, invading the private homes and bodies of the camera phone users. The chemicals (such as ammonium nitrate and potassium nitrate) that caused the explosion may not find their way into the final product of ICT. Yet their role as explosives in coal mining and other mineral extraction helps to generate the electricity that powers the mobile phones and computers distributing the online videos. When the spectators make use of their mobile phones to document, visualize, and disseminate imageries of such an industrial catastrophe, they also generate large quantities of digital data, which requires physical storage facilities in various parts of the world. The eco-media event, then, is best understood as a transnationally circulated “accident in geologies of media culture” that illuminates media as “multitemporal planetary environments in which planetary pollution becomes perceptible and sometimes also experienced.”⁵⁶ It allows us to understand media as a dynamic milieu wherein human bodies are simultaneously agentive in carrying out actions that have environmental consequences *and* vulnerable to such nonhuman forces as the accumulation of dust.

During these eco-media events dust, chemicals, and debris become “a narrative that enters us.”⁵⁷ They become a part of who we are, especially as consumers of media tools such as iPhones and computer technologies of all kinds. Evocative of Alexander Weheliye’s notion of *habeas viscus*, or “a technological assemblage of humanity” that highlights the communicative potential of the (nonwhite) body,⁵⁸ eco-media events

52. Dong, “Tour American’s Home Destroyed by China Blast.”

53. Tianjin Baozha Paishe Shipin de Ren Dou Zenmeyang Le? (“How Are the People Who Took Videos of the Tianjin Explosion?”). Zhihu. www.zhihu.com/question/34523697 (accessed July 4, 2018).

54. Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 77.

55. Kember and Zylinska, *Life after New Media*, 77.

56. Parikka, “Deep Times of Planetary Trouble,” 285.

57. Parikka, *A Geology of Media*, 102.

58. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 12.

thus conjoin the abstract with the material to blur the boundaries between the textual and the physical. In this sense, media materialism urges us to understand dust and debris as agents that forge what Nicolas Mirzoeff calls a countervisuality—a visual practice countering hegemonic representations of Anthropocene visibility.⁵⁹ Just as Anthropocene visibility blinds us to the destructive effects of the Western-led, neoliberal faith in market forces, we have suggested that Yellow Eco-peril systemically disconnects China from the material processes of global (media) production, consumption, and recycling. A turn to a counter-visibility is therefore consistent with “a decolonial politics that claims the right to see what there is to be seen and name it as such: a planetary destabilization of the conditions supportive of life.”⁶⁰ Rendered as a force, dust and debris as vibrant matters offer a glimpse into the workings of digital global capitalism. More important in our view, they invite new political questions about life and death in digital-age China, and globally.

Chinese Eco-Media Events in Global Contexts

The Tianjin and Kunshan explosions and the slow violence of deep-earth mining and black lung disease are all events that took place in China. However, we have argued that once examined through some of the analytical tools provided by new work in media materialism, they allow us to see how intricately entangled they are in the logics and processes of global digital capitalism. Nonetheless, the challenge remains whether a nonhuman matter such as dust, as a kind of evidence of disease, or something that explodes and kills when not properly handled, will create new spaces of hope and a new politics of digital activism that defy the racialized representationalism of Yellow Eco-peril.

This ultimately gets at the larger political question of China’s place in debates about the future of the planet. To borrow from the authors of *Screen Ecologies*, the Asia-Pacific region forces us to “go beyond the conventional backyard of media studies of Europe and the United States.”⁶¹ After all, this is a region that is “undergoing rapid urbanization, has the globe’s largest percentage of megacities, and is the site of much ICT manufacturing and consumption.”⁶² Countries within the Asia-Pacific are also subject to greater risks of natural disasters due in part to the uneven effects of climate change, as attested by the increased frequency of typhoons in countries such as the Philippines. In this sense, our contemporary digital lives in the First World may also pose tremendous danger for the future well-being of many people living in the Global South, who in comparison contribute much less to climate change in the present than those in the so-called developed world.

59. Mirzoeff, “Visualizing the Anthropocene,” 226.

60. Mirzoeff, “Visualizing the Anthropocene,” 230.

61. Hjorth et al., *Screen Ecologies*, 5.

62. Hjorth et al., *Screen Ecologies*, 18.

The Asia-Pacific, as Rob Wilson argues, is very much an imaginary that informs the Korean global film *Snowpiercer*.⁶³ In addition to the metaphoric power of Kronon that inspired our conception of eco-media events, we are also taken by the film's depiction of the miserable and seemingly depleted people packed into the back of the train as unruly subjects. These are people with desires to better understand the conditions of their oppression—Why are we here? How does the system work?—and to take control of the engine that keeps the train going. They are not unlike the activist volunteers in China who constantly defy state surveillance and harassment from mine bosses and local government officials alike to advocate for the miners' well-being, often using online digital platforms as well. In Muchuan county, Sichuan province, for example, since the late 1980s, tens of thousands of peasant workers have worked the lead and zinc mines in Leshan City. In 2003 large-scale closure and the rapid fire selling of private mines left many workers without jobs and without the possibility for adequate health exams. Many of those who returned home started to show symptoms of lung disease. In 2007, under the leadership of a former miner turned activist named He Bing, sixty workers with black lung in Muchuan county decided to pressure the government to hold these private mining companies accountable. In organizing the activist community, they elected a workers' committee led by worker representatives, who forwarded their demands through letters and appeals to the government. During their resistance, they raised technological literacy through group-based education. They also mobilized social media and public news, attracting public attention and donations from all over the country.

The localized resistance movement in Muchuan extended to eight adjacent counties and small cities. The government eventually listened and created a new program called Rescue Methods for Black Lung Workers in Leshan City. This new fund, now several years in the works, primarily focuses on issue of poverty, workers' medical expenses, life compensation, and children's education. Much of this, of course, came too late, since during the five-year struggle, fifteen members passed away. Additionally, activists such as He Bing do not like how the government equates the prevalence of black lung disease to poverty, which they feel ignores the insufficient industrial regulations and social infrastructures that produce black lung in the first place. Yet, the story of collective resistance in Leshan City has had a far-reaching impact. Following its lead, in Jiulong County, a Tibetan Autonomous County, for example, 146 pneumoconiosis workers pressured the local government and private mining companies to eventually take responsibility for the massive outbreak of pneumoconiosis in the area.

With their bodies having become environmental⁶⁴ by way of exposure to dust, the Leshan miners-turned-activists have also shown that "communication is the material form in which not only speech but action occurs."⁶⁵ Digital media tools—deeply

63. Wilson, "Snowpiercer as Anthropoetics."

64. Cubitt, *Finite Media*, 180.

65. Cubitt, *Finite Media*, 181.

implicated in histories of resource extraction, in the making of precarious lives, and surrounded by the ever-present specter of death—can indeed open up possibilities for different forms of activism in China. But more importantly, the activists behind the Leshan victory demonstrate that when “the distinction between environment and humanity . . . is breaking down in favor of a distinction between market and environment,” people who have become part of the environment by way of their exclusion from the market would then be “in a position to build a completely unprecedented commons.”⁶⁶

It is precisely this kind of communicative possibility that media materialism can help us envision with regard to eco-media events that are ostensibly Chinese. “The political event occurs,” Cubitt reminds us, “when order is confronted with what it has excluded, yet over which it has exercised command or asserted stewardship.”⁶⁷ We have discussed Yellow Eco-peril as a discursive regime that depicts China’s eco-crisis in such a way as to exclude the participation of Chinese miners, workers, and other subalterns in the global economy that creates it. Eco-media events in China, in this sense, are political in that they bring into visibility the material processes of digital capitalism that are otherwise obscured. Grasped through the framework of media materialism, they prompt us to connect the lives and activism of Chinese miners and workers to other sites around the world where similar struggles have taken place.

In the mountains of Peru and Ecuador, at Standing Rock, in the Congo, and so many other places, we continue to engage in the political battle over what Naomi Klein among others has called extractivism—“a nonreciprocal dominance based relationship with the earth, one purely of the taking” and one that “is the opposite of stewardship, which involves taking but also taking care that regeneration and future life continue.”⁶⁸ Our use of media materialism, and our concept of the eco-media event, make us uneasy with this dichotomy, since extractivism is not in any simple way the opposite of Klein’s somewhat romantic notion of earthly stewardship. Extractivism is what fuels and fires and energizes life today, especially our digital lives, and the materials of media culture on which we depend. It links the deep geological history of the sub-strata of the earth to the atmospherics of everyday life. In our discussion of a few selected yet widely covered and discussed eco-media events in China we have tried to show how new theoretical thinking in the field of media materialism allows us to draw connections in novel and more critical ways between these seemingly disparate ecological and cultural spheres. Establishing these linkages, we argue, is crucial to situating eco-media events in China within a wider global context given that this is a country under increased pressure to address the deleterious effects of the production, consumption, and recycling of media technologies.⁶⁹

66. Cubitt, *Finite Media*, 180.

67. Cubitt, *Finite Media*, 178.

68. Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 169.

69. Maxwell and Miller, *Greening the Media*.

Conclusion

In *Snowpiercer*, the industrial waste Kronon works simultaneously as a hallucinating drug and an explosive, one that ultimately brings an end to the world of industrial capitalism and brings about its grisly aftermath of brutality and oppression on the train. In our thinking about the Kunshan and Tianjin explosions and about the activism that surrounds miners living the slow violence of black lung, the film and its ending kept haunting us. We needed to think not just about the materiality of Kronon itself—a by-product of waste that contains within itself a potent vitality—but also about the ambiguous question of hope after the train is spectacularly exploded. *Snowpiercer* leaves us with a world devoid of white Europeans, in which two people of color survive, alone with a polar bear, who may devour them or care for them. In Bong's cinematic imaginary, the post-Anthropocene future is radically uncertain, wildly contingent, completely up for grabs.

China, of course, is not post-Anthropocene. It is very much of the Anthropocene, entangled in myriad debates about the present and about planetary futures. Scholars are writing about e-waste and the toxic discarded debris of digital consumerism.⁷⁰ Increasingly we encounter stories and images of bicycle graveyards, calling into question the easy disposability of the shared economy.⁷¹ Questions about whether China can wean itself off of coal, the geopolitics of building oil and natural gas pipelines across national borders in Myanmar and Central Asia, and citizen reporting on the deadly environmental effects of chemical and industrial ruin animate all discussions about China's ecological futures.⁷² Given the two hundred eighty million plus rural migrants who have toiled in China's factories, built its global cities, and worked the mines, China must be part of any global discussion about precarity, about whose lives matter, and whose are expendable. Thinking through work on media materiality, representationalism, and nonhuman vitality, we have highlighted the role of digital devices in documenting and circulating images of industrial explosions. We have argued that the dangerous dust that forms in factories and in the lungs of miners involved in coal production, mineral extraction, and deep-earth mining are inextricably part of the processes that produce our digital lives. In writing against the ideological distortions of what we have called Yellow Eco-peril—that see China and its developmental model as always already destroying the planet, bringing forth, through its insatiable desire for economic growth, a planetary ecological catastrophe—we have tried to connect our digital present to the material conditions—always global and always linked to supply chains—that underpin them. We want to take seriously scholars and activists who have called for an end to digital fetishism.⁷³ We want us users to better understand the larger supply chains that

70. See Lora-Wainwright, *Resigned Activism*.

71. Bird, "China's Bike Sharing Bubble Has Burst."

72. Tilt, *Struggle for Sustainability in Rural China*.

73. There is a quite vast and diverse literature on digital fetishism. For one widely cited and circulated example, see Wu Ming Foundation, "Fetishism of Digital Commodities and the Hidden Exploitation."

make the digital possible, to link gold mining in Guizhou to coal mining across the north of China to mineral extraction in Tibet and Xinjiang to cobalt mining in the Congo to lithium production in Argentina to Foxconn manufacturing plants across China, and to consumers around the world who make use of all this invisible stuff every time they turn on their computers, their smartphones, snap a selfie, record a protest, document an industrial explosion.

Finally, we also want to call attention to the fact that our own tools of research and ethnographic storytelling—the mobile phones, the digital cameras and images, the social media platforms, the batteries, cables and the clouds—are implicated in the deadly dust that enters the everyday lives of miners and industrial factory workers, in China and elsewhere. In *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, Roy Scranton writes, “The study of the humanities is nothing less than the patient nurturing of the roots and heirloom varietals of human symbolic life. This nurturing is a practice not strictly of curation, as many seem to think today, but of active attention, cultivation, making and remaking.”⁷⁴ This collaborative essay is an attempt to enact this mode of nurturing. We want to cultivate a reflexive sensitivity toward the uneven politics of life and death as they are intertwined within new and ever-changing configurations of global capitalism. By carefully placing the eco-media events we have examined within wider, globalizing worlds of capitalist production and consumption, and writing against views that recycle Yellow Peril discourses in our Anthropocene present, we think it is time to make the dust and the debris of mining, the spectacular destruction and death from aluminum explosions, and the slow dying from black lung disease and smog part of any debate about digital media in the environmental humanities. The relevance of digital media—its global production, circulation, and consumption—to China’s so-called eco-apocalypse is too intimate to dismiss.

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Acknowledgments

The first version of this article was presented January 22–23, 2017, at the Environmental Humanities in Asia workshop, sponsored by the Global Asia Initiative at Duke University. We thank Prasenjit Duara for giving us the opportunity to share our ideas and all the workshop participants for their generous feedback. Another version of this article owes much to the critical commentary of Chia-ru Chuang, who has been spearheading some of the best new thinking on the environmental humanities

74. Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, 99.

in the Asian context. Finally, this article would not be possible without the insightful comments from two anonymous reviewers and for the encouragement of the editors to sharpen our arguments and explore new sources.

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