

However, this focus of formal expression on modernism is criticised by authors from the recipient countries. For example, in Chapter Four, Amoah, a senior lecturer from the Department of Political Science at the University of Ghana, argues that the focus on modernism should be neither overplayed nor simplified to mask the problematic political-economy dynamics. He instead criticises China as a powerful player manipulating developing countries, and calls for the local community to be more involved in the aid process. China-aided buildings construct delicate diplomatic relations between China and the recipient countries. The initial “equal and mutual benefit” principles, which were issued by Premier Zhou Enlai in the 1960s to provide aid in a more equal and friendly manner compared to “unequal” foreign aid agreements imposed by the superpowers, become controversial due to the asymmetric power relationship resulting from China’s rapid rise.

The book also demonstrates the social consequences of how these aid projects continue to serve the local residents. For example, aided educational buildings provide more educational opportunities for youngsters. Medical projects have not only improved regional medical facilities and services, but have also promoted medical-related industries and development in surrounding areas. However, the authors of Chapter Nine argue that the turnkey mode lacks local participation, which can lead to China monopolising large projects. Similar to the Western approach in international cooperation, this Chinese approach is also criticised as an imposition of economic dependence through the exercise of soft power.

As the book brings together a collection of separate writings, there is some repetition of concepts and arguments. But overall, this book provides a comprehensive historical reference on exported Chinese architecture, including related issues such as international and political influence, economic exchange, and cultural engagement. This is an intellectual heritage and reference for the new challenges ahead in the ongoing “one belt, one road” initiative, making the book accessible and engaging to a wide nonarchitectural audience as it usefully introduces the architectural piece of “made in China.”

References

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I FRÉDÉRIC KECK

is Senior Researcher at the Laboratory of Social Anthropology (LAS, CNRS-Collège de France-EHESS), 52 rue du Cardinal Lemoine, 75005 Paris, France (frederic.keck@cnsr.fr).

Princeton anthropologist Jerry Zee has published a groundbreaking book on the management of dust storm and air quality in China. Borrowing from innovative works in the anthropology of globalisation and environmental humanities (Hugh Raffles, Anna Tsing), Zee follows scientists and engineers with the method of science and technology studies, avoiding the opposition between subject and object, to ask: what kind of being is a “continent in dust”? Resisting the tropes of the “Yellow Peril,” which depicts China as an environmental threat, he shows that in the monitoring and modelling practices implemented by these scientists and engineers, a new form emerges that doubles the earth of China by the atmosphere of China, as a series of dust storms troubling air quality in China and beyond. This double entity, which he calls a weather system, goes beyond the opposition between earth and sky, or between geology and meteorology, to become a new entity at stake in global environmental debates. Zee’s book is an enduring meditation on the consequences of China’s modernisation, which avoids the nostalgic return to a preserved soil or community and stresses the experimental potentials of a socialist management of the environment from China to the rest of the world.

Asking “what if the rise of China were to be approached literally, through the rise of China into the air?” (p. 7-9) allows Zee to analyse what the weather system is in and for China. Borrowing from anthropologists Tim Choy, Michael Hathaway, and Lisa Rofel, who stress the nondeterministic openness of the mix of neoliberal policies and socialist discourses in contemporary China, Zee raises the debate to the scale of “Asia as a laboratory of possible planets” (p. 14). He convincingly pleads for an anthropology of the “Sinocene” which, following debates on the “Anthropocene” and the “Capitalocene,” starts from the fact that modern China is a major source of environmental damage but also has the ambition to manage it with its own conceptual tools (p. 207). From the discourse of Sun Yat-sen criticising the Chinese population as “a sheet of loose sand” (p. 74) to the performance of Xi Jinping coming out to breathe the unclean air of Beijing in 2014, the idea of China as a weather system has several declinations.

The book is based on “fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork at various points along the dust stream designated on the weather map as an official Northwestern Route of sand and dust transport” (p. 33). It moves westwards from Beijing to Inner Mongolia and Gansu, and then eastwards through interviews in South Korea and California. It is thus a global multi-sited ethnography of China as a “continent in dust.”

The first part follows Chinese engineers who attempt to control the spread of dust storms by correlating them with the desertification of the Chinese soil. These engineers endeavour to reply to the declarations of CCP Premier and Party geologist Zhu Rongji 朱镕基, when he travelled to Gansu after the 2000 dust storm and warned about the effects of a “land on the move” (p. 15-6). The work of Chinese engineers in Gansu and Inner Mongolia aims therefore to prevent the capital from being polluted by air coming from the Chinese margins. “We cannot stop the wind,” says one of them, but “we can change the way it moves across the land” (p. 49). Here, the massive program of reforestation called “Three-North Shelterbelt” or “Great Green Wall of China” leads engineers to plant trees on the top of dunes but also to work with pastoral herders to prevent their animals from eating the seedlings. Zee offers a refined analysis of the discussions between these well-funded centralised engineers and precarious nomadic herders on how to reorganise their mobility through state incentives.

Another chapter describes the inter-rooting of two plants in engineering plans: the saxoul shrub (*suosuo* 梭梭) and the *Herba cistanche* (*rou cong rong* 肉苁蓉), known in Chinese traditional medicine as the ginseng of the desert. Ex-herders have been enticed to cultivate these plants as “sand products” since Zhu Rongji’s warning in 2000, and after being blamed for desertification under the slogan “kill goats, protect grass, protect Beijing” (p. 88). Zee analyses this policy as an “administrative gateway” (p. 92) that focuses on channelling the flows of beings (goats and plants) from one direction to another to preserve the centre of the system, and conceives of living beings not as rational free agents in a market of goods but as actors reactive to signals sent by the environment and interpreted by the government.

The third chapter then moves to villages in Gansu that are “swallowed” by sand (p. 120). Politics of “sand control” (*zhisha* 治沙) and “pressing sand” (*yasha* 压沙) aim at keeping sand on the ground before the next dust storm to avoid its escape, while planting pioneer plants and monitoring others as indicators of sandification. These programs rely, for Zee, not on an apocalyptic imaginary of the future but on a temporality of 5,000 years in which humans must act in such a way that the whole weather system doesn’t change.

In the book’s second part, the most literary, the author analyses his own experience as a California-raised Chinese-American living amidst the Beijing smog. Discussions with activists on controversies about fine particles allow him to reflect on the solidarity instilled by Xi Jinping’s slogan “Breathing together, sharing a common destiny” (p. 141) and to criticise its uniformity to find “other ways of breathing and dying together” (p. 143). The impossibility not to breathe, Zee argues, exposes human subjects to a common vulnerability that can lead to different forms of solidarity. In another chapter, Zee describes experiments made in Beijing to live and breathe in an atmosphere polluted by dust particles: an entrepreneur selling

capsules of “compressed, fresh air” from Tibet, Yan’an, or Taiwan; a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Sciences planning to build massive indoor smog-chambers; a journalist whose film *Under the Dome* (2015) made people reflect on the temptation of private institutions to build their own domes protecting their members’ health; or even works from several artists making “smog rings” or bricks out of Beijing air.

The third part brings ethnography back into play. The author follows a geochemist at the Lawrence Berkeley National Labs (California), who climbs up Mount Tamalpais weekly to collect particulates. Based on the analysis of isotopes, this scientist estimates that 40% of particulates in northern Californian air are of Chinese origin – a figure contested by Chinese scientists in the area. Rather than analysing the controversy, Zee suggests reflecting on what it means to trace the movements of air “downwind” from Asia to America along “gradients of dust.” A key interlocutor here is the former South Korean ambassador to China, Kwon Byong-Hyon, who reflects on his experience of having been exposed in Beijing to the same dust storm as his daughter in Seoul. Realising that the degradation of China’s soil was not only a problem for Beijing, as assumed by Zhu Rongji, but also for Asia and the world, Kwon launched an organisation named Future Forest to build a wall in the Kubuqi Desert that would protect both Beijing and Korea. The book ends with an apparatus entitled “Monsters,” in which sea whales and mountain lions are described as indicator species for the bioaccumulation of carbon particles, thus suggesting that the story of the Sinocene, including many humans, some goats and a few plants, should be extended to other nonhumans.

The figure of haunting on which the book closes is also there at its beginning. Zee plays with Marx and Engels’ famous quote from the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: “A spectre haunts Europe...” But if the spectre of European communism seems to have faded away, the spectre of Chinese socialism is an obsession for global elites. Zee quotes another famous sentence from the *Manifesto*: “All that is solid melts into the air” (p. 19), initially describing the historical role of the bourgeoisie in dissolving feudal forms of attachment. Following Zee, one could argue that Chinese socialism is another step in the “melting into the air” of human attachments, successfully doubling its own problems in the soil through the spread of dust storms, which then become objects of global controversy. The goal of Zee’s book is to refuse to engage in these speculative controversies on air particles and rather to describe the new attachments caused by these models between engineers and herders, plants, trees, urban citizens, Chinese artists and entrepreneurs, Californian geochemists, and Korean ambassadors. In that sense, Zee may be closer to Claude Lévi-Strauss, quoted from *Tristes tropiques* (“The atmosphere sickens everywhere,” p. 233), than to Bruno Latour, whom he surprisingly never cites. By following humans and nonhumans as they perceive signs of the environmental changes through which China is doubled between earth and sky by “wind-sand,” he opens a new program for an environmental anthropology of China.

References

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