Gray Pastoral: Critical Engagements with Idyllic Nature in Contemporary Photography from China

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In both public and academic arenas, we often encounter the notion that a defining trait of China's culture, stemming from its philosophical, literary, artistic, and even folk traditions, is a particular empathy with "nature." Ranging from popular culture and the mass media to political and scholarly practice, a reified view of Chinese culture emerges [1] [#N1] for which some sources of China's intellectual traditions (Daoism, Confucianism) would have had defined a "Chinese model of the world." In the influential yet contested perspective of Tu Weiming, for example, such a model is defined by the elements of *wholeness*, *dynamism*, and *continuity* as they pervade the relationship of mankind with nature (Tu 2004).

Similar views are found in contemporary ecocriticism, which (as it gradually carves for itself a significant position in the humanities since the initial proposals of Lawrence Buell, Cheryll Glotfelty, and Laurence Coupe, in the late 1980s) has encountered fertile ground in China. [2] [#N2] In some of the works in this field, philosophical and literary notions such as the "unity of Heaven and humanity" (*tianren heyi*) and the "spiritual correspondence between Heaven and humanity" (*tianren ganying*) or legendary tales, such as the story of the Peach Blossom Valley, are cited as cultural antecedents for the present concerns of Chinese ecocriticism. [3] [#N3] Daoist masters such as Zhuang Zi and poets, among them Tao Yuanming (365–427) and Hanshan (618–907), who celebrated a relationship with nature based on humility, harmony, and unity (Slovic 2012) and were subsequently canonized, [4] [#N4] are called on in Chinese ecocritical theory and practice as sources of a culturally marked bias toward integration with nature, often opposed to a "Western" attitude regarding nature (framed variously as Judeo-Christian, Cartesian, scientificist, and so on) characterized by anthropocentrism, utilitarianism, and positivism.

Adding to the culturalism these visions foreground, certain academics point to the stark contrast between the principles allegedly regulating this learned, *avant la lettre* "green" tradition and the actual attitude toward nature across China's history. A number of scholars have also noted that, extending beyond the impulse of modernization and revolutionary zeal (Shapiro 2001), the contemporary aggressive exploitation of the environment — massive deforestation, for instance, and pollution — is part of a centuries-long, radical intervention in the natural environment.

For example, in *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China*, Mark Elvin concludes that "[b]y late imperial times there was little that could be called 'natural' left untouched by this process of exploitation and adaptation" (Elvin 2006, 323). Rhoads Murphey posits that "despite the professed values of the literate elite, people have altered or destroyed the Asian environment for longer and on a greater scale than anywhere else in the world, even in the twentieth-century West" (Murphey 2000, 36). And within the context of ecocriticism, Karen Thornber (2012) cites the sense of paradox between an alleged cultural empathy for nature and the destructive exploitation of the natural resources to illustrate what she terms "ecoambiguities." [5] [#N5]

It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the arguments and reasons for contemporary views on "nature," but they offer the context for an examination of vernacular notions of idyllic nature in the work of some of the most prominent contemporary photographers from China. What follows, then, is a discussion in which the photographers Wang Qingsong, Yang Yongliang, and Zhang Kechun, going beyond what Roetz terms the "cliché of 'harmony' between man and nature in China" (2010, 200), offer layered visualizations of landscapes and natural settings in dialogue with intellectual and aesthetic notions of the pastoral retreat. In so doing, these photographic works activate entry points for current discussions about contemporary visual culture from the standpoint of eco-aesthetics and ecocriticism.

Wang Qingsong (Heilongjiang 1966) has developed one of the most successful careers among art photographers from China. His global importance was confirmed in 2011 in a solo exhibition at New York's International Center for Photography, *Wang Qingsong: When Worlds Collide*, curated by Christopher Phillips, and some of his works are among the most widely diffused and representative pieces of contemporary art from China.

Since his earliest works, connected with Gaudy art (*Yansu yishu*), Wang's photographs have incorporated elements from the religious, artistic, and folk traditions of his country (such as Buddhist iconography), and reinterpreted canonical artworks (for example, Gu Hongzhong's *Night Revel of Han Xizai,* 10th century) into highly elaborate tableaux. In *Yaochi Fiesta* (*Yaochi xianghui*, 2003; figure 1), Wang reenvisions the Daoist paradise of the Queen Mother of the West. As in others of his photographs, *Yaochi Fiesta* comments on what the artist perceives as the vacuous and inauthentic happiness resulting from the modernization of the country and the economically driven pursuit of personal and social arcadias. In his version of the mythical Peach Feast (*Pantao hui*), the guests look bored and spiritless, in contrast with the dancers and musicians of traditional representations. Wang's group of naked, ordinary citizens does not seem particularly excited about the prospects of contemporary happiness and immortality.

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Fig. 1. Wang Qingsong, Yaochi Fiesta *(2005), 127 x 410 cm., ©Wang Qingsong, courtesy of Galerie Paris-Beijing.*

But Wang's repertoire of cultural references is not limited to Chinese lore. In another tableau that addresses notions of the pastoral and harmony with nature, *Romantique* (*Luomantike*, 2003; figure 2), Wang creates an idyllic garden, combining references to a biblical Eden and Chinese-inflected notions of paradisiacal retreat.

The more than fifty nude models, posing as figures of paintings from the European canon (Botticelli's *Birth of Venus,* 1486, and Masaccio's *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden*, ca. 1425, among others), share a luxuriant orchard, spreading, scroll-like, over a six-meter-wide photograph, with a golden Buddha; in the far right, and next to a modern multicultural family, a girl reminiscent of the subject of Manet's *Olympia* (1865) sits in a rickshaw, gesturing toward past and present circumstances of China's encounter with the West. The resulting imagery and relations among the different figures are, for the artist, "forced, manufactured, chaotic and confusing . . . like a daydream, a bubble of momentary fantasy," and portray the "fabricated happiness of man-made utopia" (Wang 2013).

[http://quod.lib.umich.edu/t/tapic/x-7977573.0005.202-00000002/1?subview=detail;view=entry]

Fig. 2. Wang Qingsong, Romantique *(2003), 120 x 650 cm., ©Wang Qingsong, courtesy of Galerie Paris-Beijing.*

"The Peach Blossom Spring" (*Taohua yuan*), a fable about a pastoral retreat beyond the reach of society and its discontent, is another reference to idyllic nature frequently cited in Chinese ecocritical and eco-aesthetical theoretical literature, as well as in contemporary art. Introduced in Daoist texts, [6] [#N6] the tale was canonized in Tao Yuanming's *Record of the Peach Blossom Spring* (*Taohua yuan ji,* ca. 421) and became a recurrent trope in painting and poetry. It tells the story of a fisherman who finds himself in a valley thick with peach trees in bloom on the banks of a river. Continuing upstream, the fisherman discovers a cave next to the source of the river and, on entering it, comes across a land of abundant vegetation, a place where people live happy, carefree, and unaware of the vicissitudes of the outside world. After spending a few days there, the fisherman goes back to his city, where his descriptions pique the interest of the magistrate. All efforts to find the entrance to the secluded valley again are to no avail, and it remains forever hidden. Peach blossoms, representing access to that idyllic land, have come to epitomize retreat from society and a life in harmony with nature.

Symptomatic of the culturalist appropriation of vernacular references, the literature scholar Wang Ning, one of the pioneers of ecocriticsm in China, understands the tale as an "Oriental version of Utopia" (Wang 2009, 293–95; 1997). A photographic series by Yang Yongliang (Shanghai, 1980), however, offers an interesting alternative. To Yang, "The Peach Blossom Spring" serves as an umbrella reference for the series *Peach Blossom Colony* (*Taoyuan ji* 2011), in which the unspoiled, legendary valley is portrayed as a series of bleak landscapes of rubble and waste where rivers of dark water run among lifeless trees and industrial wreckage. In the ten photographs, references to famed vistas, paintings, characters, and legends are reframed in desolate, postindustrial scenarios: an angler on a lake is surrounded by naval mines that bring to mind Three Ponds Mirroring the Moon (*San tan yin yue*), a famous attraction at Hangzhou's West Lake; the elegant literati enjoying the water cascading down from a derelict blast furnace (figure 3) elicit the traditional motif of the scholar reflecting on the rapids, present in paintings from all ages, from Ma Yuan (active ca. 1190–1225) and Zhong Li (active ca. 1480–1500) to Fu Baoshi (1904–1965).

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Fig. 3. Yang Yongliang, Peach Blossom Colony *series (2011),* Appreciation of the Waterfall*, 185 x 340 cm., ©Yang Yongliang, courtesy of the artist.*

Amid these devastated landscapes make their appearance a series of legendary literati and scholars — symbolic of unity with nature — impersonated by actors dressed in robes. Significantly, these characters do not seem aware of their desolate surroundings, and, echoing canonical paintings, are depicted as engaged in lofty conversation with fellow literati or lost in contemplation of the view. In *The Mind Landscape of Xie Youyu* (*Youyu qiuhe tu*; figure 4), the eponymous Jin dynasty scholar celebrated for his imagining of landscapes, is portrayed in a composition similar to Zhao Mengfu's famous rendition (figure 5). Seated on a riverbank filled with rubble, Yang's Xie Youyu does not react to the fact that in the background, instead of the hills and pine trees of ancient paintings, high-rise buildings pile toward the sky, and a few paces to his left an electric pylon slants over the water. In *Ode to the Goddess of the Luo River* (*Luoshen fu*; figure 6), titled after a *fu* poem by Cao Zhi (192–232 CE), the poet-prince admires the beauty of the goddess and proclaims his love across a Luo River of pitch-black water that reflects withering trees and a derelict building.

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Fig. 4. Yang Yongliang, Peach Blossom Colony *series (2011), T*he Mind Landscape of Xie Youyu*, 95 x 321cm. ©Yang Yongliang, courtesy of the artist.*

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Fig. 5. Zhao Mengfu (1254–1322), The Mind Landscape of Xie Youyu *(ca. 1287), 27.4 x 117 cm., courtesy of Princeton University Art Museum.*

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Fig. 6. Yang Yongliang, Peach Blossom Colony *series (2011),* Ode to the Goddess of Luo River*, 95 x 350 cm., courtesy of the artist.*

The significance of these characters is not immediate. On the one hand, their blasé attitude seems to emphasize the impossibility of a profound interrelation with nature under the current state of degradation of the environment. On the other hand, and taking into account that the artist has commented that "The Peach Blossom Spring" still represents a "spiritual refuge" for those contemporary urban citizens "in touch with their conscience" (Yang 2011), their presence might indicate that a harmonious connection with nature could still be possible, albeit on a spiritual level.

Most important is perhaps the fact that these figures activate a series of self-reflective commentaries on the conditions and dynamics of perception, imagining, and art. In one view, ancient culture and tradition, epitomized in these culturally revered models, come off as solipsistic, self-absorbed, and ahistorical in their apparent denial of contemporary waste and degradation. In another view, however, the unpolluted gaze of the characters seems to act as a catalyzer, able to reveal the desolation lurking behind the glossy veneer of contemporary economic development, akin to the story of the emperor's new clothes.

A productive dialogue about notions and conventions governing art is also established by the particular technique employed by Yang Yongliang to create his photographs. His signature landscapes are based on a two-level perception: seen from a distance, the images resemble — or, on occasion, copy (*fang*) — Song and Yuan dynasty landscape paintings. Using scroll-like, oval, or vertical layouts and seals and inscriptions in the corners, the artist reinforces the impression of a traditional ink painting. But on a closer look, the trompe-l'oeil collapses: mountains and hills are revealed to be a collection of high-rises and half-demolished houses; what looked like trees and vegetation are in fact construction cranes and electric pylons; and the gray tones of the images are not those of ink- and brushstrokes, but rather the black-and-white hues of digital photography. [7] [#N7] In this sort of game, the distance of the observer from the photograph determines the visual outcome: either the serene beauty of an idealized landscape or the appalling revelation of a postapocalyptic scenario. [8] [#N8]

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Fig. 7. Yang Yongliang, Peach Blossom Colony *series (2011),* The Peach Blossom Colony*, 85 x 223 cm. ©Yang Yongliang, courtesy of the artist.*

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Fig. 8. Yang Yongliang, Peach Blossom Colony *series (2011),* The Peach Blossom Colony *(fragment showing the buildings as they create the volumes of the hills, author's crop). ©Yang Yongliang, courtesy of the artist.*

These simultaneous versions of a landscape as a result of observational distance echo what the painter and theoretician Guo Xi prescribed in the treatise *The Lofty Message of Forest and Streams* (*Linquan Gaozhi*, ca. 1090):

> There is a proper way to paint a landscape. When spread out on an ambitious scale it should still have nothing superfluous. Restricted to a small view it should still lack nothing. There is also a proper way to look at landscapes. Look with a heart in tune with forest and stream, then you will value them highly. . . . Approach [them] with the eyes of arrogance and extravagance, then you will value them but little. Landscapes are vast things. You should look at them from a distance. Only then will you see on one screen the sweep and atmosphere of mountain and water. (Bush and Shih 1985, 151)

At the level of the "proper way to paint a landscape," Yang's photographs adhere to Guo Xi's instructions, lacking nothing in a detailed view yet as compact as landscape representations from afar. At the level of looking at the landscape, though (and while acknowledging that Guo Xi's notion of *distance* is something more complex than a mere physical determinant), Yang's renderings of traditional-style landscapes by means of digital synthesis activate a series of reflections on the artistic conventions and technological apparatus of sight in contemporary digital photography. From the "proper" distance, Yang's works appear as atmospheric natural compositions that, as in ink landscape paintings, try to express the "spirit resonance" [9] [#N9] of the site. Conversely, the "eyes of arrogance and extravagance" would correspond with, in the photographs, the gaze that zooms in on details, lifts the curtain of illusion, and discloses a hidden and obscure reality.

Because *shanshui* painting acts often as a stand-in for "Chinese" art, the opposition between these two modes of representation inevitably becomes culturally marked. As mentioned earlier, some of the ecocritical literature equates the Chinese understanding of nature with that of the philosophical and artistic sources and authorities that privilege a harmonious integration with nature. By the same token, such traditions are opposed to a "Western" way of perception and interrelation with nature, a distinction subsumed under the binaries "nature-centric versus anthropocentric" and "subjective against objective," for example.

Although Yang's work does, to an extent, capitalize on a reified vision of Chinese culture, [10] [#N10] his photographs articulate a perceptive commentary on the cultural dynamics animating the representation of contemporary landscapes. In the context of his work, both the Chinese tradition of landscape representation and transnational digital photography display dual effects: the former, at once concealing a reality of natural degradation and simultaneously providing spiritual reconciliation with an aestheticized nature; the myriad of digital photographs of buildings and construction sites remain detailed and evidentiary, and yet, in their fragmentary replicability, share the depthlessness and anonymity of mass-produced images/commodities.

Zhang Kechun (Sichuan 1980), a young photographer whose work receives ample international praise, is the third photographer whose work presents interesting points for discussion about the relationship of photographic works to environmental degradation, and about the articulation of traditional notions about nature and art in contemporary practice. Zhang's *Yellow River* series [11] [#N11] offers a record of life along the banks of the Huang He, China's second-longest river, which shuns its recurrent idealized characterization, either as the archetypical cradle of China's civilization or as the stage of "root-seeking" literature and film. [12] [#N12] In terms of style, Zhang's work combines strong connections with traditional Chinese conventions of landscape representation with a sober documentary approach. For different critics, Zhang's photographs reflect the calmness and empathy with which he approached his subject.

Over a period of two years, Zhang took a series of walking trips, from the river's estuary in Shandong upstream across several provinces toward its source, in the Bayan Har Mountains in northwestern Qinghai, which gave

the landscapes “the necessary breathing space” (Koo 2013) and enabled them to sink in before he began photographing. Again, such an attitude resounds with the prescriptions of Guo Xi, who admonished that “an artist should identify himself with the landscape and watch until its signification is revealed to him” (Kuo 1935, 35).

At the same time, *Yellow River* is as an insightful record of the contemporary milieu of China’s northern regions. The “component parts” that, as Guo Xi notes, should be revealed in a landscape when “viewed at close range” (Kuo, 35), are, in Zhang’s photographs, a pervasive human imprint of urbanization and industrial development that reaches rural areas. The palette encompasses the yellowish hues of the loess plateau and the blackened soils of pollutant extractive industries. Occasional lightly saturated details highlight unexpected appearances in remote and forsaken spots, providing poetic and almost surrealist undertones to the documentary.

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Fig. 9. Zhang Kechun, The Yellow River *series,* At the abandoned pier*, 2013, 100 x 75 cm. ©Zhang Kechun, courtesy of Three Shadows +3 Gallery.*

The comparison with one of Zhang’s self-acknowledged inspirations, the series *Sleeping by the Mississippi* (2002), in which the photographer Alec Soth (Minnesota, 1969) documents his native American Midwest, also brings to light the particular interrelation, in Zhang’s work, of documentary photography with vernacular notions about art and nature. Soth’s photographs are mostly portraits and details of people’s houses and objects; in Zhang’s photographs, humans appear dwarfed in natural settings of foggy contours and grand scale.

In the context of Zhang's comments, in the sense that the power of mankind "is nothing compared to the power of nature, even when we try to change it" (Zhang, cited in Rauhala 2012), the resulting landscapes actualize a Daoist-inspired view of nature as constant and eternal, where human intervention is ultimately futile, and thus deactivates an environmentalist reading of the series.

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Fig. 10. Zhang Kechun, The Yellow River *series,* A man pumping in the desert*, 2011, 100 x 75 cm. ©Zhang Kechun, courtesy of Three Shadows +3 Gallery.*

In contemporary invocations of culturally inflected notions of "nature" from China, such as the Peach Blossom Valley and Song dynasty landscapes, nature is often treated as an example of an *avant la lettre* green consciousness that would have permeated Chinese civilization. Neglecting the historical record of natural exploitation, and dehistoricizing philosophical, artistic, and literary sources, has the effect of turning environmental degradation and widespread pollution into essentially "non-Chinese" social and cultural practices. By contrast, photographic series by Wang Qingsong, Yang Yongliang, and Zhang Kechun put to work these representational heritages to create polysemous works that capture and foreground the complexity of mankind's interrelation with nature, the implications of environmental degradation for social and cultural life, and the inescapable transnationalism of contemporary art.

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Notes

1. Arif Dirlik (1987, 14) notes that the resulting culturalism is the “ideology which not only reduces everything to questions of culture, but has a reductionist conception of the latter as well.” For her part, Rey Chow (1998, 6–8) characterizes “the habitual obsession with "Chineseness" [as a] a kind of cultural essentialism — in this case, sinocentrism — that draws an imaginary boundary between China and the rest of the world. Everything Chinese, it follows, is fantasized as somehow better — longer in existence, more intelligent, more scientific, more valuable, and ultimately beyond comparison. (6) Chow writes that “Chinese intellectuals’ obsession with China and their compulsion to emphasize the Chinese dimension to all universal questions are very much an outgrowth of this relatively recent world history,” meaning the violent presence of Western power since the mid-nineteenth century and the academic alternatives to these forms of “sinochauvinism” posed by studies of minority populations and the diaspora. [#N1-ptr1]
2. A number of scholars are pushing ecocriticism (*shengtai piping*) and eco-aesthetics (*shengtai meixue*) to an academic first line while also trying to reach political decision makers. See Zeng Fanren, *Shengtai meixue daolun* [An Introduction to Ecological Aesthetics]. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2010; Wang Nuo, *Shengtai yu xingtai. Dangdai Oumei wenxue yanjiu* [Ecology and Mentality: Studies in Contemporary Euro-American Literature]. Nanjing: Nanjing Daxue chubanshe, 2007; Lu Shuyuan, *Shengtai piping de kongjian* [The Space for Ecocriticism]. Shanghai: East China Normal UP, 2006; Cheng Xiangzhan, *Zhongguo Huanjing Meixue sixiang yanjiu* [A Study of Environmental Aesthetics in China]. Zhengzhou: Henan People’s Press, 2009. [#N2-ptr1]

3. Scott Slovic (2012) makes that point: “When we speak today of the *emergence* of an ecological civilization in China, we are, in a sense, referring to a re-assertion of traditional Chinese values rather than the creation of entirely new concepts, vocabularies, or attitudes.” [#N3-ptr1]
4. In a recent paper, Yuan Xingpei and Alan Berkowitz analyze the process by which posterior generations of scholar-officials “who reimagined, constructed, and selectively formulated a paradigmatic character-type on top of the base supplied by his own core character” carried out the transformation of Tao Yuanming into a “cultural symbol.” Yuan Xingpei and Alan Berkowitz, “Tao Yuanming: A Symbol of Chinese Culture, in *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture*, vol. 1, issues 1 and 2, November 2014. [#N4-ptr1]
5. “Environmental ambiguity manifests itself in multiple, intertwined ways, including ambivalent attitudes towards nature; confusion about the actual condition of the nonhuman, often a consequence of ambiguous information; contradictory behaviors towards ecosystems; and discrepancies among attitudes, conditions, and behaviors that lead to actively downplaying and acquiescing to nonhuman degradation, as well as to inadvertently harming the very environments one is attempting to protect” (Thornber 2012, 6). [#N5-ptr1]
6. Bokenkamp (1986, 65) cites the *Lingbao wufu xu* [Scripture of the Five Talismans of the Numinous Treasure] as the earliest example of the story, in the late third or early fourth century. [#N6-ptr1]
7. The photography historian and critic Gu Zheng notes how in using the different sizes, shades, and hues of buildings to create volumes and shapes, Yang Yongliang subverts and extends the *cun* brushstrokes of traditional ink painters (Gu 2008). [#N7-ptr1]
8. The artist’s website reproduces these two possibilities of observation, including a zoom effect on the computer’s pointer in passing over the images. See [http://www.yangyongliang.com/index.htm [http://www.yangyongliang.com/index.htm]]. [#N8-ptr1]
9. “Spirit consonance” is one of the recurrent — though always controversial — translations of *qiyun shengdong*, Xie He’s (active 500–535) “First Law” as stated in the introduction to his classic and highly influential text *Classification of Old Painters* (*Gu huapin lu*). See Bush and Hsih, 1985, 10–15. For the discussion on the translation, see “CLP 174: "Good Grief, Not the Six Laws Again!" in the late James Cahill’s blog: http://jamescahill.info/the-writings-of-james-cahill/cahill-lectures-and-papers/108-clp-174-2002a2007 [http://jamescahill.info/the-writings-of-james-cahill/cahill-lectures-and-papers/108-clp-174-2002a2007] . [#N9-ptr1]
10. Not to mention the fact that the appeal of cultural emblems for foreign viewers and art markets often raises questions about a conscious self-exotization in the work of contemporary artists and filmmakers from China. For discussions on the role of self-orientalization in contemporary visual culture in China, see Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), and Sheldon H. Lu, *China: Transnational Visuality, Global Postmodernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2002). [#N10-ptr1]
11. The Chinese title of the series Beiluo huohuo, “The river rushes north,” makes reference to a poem from the Book of Songs (Shi Jing), the section “Songs of Wei” (Wei feng), titled “The Duke’s Bride” (Shuo ren): 河水洋洋，北流活活,施罛濊濊，鱣鮪发发。葭菼揭揭，庶姜孽孽，庶士有朅. (*The Yellow River wide and deep / Rolls northward its jubilant way. / When nets are spread out, fishes leap / And throw on reeds much spray. / See how the richly dressed bride keeps / Company with her lord on bridal day!*). [#N11-ptr1]
12. Zhang’s initial inspiration was *River of the North* (*Beifangde he*, 1984), by Zhang Chengzhi, a root-seeking (*xungen*) novel inspired by the writer’s experience as a *zhiqing*, or sent-down youth, in Inner Mongolia. [#N12-ptr1]

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