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doi:10.1017/S0026749X20000062 First published online 17 August 2020

*The Ethnic Ecocritical Animal: Animal protagonists and ethnic environmentalism in contemporary Sino-Mongolian literature and art**

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Abstract

Drawing on ideas from ecocriticism, literary animal studies, and post-colonial studies, as well as anthropology and cultural studies, this article examines the representations of animals in contemporary Sino-Mongolian literature and art, and the various connections between these representations and issues related to ethnic and environmental politics. I propose that the intensive engagement of Chinese-Mongolian writers and artists with animals is related first and foremost to the central role that animals, both wild and domesticated, have traditionally played in Mongolian nomadic pastoralist culture. However, I also argue that it is closely connected to two interrelated processes that are currently taking place in Inner Mongolia: the severe degradation of the Inner Mongolian grassland and the rapid sinicization of China's Mongols. I suggest that in the context of this environmental and cultural crisis, the engagement with animals reflects anxiety about the fate of the Inner Mongolian grassland, the fate of real animals, which, for centuries, have been closely associated with this landscape and Mongolian nomadic culture, and, most importantly, the fate of Mongolian culture itself. I also argue that Sino-Mongolian writers and artists use literary and artistic animals to construct and assert Mongolianness as part of their search for an 'authentic' ethnic identity, and to comment critically on the impact that Chinese domination has had on the Inner Mongolian grassland, its indigenous human and non-human inhabitants, and Mongolian culture and identity. Finally, I propose that through their ethnic

* I am grateful to Shahar Bram, Ayelet Ben-Yishai, and the two anonymous reviewers for *Modern Asian Studies* for their valuable comments. All of the translations from Chinese in this article are mine. The research for this article was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (Grant No. 435/16).

environmentalism, Chinese-Mongolian artists and writers have made an important contribution to the development of China's environmental movement.

Introduction

Reflecting the global environmental movement and the resultant increase in attention paid to and respect for animal life and animal rights, China's cultural sphere of the last three decades or so has seen a dramatic shift in the literary and artistic representations of animals. Animals have not only started to gain a more prominent place in literary and artistic works, but have also gained intrinsic value beyond their use by humans.

Thus, more and more artistic and literary works have begun to show a strong interest in the relationship between animals and humans, empathy for the suffering of animals, and concern for their well-being and survival. Moreover, some of these works have begun to challenge the traditional anthropocentric dichotomy between humans and animals, treating the latter as sharing important similarities with humans, and treating humans as another kind of animal. In these new representations, animals have often attained subjectivity and agency. In addition, an increasing number of works have begun to engage in moral questions related to the human treatment of animals and the negative impact that human actions have on animals and on nature in general.¹ As this new trend gained momentum, and as China's environmental movement continued to develop, the representation of animals in cultural production, especially in literature, has also become a popular topic for research in Chinese academia.²

¹ This is not to say that concern for the well-being of animals and empathy for their suffering did not exist earlier in Chinese history. On animal-friendly ideologies and related practices in traditional China, see Joanna F. Handlin Smith, 'Liberating animals in Ming-Qing China: Buddhist inspiration and elite imagination', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 58, no. 1, 1999, pp. 51–84.

² See, for example, Peng Siyuan (彭斯远), 'Zhongguo dangdai dongwu xiaoshuo lun' (中国当代动物小说论), *Chongqing shiyuan xuebao zheshe ban*, no. 3, 2000, pp. 37–44; Wang Junning (王军宁), 'Wufa fangui de ziran—dui Zang ao de shengtai piping' (无法返回的自然: 对“藏獒”的生态批评), *Xinan jiaotong daxue xuebao shehui kexue ban*, vol. 7, no. 6, 2006, pp. 72–76; Xu Fuwei (徐福伟) and Han Tao (韩韬), 'Xin shiji dongwu xiaoshuo de shenmei tezhen' (新世纪动物小说的审美特征), *Zibo shizhuan xuebao*, no. 9, 2007, pp. 66–69; Hao Jingkun (郝婧坤), 'Lun dongwu xiaoshuo de shengcun zhihui ji qi shengtai jiazhi' (论动物小说的生存智慧及其生态价值), *Hunan keji xueyuan xuebao*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2008, pp. 12–14; Wu Xiuming (吴秀明) and Chen Lijun (陈力君), 'Lun

The year 2004 can be regarded as a milestone in the new treatment of animals in Chinese literature and art, because it was in that year that the two most famous works to date which exhibit the new representation of animals were published. The first is the semi-autobiographical novel *Wolf Totem* (*Lang tuteng*, 狼图腾) by Jiang Rong (姜戎, the pen name of Lü Jiamin, 吕嘉民), which explores in impressive detail the life of wolves in the Inner Mongolian grassland during the late 1960s and early 1970s.³ In 2007 it won the first Man Asian Literary Prize and, according to some reports, has been ‘China’s no. 2 bestseller after Mao Zedong’s “Little Red Book”’.⁴ The novel devotes dozens of pages to detailed—if often over-romanticized—depictions of the behaviour of wolves and extols their spirit, which it considers to be a model for imitation by human beings. It also suggests that wolves possess unique wisdom and have a rich emotional world. Among its many didactic messages, the novel presents harsh criticism of the severe degradation of the Inner Mongolian grassland, and laments the extinction of wolves, which it considers one of the prime causes of this degradation.⁵

shengtai wenxue shiye zhong de lang wenhua xianxiang’ (论生态文学视野中的狼文化现象), *Zhongshan daxue xuebao shehui kexue ban*, no. 211, 2008, pp. 39–46; Liao Zheping (廖哲平), ‘1985–2009: dangdai Zhongguo wenxue “lang” xingxiang de liubian’ (1985–2009: 当代中国文学“狼”形象的流变), *Fujian luntan—renwen shehui kexue ban*, no. 2, 2010, pp. 57–62; Gao Ping (高平), ‘Lun Liu Xianping daziran wenxue zhong de dongwu xushi’ (论刘先平大自然文学中的动物叙事), *Huainan shifan xueyuan xuebao*, vol. 67, no. 13, 2011, pp. 64–66.

³Jiang Rong (姜戎), *Lang tuteng* (狼图腾) (Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 2004). For the English translation of the novel, see Jiang Rong, *Wolf totem*, (trans.) Howard Goldblatt (New York: Penguin Press, 2009). Inner Mongolia, or the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region as it is officially called in China, was established in 1947. It should be distinguished from the independent state of Mongolia, which is sometimes referred to as Outer Mongolia. For several hundred years the territories of both constituted ‘Mongolia’ and from the seventeenth century until 1911 were part of the Qing empire. When the latter collapsed in 1911, Outer Mongolia declared independence, whereas Inner Mongolia was fully integrated into the People’s Republic of China (PRC; hereafter China) when the latter was established in 1949. Since this integration took place, the Mongolian population in China, which I refer to as Chinese-Mongols or Sino-Mongols, have been officially labelled an ‘ethnic minority’ (*shaoshu minzu*, 少数民族).

⁴William A. Callahan, ‘*Wolf totem*’s “rational exploration” of civilization and barbarians’, *The China Beat*, published online on 29 September 2009, available at <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/606>, [last accessed 29 June 2020].

⁵Jiang, *Lang tuteng*, p. 364; see also pp. 77, 96, 125, 160, 183, and 309. For an analysis of *Wolf totem* from an ecological perspective, see Qiao Meng and Noritah Omar, ‘Grassland ecology: an analysis of *Wolf totem* from an ecological perspective’, *Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2011, pp. 35–40; Jerry Varsava, ‘Jiang Rong’s *Wolf totem*: toward a

The second famous work that exemplifies the new literary and artistic engagement with animals is the 2004 film *Kekexili* (可可西里) by the director Lu Chuan (陆川), which won China's Golden Rooster Award for best film in 2005. Inspired by a real story,⁶ the film depicts in a semi-documentary style the life and death struggle of a group of Tibetan men to protect the Tibetan antelope (*Zanglingyang*, 藏羚羊), an endangered species that inhabits the harsh environment of the Tibetan Plateau, from illegal poaching. Unlike *Wolf Totem*, the film contains only a few references to the animals themselves, but it is similar to the former in its novel focus on the theme of wildlife protection.

Significantly, the new literary and artistic treatment of animals in *Wolf Totem* and *Kekexili*, as in dozens of other 'ecological animal fictional works' (*dongwu shengtai xiaoshuo*, 动物生态小说), is framed in the context of China's minority regions. This is not surprising, considering that both works focus on wild animals and that, with few exceptions, today such animals can be found mostly in China's ethnic periphery which is still sparsely populated with humans due to its harsh climate. Considering this geographical setting, it is also not surprising that in both *Wolf Totem* and *Kekexili* minority people and their special relationship with native animals feature prominently. However, this focus on minority people notwithstanding, both works were created by Han Chinese individuals and therefore embody and express Han Chinese subjectivities and sensibilities. This fact does not mean that the works ignore the attitudes of minority people towards animals and nature or that these attitudes are represented in a negative light. On the contrary, in both works, in fact, the representation of minority people and their relationship with animals and nature is extremely positive—even idealized. *Wolf Totem* in particular not only suggests that the Mongolian herders have always

narrative ecology of the grassland of contemporary Inner Mongolia', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2011, pp. 283–301; Karen Laura Thornber, *Ecoambiguity: environmental crises and East Asian literatures* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2012), pp. 310–318, 381–389. For another work that analyses the novel in the context of China's recent environmental crisis and growing environmental awareness, see Chengzhou He, 'The wolf myth and Chinese environmental sentimentalism in *Wolf totem*', *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 21, no. 4, 2014, pp. 781–800.

⁶ Emily T. Yeh, 'Tibet in China's environmental movement', in *On the fringes of the harmonious society: Tibetans and Uyghurs in socialist China*, (eds) Trine Brox and Ildikó Bellér-Hann (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2014), pp. 252–257.

existed in harmony with nature and its non-human animals, but also presents a harsh critique, which would be unimaginable had the author been an ethnic Mongol, of the destructive role that the Han Chinese have played in the extermination of the wolves and the desertification of the grassland.⁷

However, despite the novel's many references to the indigenous environmental wisdom of the Mongolian herders, the voices, concerns, and sensibilities of the Mongols are still mediated and overshadowed in *Wolf Totem* by those of the Han Chinese narrator/author.⁸ Moreover, the main concern of the latter is ultimately with the question of how the wolves, their 'wolf spirit', and the Mongolian people have helped in the past, and can help in the future, to revitalize and reinvigorate the Han Chinese and the Chinese nation/civilization.⁹ The subjectivity, agency, and voice of the minority people are even weaker in *Kekexili*, where we hear almost nothing about the sentiments and attitudes of the Tibetan protagonists in the film beyond their practical concerns with how to prevent the poaching of the Tibetan antelope and how to proceed with chasing the poachers.

Han subjectivity and mainstream majority sensibilities have not only dominated the artistic and literary works themselves but also their interpretations in academic studies. Thus, for example, several essays on *Wolf Totem* have suggested that the novel expresses the craving of a modern, urban writer for the vitality and spirituality of the wild.¹⁰ Other essays have maintained that the novel can be used as a lesson for 'the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation'¹¹ or as a good reference

⁷ Callahan, 'Wolf totem's "rational exploration"'; Meng and Omar, 'Grassland ecology'; Thornber, *Ecoambiguity*, pp. 310–318.

⁸ For a similar criticism, see Tenzin Jinba, *In the land of the eastern queendom: the politics of gender and ethnicity on the Sino-Tibetan border* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), p. 57; Callahan, 'Wolf totem's "rational exploration"'; Uradyn E. Bulag, *Collaborative nationalism: the politics of friendship on China's Mongolian frontier* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), pp. 1–4.

⁹ Jiang, *Lang tuteng*, especially pp. 364–408.

¹⁰ Gerard J. Dollar, 'In wildness is the preservation of China: Henry Thoreau, Gao Xingjian, and Jiang Rong', *Neohelicon*, no. 36, 2009, pp. 411–419; Chengzhou He, 'Poetic wolves and environmental imagination: representations of wolf in recent Chinese literature', *Neohelicon*, no. 36, 2009, pp. 397–410.

¹¹ Ai Hong (艾虹), 'Langxing xingxiang de chonggou yu zhesi: guanyu "Lang tuteng" de yi zhong chanshi' (狼性形象的重构与哲思: 关于“狼图腾”的一种阐释), *Mianyang shifan xueyuan xuebao*, vol. 27, no. 6, 2008, p. 73.

for Chinese teachers who teach courses on ideology and politics.¹² The popularity of *Wolf Totem* and *Kekexili*, as well as other environmental literary and artistic works by Han Chinese writers and artists, has not only overshadowed the treatment of animals and nature in minority literature and art, but also the ethnic characteristics and subjectivities that are embodied in these representations. No less importantly, it has also overshadowed the contribution of ethnic minority writers and artists to the development of the new literary and artistic treatment of animals in China's general cultural sphere and to China's environmental and ecocritical culture in general.

Shifting the focus to these overshadowed and under-researched domains, my article focuses on the representations of animals in the works of contemporary Chinese-Mongolian artists and writers, and the various connections between these representations and issues related to ethnic and environmental politics. My basic proposition is that the intensive engagement with animals that I demonstrate in this article, which cuts across different domains of cultural production, is related first and foremost to the close relationship between humans and animals, and the strong sensitivity to animals that has been embodied in Mongolian nomadic pastoralist culture, as in the cultures of many other pastoral nomads.¹³

My main goal, however, is to demonstrate that this intensive engagement with animals is also closely connected to two interrelated processes that have been taking place in Inner Mongolia in recent decades: the severe degradation of the Inner Mongolian grassland and the rapid sinicization of China's Mongols. Drawing on ideas from ecocriticism, literary animal studies, and post-colonial studies, as well as anthropology and cultural studies, my central argument is that in the context of this environmental and cultural crisis, the engagement with animals reflects and expresses anxiety about the fate of the Inner

¹² Yang Jujing (杨居璟), 'Xiaoshuo "Lang tuteng" dai gei sixiang zhengzhi ke jiaoxue de ruogan qishi' (小说“狼图腾”带给思想政治课教学的若干启示), *Anhui wenxue*, no. 5, 2008, pp. 238–239.

¹³ See, for example, Hugh Beach and Florian Stammer, 'Human-animal relations in pastoralism', *Nomadic Peoples*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2006, Special issue: Humans and reindeer on the move, pp. 6–30; Natasha Fijn, *Living with herds: human-animal coexistence in Mongolia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). A powerful artistic representation of the close relationship between humans and animals in Mongolian pastoralist culture can be found in the film *The story of the weeping camel*, by directors Byambasuren Davaa and Luigi Falorni (ThinkFilms and National Geographic, 2003).

Mongolian grassland, the fate of real animals, both wild and domesticated, which for centuries have been closely associated with this landscape and Mongolian nomadic culture, and, most importantly, the fate of Mongolian culture itself. Moreover, I also argue that contemporary Sino-Mongolian writers and artists use what I call 'the ethnic ecocritical animal' more symbolically to construct and assert Mongolianness as part of their search for an 'authentic' ethnic identity and, at the same time, to comment critically on the impact that Chinese domination has had on the Inner Mongolian grassland, its indigenous human and non-human inhabitants, and Mongolian culture and identity. As is often the case in the construction of 'authentic' self-identities, while making references to real animals and a real place, the writers and artists whose works I explore in this article often construct an idealized image of 'traditional' Mongolian culture and the relationship that Mongols have historically had with animals and the grassland. Finally, in addition to all of these arguments, I also propose that with their ethnic environmentalism, Chinese-Mongolian artists and writers have made an important contribution to the development of China's environmental movement.

The article is divided into three parts, each of which is dedicated to the work/s of one artist or writer and to a different domain of cultural production. In the first part I analyse a short story by the writer Guo Xuebo (郭雪波), with references to other stories that he has written. In the second, I focus on two popular songs by the pop-and-rock musician Teng Ge'er (腾格尔). And in the last part I analyse a film by the director and actor Ning Cai (宁才). The focus on various forms of creative expression not only covers a broad spectrum of contemporary Chinese-Mongolian culture but also reveals voices that hitherto have received little attention because most academic attention so far has focused on literature. This broader focus is particularly important in the case of minority voices, considering that many minority intellectuals who speak out in China's general public sphere are not proficient enough in Chinese to write literature in this language.

In addition to the focus on different cultural expressions, the three parts of the article span a period of two decades between the mid-1980s and mid-2000s. Thus, they represent different phases in the development of Sino-Mongolian cultural representation of animals, which correspond to different developments in the ecological, cultural, and socio-political environments in Inner Mongolia. Moreover, the works that I analyse in this article feature different animals. Therefore, they not only represent the diverse animal world with which the

Mongols interact, but can also help us to understand the different meanings that the latter associate with the different animal species that inhabit this world. My analysis of the works has been greatly informed by conversations that I held with the two artists and the writer who created them.

Chinese-Mongols, language, ethnicity, and the environment: some theoretical considerations

Although in their creative work Guo Xuebo, Teng Ge'er, and Ning Cai celebrate Mongolianness, their ethnic identity is actually quite complex, as all of them have been strongly integrated into mainstream Chinese culture. Indeed, all three were born and grew up in Inner Mongolia, and received most of their early education at home and at school in Mongolian, which they can speak fluently. However, the first two left Inner Mongolia and moved to Beijing decades ago, and although Ning Cai lives today in Inner Mongolia, he too spent almost 15 years in Shanghai and Beijing. Moreover, even though all three speak fluent Mongolian, they all make extensive use of Chinese in their creative work, and at least two of them actually create mainly in Chinese. One can assume that the extensive use of Chinese by all three reflects the fact that they want to reach out to mainstream culture and a larger audience to achieve more fame and wealth. It also reflects the fact that all of them received their higher education in Chinese in major Chinese cities and have lived and worked in a Chinese-dominated environment for decades. However, this extensive use of Chinese notwithstanding, the creative work of the three constitutes an excellent example of what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have called 'minor literature'. Indeed, although they all use the dominant language of the Han Chinese majority, they nevertheless insist not only on maintaining and expressing their minority identity and voice, but also on challenging the hegemony of the dominant culture.¹⁴ Their works also fit the notion of 'minor literature' in that, with very few exceptions, they express collective and political messages and speak on behalf of their minority identity and people. With this last characteristic, their works also evoke what Fredric Jameson has called 'third world literature' in the sense that they are

¹⁴ See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: toward a minor literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986 [1975]), especially pp. 16–27.

produced by individuals who belong to a post-colonial/colonized nation and exhibit a strong connection between the personal and the national/political.¹⁵ This is another important explanation of why they all use Chinese in their creative work. Considering that the three have assumed the role of spokespeople for their ethnic group, using the dominant language allows them to voice the grievances of their ethnic group in China's most general public sphere.

With their multicultural biographies and bilingualism, Guo Xuebo, Teng Ge'er, and Ning Cai are quite representative of the general condition of Mongolian identity in contemporary China, which in recent decades has been undergoing a rapid process of sinicization. Indeed, by the first half of the twentieth century the Mongols had already become a small minority in their own homeland due to the massive migration of Han Chinese settlers who moved into the Inner Mongolian grassland in search of new agricultural land. These migrants not only changed the demography in the region, but, by introducing intensive agriculture, they also changed its natural environment and the culture of its indigenous people. As more and more grassland was transformed into farmland or degraded as a result of the harm that farming inflicted on the fragile local ecology (I discuss the link between the two later on), and as a result of the pressures exerted on them by the policies of the Chinese state and the culture of the Han Chinese majority, increasing numbers of Mongols abandoned their traditional nomadic pastoralist lifestyle and shifted to a lifestyle based on a mixture of farming and sedentary pastoralism.¹⁶

¹⁵ See Fredric Jameson, 'Third world literature in the era of multinational capitalism', *Social Text*, no. 15, 1986, pp. 65–88.

¹⁶ Today, Mongols constitute about 17 per cent of Inner Mongolia's population, while the Han account for about 80 per cent. For more information about the massive migration of the Han into the region and the consequent demographic, environmental, and cultural changes, see Jirgal Burjgin and Naran Bilik, 'Contemporary Mongolian population distribution, migration, cultural change, and identity', in *China's minorities on the move: selected case studies*, (eds) Robyn R. Iredale, Naran Bilik and Fei Guo (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2003), pp. 53–68; Almaz Khan, 'Who are the Mongols? State, ethnicity, and the politics of representation in the PRC', in *Negotiating ethnicities in China and Taiwan*, (ed.) Melissa J. Brown (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1996), pp. 130–131; Uradyn E. Bulag, 'Ethnic resistance with socialist characteristics', in *Chinese society: change, conflict and resistance*, (eds) Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 182; Dee Mack Williams, *Beyond great walls: environment, identity, and development on the Chinese grasslands of Inner Mongolia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 28; Wulantuya (乌兰图雅), Wudun (乌敦) and

This trend continued and increased during the Maoist era (1949–1976) as a result of the massive, state-led migration of Han settlers and several land reclamation campaigns that dealt a devastating blow to large portions of the grassland.¹⁷ High rates of intermarriage with Han Chinese and rapid urbanization and marketization during the reform era (after 1978) have led to the further decline of Mongolian culture. Today this is most evident in the fact that many Mongols, especially in the cities of Inner Mongolia, cannot read, write, or even speak Mongolian any more.¹⁸ Beyond these changes, although in recent decades urbanization and marketization together with massive industrialization have led to phenomenal economic growth in Inner Mongolia, they have simultaneously led, together with ongoing land reclamation, climate change, overgrazing, and various state environmental policies, to the further deterioration of the grassland and to unprecedented desertification. As a result of these factors, while some Mongols in Inner Mongolia have become rich, a large number of Mongolian herders, who were already a small minority among the Sino-Mongolian population, have been driven into poverty, and many of them have been forced to migrate to Chinese-dominated towns and

Nayintai (那音太), ‘20 shiji Ke’erqin de renkou bianhua ji qi tezheng fenxi’ (20世纪科尔沁的人口变化及其特征分析), *Dili xuebao*, vol. 62, no. 4, 2007, pp. 418–426.

¹⁷ John W. Longworth and Gregory J. Williamson, *China’s pastoral region: sheep and wool, minority nationalities, rangeland degradation and sustainable development* (Wallingford: CAB International/Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research, 1993), pp. 304–305; Dee Mack Williams, ‘The barbed walls of China: a contemporary grassland drama’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 55, no. 3, 1996, p. 673; David Sneath, *Changing Inner Mongolia: pastoral Mongolian society and the Chinese state* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 136; Judith Shapiro, *Mao’s war against nature: politics and the environment in revolutionary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 140, 163; Uradyn E. Bulag, ‘Inner Mongolia: the dialectics of colonization and ethnicity building’, in *Governing China’s multiethnic frontiers*, (ed.) Morris Rossabi (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), especially pp. 92, 100–107; Yihong Pan, ‘Revelation of the grassland: the Han sent-down youths in Inner Mongolia in China’s Cultural Revolution’, *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2006, pp. 225–226, 228–231; Judith Shapiro, *China’s environmental challenges* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2012), pp. 147–148.

¹⁸ On intermarriage and urbanization, see Burjgin and Bilik, ‘Contemporary Mongolian population’, especially pp. 58–61, 63–64. On language loss, see Uradyn E. Bulag, ‘Mongolian ethnicity and linguistic anxiety in China’, *American Anthropologist*, vol. 105, no. 4, 2003, pp. 753–763; Naran Bilik, ‘Language education, intellectuals and symbolic representation: being an urban Mongolian in a new configuration of social evolution’, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, vol. 4, no. 1–2, 1998, especially pp. 47–56; Enze Han, ‘The dog that hasn’t barked: assimilation and resistance in Inner Mongolia, China’, *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2011, pp. 62–66.

cities, and abandon their land and pastoralist way of life.¹⁹ Because Mongolian herders were the guardians of the Mongolian language and the pastoralist lifestyle—two elements that are widely seen as the essence of Mongolian culture—this change has dealt a fatal blow to Mongolian identity in China.

This is the general background against which Teng Ge'er, Guo Xuebo, and Ning Cai create their art and literature. In fact, Chinese not only allows them to communicate their ethnic minority voices and grievances to the majority Han Chinese audience, it is also the only language that enables them to communicate with many of their fellow Mongols, especially those who live in cities. Furthermore, it is precisely their physical distance from their homeland and the grassland, their increased sinicization and everyday contact with the Han Chinese 'other', the severe cultural loss that their people have experienced, and the environmental degradation in their homeland that have led to the heightened ethnic awareness one finds in their creative work. This heightened awareness is intertwined with the strong sense of anxiety that the three share with many other Mongols, especially intellectuals, about the future of Mongolian identity and its ability to survive the threat of assimilation.²⁰ The concern for the well-being of the grassland and its human and non-human inhabitants that is so evident in their creative work, and which I explore in this article, is an important part of this general anxiety. This concern is not surprising considering that nationalism and ethno-nationalist sentiments are usually intertwined with attachment to and celebration of a specific place and its particular landscape and non-human environment. Indeed, despite, and also very much because of, the dramatic changes that have taken place in Inner Mongolia, described above, today Mongolian intellectuals still, and more than ever before, consider the grassland, the herders, and nomadic pastoralism as the

¹⁹ On this migration, see Shi-Shan, 'Attention is called to Inner Mongolia's "environmental emigration"', *Radio Free Asia*, published online on 4 May 2002, available at <http://www.radicalparty.org/it/print/5063811>, [last accessed 29 June 2020]; Gardi Borjigin, 'Inner Mongolian environment threatened, nomads forced to move', *Radio Free Asia*, published online on 7 February 2005, available at <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/social/2005/02/07/nomads/>, [last accessed 29 June 2020]; Emily T. Yeh, 'Green governmentality and pastoralism in western China: "converting pastures to grasslands"', *Nomadic Peoples*, vol. 9, no. 1–2, 2005, p. 18; Enghebatu Togocho, 'Ecological migration and human rights', *China Rights Forum*, no. 4, 2006, pp. 26–30.

²⁰ For more details about this anxiety, see Bulag, 'Mongolian ethnicity and linguistic anxiety'; Bilik, 'Language education, intellectuals and symbolic representation', pp. 54–56; Burjgin and Bilik, 'Contemporary Mongolian population', p. 60.

primary markers of their ethnic identity.²¹ This is also the context in which Teng Ge'er, Ning Cai, and Guo Xuebo engage in their creative work with the animals, both wild and domesticated, that have been closely associated with the Inner Mongolian grassland and traditional Mongolian culture for centuries.

As a result of the growing awareness throughout the world of global environmental challenges, in the last decade-and-a-half or so an increasing number of ecocritics have called for a more global or planetary ecocriticism (also referred to as 'ecocosmopolitanism') which transcends national and ethnic-cultural boundaries and the common environmental focus on national or other local environments.²² However, most environmental literature and other creative works are clearly still locally and ethnically based, and are still concerned with specific places and environments. This is not surprising, considering that for many peoples around the globe the degradation of the particular environments they inhabit has a crucial and immediate impact on their livelihood and survival as individuals and as a group.²³ People also tend to feel concern for the specific places and environments they inhabit because of the emotional and spiritual bonds that they have developed to these places and environments, and the link that these have to their cultures, histories, and identities. Thus, parallel to the global trend mentioned above, the last two to three decades have also seen the proliferation of ecocritical studies that focus on the inextricable connection between specific ethnic groups and specific environments. These studies have explored the diverse ways in which different peoples connect and interact with their local non-human environments, the diversity of their perceptions about and attitudes towards these environments, and their varied environmental experiences and behaviours.²⁴ They have also

²¹ See Khan, 'Who are the Mongols?'; Bulag, 'Ethnic resistance with socialist characteristics', pp. 182–184; Bilik, 'Language education, intellectuals and symbolic representation', p. 56.

²² See, for example, Lawrence Buell, 'Ecoglobalist affects: the emergence of U.S. environmental imagination on a planetary scale', in *Shades of the planet: American literature as world literature*, (eds) Wai Chee Dimock and Lawrence Buell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 227–248; Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of place and sense of planet: the environmental imagination of the global* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²³ See, for example, Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier, *Varieties of environmentalism: essays north and south* (London: Earthscan, 1997).

²⁴ For a review of the large number of studies that focus on specific ethnicities and their environmental literatures, see Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic, 'The shoulders we stand on: an introduction to ethnicity and ecocriticism', *MELUS*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2009, pp. 5–24.

explored the various reactions of different ethnic groups and nations to environmental degradation and crises, the diverse impact that such crises have on different peoples, and the ways in which these reactions are expressed in the creative work of native writers.²⁵ One common feature shared by these studies is that they remind us again and again that the concern of environmental writers is very often not only inextricably linked to particular environments but also to specific histories and specific political, economic, and socio-cultural contexts and interests.

This study aims to enrich the growing body of ecocritical studies that focus on specific places and cultures by exploring an ethno-environmental nexus that to date has received little attention. Indeed, although much has been written about the Mongols in China and on the environment in Inner Mongolia, we know very little about the nature writing and art of Chinese-Mongolian writers and artists, and about the environmental perceptions and experiences of Chinese-Mongols in general. In addition, my article also intends to enrich the scholarship that focuses on ethnicity and ethnic identity in China. Since the 1990s, much has been written on these topics and on how different ethnic identities in this country have been constructed, experienced, defined, and changed, and also how they are represented in the media and in creative work. So far, however, while territory has always been considered a defining feature of most ethnic identities in China (as elsewhere), surprisingly little has been written in this body of literature about the link between ethnic identity and the non-human environments in these territories. Against this background, my study hopes to demonstrate how central the natural environment, with a particular emphasis on animals, can be to ethnic identity—be it the physical and material survival of a particular ethnic group; the sense of identity of its members; the ways members of this group imagine themselves and construct, express, and represent their identity in the public sphere; and the ways in which they negotiate their well-being and rights with the state or other ethnic groups.

Although it is over a decade old, this is probably the most comprehensive review available of this body of literature to date.

²⁵ A good example here is Thornber's *Ecoambiguity*, which focuses on East Asian environmental literature from China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. Although mostly concerned with the similar 'ecoambiguity' that is embodied in the literatures from these different places, Thornber's analysis simultaneously unveils the diversity of environmental attitudes, experiences, and expressions and how they are intimately connected to the different local contexts.

The ethnic ecocritical animal in 'The Sand Fox' and other stories by Guo Xuebo

The Chinese-Mongolian writer Guo Xuebo was one of the first writers in post-Maoist China to focus in his fiction on nature and animals from an environmental perspective. His works are among the earliest to be referred to by Chinese critics as 'ecological literature' (*shengtai wenxue*, 生态文学).²⁶ Moreover, one of his best-known works, a novel called *The Wolf Child of the Great Desert* (*Damo langhai*, 大漠狼孩), which he published in 2001, won him China's first national Ecological and Environmental Literary Prize.²⁷

In many of his stories Guo engages with the intimate relationship and interdependence between humans and nature, and his animal stories in particular suggest that the rigid, dichotomous, and hierarchical divide that has often been assumed to exist between the human and animal worlds can sometimes become fuzzy. In his focus on animals and nature, and the relationship that human beings have with both, and in blurring the boundaries between human and non-human beings, Guo challenges the anthropocentric world view that has dominated Han Chinese traditional Confucian culture since antiquity.²⁸ However, and no less importantly, his works have also challenged the radical Maoist anthropocentric ethos that dominated China from the early 1950s to the late 1970s. Indeed, in contrast to Guo's vision that humans and nature/animals should coexist in harmony with each other, Maoist culture embraced a utilitarian and confrontational attitude towards nature, usually regarding it simply as a resource that should be exploited or alternatively as an enemy that should be conquered.²⁹

Given their innovative content, Guo Xuebo's works have been studied quite extensively, albeit almost exclusively within China. However, most of the studies that have explored his literary work, even if they mention that

²⁶ For instance, see Li Xiaofeng (李晓峰), 'Cong shiyi qimeng dao caoyuan shengtai de renwen guanhuai: dangdai Mengguzu caoyuan wenhua xiaoshuo de shanbian guiji' (从诗意启蒙到草原生态的人文关怀: 当代蒙古族草原文化小说的嬗变轨迹), *Minzu wenxue yanjiu*, no. 1, 2004, p. 98.

²⁷ He, 'Poetic wolves and environmental imagination', p. 401.

²⁸ On this world view, see Shapiro, *Mao's war against nature*, pp. 7, 212–213. It is important to note, however, that traditional Chinese culture also had less anthropocentric world views, such as those found in Daoism and Buddhism.

²⁹ Shapiro, *Mao's war against nature*; Wang Shudong (汪树东), 'Chongsu Zhongguo wenxue de luse zhi wei: lun Zhongguo dangdai wenxue de shengtai yishi' (重塑中国文学的绿色之维——论中国当代文学的生态意识), *Wenxue pinglun*, no. 6, 2009, pp. 95, 97.

he is an ethnic Mongol, have generally tended to overlook or downplay his Mongolian background and subjectivity. Thus, these studies have tended to either group him together with other Chinese ecological writers³⁰ or to underscore his universal messages about humankind and the global environmental crisis.³¹ Contrary to these works, I contend that although Guo's works certainly contain universalist environmental messages, they also strongly reflect and assert his ethnic identity. Guo's ecological literature and his novel literary engagement with animals and nature are closely related to his Mongolian minority identity in several ways. Indeed, this identity is reflected and asserted first and foremost through the fact that most of his stories are set in his native land, the Horqin (Ke'erqin, 科尔沁) Grassland/Desert, a region in southeast Inner Mongolia that is still inhabited by a large Mongolian population and is strongly associated with Mongolian culture and history. It is also reflected in the author's deep familiarity with, and concern for, the natural environment of this particular region, including its fauna and flora, and in the numerous references that appear in his stories to

³⁰ For example, He, 'Poetic wolves and environmental imagination', pp. 401–402; Wang, 'Chongsu Zhongguo wenxue de lüse zhi wei'; Liao, '1985–2009: dangdai Zhongguo wenxue', pp. 60–61.

³¹ For examples of this tendency, see Li Mei (李玫), 'Guo Xuebo xiaoshuo zhong de shengtai yishi' (郭雪波小说中的生态意识), *NeiMenggu minzu daxue xuebao shehui kexue ban*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2005, pp. 49–53; Wang Shudong (汪树东), 'Kanhū dadi: shengtai yishi yu Guo Xuebo xiaoshuo' (看护大地: 生态意识与郭雪波小说), *Beifang luncong*, no. 197, 2006, pp. 34–37; Zhang Rong (张蓉) and Yu Liping (余莉萍), 'Shengtai shiye xia ren yu lang de jiujiē: Guo Xuebo xiaoshuo lang xingxiang fenxi' (生态视野下人与狼的纠结: 郭雪波小说狼形象分析), *Wenzhou zhiye jishu xueyuan xuebao*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2006, pp. 61–63; Meng Qiuyan (孟秋艳), 'Lun Guo Xuebo xiaoshuo zhong dongwu xingxiang de xiangzheng yiwei' (论郭雪波小说中动物形象的象征意味), *Mudan*, no. 24, 2015, pp. 177–178. Li Xiaofeng has also observed this tendency and criticized mainstream Han Chinese literary critics for interpreting the works of minority writers exclusively from their own perspective, while overlooking the ethnic minority perspective that is embodied in these works. See Li Xiaofeng (李晓峰), 'Zhongguo dangdai shaoshu minzu wenxue chuanguo yu piping xianzhuang de sikao' (中国当代少数民族文学创作与批评现状的思考), *Minzu wenxue yanjiu*, no. 1, 2003, pp. 68–74. Notwithstanding this dominant tendency, a few scholars have nevertheless focused on the ethnic minority voice in Guo's literary work. See, for example, Wang Junning (王军宁), 'Shengtai yu wenhua de duoyuan hudong: lun Guo Xuebo xiaoshuo de bieyang shengtai suqiu' (生态与文化的多元互动: 论郭雪波小说的别样生态诉求), *Dianzi keji daxue xuebao*, vol. 9, no. 5, 2007, pp. 67–70; Lei Ming (雷鸣), 'Weiji xungen: minzu wenhua de rentong yu xiandaixing fansi: dui shaoshu minzu zuojia shengtai xiaoshuo de yi zhong zongguan' (危机寻根: 民族文化的认同与现代性反思-对少数民族作家生态小说的一种综观), *Qianyan*, no. 9, 2009, pp. 126–130.

elements associated with Mongolian animism, shamanism, and Buddhism, and the vision of a harmonious and interdependent existence between humans and nature/animals that is often associated with these religious traditions.³²

Guo's intensive literary engagement with animals in particular has been manifested most conspicuously in his many wolf stories, in which he revolutionized not only the literary treatment of wolves in Chinese literature,³³ but also of wild animals in general. In these stories, which are usually dominated by a general realistic narrative embroidered with fantastic elements, one can find the ambivalent attitude of Mongols and Mongolian culture towards wolves. On the one hand, in some of these stories the wolves threaten people and are feared by them, so they are sometimes referred to as evil. On the other hand, however, many of these stories are imbued with a deep fascination with this wild animal, evident in the many pages that depict its behaviour in great detail, and with respect and empathy. Furthermore, Guo often ascribes to his literary wolves qualities and emotions that have traditionally been assumed to belong exclusively to humans, and sometimes even views reality from their imagined perspective. Chengzhou He has suggested that this new, positive treatment of wolves in Chinese literature, which is also found in wolf stories by other Chinese writers, 'has inevitably been influenced and inspired by the long and rich traditions of the wolf myths and literature in the West, particularly those works by Jack London, Rudyard Kipling, and other Western writers since the end of the nineteenth century'.³⁴ However, it is equally important to note that historically the wolf has not only been one of the most prevalent wild animals that inhabited the Mongolian grassland, but has also held a central place in Mongolian cosmology and is considered to be the legendary ancestor of Genghis Khan.³⁵

³² For studies of Mongolian religion, particularly Mongolian Shamanism and Buddhism, see, for example, Marie-Dominique Even, 'Shamanism of the Mongols', in *Mongolia today*, (ed.) Shirin Akiner (London: Kegan Paul International, in association with the Central Asia Research Forum, 1991), pp. 183–205; Bulcsu Siklos, 'Mongolian Buddhism: a defensive account', in *Mongolia today*, (ed.) Akiner, pp. 155–182; Christopher P. Atwood, 'Buddhism and popular ritual in Mongolian religion: a reexamination of the fire cult', *History of Religions*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1996, pp. 112–139.

³³ He, 'Poetic wolves and environmental imagination', especially pp. 401–402; Liao, '1985–2009: dangdai Zhongguo wenxue', pp. 60–61; He, 'The wolf myth', p. 783.

³⁴ He, 'Poetic wolves and environmental imagination', p. 398.

³⁵ Baasanjav Terbish, 'The Mongolian dog as an intimate "other"', *Inner Asia*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2015, pp. 141–142.

The most celebrated wolf character in Guo's wolf stories is the mother wolf, which often seems to represent motherly love in its most sublime form.³⁶ However, in addition to his continuous engagement with the image of the mother wolf, Guo has also repeatedly stressed the environmental role of wolves in general. Thus, at the very beginning of 'The Sand Wolf' (*Sha lang*, 沙狼) he highlights the positive role that wolves play in maintaining the ecological balance of the grassland. Similarly, in *The Wolf Child of the Great Desert*, he laments the extinction of the wolves and suggests that this has been a major cause of the desertification of the Inner Mongolian grassland. Jiang Rong's *Wolf Totem* makes a similar point—indeed, the presence of this theme and other ideas and motifs it shares with Guo's works have led Guo to suggest more than once that Jiang's famous novel was heavily inspired by his own stories.³⁷

³⁶ See, for example, Guo Xuebo (郭雪波), *Sha lang* (沙狼) (Beijing: Nongcun duwu chubanshe, 1992), pp. 325–375.

³⁷ Guo Xuebo, personal communication with the author, September 2017; see also Wangyi xinwen (网易新闻), 'Mengguzu zuojia cheng "Lang tuteng" cuangai Menggu minzu wenhua' (蒙古族作家称“狼图腾”篡改蒙古民族文化), published online on 24 February 2015, available at <http://news.163.com/15/0224/12/AJ7ILON100011229.html>, [last accessed 18 July 2017]. Guo has also repeatedly accused Jiang Rong and his famous novel of distorting many facts about Mongolian culture and of falsifying Mongolian history. In his most significant criticism of *Wolf totem*, Guo claimed that the wolf has never been the totem of the Mongols but rather their 'natural enemy'. See Brigitte Duzan, 'Guo Xuebo 郭雪波: présentation', in 'La nouvelle dans la littérature chinoise contemporaine', published online on 1 March 2015, available at www.chinese-shortstories.com/Auteurs_de_a_z_Guo_Xuebo.htm, [last accessed 29 June 2020]; Wangyi xinwen, 'Mengguzu zuojia'; Laura Zhou, 'Wolf totem: writer blasts hit film over "fake" Mongolian culture', *South China Morning Post*, published online on 24 February 2015, available at <https://www.scmp.com/print/news/china/article/1722433/ethnic-chinese-writer-criticizes-fake-culture-forced-mongolians-hit-film>, [last accessed 30 May 2019]. Many of my Mongolian informants rejected Guo's view, which also contradicts conventional academic wisdom. See, for example, Terbish, 'The Mongolian dog', pp. 141–142. However, Guo's view is supported by many ethnographic reports which point out that the wolf, as the most dangerous predator of livestock in the Mongolian grassland, has always been 'strongly disliked and heavily persecuted' by Mongolian herders and government officials, and that in reality it has been one of the most popular and prestigious targets for hunters. For the last quote, see Richard P. Reading, Henry Mix, Badamjavyn Lhagvasuren and Natsagdorjin Tsevenmyadag, 'The commercial harvest of wildlife in Dornod Aimag, Mongolia', *The Journal of Wildlife Management*, vol. 62, no. 1, 1998, p. 59. See also Bernard Charlier, *Faces of the wolf: managing the human, non-human boundary in Mongolia* (Leiden: Brill, 2015). Like Guo's stories,

Although wolves dominate Guo's animal stories, he has also written about other wild animals that are associated with his native land, one of which is 'The Sand Fox' (*Shahu*, 沙狐), which he published in Chinese in 1985. This short story is one of Guo's earliest environmental works, and it nicely illustrates his new literary engagement with animals and nature as well as the link between this engagement and his Mongolian identity. The story is set in the Horqin Desert and is imbued with anxiety about the deteriorating condition of its fragile natural environment. Moreover, it also laments the degradation of what, until recently, used to be lush grassland and presents a powerful criticism of the brutal human behaviour that led to it. The image of the small sand fox, the non-human protagonist of the story, stands at the centre of this ground-breaking environmental literary work and plays a crucial role in articulating many of the story's novel messages.

The plot of 'The Sand Fox' takes place in the southwest part of the Horqin Desert, in a region known by locals as the 'Demon's Desert' (*egui de shamo*, 恶鬼的沙漠). This desert is depicted as a deadly monster that gets bigger and bigger, swallowing everything that gets on its way, including humans, wild animals, and vegetation. It is against this backdrop that the human protagonist in 'The Sand Fox', a man who the locals refer to as 'Old Sand Man' (*lao sha tou*, 老沙头), is introduced. Old Sand Man has been living in the midst of the vast sand dunes for many years, far away from any human settlement. His job is to look after the plants that a local forestry centre has planted to stop the desertification process. He is depicted as extremely sensitive to the natural environment around him and is totally dedicated to protecting its sparse vegetation and the few wild animals that inhabit it.

Although the ethnic identity of Old Sand Man remains obscured throughout the story, the way in which Guo depicts his respect for nature and animals clearly alludes to animism, shamanism, and Buddhism. Hence, such allusions communicate the notion, which Guo celebrates in many of his other stories in more explicit form, that traditional Mongolian culture has always been environmentalist in nature and animal-friendly. This notion is articulated in 'The Sand Fox', for example, when Old Sand Man's daughter urges him to catch a hare that lives in the dunes. The father refuses her request, explaining:

this debate is a vivid manifestation of the ambivalent attitude towards the wolf in Mongolian culture.

Child, we should not capture it. Here we should let every single blade of tiny grass and every single little insect live and be free ... Because there are so few living things here. Child, here it doesn't matter whose life it is, because all lives mutually depend on each other.³⁸

Although neither Buddhism nor shamanism or animism are mentioned explicitly in this quote or in other places in the 'The Sand Fox', the reference to Mongolian religious traditions is quite clear. Buddhism is evoked in the emphasis on the notion of 'life' (*shengming*, 生命) as a valuable and even sacred phenomenon that is equally embodied in all living creatures, regardless of their size and species, and in every 'single blade of tiny grass'. It is also evoked when the father explains to his daughter that they should let every living creature be free, using the term *fangsheng* (放生), which denotes the Buddhist concept and ritualistic practice of freeing captive or bought animals.³⁹ Likewise, the impact of animism and shamanism is manifested in the father's explanation that the different forms of life are interdependent and that each and every one of them is essential to the survival of the entire ecological system of the grassland.

The sand fox, the non-human protagonist for which Guo's story is named, appears in the story just after the above dialogue between Old Sand Man and his daughter takes place. When Old Sand Man encounters the fox for the first time, he instinctively points his gun at the wild animal but then realizes that the small carnivore plays an important role in protecting the environment and so he spares its life. At this point, the narrator relates how wild rats eat the sparse vegetation that grows in the desert and thus accelerate the process of desertification, while foxes help to reduce the population of rats, thus protecting the vegetation. From this point on, Old Sand Man and the

³⁸ Guo Xuebo (郭雪波), 'Shahu' (沙狐), *Beifang wenxue*, no. 4, 1985, p. 4. For other translations into English of some of Guo Xuebo's stories, including 'The sand fox', see the collection *The desert wolf* (N.p.: Chinese Literature Press/Panda Books, 1996).

³⁹ Although the practice of liberating animals has long been associated with Buddhism, several studies suggest that the practice and the term *fangsheng* may have had their origin in Daoism and in China, rather than India, and that during certain periods in Chinese history the practice was also popular among Confucian scholars who strongly objected to Buddhism. For more information on the practice and its history in China, see Handlin Smith, 'Liberating animals in Ming-Qing China'; Henry Shiu and Leah Stokes, 'Buddhist animal release practices: historic, environmental, public health and economic concerns', *Contemporary Buddhism*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2008, pp. 181–196.

fox develop a tacit understanding that ‘no one will harm the other’,⁴⁰ and the readers are told that the two of them also ‘comfort each other in the enduring loneliness’⁴¹ they both experience in the vast desolate desert. Thus, the fox assumes an important ecological role, but at the same time a spiritual and emotional role in becoming a companion to Old Sand Man. The narrator also points out that the two started to live in peace with each other because they shared a common experience of struggling to survive in the harsh environment.

Life on the dunes is depicted as peaceful and harmonious, and thanks to Old Sand Man’s dedication to protecting the different forms of life that exist on the dunes, birds and other animals start to reappear in what used to be a lifeless desert. Depicted as one with nature, ‘[Old Sand Man] could count precisely how many hares and pheasants there were in the dunes’,⁴² and in a strange mixture of new environmental language and remnants of the militant discourse that prevailed during the Maoist era, the narrator tells the reader that Old Sand Man

admired the plants and animals in the desert and considered all of the lives that existed there as his partners and models, warriors who are not afraid of the desert demon. In this place, humans, animals, and plants had formed a harmonious, natural alliance to cope with the desert demon.⁴³

Old Sand Man becomes particularly excited when he discovers that the fox has given birth to three cubs. However, this idyllic, Eden-like reality in which humans, animals, and plants live in total harmony with each other, protect nature together, and keep one another company is shattered when one day the head of the local forestry centre and his secretary come to the dunes to hunt. The hunters chase the fox, which flees deep into the desert with its three cubs. The two men are portrayed not only as enemies of nature who destroy its ecological balance, but also as cruel villains who have no respect for the life of animals and no empathy for them. When the two eventually spot the fox, it is in the middle of feeding its cubs. As in many of Guo’s wolf stories, this scene clearly underscores the powerful motherhood of the mother fox, an image that highlights the shared attributes of human and non-human animals. To enhance the similarities between the mother fox and humans, the narrator also describes how she protects

⁴⁰ Guo, ‘Shahu’, p. 6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

her weakest cub and observes that animals, like human beings, tend to protect their weakest offspring the most.⁴⁴ The mother fox senses the danger but does not escape because after being chased for two whole days, she is extremely hungry and thirsty, and thus cannot resist the attractive smell of a dead horse that lies on the dunes. Therefore, instead of running away from the hunters, 'it looked with begging, pitiful red eyes at the human beings—the masters of the world'.⁴⁵ In these lines the narrator personifies the mother fox, but this is not the kind of personification that turns an animal into an allegory, metaphor, or fantastic creature. Instead, the description suggests that the mother fox, like humans, has emotions and that she can also communicate with humans, even though she does not use any words. However, the two men, who the narrator describes as 'the masters of the world'—clearly to criticize conventional human attitudes towards animals—treat the fox as a mere object and, showing no compassion for it, they shoot and kill her.

The description of the mother fox's death is full of pathos and the narrator keeps describing her in anthropomorphic terms:

The old sand fox fell down. A bullet hit her chest and red blood trickled out from it like water, painting her beautiful, snow-white fur in red, and dripping down into the soft sand ... She didn't have time to close her two eyes, and with the faint, remaining light of life, these two eyes gazed silently into the blue sky of the desert with helpless sorrow, two tears hanging at their corners. Her poor little cub still clutched at its mother's belly, sucking greedily the blood-stained nipple that already yielded no milk.⁴⁶

From the moment the two men arrive in the dunes, Old Sand Man is filled with anxiety, fearing that they will kill the mother fox. Having no power to stop them, he hopes that she will escape and thus be saved. However, after hearing the sound of the shooting from afar, he agitatedly rushes to the scene and is shocked to see his wild companion lying dead on the sand. Full of deep grief and rage, he 'knelt down beside the sand fox. With his hands shivering fiercely, he gently caressed the dead fox's neck and slowly closed her tearful eyes. At that moment, two anguished tears flowed out from the sand-filled corners of his own eyes'.⁴⁷ Following this touching scene, Old Sand Man angrily snatches the gun from the

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

hands of one of the hunters and breaks it. Then he ‘bursts into howls that sound like those of a wild beast’ and curses the desert: ‘Damn you old sand demon! You are the source of this whole disaster! I really hate you!... Who let you out of the bottle? Who was it?!...’⁴⁸

The story ends shortly after this burst of rage with a cold and detached, yet extremely tragic, depiction of the desert wind rising again, noting how it ‘chases’ Old Sand Man and his daughter while ‘burying their footprints’ and ‘pushing their bodies away’ as if trying to ‘swallow them’.⁴⁹ This tragic ending and the fact that it comes right after the death of the sand fox help to articulate the link that Guo clearly aims to create between the fate of his animal protagonist and the fate of the general environment in Horqin and its indigenous people. The tragic death of the mother fox not only emphasizes the demonic victory of the lifeless desert over the Horqin grassland and all of the living creatures that inhabit it, but also becomes an important driving force in the calamity. In other words, the way in which Guo chooses to end his story drives home one of his main messages—that the extinction of wild animals is not only the result but also one of the causes behind the death of the grassland and, no less importantly, that it will also inevitably lead to the extinction of the people who inhabit this dying environment. Beyond these messages, this tragic ending also explains the strong empathy for animals that one finds in ‘The Sand Fox’ and in so many of Guo’s other stories. It derives not only from the understanding that the specific animals and humans Guo depicts share a common struggle for survival and that the well-being of the former has a direct impact on the well-being of the latter, but also that both share a common experience of suffering and victimhood.

The tragic end of ‘The Sand Fox’ is also important because of the seemingly rhetorical question that Old Sand Man directs at the desert after the death of the fox. When Sand Man curses the desert and asks it, ‘Who let you out of the bottle? Who was it?!...’, he clearly does not expect an answer to his question. However, in the following pages I will argue that this question is far from rhetorical: it stands at the very centre of many of Guo Xuebo’s stories⁵⁰ and constitutes another important expression of his Mongolian identity. Indeed, besides referring to the desert as a ‘demon’, in many of his stories Guo also

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ This question appears twice in ‘The sand fox’. See also *ibid.*, p. 6.

keeps reminding his readers that until recently what is now a lifeless desert used to be lush grassland that was full of life and that its desertification was the result of a man-made disaster. This nostalgic and tragic narrative about what the desert used to be is a powerful manifestation of Guo's Mongolian subjectivity because it gives expression to the collective memory of the people who have inhabited the region since antiquity and therefore remember what it looked like in the past. In evoking the spiritual bond that the Mongols have had for many centuries with the grassland, a landscape on which they historically relied for their survival as nomadic pastoralists, this narrative also alludes to Guo's Mongolian identity. Furthermore, this identity is also suggested in the answer that he provides to his question, and which he reiterates again and again in different ways in many of his stories.

'The Sand Fox' offers an excellent example of Guo's answer. The story opens with a brief introduction that relates the environmental history of the Horqin Desert and suggests that the desertification of what used to be a 'vast expanse of fertile land, the land of abundance where green grass used to look like waves',⁵¹ started centuries ago. However, the narrator also notes that sources from as late as the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) depicted the area as still having 'plenty of water, lush pasture, and a lot of game',⁵² and that it served as the Qing emperor Nurhachi's hunting ground. Without specifying the exact dates, the narrative then depicts how the grassland was destroyed when 'people felt that it was really a waste not to cultivate crops in this vast expanse of fertile land, and began to plough the grassland'.⁵³ The narrator notes that 'as a result, the people brought calamity on themselves',⁵⁴ explaining that the ploughing destroyed the layer of fertile soil on which the grass grew, and brought the sand that was buried underneath to the surface, and that this process, together with the strong winds in the region, led to its desertification. The narrator then concludes, 'After experiencing several hundred years of being swallowed up by the sand ... forty million *mu* of fertile farmland have turned into this dead and desolate world of yellow sand that keeps surging forward'.⁵⁵

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* The size of the desertified land that appears in the original text is 40 million square kilometres, which is obviously a mistake. *Mu* is a Chinese unit of land that is equivalent to one-sixth of an acre.

This explanation alludes to the narrator's Mongolian identity because it articulates the traditional Mongolian perception that agriculture has a destructive impact on the grassland. As people who have historically relied for their survival on the grassland and nomadic pastoralism (as opposed to agriculture), the Mongols have been hostile to agriculture for most of their history.⁵⁶ Even today, it is considered conventional wisdom among Mongols that agriculture is one of the main causes of the severe grassland degradation that has taken place throughout Inner Mongolia in the last decades.⁵⁷ Thus, although Guo avoids any explicit reference to ethnicity, presumably because it is considered politically sensitive, by identifying farming as the cause of the desertification of the Horqin grassland, he is actually pointing an accusing finger at Han Chinese culture, the most prominent marker of which throughout most of its history has been agriculture. Indeed, many of my Mongolian informants were always quick to explain to me that the Horqin region was one of the earliest places in Inner Mongolia to experience grassland degradation because it was closest to China proper, and therefore among the first to be influenced by the agricultural lifestyle of the Han Chinese.⁵⁸

The ethnic dimension in Guo's environmental critique becomes even clearer when he discusses the harm that was inflicted on the Horqin grassland in more recent decades. After discussing the condition of the environment in the region during Qing times, the narrator proceeds with his critical account and suggests that grassland destruction reached a peak during the late 1950s:

During the booming period of the late 1950s, a huge army of workers moved into the region in a forceful assault carrying a large banner on which was written: 'Get grain from the desert!' They ploughed the sand dunes, reaching one meter deep,

⁵⁶ Williams, 'The barbed walls of China', pp. 673–676.

⁵⁷ Dalintai (达林太), 'NeiMeng caoyuan feipingheng shengtai xitong he "weifeng zhuan" suo dailai de wenti' (内蒙草原非平衡生态系统和“围封转移”所带来的问题), published online on 20 December 2006, available at http://www.xzq.gov.cn/nm/news_view.asp?newsid=164, [last accessed 14 January 2014]; Nimrod Baranovitch, 'The 2011 protests in Inner Mongolia: an ethno-environmental perspective', *The China Quarterly*, no. 225, 2016, pp. 222–223; see also Longworth and Williamson, *China's pastoral region*, pp. 304–305; Sneath, *Changing Inner Mongolia*, p. 136.

⁵⁸ The short ecological historical overview that Guo offers in the opening part of 'The sand fox' echoes the prevalent explanation among Mongols of the severe desertification in Inner Mongolia. See, for example, Williams, *Beyond great walls*, pp. 28–29; Wulantuya (乌兰图雅), '20 shiji Ke'erqin de nongye kaifa yu tudi liyong bianhua' (20世纪科尔沁的农业开发与土地利用变化), *Ziran zhiyuan xuebao*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2002, pp. 157–161; Baranovitch, 'The 2011 protests in Inner Mongolia', pp. 221–222.

and this had a devastating effect on the dunes where vegetation was already degrading. It was not long before an unprecedented sandstorm buried their tents, and they escaped in panic.⁵⁹

This account presents a bold eco-political criticism of the Maoist campaigns of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, which I briefly mentioned in the previous section, during which millions of Han Chinese cadres, peasants, workers, students, and others were sent from China's interior to the Inner Mongolian grassland to reclaim land for farming, among other missions, and as a result dealt a devastating blow to the local grassland and its extremely fragile ecology. Although still not explicit about the ethnic identity of the people who participated in these campaigns, this account nevertheless suggests that these people came from outside the region, thus hinting at the fact that most of them were Han. Moreover, the link that the narrator creates between the destruction of the grassland and agriculture also helps identify him as a Mongol. Indeed, this link would probably be denied even today by most Han Chinese and government officials, who instead tend to attribute the desertification of the Inner Mongolian grassland mainly to overgrazing and thus, by implication, to Mongolian herders.⁶⁰ The two narratives illustrate how environmental historiographies are inextricably linked to ethnicity and politics, and how different ethnic groups offer different explanations for environmental phenomena, particularly for the causes and effects of environmental degradation.

The ethnic factor that is only subtly suggested in 'The Sand Fox' reveals itself in a more explicit form in many of Guo's later works. Thus, in a story called 'The Weeping Sand Dunes' (*Kuqi de sha tuozi*, 哭泣的沙坨子), for example, Guo blames the 'farmers who gradually crowded the interior,

⁵⁹ Guo, 'Shahu', p. 3.

⁶⁰ Longworth and Williamson, *China's pastoral region*, p. 83; Caroline Humphrey and David Sneath, *The end of nomadism? Society, state and the environment in Inner Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 44–45; Sneath, *Changing Inner Mongolia*, pp. 135–136; Shapiro, *China's environmental challenges*, pp. 148–149; Renhui Miao, Deming Jiang, Ala Musa, Quanlai Zhou, Meixia Guo and Yongcui Wang, 'Effectiveness of shrub planting and grazing exclusion on degraded sandy grassland restoration in Horqin sandy land in Inner Mongolia', *Ecological Engineering*, no. 74, 2015, pp. 164–173; Baranovitch, 'The 2011 protests in Inner Mongolia', p. 216; Jiao Tang, Anthony J. Davy, Deming Jiang, Ala Musa, Dafu Wu, Yongcui Wang and Chunping Miao, 'Effects of excluding grazing on the vegetation and soils of degraded sparse-elm grassland in the Horqin sandy land, China', *Agriculture, Ecosystems and Environment*, no. 235, 2016, pp. 340–348.

and started to plough the grassland and grow crops'.⁶¹ This narrative is politically sensitive even without mentioning the ethnonym 'Han', because it is imbued with Mongolian ethnic sensibilities and implies that the Inner Mongolian grassland has been practically colonized by Han Chinese farmer-settlers who needed new land. Another even more straightforward reference to ethnicity is found in the first chapter of 'Sand Burial' (*Sha zang*, 沙葬): after recalling how today's lifeless desert used to be full of life in the past, the narrator adds that at that time the lush grassland 'supported a considerable number of Mongolian herdsmen as well as peasant families who came from outside'.⁶² This depiction underscores the fact that farming, which Guo considers to be the primary cause of the desertification of the Horqin grassland, was introduced into the region by Han Chinese peasant families. Moreover—and this point is no less important—it also reminds readers that there was a time in the past when the Horqin Mongols, like their fellows in other parts of Mongolia, used to be herders too rather than farmers. Thus, Guo also hints that the migration of Han Chinese farmer-settlers not only destroyed the environment of the Horqin grassland, but also the traditional lifestyle of the indigenous people who have inhabited the region since ancient times.

The implicit link that Guo creates in 'Sand Burial' between the destruction of the grassland, the incursion of Han Chinese culture, and the loss of traditional Mongolian culture is not confined to the introduction of farming and the demise of nomadic pastoralism. Indeed, this story suggests that another important contributing factor to the ecological disaster in the Horqin grassland is the demise of another component of traditional Mongolian culture, namely, Mongolian Buddhism and its perceived respectful attitude towards nature. This message is conveyed through the story's main protagonist, an old Mongolian Lama called Yundeng (云灯) who was persecuted during the Maoist period for his religiosity and whose old temple was torn down as part of the Maoist campaigns against religion. Throughout the story the narrator makes clear that the attack on Mongolian Buddhism during the Maoist era and the destruction of the Horqin grassland were inextricably caught up in a vicious cycle in which the destruction of one exacerbated the destruction of the other, and the latter exacerbated the destruction of the former, and so forth. This link is

⁶¹ Guo Xuebo (郭雪波), *Guo Xuebo xiaoshuo zixuanji—kuqi de caoyuan* (郭雪波小说自选集—哭泣的草原) (Nanchang: Baihuazhou wenyi chubanshe, 2002), p. 56.

⁶² Guo, *Sha lang*, p. 67.

introduced in the explanation that Lama Yundeng himself offers for the demonic expansion of the sand dunes. According to this explanation, the attack on Mongolian religion, which was manifested in the destruction of the old local Lamaist temple, led people to lose respect for the divine Buddha, which the narrator refers to as ‘the soul of the universe’,⁶³ and as a result, the Buddha stopped protecting the people. Then, in another round of the vicious cycle, the shifting sand dunes dealt another devastating blow to Mongolian Buddhism by completely burying the remnants of the old temple.

It is clear that for Guo Xuebo the loss of respect for the Buddha actually means the loss of respect for nature, and that the desertification of the Horqin grassland is nature’s revenge for the people’s loss of respect. Significantly, the respectful attitude of Mongolian Buddhism towards nature that Guo depicts in ‘Sand Burial’ is manifested in its most powerful form through Lama Yundeng’s deep love and respect for animals, the fact that he is vegetarian, and his consistent efforts throughout the story to prevent the killing of various animals around him. Similar to ‘The Sand Fox’, this respect for animals and nature is celebrated in ‘Sand Burial’ in the close relationship that Lama Yundeng develops with the story’s animal protagonist, a mysterious white wolf that he adopts as a cub, raises to maturity as if it were a dog, and then sets free (*fangsheng*, 放生 again) in the dunes to save its life after a local hunter shoots and almost kills it. This respect for nature and life, and the related Buddhist notion of the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature, which is repeatedly advocated in the story, are also revealed in the fact that both the old temple that was destroyed, as well as the new small temple that Lama Yundeng built several years later on the very same spot, were like green dots of life in the middle of the yellowish lifeless desert. Furthermore—and here animals play an important role once again—at the very end of the story, when a deadly sandstorm strikes the desert in another burst of revenge, the new temple becomes a safe haven not only for the white wolf but also for all the other wild animals that live in the surrounding dunes. However, like ‘The Sand Fox’ and many of Guo Xuebo’s other stories, ‘Sand Burial’ has a tragic end. Although the white wolf manages to survive, Lama Yundeng dies during the storm, and he and his small temple, along with several sacred Buddha statues and scriptures in Mongolian and Tibetan that he had managed to conceal and save during the Cultural Revolution, are all buried forever under the sand.

⁶³ Ibid.

Extinct wolves, dying grassland, and the demise of Mongolian culture and identity in the popular songs of Teng Ge'er

During the 1990s, as part of the rise of ethnic nationalism among many of China's ethnic minorities,⁶⁴ and thanks to the spread of cassette and CD technology, critical minority voices also started to appear in China's popular culture, particularly in popular songs.⁶⁵ The Chinese-Mongolian pop-and-rock star Teng Ge'er was one of the first minority artists to publicly voice ethnic criticism in this cultural sphere. Since the early and mid-1990s, he has been expressing deep anxiety about the degradation of the Inner Mongolian grassland in his songs, video clips, and interviews. These concerns echo the critical ethno-environmental discourse found in Guo Xuebo's literary work, but Teng Ge'er's criticism has tended to be more explicit. This difference is evident in his focus on Mongolian identity in general, as opposed to the more local Mongolian identity that is celebrated in Guo's works. Another difference lies in his more direct criticism of the demise of Mongolian culture and identity. Indeed, Teng Ge'er's artistic engagement with this demise includes many references to nomadic pastoralism,⁶⁶ the most important component in Mongolian identity. This is almost totally absent from Guo's works due to the fact that it had largely disappeared from the Horqin region long before other Mongolian regions.

The message that Mongolian nomadic pastoralist culture in China is dying out and that China's Mongols are losing their distinct ethnic identity is expressed in several of Teng Ge'er's songs. His message is intertwined with critical references to the degradation of the Inner Mongolian grassland, and some of his songs also feature images of animals. As in Guo Xuebo's fiction, Teng Ge'er uses animals that have been strongly associated with the Mongolian grassland. These include the wolf, which Teng Ge'er links to Mongolian identity much more

⁶⁴ Dru C. Gladney, 'Ethnic identity in China: the new politics of difference', in *China briefing 1994*, (ed.) William A. Joseph (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 171–192.

⁶⁵ Nimrod Baranovitch, 'Between alterity and identity: new voices of minority people in China', *Modern China*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2001, pp. 359–401; Joanne Smith Finley, *The art of symbolic resistance: Uyghur identities and Uyghur-Han relations in contemporary Xinjiang* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 173–232.

⁶⁶ See Nimrod Baranovitch, 'Compliance, autonomy, and resistance of a "state artist": the case of Chinese Mongolian musician Teng Ge'er', in *Lives in Chinese music*, (ed.) Helen Rees (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), pp. 173–212.

explicitly than Guo, as I illustrate below, as well as some of the domesticated animals that historically have been associated with Mongolian nomadic pastoralist culture. As in Guo Xuebo's fiction, in Teng Ge'er's songs too, the animals face extinction, which both reflects and is used to animate and emphasize the desertification of the Inner Mongolian grassland and the sense that Mongolian culture and identity are also dying out.

One early example of Teng Ge'er's use of animal images to convey his message about the demise of his ethnic identity is found in his 1994 song, 'The Land of the Blue Wolf' (*Cang lang dadi*, 苍狼大地), which mixes together strong Mongolian ethnic nationalism with an angry lament over the tragic fate of the Mongols and their native land. Teng Ge'er clearly uses the image of the wolf in the title of his song to assert his Mongolianness, as the Blue Wolf is considered the legendary ancestor of the Mongolian people.⁶⁷ By celebrating the wolf, Teng Ge'er clearly distinguishes himself from the Han Chinese, reacting against the growing Han racial nationalism that has taken place in the post-Mao era and which has manifested itself, among other ways, through the celebration of the dragon as the progenitor of the entire Chinese nation.⁶⁸ The wolf image, however, also helps Teng Ge'er to convey another message which is even less politically correct. Indeed, in naming his song 'The Land of the Blue Wolf', the musician also seems to claim Mongolian sovereignty over Inner Mongolia by implying that this region belongs to the wolf and thus to the Mongols, rather than to the Han Chinese and their dragon. Yet, despite this proud and subversive assertion of Mongolian identity and sovereignty, 'The Land of the Blue Wolf' is nevertheless a tragic elegy that laments the loss of Mongolian power, the destruction of the Inner Mongolian grassland, and the loss of the distinctive culture and identity of the Mongols in China:

The Land of the Blue Wolf

(Lyrics by Teng Ge'er and Buhe'aosi'er [布和傲斯尔], music
by Teng Ge'er)

The sun moves back and forth between the Tropic of Capricorn
and the Tropic of Cancer
The herders wander on the grassland of the temperate zone
I heard once that the nomadic people were

⁶⁷ Christopher P. Atwood, 'Six pre-Chinggisid genealogies in the Mongol empire', *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi*, no. 19, 2012, pp. 6, 9.

⁶⁸ On Han racial nationalism and the role that the dragon plays in it, see Bilik, 'Language education, intellectuals and symbolic representation', p. 61.

The masters of the mainland
Aha! Ya hu! A hu! Ya wei hu!

The sun comes and goes away again
All things on earth grow and then disappear
Several hundred years have already passed by in the world
My ruler of former days, where are you now?
A ha! Ya hu! A hu! Ya wei hu!

The steeds have lost their masters
The hunting dogs have lost their steeds
The land of the blue wolf is yellow sand
How lonely is the grassland in the wind
A ha! Ya hu! A hu! Ya wei hu!⁶⁹

Aside from the claim of sovereignty that is implied in the title of the song, ethnic nationalism is also articulated in the first stanza where Teng Ge'er's recalls with proud and bitter nostalgia that in the past 'the nomadic people were/The masters of the mainland', a statement implying that this territory now has new masters. It is also manifested in the second stanza, in the line 'My ruler of former days where are you now?' which clearly evokes Genghis Khan and the glorious Mongolian past when the Mongols established a powerful empire that dominated not only the Mongolian grassland but also all of China and beyond. Genghis Khan is also celebrated in the video clip of the song, in which excerpts from a biographical film show him riding a horse in militant posture and leading an army of horsemen. However, this celebration of Genghis Khan is imbued with a strong sense of tragedy and helplessness because Teng Ge'er's yearnings clearly reflect a state of severe crisis and communicate a cry for help. These sentiments are also expressed in the music of the song, where each of the three stanzas starts with soft singing accompanied by an acoustic guitar, which evoke the pastoral atmosphere of the grassland, but ends with powerful cries and drumbeats that convey a mixed sense of despair, agony, and anger.

The natural environment and the animal images that are featured in Teng Ge'er's song play a central role in this angry elegy. At the very beginning of the song, Teng Ge'er depicts what he and many Mongolian intellectuals perceive as the intimate and harmonious relationship that their people have had with their natural surroundings since antiquity. Thus, the Mongols are described as an

⁶⁹ For the earliest recording of this song, see Teng Ge'er's cassette album, *Teng Ge'er: meng sui feng piao* (腾格尔: 梦随风飘) (Baidai [EMI]/Zhonghua wenyi yinxiang lianhe chubanshe, 1994) ISRC CN-A49-94-348-00/AJ6 (94C009).

integral part of their natural environment, and their freedom of movement is depicted like that of migrating animals that move in total harmony with the cyclical movement of the sun and the seasons. This depiction also highlights the nomadic dimension of the traditional Mongolian lifestyle, and alludes to fact that in the past the Mongols could move around freely without any restrictions. The second line in the second stanza 'All things on earth grow and then disappear' enhances the environmentalist tone of the song by suggesting that the Mongols have always been part of a larger, organic ecosystem, and that their history is similar to the many different forms of life that exist in the universe.

However, it is in the last stanza that Teng Ge'er's ethnic environmental imagery manifests itself in the most powerful way, and it is also here that he conveys his ethnic environmental message in the most direct and poignant form by using animal images. Teng Ge'er devotes this stanza to depicting the dire condition of the grassland and of several animals that have been closely associated with this natural environment and Mongolian culture since ancient times. His message is that this culture, like the animals and the grassland, is dying out. These lines clearly echo Guo Xuebo's stories in expressing concern for all forms of life associated with the grassland, including humans (the 'masters' of the steeds), non-human animals, and the grassland itself, thereby also acknowledging their interdependence. Indeed, the last stanza suggests that the existence of each of the different forms of life, including humans, horses, hunting dogs, and the grassland as well, is closely related to the lives of the others. Thus, the decline or disappearance of one inevitably leads to the decline or disappearance of the rest. The disappearance of the humans and the animals, already alluded to in the first lines of the stanza, is underscored once again in its closing line, where the deserted grassland is depicted as 'lonely' (*jimo*, 寂寞), clearly because all the living creatures that used to inhabit it have disappeared. This anthropomorphized depiction of the grassland also enhances its tragic condition. But beyond the poetic force of this depiction, it also evokes the animistic notions that are embodied in traditional Mongolian culture and religion. Thus, by depicting the grassland as possessing personhood, spirit, and emotions, like humans, and by expressing empathy for it, Teng Ge'er clearly aims to assert the powerful emotional bond between the Mongols and their land, and the strong sensitivity of the former towards the well-being of the latter.

Teng Ge'er not only suggests that the Mongols have been inextricably connected to their natural environment, a point that enhances the

environmental nationalism expressed in the title of his song and which constructs the landscape as a territory and even as a nation,⁷⁰ but also that they have been a crucial element that kept the whole ecological system in their native land alive. Somewhat contrary to the conventional wisdom that the impact of humans on nature is always destructive, or that the human factor always depends on the natural environment rather than the other way around, 'The Land of the Blue Wolf' actually suggests that the Inner Mongolian grassland is turning into desert because of the political and cultural weakness of the Mongols, who have always protected the grassland but are unable to do so any longer.

This provocative message, which is also implied in some of Guo's stories like 'Sand Burial', is conveyed in the fact that the lament for the grassland and its animals appears in the song after references to the decline of the Mongols' political power. In other words, the song suggests that the Inner Mongolian grassland has deteriorated to its present poor condition because it has lost its old masters—the 'nomadic people' who have always protected it—and now it has new masters who do not care for it any more. On this point, Teng Ge'er's criticism reminds us of Guo Xuebo's criticism of the agricultural culture of the Han Chinese farmer settlers and its devastating impact on the Inner Mongolian grassland. However, Teng Ge'er goes a step further in his ethnic environmental critique in his much more explicit assertion of Mongolian identity through the references to the Blue Wolf, Genghis Khan, and the political power that the Mongols possessed in the past. The song overtly laments the loss of Mongolian political power and traditional culture, and suggests that this loss is inextricably linked to the environmental crisis in Inner Mongolia. In the 'Land of the Blue Wolf', the degradation of the grassland and the disappearance of the animals that have inhabited it since ancient times become a powerful sign of the loss of Mongolian power and the decline of Mongolian identity. However, at the same time, the song also hints at the conventional wisdom among (especially post-colonial) ecocritics that the domination, subjugation, and abuse of people are very often linked to the domination, subjugation, and abuse of the environment and animals.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Nicola Dibben, 'Nature and nation: national identity and environmentalism in Icelandic popular music video and music documentary', *Ethnomusicology Forum*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2009, pp. 135–138.

⁷¹ See, for example, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial ecocriticism: literature, animals, environment* (New York: Routledge, 2015; second edition), especially pp. 1–11. For a

Beyond celebrating the wolf image in the title of 'The Land of the Blue Wolf', Teng Ge'er honours it in the name of his band Blue Wolf (*Cang lang*, 苍狼), which he established in 1993, and also in his album *Wolf* (*lang*, 狼), which he released in 2005. Whereas in his early references to the wolf, this animal served exclusively as an abstract mythic symbol, in his 2005 album, by contrast, the wolf also turns into a real physical animal, although it still retains a strong symbolic meaning. Indeed, the wolf image is celebrated in the album in multiple ways. It appears on its cover, in a photo in which it is shown howling beneath a full moon on a plain blue background, a design that was clearly intended to evoke the legendary Blue Wolf. However, a more significant engagement with the wolf image is found inside the album in a song called 'Wolf' after which the album was named. In an autobiographical book that Teng Ge'er published in 2005, the musician writes that the trigger for writing this song was a story he heard on one of his visits to Inner Mongolia about a wolf that appeared one day in the grassland and was chased by a group of local youngsters on motorcycles until it died of exhaustion. Teng Ge'er writes that he wrote the song shortly after his return to Beijing: after hearing this story, his 'heart was broken because of the tragic fate of this lonely wolf, and also because of the cruelty and apathy of these youngsters'.⁷² Later on, the musician contextualizes the song in an environmental framework when he suggests that the 'wolf in this song is a symbol of a species that is on the verge of extinction'.⁷³ According to reports from the late 2000s, wolves have been returning to Inner Mongolia thanks to new wildlife protection laws passed by the Chinese government in recent years. However, when Teng Ge'er wrote his song, this wild animal, which had once thrived in the Inner Mongolian grassland and very much symbolized it, had almost disappeared from this vast region as a result of decades of massive hunting and the severe degradation of the grassland.⁷⁴

similar argument made outside the field of post-colonial ecocriticism, see Shapiro, *Mao's war against nature*, p. 15.

⁷² Teng Ge'er (腾格尔), *Tian chang: wo de yishu rensheng* (天唱: 我的艺术人生) (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 2005), p. 137.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁷⁴ Dan Martin, 'China's herders plea for help as wolf packs return', *AFP*, published online on 24 May 2009, available at http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hQmQSaQ_dD3WppFMoflqFQI-Jug, [last accessed 16 May 2012]; People's Daily Online, 'Wolves return to North China's pasture after decades', published online on 26 June 2010, available at <http://english.people.com.cn/g0001/g0776/g0882/7041785.html>, [last accessed 7 July 2020].

The cover notes attached to Teng Ge'er's album echo the abovementioned lines from his book:

'Wolf' incorporates [Teng Ge'er's] deep love for the grassland. He uses the howling of one lonely wolf to denounce the destruction caused to the environment by the human race. The earth on which we rely for survival is suffering from destruction caused by us ... A sense of survival crisis runs throughout the song.⁷⁵

Despite the clear attempt that is made in this text to present the environmental message in 'Wolf' as universal, apparently in order to make it look less ethnocentric and thus more politically correct, the song is actually concerned specifically with the environmental degradation of the Inner Mongolian grassland and with an animal species that has been associated since antiquity with this particular place and is now on the verge of extinction. The strong connection between the wolf and the grassland is also manifested in the fact that the disappearance of wolves from many parts of Inner Mongolia in recent decades has been one of the most important signs and causes of the severe degradation of the grassland.

However, Teng Ge'er's concern in 'Wolf' is not only for Inner Mongolia's flora and fauna. Indeed, the survival crisis of the grassland and the wolves is strongly connected to that of the indigenous people who have inhabited the grassland for centuries. The destruction and extinction of the former become a powerful indication of the demise of the latter and the fact that they, too, are on the verge of extinction. Below are several lines from the lyrics of the song:

Wolf

(Lyrics and music by Teng Ge'er)

On the boundless dunes of the Gobi
One lonely wolf is howling...

It calls the clan's glory during the time of the Empire
It looks for the vast and boundless home of forests and grassland
For many generations the incense and candles burned continuously
But today life and death crisis lies ahead
For many years there were glory and humiliation
But today only its lonely howls are left.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Teng Ge'er (腾格尔), *Lang* (狼) (Zhongguo kexue wenhua yinxiang chubanshe, 2005) (ISRC CN-A23-05-336-00/A.J6). (CD album)

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Highlighting environmental injustice and lamenting the demise of Mongolian pastoralist culture in Ning Cai's *Season of the Horse*

Another excellent example of how animal characters and images reflect and construct the ethnic identity of contemporary Sino-Mongolian writers and artists, and of how they are also used to assert this identity and to express ethno-environmental criticism can be found in the 2003 film *Season of the Horse* (*Jifeng zhong de ma*, 季风中的马) by the famous Chinese-Mongolian film actor and director Ning Cai. Focusing on present-day Inner Mongolia, the film depicts the struggle for survival of one Mongolian family of herders who still live in a yurt and rely entirely on herding for their livelihood. The survival of the couple and their young son is threatened by a combination of drought and governmental policies that make their life on the grassland impossible. After a long, harsh struggle, the family is eventually forced to leave the grassland, bid farewell to their pastoralist lifestyle, and migrate to a nearby town to start an unknown future.

Filmed in the midst of the vast grassland, with actors who speak almost entirely in Mongolian, *Season of the Horse* depicts the drama that has been taking place in the Inner Mongolian grassland as a result of its severe desertification from the perspective of Mongolian herders. Although the film makes many references to the environmental disaster, it is not concerned with the environmental aspects of the situation per se. Rather, it focuses on the human tragedy of hundreds of thousands of Mongolian herders who have been driven to extreme poverty and have been forced to abandon their traditional way of life and resettle in villages, towns, and cities. Through its focus on the impact that the degradation of the Inner Mongolian grassland has had specifically on Mongolian herders, Ning Cai engages with issues of environmental justice, land rights, and displacement, and with what Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier have called 'the environmentalism of the poor'.⁷⁷ For many, including Mongolian intellectuals, the degradation of the Inner Mongolian grassland has mainly abstract, symbolic meanings. This film, however, highlights in the liveliest way the concrete manifestations of the devastating impact that the deterioration of a particular natural environment may have on the weak

⁷⁷ Guha and Martinez-Alier, *Varieties of environmentalism*.

and marginalized social groups who inhabit this environment and depend on it completely for their subsistence.

Season of the Horse shows how the degradation of the grassland has destroyed the material and economic basis on which the livelihoods of the Mongolian herders depend, and also how it leads to their displacement by turning them into environmental refugees. No less importantly, it also illustrates how, because of their political and socio-economic weakness, they have become the prime victims of the continuing colonization of Inner Mongolia by Han Chinese migrants and the environmental policies of the state, whose declared aim is, ironically, to protect the grassland. Moreover, by focusing on the psychological crisis of the father of the family, Urgen, who refuses to leave his beloved grassland, horse, and familiar nomadic pastoralist lifestyle, it also offers a rare glimpse into the subjectivity of China's Mongolian herders and the emotional stress they have been forced to experience as a result of the environmental crisis. In addition, the film also presents, if less explicitly, a cinematic requiem for the Inner Mongolian grassland and Mongolian pastoralist culture, as well as a bitter critique of the official policies that have contributed to the demise of both.

As suggested by its title, a horse has a central role in this film and is essential to the film's engagement with the impact of environmental degradation on Mongolian herders and Mongolian identity. Ning Cai's choice to place a horse at the centre of his film is not surprising, given that horses and horsemanship have occupied a central place in Mongolian history, culture, and everyday life. Horses have also been one of the prime symbols of Mongolian identity since it came into being many centuries ago.⁷⁸ The centrality of the horse in traditional Mongolian culture has been articulated recently in a powerful statement by J. Tserendeleg, president of the Mongolian Association for Conservation of Nature and the Environment in the state of Mongolia,

⁷⁸ For the centrality of horses in traditional Mongolian culture, see Caroline Humphrey Waddington, 'Horse brands of the Mongolians: a system of signs in a nomadic culture', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1974, pp. 471–488; Sneath, *Changing Inner Mongolia*, pp. 54–56; Fijn, *Living with herds*, pp. 151–174; Robin Irvine, 'Thinking with horses: troubles with subjects, objects, and diverse entities in eastern Mongolia', *Humanimalia: A Journal of Human/Animal Interface Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2014, pp. 62–94. The association between the Mongols and horses is so strong that Mongols are often still referred to in China today as 'the people/nationality on horseback' (*mabei minzu*, 马背民族, or *mabei shang de minzu*, 马背上的民族) even though most of them do not ride horses any more.

who has been quoted as saying: 'It is not possible to imagine Mongolian history without horses ... [and] it is not possible to view the future of Mongolia without horses as well. Mongolia is not Mongolia without horses.'⁷⁹

The central place that horses occupy in the life of Mongolian herders is manifested in Ning Cai's film first and foremost in the fact that it has a horse as a character. Called 'White', the horse is photographed again and again, sometimes for lengthy periods of time, and often without any human protagonist beside it. It is also articulated through numerous scenes that depict the powerful bond between the horse and Urgen's family members. Indeed, they have such a close physical and sentimental relationship with their horse that at times it seems like another family member. The horse is constantly talked about, especially by Urgen and his son, and both of them also talk to it on a regular basis as if it were human. At one point in the film, for instance, the boy is seen sitting near the horse, reading a poem to it. Elsewhere, he tells the horse that he will have to attend school soon, asks it if it will miss him, and tells it not to be too sad. The strong bond between the two is also revealed when the boy pats the horse, or gently tends its wounds after the horse becomes entangled in a wire fence, and at another point when the boy tells his father excitedly that the horse kissed him on his neck.

The strong human-animal bond that is celebrated in *Season of the Horse* is expressed in its most powerful way when Urgen is forced to sell his horse. Despite his statement earlier in the film that he would rather die than do this, Urgen gives in to his wife's pressure to sell the horse in order to get the little money they need to send their son to school. Urgen's love for the horse is expressed in full force when he hands it over to the buyer, a Han Chinese businessman who runs a nightclub. Urgen gives his consent to the latter's offer only after making sure that he will not slaughter the horse and then asks him to treat the horse kindly. Then, before departing, he pats the horse gently on its nose and gives it a powerful kiss on its forehead, to the amazement of several Han Chinese individuals who are present. This scene is clearly intended to underscore the notion that love for horses, and animals in general, is an important characteristic of

⁷⁹ American Museum of National History, 'The horse in Mongolian culture', publication date unknown, available at <https://www.amnh.org/explore/videos/biodiversity/the-last-wild-horse-the-return-of-takhi-to-mongolia/article-the-horse-in-mongolian-culture>, [last accessed 29 June 2020].

Mongolian culture and identity, and one that differentiates them from the Han Chinese.

The selling of the horse is a significant event in the life of Urgen's family and it saddens them all. Despite the fact that it was Urgen's wife who pressured him to sell the horse, when he returns home after selling it and hands her the money, she, too, expresses deep sorrow, bursts into tears, and refuses to take it. Likewise, the son, who up to that point expressed a strong desire to attend school, now expresses his sadness by refusing to go to school as a kind of protest against his father's decision to sell the horse to pay for his tuition. It is Urgen, however, who is most affected by the parting from his horse. Thus, after returning home, he gets drunk and, sitting alone in his yurt, he hallucinates that the horse has come back. For three whole minutes he talks to the horse in the second person, and expresses wholehearted regret that he betrayed it:

My horse, my loyal horse, I knew you'd come back to me ... But why are you looking at me like that? You're angry, aren't you? You're angry because I sold you. You've every right to be angry. And every right to blame me ... You brought me honor, glory, and a happy life. Even my wonderful wife I owe to you. But now ... How did I repay you? ... I went and sold you.

At this point the desperate herder starts sobbing because he has lost his beloved, loyal horse, but also because he knows that selling his horse marks his final defeat and surrender, and the end of his pastoral life on the grassland.

While the depiction of the close relationship between humans and animals in *Season of the Horse* conforms to and clearly aims to assert the conventional wisdom in and outside China that Mongols have a very close relationship with the animals they raise,⁸⁰ Ning Cai also uses the image of the horse and the strong human-animal bond in non-conventional ways to comment critically on the condition of the Inner Mongolian grassland, Mongolian herders, and Mongolian culture and identity in present-day China. Indeed, in sharp contrast to many conventional representations of Mongolian horses in Chinese culture, *Season of the Horse* depicts a lone horse, and, with the exception of one short scene that depicts Urgen's hallucination (see below), it is the only horse seen throughout the whole film. Moreover, in another sharp

⁸⁰ For an example of this view in the Chinese context, see Wu Yingjie (吴英杰), "Dui niu tanqin": lun Mengguren yu dongwu de hexie xiangchu' ("对牛弹琴": 论蒙古人与动物的和谐相处), *Mangzhong*, no. 5, 2016, pp. 107–113.

contrast to the conventional representations of Mongolia and its horses in Chinese culture, where horses are usually depicted galloping through the lush grassland, representing power, majesty, vitality, and freedom, Urgen's horse is old and hardly moves. The horse is usually photographed standing still, tied to a dried-up tree trunk, and when it moves, it always walks very slowly and never gallops. The only time in which it is seen galloping is in Urgen's hallucination, when he is imprisoned in jail after brawling with Han Chinese migrant workers who were sent by the government to fence his land to prevent him from grazing there as part of a new environmental policy whose declared aim is to protect the grassland.⁸¹ In this gloomy scene in jail, Urgen recalls the times when the grassland was lush and when his horse could still gallop at full speed. In his daydream he also sees a herd of horses galloping freely through the grassland, the only time other horses appear in the film.

The horse in *Season of the Horse* stands in its own right as a real horse but is also used as a metaphor, and it is not always possible to clearly distinguish between these two roles. As a real, actual horse, it is an inseparable part of the real landscape and the real life of the real people that Ning Cai depicts in his film. Its physical presence and sentimental bond with Urgen's family help to articulate the central place that horses have occupied until recently in the lives of all Mongolian herders. Moreover, its lone image also helps to convey the message that the number of horses in Inner Mongolia has declined dramatically in recent decades,⁸² and underscore the severe grassland degradation that has been taking place in this region and has been responsible, at least in part, for this decline in the number of horses.

As for its role as a metaphor, the horse is clearly used to assert Mongolianness, but also to represent the tragic condition of Mongolian herders and identity in present-day Inner Mongolia. Indeed, beyond being a horse in its own right—old and disabled—it not only reflects and represents the environmental degradation of the grassland, but it also symbolizes the decline of Mongolian nomadic pastoralist culture and the fact that this culture has lost its vitality and is about to die. The metaphoric function of the horse extends beyond its physical features to

⁸¹ I identify these workers as 'Han Chinese migrant workers' because this is how they were referred to by Ning Cai himself in a conversation I had with him in September 2017.

⁸² Zhizhong Wu and Wen Du, 'Pastoral nomad rights in Inner Mongolia', *Nomadic Peoples*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2008, p. 29.

a series of highly symbolic events that it experiences during the film and which stand for and underscore the miserable experience of Mongolian herders and the predicament of Mongolian identity. In depicting these events Ning Cai presents a critique of the Chinese government's environmental policy in Inner Mongolia, which many Mongols consider to be one of the main causes of the environmental and ethnic crisis in the region (see below). Moreover, these events also highlight the unequal power relationship between the Mongolian herders and the Han Chinese who now dominate Inner Mongolia demographically, culturally, politically, and economically.⁸³ Because these issues are very politically sensitive in China, it is quite obvious that Ning Cai uses the image of the horse as a safe substitute for the Mongols to make his critique less explicit.

One such event takes place at the very beginning of the film, when a noisy group of Han Chinese in a large truck with firecrackers and a megaphone encroaches on Urgen's grazing land. Immediately identified as Han Chinese by their language and the fact that they engage in the typical northern Han Chinese *yangge* (秧歌) dance, the aggressive intrusion of the group seems to represent what many Mongols see as the destructive invasion of the Han Chinese into their native land.⁸⁴ Terrified by their noise, the horse flees and becomes entangled in a wire fence that is used to enclose the grassland. As a result, it falls down and lies helpless on the ground, entangled by numerous wires. By zooming in on the horse's frightened eyes and the nervous movement of its nostrils, the scene highlights the terrified subjectivity of the trapped horse and the trauma that it experiences as it lies on the ground unable to move. However, the scene also directs the attention of the viewer to the fact that horses can no longer gallop freely on the grassland as they have done since time immemorial, because what used to be a boundless region is now divided into plots surrounded by wire fences that were erected to prevent the free movement of livestock and their owners. Thus, albeit in an indirect way, the scene also symbolizes and highlights the dramatic changes that have taken place in the physical space of Inner Mongolia, Mongolian culture, and the lives of Mongolian herders

⁸³ Ibid.; Bulag, *Collaborative nationalism*, pp. 3–4; Han, 'The dog that hasn't barked', pp. 58–66.

⁸⁴ Dalintai, 'NeiMeng caoyuan'; MunkhDalai A. Zhang, Elles Borjigin and Huiping Zhang, 'Mongolian nomadic culture and ecological culture: on the ecological reconstruction in the agro-pastoral mosaic zone in northern China', *Ecological Economics*, no. 62, 2007, pp. 20, 24; Baranovitch, 'The 2011 protests in Inner Mongolia', p. 228.

as a result of the grassland enclosure policy that has been implemented in the region since the mid-1980s.

This policy, whose declared aim is to improve the productivity of livestock and protect the grassland, has had a dramatic impact on Mongolian herders because it has prevented their mobility, the most central element in Mongolian nomadic pastoralist culture, and has forced many Mongolian herders to become sedentary. Furthermore, many Mongolian scholars and herders as well as some Western and Han Chinese scholars believe that although the policy is intended to protect the grassland, it has actually been one of the most important causes of its further degradation. By preventing the free movement of herds it has also prevented the recovery of the grass.⁸⁵ Ironically, this degradation has not only led to further restrictions on the mobility of herders, but also to constraints on grazing that forced many herders, like Urgen's family, to quit pastoralism altogether and migrate to villages, towns, and cities, as mentioned earlier.⁸⁶ Thus, beyond saying something about the suffering of Urgen's horse and about horses in Inner Mongolia in general, the image of the miserable horse lying powerless and helpless on the ground entangled by the wire fence also seems to communicate the miserable condition of Mongolian herders and the resentment that many of them feel towards the fences that have dealt a devastating blow to their grassland, livelihoods, and lifestyle. This resentment is also expressed verbally in the film in a rare moment of explicit critique of official policy, when, as he releases his horse from the wire, Urgen curses: 'Damn fences!' and then sighs 'Poor horse'. The latter comment also offers another powerful example of the sense of empathy and compassion for animals that prevails in contemporary Sino-Mongolian literature and art, and which constitutes a central component of the image of the animal-friendly Mongol that this body of works celebrates.

⁸⁵ Humphrey and Sneath, *The end of nomadism?*, pp. 292–293; Dalintai, 'NeiMeng caoyuan'; Zhang, Borjigin and Zhang, 'Mongolian nomadic culture'; Wu and Du, 'Pastoral nomad rights'.

⁸⁶ Dalintai, 'NeiMeng caoyuan'; Togocho, 'Ecological migration'; Haishan (海山), 'NeiMenggu muqu pinkunhua wenti ji fupin kaifa duice yanjiu' (内蒙古牧区贫困化问题及扶贫开发对策研究), *Zhongguo xumu zazhi*, no. 10, 2007, pp. 45–50; Lili Xun and Zhiming Bao, 'Government, market and households in the ecological relocation process: a sociological analysis of ecological relocation in S banner', *Social Sciences in China*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2008, pp. 113–128.

Moreover, the abovementioned scene can also be interpreted more broadly as a general critique of the negative impact of Chinese culture, with its traditional fondness for walls and divisions of space, on the Inner Mongolian grassland, its animals, and its indigenous Mongolian population, who, in sharp contrast to the Han Chinese, have historically cherished open spaces and free movement.⁸⁷ All of these meanings were suggested in the name that Ning Cai originally planned to give to his film. In a conversation we had in September 2017 he told me that he originally wanted to call his film *Trapped Horse* (*kun ma*, 困马, which can also be translated as ‘a horse in a predicament’), but then changed his mind because of his fear that this title might lead to the film being banned.

Another powerful and highly symbolic scene in which the horse plays a central role takes place when Urgen is invited by an urban Mongol to a nightclub in a nearby town to have a drink. The nightclub is a totally unfamiliar and disturbing setting for Urgen. People in it are speaking Chinese, which Urgen does not understand, and it is very crowded and dominated by the powerful noise of trance music—a clear representation of urban life and modernity. Urgen’s initial discomfort turns into a burst of rage when all of a sudden he sees his horse on the stage, its eyes covered with a red bra, its nose with red underwear, and seated on it is a partly naked young woman in sexy underwear, moving to the rhythm of the music. At this point it becomes clear that the horse has been purchased in order to star in this bizarre show. The viewer recalls that Mr Zhang, the Han Chinese businessman who bought the horse and was introduced as the owner of a nightclub, was looking for ‘the gentlest, most obedient horse in the world’. Thus, the symbol of Mongolian glory, power, masculinity, and freedom is totally deconstructed and transformed into a laughable toy in a circus-like show, tamed, subjugated, displaced, and totally feminized. In addition to communicating the negative experience of the subjugated and maltreated horse, it is rather clear that Ning Cai also uses the horse in this scene to convey the sense of humiliation felt by Urgen and many of his fellow Mongols. Like the horse, they have lost their identity, freedom, power, and pride, and have become ridiculous pawns whose lives are dominated and controlled by the Chinese government, its official agenda of

⁸⁷ Williams, ‘The barbed walls of China’, pp. 669–676.

'modernity' and 'development', and the Han Chinese settlers who have essentially taken over their native land.

Indeed, the fact that the horse was bought by a Han Chinese businessman is highly symbolic too. The economic transaction in which the horse was sold offers another perspective on the unequal power relations between the Mongolian herders and the Han Chinese settlers in Inner Mongolia. It underscores the economic power of the latter and the powerlessness of the former, who hardly have any cash and do not even know how to use it. The Han Chinese use their economic as well as political power to take over even the little property that is left in the hands of the poor Mongolian herders. While the Han Chinese settlers keep accumulating capital, the Mongols lose everything they own, including their land, livestock, and livelihoods, as well as their culture, identity, and pride. Indeed, the selling of the horse symbolizes not only a total surrender and betrayal of Urgen's non-human companion but also of his own identity and soul. The notion that the Han Chinese are those who take over everything the Mongols own, while the Mongols lose everything is underscored elsewhere in the film, when a Han Chinese migrant from southern China tries to convince Urgen's wife to leave her husband and marry him. Urgen's wife refuses, but the attempt symbolizes and highlights what many Mongols perceive as the colonization of their homeland.

Season of the Horse is a tragic and angry lament for a dying world and way of life. However, at the very end of the film, a more pragmatic and future-oriented view is presented when Urgen eventually comes to terms with reality and decides to leave the grassland and move to the city. The image of the horse, which embodies the sense of demise that dominates most of the film, also plays a central role in this ending. After the scene at the nightclub, a Mongolian urban artist who witnesses Urgen's frustration and anger purchases the horse from the owner of the club and returns it to Urgen as a gesture of solidarity. As a result, Urgen, who seemed to have given up the idea of staying on the grassland, resumes his refusal to move to the city, despite understanding that his life on the grassland is doomed. Yet, lying drunk and full of despair on the ground in the open air in the middle of the grassland, Urgen is approached by an old herder who convinces him to stop pitying himself and accept reality.

Following his conversation with the old herder, Urgen arranges a *fangsheng* (放生) ritual in which fellow herders with traditional costumes perform chants in throat singing and the old herder sprays liquor on Urgen's horse's head as an expression of blessing while reciting a poem

that is dedicated to the horse.⁸⁸ Then Urgen wraps a ritualistic blue scarf on the horse's neck to mark its liberated status and sets it free, while his son bursts into tears. This ritual is a powerful statement, because Urgen does not sell the horse, as he did before, although he needs the money badly. Rather, by releasing the horse instead of selling it, he regains the little control he still has over his own life and the life of his horse, and thereby also reclaims his personal dignity and ethnic integrity. The ritual not only underscores once again the powerful bond between Urgen and his horse, but also helps the former to free himself from the psychological grip of the latter. At the same time, this scene can also be interpreted as an act of compensation in which Urgen sets his alter ego free to make up for the fact that he himself has lost his freedom. Either way, the horse does not gallop away happily as wild animals often do when they are returned back to nature after being captured, or as domesticated animals usually do when they are released from a cage. Instead, after showing Urgen and his son walking with their few belongings towards the nearby city, Ning Cai chooses to end his film with a long shot of the horse walking slowly on the asphalt road that leads to the city with the ritualistic scarf still on its neck, lost and disoriented like Urgen himself.

Conclusion: why animals? why Mongols? and some implications

Contemporary Sino-Mongolian literature and art are rich in animal images and also feature intensive engagement with the relationship between humans and animals. These features are clearly related to the geographical and ecological characteristics of the Mongols' homeland and the fact that much of this region is still sparsely populated, allowing for the existence of both wild and domesticated animals. Moreover, they also reflect the dominant place that nomadic pastoralism has occupied in Mongolian history and the close relationship between humans and animals associated with this lifestyle. Another important factor that explains this prevalence of animal images is the

⁸⁸ For interesting evidence of the long history among Mongols of the practice of liberating animals from captivity, see John Andrew Boyle, 'The attitude of the thirteenth-century Mongols toward nature', *Central Asiatic Journal*, vol. 22, no. 3-4, 1978, pp. 180-181.

non-anthropocentric world views and religious ideas and practices, particularly animism, shamanism, and Buddhism, that have dominated Mongolian culture for centuries. These characteristics stand in sharp contrast to the cultural treatment of animals and the human-animal relationship in much of mainstream Han Chinese culture, specifically the anthropocentric world view that has dominated Han Chinese Confucian thought and practices since antiquity. Chengzhou He has pointed out the latter feature in his analysis of the representations of the wolf in recent Chinese literature: ‘One important feature of the agricultural society is the alienation of animal and animality. Centred on the human “ethics”, the Chinese culture was turning further and further away from the animal world.’⁸⁹ In a similar vein, Zuyan Zhou, in his analysis of Zhang Xianliang’s (张贤亮) famous novel *Half of Man is Woman* (*Nanren de yiban shi nüren*, 男人的一半是女人) has noted that ‘[t]he pervasive and various use of animal symbolism in ... [this work] is a rare phenomenon in contemporary Chinese fiction’.⁹⁰

However, while the literary and artistic representations of animals that I have discussed in this article certainly draw on the special relationship between humans and animals that is found in Mongolian pastoralist culture, they also reflect a new contemporary context and help to express contemporary perceptions that were forged as a reaction to this context. This context combines the severe environmental crisis that is threatening both the natural environment in Inner Mongolia and the Mongolian lifestyle that evolved as an adaptation to this environment, as well as the collective identity crisis that has developed among China’s Mongols, at least in part as a result of these factors. Indeed, the most telling aspect of the animal representations that I have analysed is the fact that many of them feature images of endangered, hunted, and extinct animals or, alternatively, of old, disabled, displaced, and humiliated animals that are denied dignity and freedom.⁹¹ Moreover, many of these images are framed within an environmental setting that highlights the severe environmental degradation in Inner Mongolia, and

⁸⁹ He, ‘Poetic wolves and environmental imagination’, p. 399.

⁹⁰ Zuyan Zhou, ‘Animal symbolism and political dissidence in *Half of man is woman*’, *Modern Chinese Literature*, vol. 8, no. 1–2, 1994, p. 93.

⁹¹ For similar representations of animals by contemporary Sino-Tibetan artists, see Nimrod Baranovitch, ‘Ecological degradation and endangered ethnicities: China’s minority environmental discourses as manifested in popular songs’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 75, no. 1, 2016, pp. 193–197.

many of the works that celebrate these images are imbued with anxiety about the fate of Mongolian ethnic identity.

In this context of environmental degradation and identity insecurity, the new animal images that are celebrated in contemporary Sino-Mongolian literature and art also help to construct and assert the ethnic identity of their creators, and comment critically on the condition of this identity in present-day China. Furthermore, they also offer a criticism of the condition of Mongolian herders, many of whom have been driven into poverty and forced to abandon their grazing lands and their traditional way of life. As I have demonstrated in this article, literary and artistic animals have both realistic and metaphoric dimensions. On the realistic level, they reflect and express a concern for the physical well-being of real animals, because throughout most of Mongolian history these animals have been inseparable from the ecological system on which the physical and spiritual existence of Mongolian nomadic culture has depended. On the metaphoric level, these animals help to animate and thus enhance the critical messages about the destruction of the Inner Mongolian grassland, and they simultaneously express the anxiety that many Mongols feel about their own survival as an ethnic group and their experience of victimhood, cultural loss, and identity crisis. Moreover, they also help to highlight and protest against the severe predicament in which Mongolian herders have found themselves in recent decades as a result of the degradation of the grassland and the continuing colonization of their land by the Chinese state and Han Chinese settlers. Because these sentiments and perceptions are considered politically sensitive in China, animal characters have become very useful as a safe metaphor.

In addition to being related to the particular conditions in Inner Mongolia, the intensive engagement of contemporary Sino-Mongolian writers and artists with animal images and characters has also been part of a general trend in China in which intellectuals of various minority groups have appropriated environmentalism to construct an idealized 'green' image for their people and their cultures.⁹² This idealized image has celebrated the notion that the minority groups to which these

⁹² Toni Huber, 'Green Tibetans: a brief social history', in *Tibetan culture in the diaspora: papers presented at a panel of the 7th seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Graz 1995*, (ed.) Frank J. Korom (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1997), pp. 103–119; Baranovitch, 'Ecological degradation and endangered ethnicities'.

intellectuals belong and their ethnic cultures have always shown respect for and coexisted in harmony with nature and animals. The idealization of the Mongols' attitude towards animals manifests itself in the works of contemporary Sino-Mongolian writers and artists, for example, in the absence of any reference to the fact that Mongols have a long tradition of slaughtering horses to eat their meat.⁹³ Moreover, these works seldom mention that the hunting of wild animals, including wolves, has been an integral part of Mongolian life for many centuries and that much of this hunting was not necessarily for food, but for commercial purposes, military exercises, or as a kind of sport.⁹⁴ As part of this general trend of 'greening', animals and, more importantly, the 'traditional' attitudes of certain minority groups towards animals and nature have become instrumental in promoting certain cultural and political agendas. One of these has been the reassertion and reaffirmation of the ethnic minority identities of these groups in the face of the strong and lasting prejudices of the Han Chinese majority and the Chinese state against these identities. More specifically, the celebration of animals and nature has helped minority artists and writers connect with the new, global, postmodern ethos of environmentalism and reconstruct their ethnic cultures and identities in new, positive ways.

At the same time, it has also enabled these artists and writers to criticize and challenge the forces that have threatened the survival of their cultural identities, particularly modernity, development, and specific governmental policies. Indeed, as the limits and destructive effects of modernity, development, and the anthropocentric world view of the Han Chinese majority have started to be acknowledged in mainstream Chinese culture, the claim made by minority intellectuals that minority peoples and cultures possess animal- and nature-friendly attitudes and practices has been intended to redeem these peoples and cultures from the derogatory Chinese stereotypes of backwardness and primitiveness.⁹⁵ Moreover, this claim has also been intended to convey the message that

⁹³ Sneath, *Changing Inner Mongolia*, p. 170; Fijn, *Living with herds*, p. 151.

⁹⁴ Joseph Kler, 'Hunting customs of the Ordos Mongols', *Primitive Man*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1941, pp. 38–48; Alice Sárközi, 'A Mongolian hunting ritual', *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, no. 25, 1972, pp. 191–208; Reading et al., 'The commercial harvest of wildlife'; Charlier, *Faces of the wolf*.

⁹⁵ On these stereotypes, see Dru C. Gladney, 'Representing nationality in China: refiguring majority/minority identities', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 53, no. 1, 1994, pp. 92–123; Stevan Harrell, 'Introduction: civilizing projects and the reaction to them',

minority cultures are superior to those of the Han Chinese majority, at least where morality and living in harmony with nature are concerned.⁹⁶

In addition, as in the case of many other minority, tribal, and indigenous peoples all over the world,⁹⁷ minority artists and writers in China have also been connecting themselves to animals and nature as part of their struggle to protect the environment in their home regions, as well as their traditional lifestyle and culture, which have historically been dependent on this natural environment. This linkage to animals and nature has also been part of the struggle to protect the land rights and livelihood of their fellow minority people who still rely on the natural environment for their subsistence. In this context, minority cultures have often been presented as possessing indigenous wisdom that is beneficial for protecting the environment. And minority people, particularly the herders among them, have been depicted as the guardians of nature who, in order to implement their indigenous environmental knowledge, should be allowed to remain on their land and maintain their traditional lifestyle and culture. In the context of this struggle to protect the environment, their traditional cultures, and the livelihood of their fellow minority people, minority writers and artists use their close bond to the animals that have inhabited their home regions since ancient times as a means to prove the long historical connection between their people and their land. In doing so they can claim ownership and sovereignty over this land and also demand environmental justice. It should be made clear, however, that the concern for animals and the natural world that one finds in the creative works that I analysed in this article is not just a means or an instrument to assert ethnic identity or promote ethnic interests. Rather, as I repeatedly demonstrated throughout the article, it also reflects the fact that the non-human environment of people's native place is often

in *Cultural encounters on China's ethnic frontiers*, (ed.) Stevan Harrell (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), pp. 3–36.

⁹⁶ Dalintai, 'NeiMeng caoyuan'; Zhang, Borjigin and Zhang, 'Mongolian nomadic culture', p. 22; Wu and Du, 'Pastoral nomad rights'.

⁹⁷ See, for example, William H. Fisher, 'Megadevelopment, environmentalism, and resistance: the institutional context of Kayapó indigenous politics in central Brazil', *Human Organization*, vol. 53, no. 3, 1994, pp. 220–232; Beth A. Conklin and Laura R. Graham, 'The shifting middle ground: Amazonian Indians and eco-politics', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 97, no. 4, 1995, pp. 695–710; J. Peter Brosius, 'Endangered forest, endangered people: environmentalist representations of indigenous knowledge', *Human Ecology*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1997, pp. 47–69.

deeply embedded in their sense of ethnic identity and constitutes an integral part of that identity, both materially and non-materially.

Writing about Tibet, Emily T. Yeh has suggested that, 'Far from being peripheral, Tibet was at the heart of the rise of China's mainstream environmental movement in the 1990s.'⁹⁸ This argument is based on her observation that the two earliest environmental campaigns that took place in China in the 1990s were not only located in Tibet, but also that Tibetan activists played a central role in both. In conclusion, I would like to expand Yeh's argument by suggesting that Inner Mongolia and Chinese-Mongolian artists and writers have also played an important role in the development of China's environmental movement. In the Mongolian case, however, the contribution was embodied not so much in environmental activism, but rather in the important role that these artists and writers have played in promoting environmental literature and art in China's mainstream culture and in offering the Han Chinese majority new, alternative models of environmental attitudes and behaviour.

⁹⁸ Yeh, 'Tibet in China's environmental movement', p. 237.