

## Planet Marx Reading Club Meeting #2

### Earthen, Earthy, Earthly

On 21th April, Planet Marx landed in the house of Matsutake. For the reading club's second meeting, we collaborated with the curatorial team at Taikang Space that created the exhibition "Tracing the Mushroom at the End of the World", who also generously hosted the session.

The three texts we jointly selected stemmed from different roots, grown from a wilderness, a minority, or an exotic land. All the discoveries therein, however, instructed how we could narrate and reinvent the imaginary of Genesis, Apocalypse, and Anthropocene – criticizing the hypocrisy inherent in the "universality" endowed in these terms. Scholar Xiang Zairong and artist Mao Chenyu respectively gave us introductions of their own works, branching towards, enclosing around, sometimes intertwining with the exhibition. In line with Anna Tsing's concern of narrative politics, the exhibition encouraged its viewers to wander, traverse and forage in the perplexingly wondrous landscape of the show. As your sight was drawn to what was above and below, your feet on the ground but your body airy, your sense acute and your mind boggled — which was also how we encouraged you to read these texts.



Planet Marx Reading Club Meeting #2 Earthen, earthy, earthly, courtesy of Taikang Space

### Zian Chen: Multi-disciplinary Anthropological Writing

## 长征计划 LONG MARCH PROJECT

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Sharing his thoughts on Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015)

Why does mushroom serve as an important metaphorical thread in Anna Tsing's anthropological writing? Her book *Mushroom at the End of the World* indeed provides us with good metaphorical framework. Titles such as 'Enabling Entanglements' or 'Contamination as Collaboration' would often incite curiosity. It seems, for Tsing, 'contamination' is not so much something that starts an epidemic but a story. As you can see, the use of 'interludes' between chapters doesn't belong to the realm of typical academic writings. The author also mentions she doesn't want her essay to be like a hunter that's always searching for a target. She would prefer a mushroom forager, one that looks around and encounters the produce randomly. Each of the 20 chapters varies widely in length. While some may contain only two pages, others may be lengthy academic chapters. Like how mushrooms pop up after rains, she said.

How would a metaphorical framework awaken different ways to experience our surroundings? This may be a tip the book gives to the technique of narrative-making. At the exhibition 'Tracing the Mushroom at the End of the World', you may feel like you're being elevated when you experience artist Timur Si-Qin's VR work, whereas you find your gaze keeps directing downwards when encountering Liu Yue's installation that "contaminates" half of the exhibition space with spatial interventions across the floor, the walls, the door way. Liu's creation conditions you to heighten your awareness to pay attention to places you normally ignore in a gallery space: when you're watching the uneven landscape under your feet, you encounter a mirror in the corner in which a reflection of a plant is found. What the exhibition is trying to experiment with is more so the way in which a story can be woven beneath the mushrooms as a metaphor.



Timur Siqin New Agreement VR version 1.2

in the exhibition "Tracing the Mushroom at the End of the World", 10 min, 2018



Liu Yue, *Slow Slope - Taikang Space*,

in the exhibition "Tracing the Mushroom at the End of the World", size variable, 2019

The fifth chapter "Open tickets arena, Oregon" is perhaps the closest to academic anthropological writing. It tells about a variety of migrants in Oregon's forests who make a living there picking or selling matsutake. They come from different backgrounds, including ethnic minorities from Yunnan, China. Because of the high economic value of the produce, cultural differences and discriminations persist even deep in the woods. However, because they used to the woodlands, migrating to forests is a kind of freedom, or at least the author employs this perspective to initiate a new contemplation on the imagination of "freedom". In addition to international matsutake market in Oregon and Japan, the author also visits other more local locales of the trade, i.e. Yunnan, to form a fuller picture of the largely hidden production and distribution line of matsutake.

Each chapter of *Mushroom at the End of the World* begins with an illustration. In the interlude chapter entitled 'Smelling' a matsutake dish being served is illustrated. Matsutake may not be the best-smelling mushroom. To those who are not expert in cooking matsutake, it could smell quite unpleasant. However, for people who know not to use oil or not to cut it with metal blades, its fragrance can be unveiled. The reader can see the process of Tsing re-learning about fragrance as a clue as well. It is a metaphor, another important metaphor from the mushrooms is that they grow when the land is rapidly recovering after sustaining severe damage (after the atomic bombing in Hiroshima, for example). It suggests that there could still be the moment of revival and prosperity in the aftermath of catastrophe. Tsing further developed this point in chapter eleven, 'The Life of Forest'. Humanists, not used to thinking with the idea of disturbance, connect the term with damage. This is where matsutake offers an alternative perspective, being the species that thrives alongside disturbance. Therefore, the whole discussion of disturbance brings us to a heterogeneous environment where conventional philosophical

thoughts start to evolve: ecosystem engineering, in fact, is not only something that human beings can do, but also a result of multi-species intertwinement.

### **Mao Chenyu: Anthropocene and Scenarised Writing**

Sharing his thoughts on his article 'From Xlmaojia Village to the Song Dynasty' in *Tracing the Mushroom at the End of the World Reader* (Beijing: Taikang Space, 2019)

When I came to Beijing by air, the aeroplane flew around above the airport for some time. I saw a large piece of green on the ground, near the sixth ring road. It was very large, taking up a space of several square kilometres. Those were architectures torn down two years ago, now covered up by green plastic sheets. What I call 'green screen' is informed by a concept often mentioned by Bruno Latour, i.e. *scenarisation*. Usually, when we try to narrate an object, we have to give it a background, contextualise it. However, in Latour's opinion, a scenario is also necessary. Today when we talk about Anthropocene, an urgent scenario is always pre-set, and the meaning in any discussion of action anchors in collective survival.

I wrote four stories during my Spring Festival holidays within one week. All of them are to some extent improvised and scenarised. Song dynasty is one of the scenarios from my reflection, which I juxtaposed with the more personal scenarios from my experiences. My general assumption is, today we have to make full use of all sorts of available materials to tell a story. We shall establish a balloon-like world, empty on the inside, having no substantial content. Its surface is temporary, and can burst at any time. Such is the world as we call it. On the surface of this balloon, we should actively utilise all sorts of resources available to us. At a moment like this, story-telling may involve much more than mere perspective-shifting.



## 长征计划 LONG MARCH PROJECT

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*A Kiln God, Photography: Mao Chenyu, 2008*

My hometown is a village on the bank of Dongting Lake, Hunan, and all of my narratives are based on the geography there. Such 'topography', as we may put it today, stems from not only my life experiences as a child, but also me returning home to farm and produce wine, as well as the on-site response I had on the discussion regarding the relationship between Chinese cities and countryside. Either through exhibitions or my own personal farming practice, I seek to tug at the possibilities of such discourse.

I favoured Song chinaware particularly, so I chose Song dynasty as a thread. I was only able to approach the local firing technique in my hometown in 2008. I made sculptures with local clay of my ancestors, many of whom left no images of themselves behind. I made a kiln with my father, but the ceramic wares made from the kiln was very rough, as it could not attain the required temperature of 1300°C, reaching only 1000°C. These ceramic wares were exhibited in 2016 in Shanghai Biennale. They depict various figures: from ancestors to ghosts, from realistic portraits to imaginary beings. One of them is half-male and half female: (s)he is the Kiln God(dess). It has been a local custom to sacrifice a female body to the kiln and bake a male god out of her. Local people's oral tales keep track of such a process of gender fluidity.



*Ceramic figures depicting Ximaojia ancestors, photography: Mao Chenyu, 2008*

I touched on the topic of Song Dynasty only a little bit in my article. When I spoke about 'volume of time', i.e., our various discussions on the surface of Anthropocene, comes with a real crisis of our narrative about civilisation. Those discourses are failing; our words and speech as human cease to function. Our speech is no longer of authority. The real actor is hence geological substances (now with a prefix). If we shall still try to speak, we must derive our materials from geological researches, discoveries, observations, and see what kind of narrative pattern would surface to form the beginning of a story.



Mao Chenyu's work *Song Dynasty No.1 – Song Dynasty*, in the exhibition "Tracing the Mushroom at the End of the World", 2019

In my writing, I assumed a certain 'counterfeit' geological theory. My objective is not to make any academic point about understanding Song Dynasty. Rather, I would like to make clear how I understand it. My series of 'Song Dynasty' is a continuous project. I fervently search for unearthed ancient ceramics, and I have seen my share of different shapes and styles. Some of them look like a turtle, which can be linked back to Shang or Zhou's primitive earthenware, or even Hongshan culture. When I went through the process dating these artefacts, I thought, among so many counterfeit ceramic wares circulating in the market (thus also online), it is almost guaranteed that you can find an image that correspond to a certain era. What I should do is thus to establish a museum that exhibits both reality and fiction: I name it *Reindeer Art Museum*. This will be a project/museum that will physically exist and operate. I already collected more than 1,000 objects from various dynasties. It

is now time that I try and catalogue these items. Archaeological typology of Chinese wares is quite developed, and each dynasty has its own clear-cut indices. For example, the status of a ware can be very different with or without an official stamp.

If I were to rethink the cataloguing system, I may falsely attribute an image to Song dynasty, and attribute something newly made by myself to more than 3000 years ago. I hope to render these materials fluid and agile, and thus apt to the scenario I made. Then, time points like 2019, Song Dynasty, 2000 BC, 2000 AD, 2000 years from now, all make up a geological entity that is based on the geopolitical macro-structure that we live in.

**Xiang Zairong: Zero Degree of Mythologies and a Decolonial Exploration** Sharing his thoughts on his *Queer Ancient Ways* (Earth: Punctum Books, 2018)

*Queer Ancient Ways* was my doctoral dissertation, and I continued working on it even after its submission in 2013. Last year, it was finally published. After so many years, I finally managed to find a way sum this book up, 'this is a research that, from a de-colonial, feminist, and queer perspective, interrogates and criticizes previous ideas (whether art historical, anthropological, archaeological, theological, or philosophical) about the so-called goddesses in Babylonian myth *Enuma Elish* and Nahuatl mythology.' The book is divided into three chapters: part one, part zero and, part two. It is not serially-ordered as one may traditionally expect, and I hope to break away from the progressive model in a way by doing so.

Part I is called 'the Waters'. It is about the Babylonian creation myth *Enuma Elish*. I wrote about a specific figure in it, whose name is Tiamat. Tiamat was thought to be a goddess before my book was published. However, if we read it more in detail, we will find that her or his female identity is not clearly defined. Part II is called 'the Earth', and is about the Nahuatl creation myth. Nahuatl language is the official language of the people known by us as Aztec, and also a lingua franca shared by various ethnic groups in the Basin of Mexico, around what is now Mexico City. Before the Spanish *conquista* in 1521, Nahuatl was an empire, and they called their land Cemanahuac, meaning land completely surrounded by water.



Nahuatl God(dess) Tlaltecuhltli

The two creation myths I explored here have no direct links with each other. They are quite far away, one in Babylonia, one of the earliest civilisations on earth, and another in so-called Aztec, mainly from 14th to 16th century.

However, there is something in between, something I call Zero Degree. 'Zero Degree' refers to a concept in mainstream Christian Theology, namely Creatio ex Nihilo (creation from nothingness). It means that God created the world from an absolute void. Before God made light be, there was nothing. To criticise this concept of Creatio ex Nihilo, I borrowed a concept from an American feminist theologian Catherine Keller, *tehomophilia*. It roughly means deep reading of the Bible, which could be done in several aspects: textual, discursive, and ideological, which progressively leads to a decolonial method. On the textual level, let us first look at the first sentence of Genesis in Bible: it is translated as 'In the beginning God created', and in Hebrew 'Bereshit bara Elohim'.



A Nahuatl Statue of Coatlicue Mayor

Hence, we can talk about many things. 'Bereshit's usual translation is 'in the beginning'. 'Bara' is 'create'. 'Elohim' is 'God'. Such translation lost a very important piece of information. Because in Hebrew, the sentence is a 'time coordinate'. More properly speaking, the translation should be 'In the beginning when God created', i.e., when the authors of Bible wrote the Bible, they did not intend to prove that God created. He merely said that it happened: when God created heaven and earth, such and such things appeared. As we all know, Bible has many versions. It was influenced by multiple Mesopotamian cultures. Bible was composed from many different books, and thus its Greek and Latin name was Biblia, book in plural form. However, in orthodox theology, all previous influences are wiped out and becomes 'Nihil'.

The book title also contains the expression 'decolonial exploration'. In Nahuatl mythology, there is a very important god(dess), their god(dess) of earth, Tlaltecuhli. Tlaltecuhli has four presences or representations. What we see here is the largest of four. In 2006, this huge sculpture was discovered in Templo Mayor in Mexico City, which has feminine features on it. Who is this god(dess)? (S)he is one who devours corpses and then bear new lives. For this reason, (s)he is a god(dess) of destruction but also a god(dess) of production. Normally speaking, museum and research texts would describe him/her as a goddess or diosa. However, in Nahuatl, Tlaltecuhli comes from the combination of tlalli (earth) and tecuhli (male lord). Thus, 'he' is a lord, lord of earth. Sometimes, the clergy men and women would chant this creation myth like this: 'Tonantzin Tlaltecuhli', 'Tonantzin' is 'our beloved mother', and 'Tlaltecuhli' is 'lord of earth'. At this time and in this text, gender flows extremely naturally.

Among the decolonial methods, we should first of all admit the blindness of colonisation. A more powerful culture comes, eliminates the local culture, and establishes his own culture, passing on his epistemology. The blindness of colonisation lies in the fact that he sees through his own eyes. When we read the texts of the other, we might also encounter such a problem. The second point is the knowability of the colonised culture, which means that it can be known, learned, and researched. The third and very important point is the colonised culture's unknowability: there is something that we cannot know, and is eternally impossible for us to know.