

**Thornber, Karen. 2012. *Ecoambiguity: environmental crises and East Asian literatures*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. ISBN 978-0-472-11806-9; US\$90.**

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Karen Thornber's *Ecoambiguity: environmental crises and East Asian literatures* is a massive undertaking by a first-rate scholar. While primarily focused on the creative literature of authors from China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan, there is no doubt this work will also be considered a classic within the emerging field of environmental humanities. Unlike many academic studies of the environment, this book is not topical but rather explicitly conceptual. The author focuses all of her rich empirical detail on the study of the ambiguous way human interactions with nonhuman beings are portrayed in creative works, which Thornber calls ecoambiguity. Chapter 1 begins by providing a brief environmental history and a history of environmental literature for China, Japan, Korea and Taiwan. After this, the book is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the ambiguity within the environmental attitudes, information and behaviors that are portrayed in literature, while the second part focuses on the ambiguity between attitudes, information and behavior.

Chapter 2 describes the way individuals within a story can have conflicting attitudes towards protecting the environment, which Thornber describes as ambivalence. A useful example is seen in Huang Chunming's short story 'Set free', where a family of environmentalists fights to prevent industrial factories from emitting pollutants but then become dismayed that the land where they trap egrets might become a protected area. Chapter 3 is concerned with the difficulty in interpreting environmental information, which is described as a kind of uncertainty. For instance, Wang Ping's 'Maverick' discusses the moments leading up to the final breaching of the Yangtze River at the Three Gorges Dam site that leaves many residents concerned about their unknown future once their homes will be flooded. In Chapter 4, the author examines the way conflicting behaviors, or contradictions, towards the environment are negotiated within East Asian literature. This is best highlighted through Masuda Mizuko's 'Horn' about the growing of flowers in a botanical garden. The short story talks about how human beings design parks to preserve the nonhuman within our cities, but in the end we are simply substituting one nonhuman for another, such as when we swap out different types of flowers in the flower beds of parks simply to accommodate our seasonal preferences.

Chapter 5 moves the book into Part II, where the author begins by describing characters within the literature who tend to give in, or acquiesce, to the enormity of environmental degradation. For instance, Cho Sehüi's story 'City of machines' provides a stark example of industrial workers who feel that "nothing can be done" about the massive amount of pollution they are exposed to everyday in the factories where they work. Thus, much as can be seen in Cho Sehüi's story, acquiescing is often the result of the feeling that the environmental damage is too great or the social system is too obstinate. Chapter 6 then analyzes how creative works narrate certain beliefs that lead individuals to ignore obvious environmental conditions, which Thornber describes as a kind of delusion. Probably the starkest example of this is the way Wang Lixiong's *Yellow Peril* (1991) describes China's post-apocalyptic future as being caused by the delusion that the polluted regions along the Yellow River would survive the next major flood, which turns out to trigger a global collapse in the story's narrative. Finally, in Chapter 7, the author reflects on what she calls the paradoxical nature of some environmentalist attitudes that actually results in further damage to the environment. For instance, in Jiang Rong's *Wolf totem* (2004) Chen Zhen, one of the main characters, is appalled at the rapid extinction of the wolf population in Inner Mongolia and adopts an abandoned pup to ensure that at least one of the species will survive. Unfortunately, it becomes impossible for Chen Zhen to keep the pup in captivity as it becomes an adult wolf that yearns for freedom, but he decides to take the young wolf's life rather than allow it to starve on its own in the wild.

The book would have benefited from a concluding chapter to discuss more clearly how these six aspects of ecological ambiguity are distinct from each other. It is often difficult for the reader to determine how the ambiguity described in one story is different from that of another. Overall, the organization of the book allowed the author to focus on concepts instead of topics, which was an important stylistic decision that probably helps the argument of the book more than hinders it. However, one other issue within the book is

the lack of engagement with political economy and social power. This prevents the author from placing ecological ambiguity within broader arguments related to how we understand sustainability and environmentalism. For instance, in Huang Chunming's 'Set free' Thornber provides some of the political context regarding how residents of Dakenggu attempt to cope with industrial pollution from nearby chemical factories. She explains that a Kuomintang official up for election promised to bring the factories to the village and then eight years later a new candidate (of what party we are not told) promised to get rid of them. However, Thornber's analysis makes it appear as if the interactions between the villagers, factory owners and politicians are uninfluenced by social power. Without going back to the original story, it is hard to know if this is the result of Huang Chunming's storytelling or if Thornber has just provided a very flat interpretation. Such interpretations are quite common throughout *Ecoambiguity*. The one exception is her analysis of Cho Sehüi's 'City of machines' that vividly describes the conflicts between factory workers, general residents, an activist and the industry leaders. Here Thornber makes clear the power that industry leaders use to manipulate the residents. Thus, because of the rich political economic context that she provides, the reader gains a profound understanding for what it means to acquiesce in the face of known environmental degradation. I think this highlights an important reason that a deep discussion needs to be developed between political ecology and the environmental humanities. Political ecology could gain a great deal from drawing on material found in creative literature to ensure that our political economy is robust enough to capture the sociological imagination of the non-human world that is well described by Thornber's idea of ecological ambiguity. Similarly, the environmental humanities needs political ecology to ensure that analysis of this literature is connected to the political realities faced by a society in the midst of ecological change; realities which may be stimulating the writing of such literature in the first place. While some of this work has been accomplished by Erin James' (2015) use of postcolonial theory to combine ecocriticism and narratology, there is still an opportunity for grounding our analysis of creative literature within the lived experience of the environment from which that literature emerges. The breadth of content that Thornber covers is astounding, but even in her meticulous notes she does not really engage with the depth of material available within other disciplines that could be used to better contextualize the politics of East Asia that ultimately structure the narratives about the non-human world that she analyzes.

One major benefit is that the book is fairly jargon-free making it readily accessible to non-specialists. However, some aspects of how Thornber describes ambiguity may create confusion, particularly the way she uses the concept of uncertainty, an idea which is well established within other disciplines. Uncertainty is often thought of as that which is unknown about the environment but which we also endeavor to learn more. Different places in the world have a unique political structure for how to resolve those unknowns (Jasanoff 1999), which is why it is so important for us to take political economy seriously when discussing environmental issues. If we go back to the concerns of residents living behind the Three Gorges Dam in Wang Ping's 'Maverick', I am not entirely sure that "uncertainty" is the best word to describe this situation. Rather, the residents in 'Maverick' find their future to be obscure and indistinguishable, but due to state control over knowledge it is not necessarily possible for them to find more information regarding the unknowns related to the flooding of their homes. Moreover, what Thornber is describing is quite different than scientific uncertainty about the environment, although the ambiguity she discusses could very well be a part of the social reaction to scientific uncertainty. This social reaction is worthy of systematic study, but to avoid confusion it is important to distinguish between these concepts.

In general, it is important to take the other disciplines concerned with environmental issues seriously, because many of us hope that when the environmental humanities creates useful ideas these disciplines will reciprocate. Moreover, through reciprocation we can ensure a stronger bridge is built across the 'Two Cultures' divide. If we want environmental engineers, for instance, to recognize the widespread proliferation of ecologically ambiguous discourses in society and how that may influence the way we come to understand and react to evidence of environmental degradation, then those working in the environmental humanities also need to give the same amount of recognition to the scientific concepts that generate such evidence. Those within environmental humanities should feel comfortable challenging concepts within other disciplines but they at least need to demonstrate their understanding of how those concepts are typically used so as to avoid confusion and stimulate debate. In my mind, this is not an issue that necessarily undermines the power of Thornber's argument, but it does show that the environmental humanities still have room to grow. This is

precisely why the environmental humanities could benefit from a deeper engagement with political ecology, which has been working towards bridging the Two Cultures through the common goals of achieving social equality and environmental sustainability for many decades now.

## References

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