

BOOK REVIEW

## Questioning Borders: Ecoliteratures of China and Taiwan

Robin Visser. New York: Columbia University Press, 2023. 352 pp. \$35.00; £30.00 (pbk). ISBN 9780231199810

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Indigenous forms of ecocriticism are often built on creative visions of the future, which as Robin Visser shows in *Questioning Borders*, may unsettle the colonialist assumption that the world and wider cosmos are (or ever should have been) anthropocentric. Visser's book offers a rich comparison of ecoliterary works by Indigenous, Indigene and ethnic majority writers in China and Taiwan, which brings to life their visions for how to relate to their unknown ecological futures and the nation-states in which they live. By throwing light on Indigenous creativity and future-oriented uses of technology – covering everything from renewable energy sources to the production of ecoliterature itself – Visser does an admirable job of decentring popular assumptions about Indigenous people, lives and planetary visions.

Much of the analysis in this book starts from the study of cosmology in the anthropological sense of the term, which often refers simultaneously to a way of envisioning the world/cosmos (at the epistemological level) and a way of being within it (at the ontological level). Visser seeks to pitch her book specifically at “the scale of ‘relational cosmologies’” in which “Indigenous cosmologies are always already embedded within imperial ones though they operate within different logic streams” (p. 13). To this end, she juxtaposes pieces of ecoliterature written by Indigenous, Indigene and ethnic majority authors in China and Taiwan with the various logic streams (for example, animistic and imperial) that underpin them – and does so in sometimes spellbinding ways that position readers deeply inside of these writers' imaginations.

One important contribution that Visser introduces in the book is her concept of “Beijing westerns,” which are a kind of ecoliterature by Beijing-based writers that critiques the ecologically destructive policies of the Chinese Communist Party even as it draws on many of its colonial and ecological assumptions. Notably, Beijing westerns build on the Han Chinese cosmology of *tian-xia*, or “all under Heaven,” which has long justified the colonialist ideologies of the People's Republic of China (PRC) concerning its centre and (typically western) periphery. However, Beijing westerns are also often founded on the mid-1980s Chinese concept of “ecological civilization” (*shengtai wenming*) and its accompanying green governance tactics, some of which have adversely shaped both Han neo-Confucian values and Indigenous ways of life that do not follow the agrarian logistics favoured by the state. As a counterpoint to the Beijing westerns, Visser introduces the “South Seas Dreamscape” of political discourse in Taiwan, which normalized its own ecological and neocolonial advance towards Southeast Asia in 1994 by launching the “moving southward” (*nanxiang*) policy. The upshot, Visser explains, is that Beijing westerns and the South Seas Dreamscape “strategically appropriate Indigenous perspectives in ecoliterature for geopolitical ends, even as these works raise awareness of environmental devastation” (p. 2).

In contrast, Visser suggests that Indigenous and Indigene ecoliteratures from across the PRC and Taiwan present their own cosmological visions of how humans should relate to their environments. Visser enlivens some of these visions in her five main chapters (each of which is devoted to a

different geographic region) by first analysing excerpts from Beijing westerns or the South Seas Dreamscape and then comparing them to works of Indigenous or Indigene ecoliterature. The connections and contrasts that she raises speak volumes. Starting with Southwest China, where many Indigenous animistic and shamanic writers set out to counter exoticizing stereotypes, Visser shows how “postcolonial strategies of opacity, mimicry, exaggeration, or evasion” are melded with elements from traditional epics to produce an “anti-epic of the Anthropocene” (p. 57). She then turns to the ecoliterature of Inner Mongolia and its “grassland logic,” in which, she suggests, shamanism and Tibetan/Mongolian Buddhism entertain a radical nonattachment that makes organic and inorganic entities equally vital to the cosmos and existence. A different cosmology unfolds through the ecoliterature of Xinjiang, where Indigenous Kazakh and Uyghur writers build absurdist comedies on the relationships between humans and the earth (particularly mud), nonhuman animals, the sentient body, and the existential need for mobility in the cities and countryside. Moving to Tibetan ecoliterature, Visser reveals that it often takes a trickster to recognize resource extraction, racism and the hypocrisy of a world shaped by “Buddhist or Bön metaphysics and grand discourses of imperial and Sino-globalization” (p. 147). These findings are taken to another level in Visser’s discussion of the ecoliterature written by either Indigene or Indigenous “native Taiwanese” (*bensheng ren*) authors whose ancestors migrated to Taiwan in the 18th century. Both Indigene and Indigenous Taiwanese increasingly inhabit a cosmology that blends literature with activism, past with future, and human with nonhuman animals, including through imaginative reflections on the experience of “becoming animal” in which the human writer strives to associate and enter into dialogue with other species.

There is much to praise about this remarkable book, which quickly draws readers in and stokes their curiosity. Visser wants readers to decolonize their thinking by setting aside the impulse to react to colonial power and choosing instead to take the more powerful route of pointing to how Indigenous and Indigene ecoliterature decentres colonial powers. By holding these ecoliterary visions up to colonialism – like a mirror – Visser proposes that we may spread awareness of their intrinsic value. Key to acknowledging their value, she adds, is that we accept Indigenous and Indigene visions of planetary renewal may contain elements which are (perhaps even intentionally) impenetrable. Pointing to Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* (University of Michigan Press, 1997), in which opacity “claims the right to be valued even if *not* transparent or perfectly understood by others,” Visser concludes that no person and no cosmology should need to account for its right to existence (p. 235).

This observation undoubtedly rings true on many levels, although I would caution against using the concept of opacity in ways that might lead to unwitting generalizations. There are moments when Visser seems to slip into conflating the multiplicity of different animisms, shamanisms, Buddhisms and even metaphysics of radical nonattachment (the latter of which are not necessarily the same, for example, in different kinds of Mongolian shamanism or in Mongolian approaches to various forms of Buddhism). Differences such as these are often all too easy to obscure. Yet this small caveat should not cloud the vital contributions that Visser makes throughout this marvellous book, which unleashes some of the most creative planetary visions of Indigenous, Indigene and ethnic majority writers in China and Taiwan.