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Chapter 6

Worms in the Anthropocene: The Multispecies World in Xu Bing's *Silkworm Series*

Kiu-wai Chu

In a visual art project titled *Dear Climate*, a group of American artists and scholars designed “a collection of agitprop posters and meditative audio experiences that help you meet, befriend, and become climate change.”¹ These posters are designed to promote environmental awareness, and particularly, multispecies co-existence in the Anthropocene age, as reflected in posters with slogans such as “BIODIVERSITY IS THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY”; “PARTY WITH THE BEES IN THE BUTTERFLY BUSH”; “MEET THE BEETLES”; and “SPEND QUALITY TIME WITH AN INSECT.” Human beings encounter insects on a daily basis and yet rarely give them much attention. When they are noticed, they are often exterminated or turned into economic resources for human consumption and utilization. What does it mean to spend quality time with an insect? What is the role of art in cultivating such an attitude in the contemporary world?

More and more artists have “generated multimedia installations and performative interventions to bring attention to animals, plants, fungi, and others at the periphery of anthropocentric worlds” in recent years (van Dooren, Kirksey and Muesnster, 9). As such, we are beginning to see the power of art in shifting our focus towards the non-human world, including that of the worms. However, in a world perceived generally in anthropocentric terms, human beings continue to occupy a role in the center while the rest (animals, insects, plants and all nonhuman beings) at the margins. Because of that, is, responding to the theme of this book, “practicing environing at the margins” a celebration and glorification of humans’ role in shaping the environment and the external world? In other words, are we celebrating anthropocentrism? This chapter juxtaposes two ecocritical approaches, namely multispecies studies and Anthropocene criticism, to explore the dynamics between human and non-human agencies in the present world that drives the debates in anthropocentrism. Focusing on contemporary Chinese artist Xu Bing’s *Silkworm Series* (1994-2014) and several other art installations that have made use of living insects, it explores how art facilitates ecocritical reflections upon our relationships with the non-human world.

This chapter also illustrates how Xu’s *Silkworm Book* is a fitting metaphor of the multispecies condition in the Anthropocene, in which non-human beings are increasingly registering their material presence and agency to impact the world, while at the same time human beings continue to play a role in shaping it. By adopting living insects in art performances and carefully monitoring their movements and activities during the period of exhibition, Xu Bing demonstrates spending “quality time” with insects by “performing” special care towards them, as a way to rethink questions centering multispecies co-existence and worldmaking in the age we call Anthropocene. This chapter also argues the “artfulness” of *Silkworm Book* as an ecological art lies in the tension and balancing of non-human agencies and human interventions. It presents us an open-ended platform for debates about the role of human beings in the present world.

Fig. 1. “Spend quality time with an insect.” *Dear Climate*.

I. Worms in Contemporary Art

British artist Damien Hirst has been known for his animal and insect-themed art installations since the early 1990s. As critics point out, most of his works “grapple with the seemingly alchemical, violent transformation of life to death” (Broglio, 1). Many of his controversial pieces involve whole or dissected animals, living insects, and other non-human creatures. From “A Hundred Years” (1990); “A Thousand Years” (1990); to “Let’s Eat Outdoors Today” (1990-91; 2011), Hirst created a series of installations with maggots and flies. In the confined vitrine that was divided into two halves, we see one half with trays of maggots being fed slices of raw meat. The thousands of maggots hatch into flies and pass through the circular hole to the other side of the vitrine, where they gather over the leftovers of food and drinks laid on a table. Before long, the flies are electrocuted by the large insect-o-cutor hanging above the table. In 2012, Hirst’s “In and Out of Love” exhibited in Tate Modern in London contains two windowless rooms swirling with live butterflies. Viewers are led to observe them close up and as they fly, feed, and rest. However, Hirst was condemned by animal rights activist groups, because it was later revealed that over 9000 butterflies died during the 23 weeks the exhibition was open.ⁱⁱ

In the Chinese art scene, several artists have also experimented in creating art works with living insects, including Huang Yong Ping’s controversial work “Theatre of the World.” First exhibited in Germany in 1993, the installation consists of a transparent dome-shaped construction where hundreds of reptiles and insects are placed within. During the several months-long exhibition, the creatures battled against one another, some were eaten, and others died of exhaustion. They were then replaced by new creatures to keep things in action. The insects that were trapped inside the dome structure, which included spiders, scorpions, crickets,

cockroaches, black beetles, stick insects, and centipedes, were mostly killed and eaten by the lizards, toads, and snakes that were placed within the confined battlefield. In 2017, “Theatre of the World” was planned to be a highlighted piece in the Guggenheim Museum’s exhibition “Art and China after 1989: Theater of the World” in New York. However, animal rights activists started an online petition and garnered over 800,000 signatures in two weeks to criticize Huang’s piece, together with two other video art works including Xu Bing’s *A Case Study of Transference* (1994) and Peng Yu and Sun Yuan’s *Dogs that Cannot Tough Each Other* (2003), for animal cruelty. Within a few days, the museum pulled the concerned three works in response.

Huang Yong Ping in fact was not the only Chinese artist who has experimented using live insects in art works. In the 1990s, Xu Bing’s *Silkworm Series* and Cai Guo-qiang’s *The New York Earthworm Room* also created a significant stir in the international art scene. The two works are seen as a more humane and ethical use and involvement of insects in art installations.

Xu Bing’s *Silkworm Series* first started in 1994, four years after he moved from China to the United States. In his *American Silkworm Series* exhibited in Boston and New York between 1994 and 1998, Xu placed silkworms under different physical environments, ranging from mulberry branches, television sets, and books, and let them move, eat, grow and transform, and spin their silken cocoons, with regular human monitoring and interferences throughout the exhibition period. China has over 2,000 years of history in raising silkworms for silk production. Because breeding similar kinds of silkworms has proven to be difficult in the United States, for his art installations, Xu Bing imported hundreds of live silkworms needed from Linhai, Zhejiang, which is a region most famous for its silk production. The *Silkworm Series* entailed both installations as well as performances during which hundreds of live silkworm moths laid eggs and spun their silk over everyday objects, varying from mulberry branches, books, newspapers, and photographs, to computers and videotapes.

Xu revived his *Silkworm Series* with a two-part installation in summer 2014, exhibited in *It Begins with Metamorphosis: Xu Bing* at The Asia Society Hong Kong. In the first installation, *The Opening* (開幕式), silkworms were placed in a large vase of mulberry branches. Over the three-month period of the exhibition, the silkworms ate up the leaves until only dead branches remained, and clusters of cocoons were seen nestled within (Figs. 2 & 3). In juxtaposition with this was the second installation, *Silkworm Book* (蠶書), where silkworms were placed on a hardcover edition of Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, which was neatly nailed on a raised wooden platform. Similar to previous works in the *Silkworm Series*, the book provided a physical environment for the silkworms to continuously move around its surface, creating silken strands that gradually obscured the text until the entire book surface was covered up in silk and insect droppings, as the silkworms slowly died and were replaced (Figs. 4 & 5).

Prior to creating the *Silkworm Series*, Xu established himself as a calligrapher and artist in the international art field by inventing unreadable pseudo-Chinese characters that both confuse and amuse Chinese and foreign viewers, but uniting them “in a kind of egalitarianism of induced illiteracy” (Silbergeld, 2006:20). From the late 1980s until the 1990s, he produced his definitive work *Book from the Sky* (天书), dedicating nearly three years to carve over 4000 of these reinvented Chinese characters into wood blocks. Xu’s dedication as an artist is reflected in his subsequent work, *Silkworm Series*, in which he “found himself identifying with

the way the silkworms diligently and slowly went to work, ignoring the world outside” (Koon, 19).

With the gradual consumption of the mulberry branches as well as the pages of *Metamorphosis* being covered by white silk and stains, viewers are reminded of the short lifecycles of the silkworms. Despite the worms’ lifespan that lasts only for a few weeks, what **Xu Bing** has done as an artist is to magnify their lifecycles in a human-controlled, semi-natural environment, allowing the silkworms to do what they naturally do and letting the ecological processes take place in a quiet manner for several weeks.

Fig. 2. Xu Bing, *The Opening*, 2014. Silkworms, mulberry plant, and ceramic vase. Collection of the artist. Exhibited in *It Begins with Metamorphosis: Xu Bing*, Asia Society Hong Kong Center. 2014. (Photo taken mid-May 2014) (Left)

Fig. 3. Xu Bing, *The Opening* (Close up). Silkworms, mulberry plant, and ceramic vase. Collection of the artist. Exhibited in *It Begins with Metamorphosis: Xu Bing*, Asia Society Hong Kong Center. 2014. (Photo taken mid-May 2014) (Right)

Fig. 4. **Xu Bing**, *Silkworm Book*, 2014. Silkworms, silk, and book. L39.5 x W39.5cm. Collection of the artist. Exhibited in *It Begins with Metamorphosis: Xu Bing*, Asia Society Hong Kong Center. 2014. (Photo taken early-May 2014)

Fig. 5. **Xu Bing**, *Silkworm Book*, 2014. Silkworms, silk, and book. L39.5 x W39.5cm. Collection of the artist. Exhibited in *It Begins with Metamorphosis: Xu Bing*, Asia Society Hong Kong Center. 2014. (Photo taken mid-May 2014)

A joint-exhibition took place at Bard College in New York in 1998 for both Xu Bing's *The Silkworm Series* (蠶系列·開幕式) and Cai Guoqiang's *The New York Earthworm Room* (紐約蚯蚓室). The exhibition was titled "When Heaven Meets Earth", which implies the conditions of the worms used in the two installations: Xu Bing's silkworms spread over and covering different objects, and Cai Guoqiang's earthworms burrowing under the soil. Cai's work was inspired by American artist Walter De Maria's renowned installation *The New York Earth Room*, which has been exhibited since 1977. De Maria transported 250 cubic yards of earth to fill up the ground of a New York art gallery, turning nature into an indoor earth sculpture in which no plant or living matter could live or grow, to ensure the piece will stay unchanged since it was first installed in the late 1970s. The work urges people to ponder on human interaction with, and interference of, nature, at a time when people are seeing a rapid deterioration of natural environment in the real world.

Creating a cross-cultural dialogue with De Maria, Cai replicated his installation, but reversed the concept by reintroducing living organism, in particular earthworms, into the replicated earth room. As a result, the earthworms aerated the soil and nourished it with organic matters, and grass began to grow. The work, as curator Zhang Zhaohui points out, turned De Maria's "almost ossified earth into a laboratory of earth amelioration, and restores its natural condition by means of the earthworms' instinctive puncturing inside the dirt. The ameliorated earth begins to nurture life; green comes back to the ground. [...] Thus the work returns us to the fundamental issue that Cai Guo-qiang constantly addresses: the relation of heaven, earth, and human beings" (Zhang Z., 42, 43).

The silkworms and earthworms in Xu and Cai's art installations do what they naturally do: create silk; and aerate and nourish the earth. However, it is by doing what they do that the installations and performances are made possible. As the worms are placed not in a natural environment but within a confined human-controlled space, the two pieces are turned into fitting metaphors for the Anthropocene, where our world is inhabited by multiple species, and even tiny creatures like silkworms and earthworms are all playing their roles in shaping not just the physical environment, but also human culture and civilization as well as our understanding of the world over the course of history.

Leaving China in the politically unsettling 1980s, Cai Guoqiang and Xu Bing's early experience as young artists in the West had not been easy. Like most diasporic subjects, they constantly found themselves at the margins of two worlds. And yet, by finding their ways in practicing art at the margins, they soon established their reputations as cross-cultural artists whose works explore the connections, fusions and confusions, as well as conflicts and collisions, between the East and the West. Both artists use worms to symbolize their own transformation and metamorphosis, from artists rooted deeply in their Chinese cultural origins, to cosmopolitan artists whose works address larger issues at a time of globalization. They are "playing the part of the cultural broker, bringing something of China to the United States, and taking something from the United States back to China, bridging the gap" (Zhang, 38). Silbergeld (2011) describes the cross-cultural dimensions of Chinese as developing their "signature styles based on borrowing from China and the West, transforming these into something neither East nor West, not just Chinese, not not Chinese. Their art creates and operates in a world of its own, on a space between" (Silbergeld, 195). Along similar lines, Wiseman (2011) sees Xu and Cai's works as "subversive" by positioning themselves in-between the global and local (4). While scholars have been fascinated by the artists' transcultural experience in China and the world, they do not usually mention how Xu and Cai's works are actually doing more than just to negotiate between the East and the West; they too demonstrate both physically and metaphorically human/non-human encounters in the long

history of China and the world. They are not just art practices at the margins of China and the West. They are, at the same time, art practices of environing that negotiate between the human and nonhuman worlds.

Focusing on Xu's art installation series exhibited in Hong Kong in 2014, particularly the *Silkworm Book*, the following section adopts two different approaches in recent environmental humanities, multispecies studies and Anthropocene criticism, to examine how the art work serves as a metaphor to reflect upon how human history and culture mingle with non-human presence and influence, thus suggesting a rethinking of human civilization, particularly from the non-Western scope and perspective, in the age of Anthropocene.

II. **Silkworm Books and the Ecological Art**

Throughout Xu Bing's "Silkworm Series" that have been exhibited multiple times over two decades, books have played a major role in the exhibition. Since 1994, Xu Bing has created several versions of the *Silkworm Books*. In the original installation, *American Silkworm Series Part I: Silkworm Book*, silkworms were placed over a book with blank pages, thus instilling new meanings to a book without content. In 2001, in *Silkworm Chairman Mao Red Book*, Xu replicated the installation with the famous *Quotations of Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, the Little Red Book that was read by the entire nation of China during the 1960s and 1970s. In the more recent Hong Kong installation in 2014, Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* was used. Exhibited in different countries at different times and with the varied cultural significance of the books used, the *Silkworm Books* have generated and conveyed different political, cultural, and ideological messages. It is with such cosmopolitan perspectives that Xu Bing has become known as a cross-cultural diasporic Chinese artist, and his works are considered to be a bridge between Chinese and Western societies. At the same time, the *Silkworm Books* also encourage us to adjust our perception of the world in non-anthropocentric ways. Through their engagement with insects, the *Silkworm Books* can be regarded as ecological art that represent not just cross-cultural but cross-species encounters in the Anthropocene epoch.ⁱⁱⁱ

In *The Ecological Thought*, Morton suggests that "Ecological art, and the ecological-ness of all art, isn't just about something (trees, mountains, animals, pollution, and so forth), Ecological art is something. Art is ecological insofar as it is made from materials and exists in the world" (Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 11). What Morton advocates is to expand our scope beyond representations and semiotic analysis of an artwork and to shift towards the quality of art and "artfulness" (Manning 2015), which we may find in the subject's material presence and agencies as artwork. In Xu Bing's silkworm installations, this would mean thinking beyond what the installation represents metaphorically, or how silkworms are represented in the work, and focusing on the material significance of the presence of these live silkworms.

Manning, on the other hand, adopts a Bergsonian approach to defining eco-art and "artfulness," by emphasizing relationality and the notion of perpetual becoming:

"[t]he work *art* in German (*die Art*) continues today to carry one of the earliest meanings of the term: 'manner' or 'mode.' In the early thirteenth century, art was still connected to this qualifying notion, attuned less to an object than a skill or craft of learning. A way of learning. [...] Art, understood along these terms, is not yet about an object, about a form, or a content. It is still on its way, in its manner of becoming" (Manning, 45).

To her, “[a]rtfulness is always more than human” (Manning, 72). She sees the quality of art in “activating fields of relation that are environmental or ecological in scales of intermixings that may include the human but don’t depend on it” (*ibid.*).

Placing together a book, numerous living silkworms, the white silk they produce, and human monitoring efforts as a multimedia art installation, Xu Bing created in *Silkworm Book* a vibrant art assemblage that relies on both materiality and relationality/interactions among the different components of the piece. However, taking into consideration interspecies ethics and the notion of “care” for the nonhuman world, can the *Silkworm Books* still be defined clearly as an ecological art?

Anthropologists, animal studies experts, and ecocritics have proposed various theoretical frameworks in recent years for examining the interconnectedness and entanglement of human and non-human species, so as to re-evaluate human and non-human agencies and to challenge our long established understanding of human societies and cultures. The emergent framework of “multispecies ethnography” developed by anthropologists in the past decade centers on “how a multitude of (nonhuman) organisms’ livelihoods shape and are shaped by political, economic, and cultural forces” (Kirksey and Helmreich, 545) and highlights the “situated connectivities that bind us (humans and nonhumans) into multi-species communities” (549). As they argue, “relationships also have histories. Beyond a static ecological exchange, like the energy circuits mapped by early ecologists, organisms are situated within deep, entangled histories. And so, beyond mere survival, particular lifeways in all their resplendent diversity emerge from interwoven patterns of living and dying, of being and becoming, in a larger world” (van Dooren, Kirksey and Muesnster, 2016:2).

Scholars within the field of multispecies studies have emphasized “cross-species kinships” and “interspecies ethics” among various animals, plants, and other species (Haraway 2004, 2016; Rose 2011). Similar to other kinships, the ethics of interspecies kinships is built on the gesture of “care” (van Dooren, 2014). While it may be a bit far-fetched to talk about caring for the worms that most urban people in the present world would hardly have contact with, by adopting living insects in art performances and carefully monitoring their movements and activities during the period of exhibition, Xu Bing’s *Silkworm* installations illustrate “performing” special care towards the insects as a way of spending “quality time” with them and help us rethink various questions centering multispecies co-existence in the Anthropocene. Through these “performances of care,” viewers are enabled to see the miniature of a world co-habited and shared by human and non-human beings. As van Dooren suggests, “caring is always a practice of worlding” (van Dooren, 2014:294). By highlighting care in human/non-human interactions, we are “remak[ing] ourselves, our practices and our world” (*ibid.*). Entering the Anthropocene era, theories of cosmopolitanism no longer focus only on humanity as a shared, universal concept, but also “the urgency and challenges of developing a contemporary vision of planetary identity that would be accountable to socioeconomic, racial, sexual, cultural, linguistic, religious, and other kinds of difference” (Heise, 2016:225). Building upon her previous work on eco-cosmopolitanism – an ecologically oriented, deterritorialized form of cosmopolitanism that envisions human and non-human beings co-existing in imagined communities on a planetary scale (Heise, 2008:61) – Heise refines her focus on interspecies relations in her conceptualization of “multispecies cosmopolitanism”, which “aims broadly at reconstructing the understanding of ‘human’ communities as in reality conglomerates of human and nonhuman species that shape each other” (Heise, 2016:195). As a multispecies work of art, Xu’s *Silkworm Series* embraces and reflects such an ecological worldview and enables us to rethink in artistic terms what performance of care could mean.

In order to understand what makes the artwork ecological, it is crucial to understand how it cultivates (interspecies) care and attentiveness towards the non-human world.

“[R]ather than simply celebrating multispecies mingling – a basic fact of life [...] [...] work in **multispecies studies** is concerned with the cultivation of what we have called arts of attentiveness. This attentiveness is a two-part proposition: both a practice of getting to know another in their intimate particularity [...] and, at the same time, a practice of learning how one might better respond to another, might work to cultivate worlds of mutual flourishing, [...] In short, the arts of attentiveness remind us that knowing and living are deeply entangled and that paying attention can and should be the basis for crafting better possibilities for shared life” (**van Dooren**; Kirksey; and Muenster, 17).

Responding to **Van Dooren**, Kirksey and Muenster’s call for “cultivating arts of attentiveness” for the “worlds of (multispecies) mutual flourishing,” the **Silkworm Books** reflect ecocritically on the role of human beings in shaping the more-than-human world, while on the other hand, how non-human beings shape human culture and civilization. In doing so, they reflect the power dynamics between humans/non-humans that contributes to the promotion of **multispecies cosmopolitanism** that increasingly defines our world today.

Non-human Agencies in the Multispecies World

From tiny maggots maturing into adult flies and eventually getting electrocuted by a huge fly-zapping machine, Damien Hirst’s *Let’s Eat Outdoors Today* (1990-91) shows us the moments of life and death of thousands of insects. Huang Yong Ping’s *Theatre of the World*, on the other hand, shows us the fights among the numerous reptiles and insects within a dome installation, and their injuries and deaths are being put on display. What is common between the two works is how they highlight the transition of non-human beings from living to dead, and the turning of their deaths into visual spectacles. Both works have been criticized by animal right advocates for their unethical treatments of non-human lives. In contrast to Hirst and Huang’s installations, **Xu Bing**’s **Silkworm Series** avoids the intense and dramatic spectacles generated by the torture and exterminations of insects and presents what seems a more ethical kind of performance.

According to Sharon Chan, the co-curator of **Xu Bing**’s exhibition in Hong Kong, Xu has given specific instructions in preparation of the **Silkworm Book**: “Select silkworms of the fourth or fifth stage of development. Feed them with dry mulberry leaves three times a day until their appetites decrease. Prepare a book, nail it to a raised wooden platform and let the silkworms spin the silk. Clean the droppings”(Chan, 103). Compared to Hirst and Huang’s installations in which insect exterminations became art spectacles for public viewing, the silkworms used for Xu’s art installations are handled with better care and in more ethical ways. It shows us how worms live, act, and what they can do as living beings.

Unlike Hirst’s maggots that transform into flies in front of the viewers’ eyes, **Xu Bing** did not show his silkworms metamorphosing into moths. Instead, in the 2014 installation the worms were placed on top of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. By doing so, the art piece makes symbolic, literary reference to the story of Gregor Samsa morphing into a giant insect and

allows it to shape our perception of the live worms used in the piece in imaginative ways. While the silkworms do not metamorphosize in front of our eyes, their presence and activities transform the piece of installation gradually and present us with a multispecies art **assemblage** that “emerges as an intertwined flux of material and discursive forces... a material-semiotic network of human and nonhuman agents incessantly generating the world’s embodiments and events” (Iovino and Oppermann, 3). Within this material-semiotic network, our focus is shifted from the subjectivity of individual lives to the non-human agencies (of silkworms, silk, and the book) within the art **assemblage** as a whole. We are led to observe the agential dynamics among human and non-human beings within it.

Differing from Huang and Hirst’s insect installations, **Xu Bing’s Silkworm Series** focuses on the slow, quiet, and un-dramatic process and encourages us to turn our attention from spectacles of life and death to the non-human agency of silkworms and how their quiet presence alters and shapes the exhibition environments over time. Versus the trend of individualism in Chinese art scene,^{iv} **Xu Bing** and **Cai Guoqiang** have reduced their own presence in their works of the **Silkworm Series** and Earthworm Room, making worms and their non-human agency central to the work, as a response to the call for addressing broader ecological issues in art. To be eco-conscious, artists often have to “downgrade the ego in order to upgrade the eco component of their creative practices” (Weintraub, 45). As Wang suggests, “What makes the Chinese use of animal images distinct is not so much what they stand for as how they stand in relation to each other. In other words, it is the way they all add up and work in concert that matters most. The web of relationships to which they are integrated is the key to Chinese animal ‘symbolism’” (Wang, vii). Loaded with various “performers”, the **Silkworm Books** present a series of art installations that highlight such a web of relationships: “from **Xu Bing** [and his assistants] as the invisible silkworm farmer[s] at the preparatory stage, to silkworms as animals that carry cultural connotations of material production, and the book as the symbol of cultural production, as well as another site of creativity” (Chan, 103). In addition to that, the spectators coming for the exhibition and other dynamic elements, such as the mulberry leaves, the lights, humidity, and room temperature,^v are all components that contribute towards a collaborative “performance” among the multiple human and non-human parties.

Xu’s installation enables the non-human beings, particularly the silkworms, to take over some degree of control and make their non-human agency visible. Within the several months in which the **Silkworm Book** installations were exhibited, the art **assemblage** underwent constant and gradual transformation. The silk created by the silkworms gradually thickened and covered the book, obscuring us from seeing the texts as the worms continue to wind their silk in all directions. On top of the white layer of silk, brownish stains are also increasingly seen which, as Koon describes it, presented “testimonial forces of [the silkworms’] existence and a haunting reminder of nature’s fate that bring poignancy to the artwork” (Koon, 20). By obscuring human gaze and access to the book, the art installation forces viewers to focus on the silkworms and their alteration of the environment (Fig. 6). Pheng Cheah argues that **Silkworm Book** aims to deconstruct anthropologism^{vi} and suggests that silkworms have a world, too:

“[I]t disrupts the teleological completion of the signification process by preventing our gaze from penetrating what is below the silk covering. And the means of this blocking of human access is precisely the world that the silkworm creates through its natural artifice. It is as though the silkworm is saying to the viewer: ‘You have to enter my world and pass through it to get to yours. You

can only achieve meaningfulness if my world gives you access to meaning. So you must acknowledge that I have a world””(Cheah, 100).

Fig. 6. **Xu Bing**, *Silkworm Book*, 2014. Silkworms, silk, and book. L39.5 x W39.5cm. Collection of the artist. Exhibited in *It Begins with Metamorphosis: Xu Bing*, Asia Society Hong Kong Center. 2014. (Photo taken by Sylvia Tsai, June 2014. Courtesy of ArtAsiaPacific.)

Acknowledging the silkworm's world gives the material art **assemblage** a metaphoric significance in representing a **multispecies** condition in which non-human beings exert their agencies. With the silkworms spinning white silk to cover up all the words and obstructing us from reading the texts, the different versions of *Silkworm Books*, whether Mao's *Little Red Book* or Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, are all turned into the silkworms' world in which human constructs – such as the three “wen”, *wenzhi* (文字/words); *wenhua* (文化/culture); *wenming* (文明/civilization) – are all being obstructed by the non-human presence and actions. The worms and their activities have both physically and metaphorically overpowered the human world. Comparing that with the present environmental condition of our world, one could argue it reflects that in a time of environmental crisis, national and political agendas and everything anthropogenic, from human ideologies, culture, to civilization, are all increasingly overshadowed by ecological and natural phenomena as represented in the installation by silkworms' natural practice of silk making.

While a **multispecies** reading of Xu's Silkworm installation enables us to see how non-human agencies operate in a way that overpower the human world, one could at the same time argue the **Silkworm Series** presents, after all, art artifacts that are created as a result of human design and interventions. They are still installations created for humans to gaze into non-human silkworms' lives. Are they therefore still being deprived of a world of their own? Framing it within an **Anthropocene** discourse, we are led to question are human intervention and control necessarily bad things?

In the following section I wish to argue that the **Silkworm Book** is inviting multiple ecocritical approaches for interpretation: while placing it in a **multispecies** framework enables us to highlight the non-human agencies of silkworms and thus **multispecies** co-existence between human and non-human beings; an **Anthropocene** reading reminds us that human centrality is still a determining factor, both in the artwork and in our real world. Juxtaposing the two readings magnifies the tensions and interdependence between human and non-human agencies and pushes us to rethink the role of human beings in practicing environing towards the more-than-human world.

Hageman argues that a dialectical ideological critique is a necessary apparatus in ecocinema studies, since "all films are bathed in ideology," and "ideology always contains contradiction, internal and inherent to its structure" (Hageman, 64-5). Like films, artworks are ideological constructs. They too contain internal contradictions when placed under different frameworks for critical analyses. The discrepancies within the different approaches and analyses should be seen as "indices of the contradictions within the ideology that determines our current ability to think and represent ecology" (Hageman, 65). No clear position or answer is offered in **Xu Bing's Silkworm Series** under the presence and agential capacity of silkworms that remind people of **multispecies** co-existence in our world; while at the same time it urges us to contemplate upon the centrality of human agency, an eco-dialectical critique can also be made to open the issue up for further debates and discussion.

Anthropocene Metaphor and the Confucian Eco-Governance

Considering the growing magnitude and impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere, Crutzen and Stoermer propose that humankind is finally moving beyond the Holocene, the post-glacial geological epoch that lasted for over ten thousand years. As they argue, it seems "more appropriate to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by proposing to use the term '**Anthropocene**' for the current geological epoch" (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000:17). In contrast with **multispecies studies**, **Anthropocene** studies highlight the centrality of humans in transforming the earth. In a way, the emergence of an **Anthropocene** discourse complicates the recent discussion and debates in posthumanist ecocritical studies, for it "stands in tension with those varieties of posthumanism that have, over the past three decades, sought to emphasize the central importance of nonhuman agents in social networks" (Heise, 2016:203). According to Heise, **Anthropocene's** focus on human centrality has led to two opposing interpretations: it has been understood both pessimistically and optimistically. "For pessimists, the **Anthropocene** signals the enormous scope of negative human impacts on the environment; for optimists, it opens up the possibility of reimagining the nature of the future not as a return to the past or a realm apart from humans, but as a nature reshaped by humans" (*ibid.*). While **Anthropocene** and its Chinese translation *ren lei shi* (人類世) have not yet become dominant keywords in Chinese ecocritical studies, a similar understanding of

humans' relationship with the environment has been in consonance with **Confucian** tradition since ancient time, particularly in their common emphasis on the need of human dominance over the non-human world.

In **Mencius** – the **Confucian** classic published in 300 B.C. – **Mengzi** tells the legendary tales of several Chinese emperors in the section “Duke Wen of T’eng Book Two”: “In the time of great floods during Emperor Yao’s time, it was said that snakes and dragons emerged and intruded human lands, leaving humans with nowhere to settle. Emperor Yao appointed Yu to bring the waters under control. Yu dug furrows in the land and diverted the water into the sea. As a result, obstacles and dangers were rinsed away, snakes and dragons were driven into marshes, and ravaging birds and animals disappeared. People regained their farmland and settled down. However, soon after the capable emperors Yao and Shun’s deaths, the disasters came back under the savage emperors’ ways of rule. They left the fields unattended, and built pleasure lakes and parks that caused the swarms of birds and animals to return. By the time of Tyrant Chou, the country was in complete chaos. Fortunately, the disastrous time ended with the arrival of good Duke Chou, who put an end to the tyrannical regime, conquered fifty nations, and drove away all the fierce beasts such as tigers, leopards, rhinoceros and elephants. People of the time were once again greatly delighted” (Mencius, 90-91).

Putting Sage rulers Yao, Shun, and Duke Chou in contrast to savage and cruel rulers like Tyrant Chou, **Mengzi** concludes that good human leaders bring about effective governance and thus harmony and stability to the world; while bad rulers turn animals predatory and the environment hostile to human beings. **Confucian anthropocentrism** proves its relevance in the contemporary world by offering us insights into the debate on humans’ role in shaping the environment. From the words of **Mengzi**, the ancient **Confucian** Sage, we could see the **Confucian** stance towards human dominance: that humans both build and destroy the environment, subject to the intentions and virtues of rulers of the time.

Incorporating **Confucian** thoughts on **environmental governance** in our **Anthropocene** reading, **Xu Bing**’s **Silkworm Book** presents a fitting metaphor of the ecosystem in miniature that leads us to contemplate humans’ role in affecting the more-than-human world. All of **Xu Bing**’s **Silkworm** installations involve a great deal of human intervention and management. Instead of being a static, unchanged art installation, **Silkworm Book** is designed to be an ongoing performance with human work throughout the exhibition period. Each day after the gallery closes, the silkworms are monitored, their droppings cleaned, and dead worms removed. Human intervention becomes necessary in order to ensure what viewers focus on is what the artist intends to present: not just a completed art piece created by a human artist, nor a demonstration of how nature operates without human intervention, but an ongoing performance of tensions created between humans and non-humans. Viewers are encouraged to observe what the silkworms have created and to experience the regulated process of the quiet tensions and peaceful interactions and wrestles between human beings and the silkworms throughout the period. The “artfulness” of the piece lies in the balance between what elements in the art installation are kept and what others are removed, in order to create a sense of interspecies harmony within an artwork constantly under transformation.

The multispecies world in the **Silkworm Book** resembles a miniature of the world in the **Anthropocene** era. From a **Confucian** perspective, the role of human artists to the world created within the art installation is comparable to the ancient rulers’ role in shaping the environment of their time. Whether harmony and peace are attainable (in the artwork versus in reality)

depends on their intentions and virtues, which are translated into their care and attentiveness to the non-human environment under their influence and governance.

The *Silkworm Book* presents us a world that is increasingly defined by the dissolved boundaries between human/non-human; nature/culture; construction/destruction; and despite the non-human ability to impact the environment, human activities and interventions remain crucial in the worldmaking process. Because of such human intervention, the artwork transcends from a random and unnoticeable slice of reality (a “non-art”) into an art assemblage highlighted by its materiality (human and non-human agencies) and relationality (human and non-human dynamics) that enable human viewers to make sense of the interspecies interactions and multispecies co-existence.

Concluding Notes: Rethinking Silk Road Culture and Civilization

Fig. 7. Bathing silkworm eggs. (浴蠶) *Chinese Technology in the Seventeenth Century*.

Fig. 8. Mature silkworms are placed on split-bamboo screens to spin cocoons. (山箔) *Chinese Technology in the Seventeenth Century*.

Sung Ying-hsing, a Chinese scientist and public official of the Ming Dynasty, published the classic work *Chinese Technology in the Seventeenth Century* (also known as *T'ien-kung K'ai-*

wu 天工開物) in 1637, which documents the history of traditional Chinese technology ranging from agriculture, textiles, and mining to the manufacturing of weapons. Sung dedicated an extensive section of his publication on depicting the processes of producing clothing materials. As he suggests, “Nature has provided the materials for clothing” (Sung, 35). In this section, Sung documents in great detail how, in order to produce high-quality silk, the process begins with carefully raising silkworms. From bathing the silk-moth eggs, identifying the varieties of silkworms, and hatching and raising them, to preventing them from getting diseases, the book stresses the tremendous effort and time required for growing healthy silkworms (Figs. 7 & 8).

The careful breeding of silkworms and the skillful production of high-quality silk have long been considered a significant part of Chinese civilization and cultural history. Since the 19th century, the networks of trade routes between China and various Eurasian countries have been called the Silk Road. Silkworms and silk thus play an important role in defining the transnational image and early forms of globalization in Chinese history and civilization.

With the growing concerns for environmental well-being and animal welfare in recent years, these commercial practices of silk productions have, however, increasingly been deemed unethical. An animal rights organization points out that over 6600 silkworms have to be killed in order to produce one kilogram of silk, and billions of silkworms are killed each year in the world for silk productions.^{vii} With that in mind, it would seem necessary to re-examine whether the long Chinese tradition, as well as our understanding of Silk Road culture and civilization, is still in any way natural or ecological by today’s standards. The changing ideologies and paradigmatic shifts in the age of **Anthropocene** mean that practices of environing requires our constant self-reflections; looking ahead to the future; and adjusting our beliefs to lead more ecological ways of life.

In this chapter I have illustrated how **Xu Bing**’s art installation, the **Silkworm Book**, offers a metaphor for the **Anthropocene** condition by offering a space for an eco-dialectical ideological discussion on human/non-human relationships in the present world. By using silkworms in his art installations, as well as showing considerable care and attentiveness to them, Xu is offering the silkworms a voice they never had before. While the **Silkworm Series** is not a harsh critique towards exploitation of insect lives, it does leave us to ponder what Chinese culture, or more broadly, human knowledge and civilization are built upon, and at the expense of what?

Such ecocritical reflections of human knowledge, history, culture, and civilization are becoming more and more important in the **Anthropocene** age. Moreover, the aesthetic value of artworks like **Xu Bing**’s **Silkworm Series** lies in their ability to provoke and challenge our predominating concepts of human centrality and dominance, as well as to ponder our relationships with non-human species, thus helping to build a future with better awareness of **multispecies co-existence**.

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ⁱ *Dear Climate*. <http://www.dearclimate.net>

ⁱⁱ Kikkhah, Roya, "Damien Hirst condemned for killing 9,000 butterflies in Tate show", *The Telegraph*, 14 Oct 2012.
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/9606498/Damien-Hirst-condemned-for-killing-9000-butterflies-in-Tate-show.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ The same can be said of Cai Guoqiang's *New York Earthworm Room* (1998). This chapter, however, focuses on Xu Bing's *Silkworm Series*, which the author visited in 2014.

^{iv} From visual artists such as Yue Minjun and Fang Lijun who frequently depict themselves in paintings, to installation and performance artists like Zhang Huan, Sun Yuan, and Peng Yu who had in the past used their own bodies to create and perform personal art pieces, Chinese artists have been exploring issues of individual identity and human subjectivity, being in a society where individualism and collectivism are in constant conflicts.

^v As chief curator of the Xu Bing exhibition (2014) organized by the Asia Society Hong Kong Center, Yeewan Koon points out, "there were mitigating factors that affected this work, such as the environment of the exhibition space and the timing of the exhibition in May in Hong Kong that affected the lifespan of the silkworms" (Koon, 45).

^{vi} Building upon Heidegger's work, Pheng Cheah uses the term "anthropologism" to refer to the philosophical conception with "man" as a basic philosophical category and asserts that only by proceeding from this can one develop a system of ideas about nature, society, and the world.

^{vii} <https://www.peta.org.uk/issues/animals-not-wear/silk/>