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# Communicating the "incommunicable green": a comparative study of the structures of desire in environmental advertising in the United States and China

Xinghua Li  
*University of Iowa*

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COMMUNICATING THE “INCOMMUNICABLE GREEN”:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE STRUCTURES OF DESIRE IN  
ENVIRONMENTAL ADVERTISING IN THE UNITED STATES AND  
CHINA

by  
Xinghua Li

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Doctor of  
Philosophy degree in Communication Studies  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

July 2010

Thesis Supervisor: Professor John Durham Peters

## ABSTRACT

Situated at the intersection of global media studies and environmental communication, this dissertation is a comparative study of environmental advertising in the U.S. and China. I employ a combination of semiotic, psychoanalytic, and historical methods to read Chinese and American environmental advertisements in order to interpret the structures of desires that motivate (or fail to motivate) green consumption in these two cultures. As the world's two largest consumer economies, China and the U.S. are both key contributors to the exhaustion of global resources and the pollution of the world environment and, thus, are crucial in deciding the future of the global environmental movement. I look into green consumerism, a popular cultural phenomenon in both the U.S. and China, and examine its efficacy in motivating public participation in environmental affairs. In particular, I select advertisements as unique artifacts of the consumer culture and read them as symptoms to interpret the structures of desires that underlie two strands of dominant green discourse.

Named by Raymond Williams as the "magic industry," advertising is often denounced as an omnipotent machine that manufactures mass desire and dictates collective behavior. I, however, explore the cultural and historical differences that perturb the effectiveness of advertising and generate possibilities for local resistance during the global spread of green consumerism. My analysis shows that while most American green ads use images of harmony to appease a deep apocalyptic fear aroused by radical environmental rhetoric, the Chinese culture lacks the apocalyptic tradition and only responds to green ads that appeal to national pride and the desire to emulate the West. Moreover, heavily influenced by Confucianism, Taoism,

and Maoism, the Chinese view the relations between humans and nature, individual and collective, subject and authority differently from the Americans. These views shape the ways the Chinese perceive and react to environmental dangers and lead to a significant disjunction in the understanding of “green” between China and the U.S. By acknowledging these cultural, ideological, and historical differences, this dissertation investigates the international struggles for hegemony underlying the green consumerist movement and explores the conditions under which global environmental alliance can be established.

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Graduate College  
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

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To the World



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## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Almost three years ago, I went through an intense panic after watching *An Inconvenient Truth*, Al Gore's global warming documentary. It predicted that the current speed of the arctic meltdown would cause Shanghai, my hometown, to soon be underwater. Terrified, I called my parents in China and urged them to move out of Shanghai. To my surprise, my father sounded very calm: "Don't worry, we live on the 11<sup>th</sup> floor, we'll survive." My mother chimed in with the joke: "It's great that your uncle lives on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor in the next building, so we can just buy a boat to visit him!" My parents' teasing manner made me angry. What upset me more, however, was that I sensed something profoundly incommunicable in the apocalyptic anxiety I was experiencing. Having stayed in the U.S. for four years, I was familiar with the Western apocalyptic narrative through science fiction novels and disaster movies, and thus had no difficulty imagining a global-scale environmental catastrophe. However, since the apocalypse is absent from Chinese traditional belief systems, it was difficult for my parents, who rarely watched Hollywood movies, to imagine the world ending as they have just achieved the long-overdue "good life" and bought the first condo of their lives.

The shocking awakening to cultural differences put me into deep thought. What, then, would motivate the Chinese to be concerned about

environmental issues? What different sets of desires do the popular environmental discourse in China and the U.S. generate to stimulate public participation? How are these desires connected to the cultural, political, and ideological differences in these two countries? How do the Chinese imagine environmental crises and how are these different ways of imagining related to the representations in domestic and international media? Can global environmental alliance be established despite these differences, and how? These questions helped me conceive this dissertation, which inquires into the relationships between media, imagination, desire, and agency in the face of the global environmental crises.

In a nutshell, this project is a comparative analysis of environmental advertising in China and the U.S. To examine the relationship between media and desire, I will look at advertising, one of the most ubiquitous media forms in the public sphere and an institution notoriously known to generate mass desire in the consumer society. Named by Raymond Williams (1980) as the “magic system,” advertising can shape the fantasies and dreams of a society, influence cultural values and beliefs, and stimulate collective desires. Also, its unique “imaging” power and the aesthetic way it speaks to our desires make it an interesting cultural artifact to examine in order to investigate the relationship between media imagery, social imagination, and collective desire.

While there is rich literature on the cultural history of American advertising (e.g. Ewen 1976; Williams 1980; Schudson 1986; Lears 1995), most of it focuses on the period from the 19th century through the 1970s. However, little critical historical work has been done on advertising since the 1970s and hardly any attention is paid to the rise of green advertising in Europe and North America and their spread into developing countries such as China. By “green advertising,” I mean commercial advertising that uses an environmental theme to promote products, services, or corporate public images. While this dissertation emphasizes this commercial type of green advertising, it also contextualizes it by examining other non-commercial advertising discourse which precede, supplement, or challenge the commercial discourse of green consumption. This general category of advertising that features various environmentally-related subjects is referred to as “environmental advertising” and is the central text to be examined in this dissertation. It ranges from environmental NGO’s public service advertisements, political advertisements, or the Chinese version of political advertising, i.e. governmental propaganda. Through comparing, contrasting, and relating these different strands of discourse, this dissertation is able to explore the broader social and cultural function of green advertising.

Green advertising and green marketing have been a heated topic in business literature and mass media. The mainstream debate currently centers on whether it is a progressive movement that raises the public’s



environmental consciousness or a conservative movement of “greenwashing” that continues to preserve our environmentally-damaging lifestyles (Todd 2004). However, both sides of the debate tend to treat green marketing as an instrument of mass motivation and are only concerned about its “external” effects on collective behavior or the natural environment. Turning towards the “internal” questions of desire, subjectivity and ethics, I investigate the phenomenon of green consumerism and seek possibilities of agency in advertising and popular culture.

My analysis uses a critical interpretive method informed by psychoanalysis which, I argue, provides a unique approach to desire. While traditional media critics treat advertising as a manipulative tool used to manufacture mass desire, they cannot explain the uncertainty in the consumers’ desire that goes beyond the marketers’ control. Psychoanalysis, however, suggests that communication simultaneously creates the desire to obey and the desire to transgress. These transgressive desires drive our actions in unconscious ways that we are unaware of, but they can be read symptomatically from the gaps, holes, nodes, and seams of the symbolic text. Applying the psychoanalytic method, I interpret how advertising discourse structures consumers’ desire to “go green” while at same time fulfills their unconscious transgressive desire to continue wasting resources and exploiting nature. I also seek the possibilities of resistance inherent in popular culture and consumerism by analyzing the dynamic relationship

between the desires underlying commercial green advertising and other types of environmental discourse. This analysis allows me to explore what John Fiske (1989) calls the “transformative powers and subversive pleasures involved in consumption” and theorize how the transgressive nature of desire can be also used in resisting dominant discourse.

### Methodology

To study how cultural differences can impede international cooperation in environmental affairs, I select China and the U.S.—the world’s two largest consumer economies and main contributors to global environmental resource use and waste production. However, ironically, both also show a certain backwardness in their environmental actions and reluctance in taking responsibility for their environmental debts. For example in the pressing climate issue, China and the U.S. have been using each other as excuse to postpone their own environmental actions. In preparation for the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Conference, the U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi sought cooperation with China but found herself “deeply afraid that the two countries would fall into an old trap: hiding behind each other so that neither would have to do anything difficult or expensive.”<sup>1</sup> While the buck-passing between China and the U.S. can be attributed to a conflict in political economic interests, it is also partially influenced by the cultural historical differences between these two countries. Dedicated to the exploration of the latter, this dissertation compares a key component of their popular

environmental discourse—environmental advertising—and explores the different structures of desire that have prevented their environmental collaboration.

Advertisements analyzed in this dissertation were collected and photographed through data-gathering in two Chinese cities (Shanghai and Beijing) and two American cities (Iowa City, IC and Durham, NC). Due to the low resolution of some photographed prints, I replaced them with the digital versions of the exact same ads I located online. The American portion of my data was derived by visiting the magazine collection in the Iowa City Public Library and the J. Walter Thompson (JWT) Company Collections in the Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising and Marketing History at Duke University. Most American corporate image advertisements and hybrid-electric car advertisements appearing in Chapter three and five derive from two influential magazines *The New Yorker* and *National Geographic*. *The New Yorker* is an American weekly magazine, which is well known for its commentaries on popular culture and eccentric Americana.<sup>2</sup> Claiming a readership of over one million in 2009, it is circulated nationwide and especially among upper-middle class, middle-aged readers who live in top U.S. metropolitan areas (Audit Bureau of Circulations). To find advertisements that feature environmental or green values, I hand-searched all the *New Yorker* issues for the three-year period from 2006-2009 on a page-by-page basis and included advertisements that took up more than half

a page and featured environmental values. *National Geographic* is the official journal of the National Geographic Society. It has a worldwide circulation of nearly nine million and is famous for its articles and photography on geography, popular science and cultural events. I applied the same hand-searching selection method to its issues for the two-year period from 2007-2009 and gathered corporate and product advertisements that contained environmental or green appeals.

The Chinese portion of my data was partially collected during a research trip to China in the summer of 2008. I visited the Shanghai Library, the largest public library in China, and looked into its magazine and newspaper collections for advertisements that pertained to environmental themes. Most of the environmental NGOs' public service ads, analyzed in Chapter four, were found in the *IAI China's Advertising Works Yearbook* (2007) published by the Communication University of China. This yearbook contains a wide collection of print, TV, and online advertisements, which are selected to represent the general aesthetic trend of contemporary Chinese advertising. In addition to library archival research, I also spent four weeks walking in the streets of Shanghai and Beijing and photographed outdoor billboards, propaganda posters and advertisements in buses and metro stations, and shopping center LCD screens, etc. My visit to Beijing took place in late July, the last two weeks before the opening of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. During the city's final preparation for the Games, Beijing launched

a massive public relations campaign “Greening the Olympics” to offset its negative reputation about its environment. Many contemporary environmental propaganda posters analyzed in Chapter four were photographed in that context. Finally, the historic propaganda posters from Mao’s time to the Four Modernization period are derived from Stefan Landsberger’s book *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization* (1995) and his corresponding website [www.chinese posters.net](http://www.chinese posters.net). The book and the website provide an annotated collection of high quality propaganda posters spanning from six decades of Chinese poster production. They yield many environmental or nature-related posters that are also studied in Chapter four.

Despite the large size of the data I collected for this project, only a small number of the advertisements and posters are selected to be included and analyzed in this dissertation. Two criteria are used to determine their selection—their **representativeness** and **symptomatic value**. By representativeness, I refer to the type of advertisements that display certain visual or textual features which are also observed in other advertisements of the similar category. For instance, the 1977 propaganda poster “Move Mountains and Make New Land” (Figure 13, 132) portrays the erection of an enormous dam in the place of a demolished mountain. Its nature-conquering feature is shared by many propaganda posters of Mao’s time. By symptomatic value, I mean the type of ads that contain a visual or textual element which

is inconsistent with the overall ideology or explicit meanings expressed by ads of the same category. An example would be the Toyota Prius' ad "Zero Emissions" (Figure 28, 189): it presents an image of human-nature harmony without showing a trace of the very car it tries to sell. The total erasure of the car is counterintuitive to the overt message of this ad, but this technique is actually shaped by the unconscious desire that this ad tries to satisfy. An advertisement's symptomatic value may or may not be shared by many other ads of the same category, but its existence alone exposes the internal contradictions of the structure of desire underpinning a dominant ideology. A detailed explanation of the psychoanalytic notion of the **symptom** and the method of symptomatic reading will be discussed later in this chapter. In general, representativeness and symptomatic value are two common features of the ads that are selected in this dissertation. Although these two criteria seem to bear opposite meanings, they are in fact not mutually exclusive and often coexist in many cases such as the example of the Toyota Prius advertisement.

#### Advertising, Desire, and the Global Environment

The origins of advertising, as a way of attracting attention and disseminating information, can be dated back into the histories of different cultures. According to Raymond Williams (1980), early advertising included the "three thousand year old papyrus from Thebes," the "crier in the streets of Athens," "the paintings of gladiators in ruined Pompeii," and "the flybills

on the pillars of the Forum in Rome” (170). However, it was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in Western capitalistic countries that it turned into “an institutionalized system of commercial information and persuasion” (Williams 1980, 170). Modern advertising emerged along with the rise of the large-scale industrial capitalism, as a part of the system of “market-control” which included other tools like “the growth of tariffs and privileged areas, cartel-quotas, trade campaigns, price-fixing by manufacturers [and] economic imperialism” (178). Advertising’s goal was set to stimulate market demands for commodities. It accomplished this by attaching unrealistic fantasies and wish-fulfillments to material objects, so that these material objects being sold will never be fulfilling enough for the consumers (185). By keeping consumers constantly under-satisfied, advertising managed to stimulate consumption and fuel the capitalistic economy of mass production and mass consumption.

To quicken the process for commodities to “go through the circuit of distribution, exchange and consumption, so that profit can be returned” (Jhally 2000), advertising helped create a consumer culture that radically challenged the classical definition of consumption. In classical economics, **consumption** was defined as the “use of goods in the satisfaction of human wants” (Kyrk 1923, 4). This view of consumption conceptualized **want** or **need** as a pre-social, biological instinct that must be fulfilled in order to sustain life. Also a believer in basic “human requirements”, Karl Marx (1976) proposed his critique of the separation between use-value and exchange-value

in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and questioned whether the capitalistic exchange system is able to reflect the commodity's ability to satisfy instinctual needs. Radical challenges to the notion of instinctual needs came from the critics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who witnessed the full blossom of the advertising and consumer culture in Western societies. These critics (e.g. Adorno 1967, Jameson 1979, Leiss 1983) pointed out that instead of selling the utilities of the commodities which were addressed to fixed consumer needs, the advertising and marketing industry "attach[ed] to them new images and signs which can summon up a whole range of associated feelings and desires" (Featherstone 1991). The shift from **need** to **desire** as a motivational force constitutes the fundamental dilemma of consumerism: while needs are supposedly biological and limited, desires are enmeshed in social and symbolic relations and thus are insatiable. Always asking for more than what can be obtained, desire is experienced as a psychical *lack* which can never be filled. Appealing to the insatiable desire instead of the limited need, consumerism turns humans from **users** of objects to **consumers** of products (Williams 1980). The word "consumption" is, according to Williams, originally a metaphor drawn from the stomach or the furnace. In this sense, the market becomes a gigantic "furnace" and the consumers become the "channels along which the product flows and disappears" (187).

Professionally dedicated to the stimulation of desire, advertising performs the crucial function of fueling the consumer economy, a gigantic



“furnace” which is rapidly burning up the Earth’s natural resources. According to Durning (1992), since 1950 the world’s population has used up more of the earth’s resources than all the generations that came before. Also, such exhaustion of resources is highly uneven: roughly one fifth of the world’s 6 billion people consume close to 80 percent of global production. The dramatic increase in consumption leads to environmental crises such as resource depletion, waste overflow, air and water pollution, and most importantly to the international community, global warming. Yet these ecological imbalances can be traced, to a large extent, to a fundamental psychic imbalance in our culture—an unnamable and irreparable lack around which a culture of excessive production and consumption is structured.

While consumption-related environmental threats are global in nature, they hit China, the rising consumer economy with the world’s largest population, the hardest. Since Deng Xiaoping’s economic reform in 1978, the Chinese experienced an unprecedented rise in household income and an increased appetite for consumer products. Soon after Deng’s Open Door Policy, commercial advertising reappeared in public spaces, gradually replacing the state-sponsored propaganda which has been preaching socialist ideologies for decades. In the 1980s multinational advertising agencies based in New York, London, Paris, and Tokyo started to set offices in China (O’Barr 2007). As the vanguards of consumer culture, these agencies launched advertising campaigns that not only exposed the Chinese to Western forms of

art but also generated their unyielding desires for Western consumer goods. These desires pushed for the constant upgrading of the “four big belongings” (*sidajian*)—the major consumer items of the Chinese households—which epitomizes the dramatic expansion of consumer demands in China:

Where as in the 1960s and 1970s, [the “four big belongings” referred to] a wrist-watch, a radio set, a bicycle and a sewing machine [...] by the mid-1980s and 1990s these included more expensive high-tech goods: a color television, refrigerators, tape recorders and automatic washing machines. Today, Chinese yearn for air-conditioners, video recorders, motorcycles, and some even dream of the ultimate status symbols—a private car and a house (Richard 1997).

Mostly Western technological products, these commodities quickly become fashionable, spread to the mass consumer society, and soon grow outdated. Such fast growth in domestic consumer demands indeed drives China’s capitalistic economy but, at the same time, places the country’s environment on edge. According to Smith (1997), the mix between China’s stunning economic growth and its colossal-sized population is a recipe for ecological disaster. The country is frequently haunted by severe crises related to population expansion, water and air pollution, solid waste overflow, desertification, reduction of biodiversity, etc. (Hu and Yang 2008).

The exacerbation of China’s environmental conditions raises a critical question about the relationship between advertising, desire, and the global environment: To what extent are the transnational advertising agencies responsible for people in the Third-World’s desire for Western high-

consumption lifestyles? If all six billion people on earth started to live like Americans do, what kind of burden would be placed on our ecosystem? Advertising critic Sut Jhally (2000) puts it alarmingly: it will be the end of the world. He suggests the consumer society look into the future of the human race and start shifting its current direction before it is too late. But he adds that, the current commander of our consumer culture—advertising—is inadequate in navigating this social change because:

the time-frame of advertising is very short-term. It does not encourage us to think beyond the immediacy of present sensual experience. [...] The value of a collective social future is one that does not, and will not, find expression within our commercially dominated culture.

Designed to produce instantaneous pleasure, advertising appears to be unsuitable for future projection and long-term strategic planning. Its myopic nature seems to hinder its ability to express concerns for human welfare on a communal and societal level. But is Jhally right?

### The Rise of Green Marketing in the U.S.

The rise of green marketing, at first glance, seems to have disproved Jhally's point. As consumerism runs rampant and threatens to bring the world to an ecological collapse, the Western advertising industry gradually withdraws from preaching of hedonism and starts to advocate the long-term socio-ecological harmony of the planet. The scheme of green marketing has been brewing since the heyday of the 1970s environmental movement. In 1975, the American Marketing Association (AMA) held the first workshop on

“ecological Marketing.”<sup>3</sup> In 1988, the first green consumer guide was published in the U.S., signaling the rise of green consumerism, “the use of individual consumer preference to promote less environmentally damaging products and services” (Irvine 1989, 2). Since then, “eco-friendly” claims started to appear on product packages and advertisements. Over the next two decades, green marketing has evolved into a multi-layered, diverse media culture, ranging from green product advertisements, green corporate image campaigns, green public service ads, green lifestyle journalisms, to green celebrity tabloids.

With portrayals of ecological harmony, promises of individual wellbeing and preachings of civil responsibility, green marketing has become a dominant trend in contemporary advertising culture and received an overwhelming amount of optimism. *Advertising Age*—the advertising industry’s flagship trade magazine—began to hold annual Green Marketing Summits since 1991. Outside the professional circle of the advertising and marketing industry, green marketing also received accolade from popular media discussions, marketing and business literatures, to environmental NGO’s publications. Supporters not only valorize it for fostering eco-friendly consumption habits, but also praise its ability to raise the public’s *environmental awareness, or consciousness*. For example, Hailes (1998) argues that green corporate advertising campaigns use the corporations’ international prestige to “green the consciousness” of the American people

and thus should be considered as a progressive social movement. Calfee (1998) suggests that advertising is a good medium for outreaching to the general public, as “its mastery of the art of brevity, its ability to command attention, and its use of television” touch the population that the scientific communities or governmental agencies are desperate to reach. Comparing green advertising with popular media’s representation of ecological issues, Prothero (2000) points out that news accounts always “polarize and simplify the ongoing debate concerning sustainability” and “disable a more detailed analysis of the central issues”; but advertising is “a productive, persuasive and communicative medium that can be used just as successfully by those seeking to achieve environmental enlightenment as it can for those who aspire to ecological martyrdom” (46). Underneath these praises of advertising, one can detect a streak of populist philosophy that the broader public participation is the more successful an environmental movement will be.

From a traditionally hedonistic medium to an allegedly noble and “far-sighted” one, the seeming return of advertising the “prodigal son” does not take place out of a historical vacuum. Its emergence and popularization can be traced to three social movements occurring in the U.S. since the 1960s and 1970s—the environmental movement in the political realm; the neoliberal movement in the economic realm; and the New Age movement in the religious and cultural realm. First, green marketing rose in response to the

waves of the American environmental movement. Initiated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by early preservationists like Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, environmentalism took the central stage of American politics in the 1960s and the 1970s. The publication of landmark books such as *Silent Spring* (Carson 1962), *The Population Bomb* (Ehrlich 1968), and *The Limits to Growth* (Club of Rome 1972) drew attention to the impacts of human civilizations on the natural environment and, as a result of vigorous political struggles, led to several legislative breakthroughs such as the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act. In the aftermath of the Three Mile Island accident in 1979, anti-nuclear activism also gained a wide appeal and prompted many mass demonstrations in the American society. Having watched a few decades of news about ozone-layer depletion, oil spills, and overflowing landfills, the public developed a “general fear of an ecological crisis and a public willingness to act” (Smith, 1998, 97). This widespread affect of fear and the high level of concern paved the road for green marketing which promises to bring back ecological harmony between humans and nature.

The second condition for the emergence of green marketing is the global spread of economic neoliberalism. During the 1980s, as the wave of “liberalization” swept around the world, “state enterprises were privatized, private businesses were deregulated, and government welfare state initiatives were cut back” (Herman and McChesney 1997, 26). The most

prominent results of these changes were the cross-border expansion of transnational corporations and the rise of a highly integrated global capitalistic economy. Such a dramatic shift in political economy, write Herman and McChesney (1997), was rationalized by corporate ideologies and the centerpiece was the free-market ideology—

the idea that the market allocates resources efficiently and provides the means of organizing economic (and perhaps all human) life. There is a strong tendency in corporate ideology to identify “freedom” with the mere absence of constraints on business (i.e. economic, or market, freedom) [...] it is argued that economic freedom is basic and deserves top billing because in the long run it will allow or even cause political freedom to emerge.  
(35)

Due to the belief that the market is the best solution to all problems, corporations are designated as the primary agent in creating political changes and resolving social crises. Guided by this ideology, the 1980s and 1990s American business world saw the rise of the corporate social responsibility movement—a form of corporate self-regulation to preempt governmental intervention (Wood 1991), social marketing—commercial marketing that claims to promote public good (Philip and Zaltman 1971), and a whole business ethics industry from “corporate ethics programs, university and college centers, socially responsible investment, [to] the consulting industry” (Neimark 1995, 84). While the themes of business ethics are many—ranging from public health to social development—environmental

issues constitute one of its major causes and attract many environmentally minded consumers (Andreasen 1995).

The third factor that contributes to the surge of green marketing takes place in the religious and cultural realm—the New Age spiritual movement. Drawing from an eclectic mix of older religious traditions such as Buddhism, Chinese folk religions, Hinduism, and Native American spirituality, the New Age movement took distinct form during the 1960s and 1970s counterculture movements and was strengthened in the following two decades (Melton 1989). Opposing Cartesian dualism and promoting connectivity, New Age philosophy emphasizes the sanctity of the Earth and Nature while upholding the importance of spirituality and magic (Scott and Penaloza 2006). Neopaganism, one of New Age’s most important components, challenges the Christian mandate to “dominate and subdue” nature and the “instrumental, cause-and-effect ways of capitalism and Newtonian science.” (60) It “gravitates toward the newer visions of science, such as Gaia theory and chaos theory, in which the emphasis is on system connectivity and interdependence rather than on isolated and abstract causes and effects.” (61) Echoing with the morals of the environmental movement on multiple levels, New Age philosophy was often adopted as a type of spiritual remedy for the traumas inflicted by industrialization, modernization, and capitalistic expansion. Many of its discursive elements such as harmony, balance, connectivity, health, and well-being have been appropriated by green



marketing and became popular commercial slogans. Indeed, it was through assembling catchphrases from various strands of discourse like environmentalism (nature, ecology), neoliberalism (ethics, responsibility), and New Age philosophy (harmony, balance) that green marketing was able to build up its vocabulary and construct its popular imagination.

### The Introduction of Green Marketing into China

Upon its introduction into China, green advertising was warmly welcomed by the academic elites and the government. At an international marketing conference in Hong Kong in 1992, marketing scholars from mainland China learned for the first time about green marketing and strongly recommended this Western novelty to the government and the entrepreneurs. During the next two decades, the concept of green marketing seeped from academic theory into governmental imperatives and then into general business practice. According to Li Rongqing (2006), this process can be divided into three stages: At its inception (1993-1994), the importance of green marketing was first put forward for academic and governmental discussion. In the growth stage (1995-1997), theoretical discussions in academia mainly focused on the negative effect international “green trade barriers” had on China’s export trade. During the maturation stage (1998-present), the academic discussion broadened to a whole field of green economy (green consumption, green distribution, and green marketing), and

the practices of green business began receiving much more governmental support (96).

The Chinese government readily adopted the idea of green marketing because it appeared to be a solution to China's urgent dilemma between economic development and environmental deterioration. Since Deng's economic reform in 1978, the government has faced numerous complaints about environmental problems, most of which came from residents of the urbanized coastal zones of East and South China (Dasgupta & Wheeler 1996). The first nationwide environmental controversy was initiated during the early 1990s surrounding the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. This event at once made environmental problems the center of national attention (Jing 1997). In 1992, China participated in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). After this event, official governmental discourse began to shift from simple economic development to a policy of "sustainable development" (Ho, 2006, 140). In the following decade, the exponential growth in economy reorganized the previously flat social structure (a heritage of Mao's socialist egalitarianism) and widened the gap between the "new winners" (e.g. entrepreneurs, educated professionals, and technocrats) and the "new losers" (e.g. the urban unemployed, underemployed state-owned factory workers, and peasants displaced by mammoth hydroelectric projects) (Lu and Simons 2006). Social antagonism gradually intensified between classes, accompanied by affects such as envy,

anxiety, discontent, and hatred. Environmental degradation further deepened social inequality. A few decades of industrialization and privatization indulged irresponsible exploitation of nature, leading to drastic reduction of available resources and exacerbating social conflicts.

In the face of severe social and environmental conflicts, in 2005 President Hu Jintao put forward a new political slogan at the National People's Congress—"Building a Harmonious Society"—aiming at directing China away from single-minded economical development towards an overall societal balance. This political milieu is highly conducive to the promotion of green marketing. The current authoritative definition of green marketing, offered by Wei Mingxia and Si Lingsheng (2001), runs closely in line with the governmental rhetoric of "harmonious society" and "sustainable development:"

Under the demand of sustainable development, bearing the goal of assuming social responsibilities, protecting the environment, efficient use of resources, and long term development, entrepreneurs take corresponding measures in the whole process of product design, production, sales, after-sale service, in order to ensure the three-way balance among consumer's sustainable consumption, industry's sustainable production, and society's sustainable development.

Promoted as a part of the official sustainability discourse, green marketing is endorsed by the government as a hegemonic strategy to appease social discontent and at the same time alleviate environmental crises.

Although fervently embraced by the government and the academic elites, green marketing's political significance has yet to be translated into economic efficacy. According to Si (2002), its current practice in China is very underdeveloped and unbalanced. The majority of Chinese businesses have not learned about green marketing, and the ones that have learned fear the risk of initiating a new market and the high cost of developing new products. Also, most businesses still adopt very backwards production and distribution methods which are far from meeting the "green" standards promoted by the government. Most importantly, business lacks the ultimate motivation to "go green" because the great majority of the Chinese consumers have not developed demands for green products (Ren 2007).

The soggyess of China's green consumer market can be traced to the country's particular cultural historical conditions which will be explored in the later chapters. But due to these differences, green marketing scholars envision a very different green future for China from the vision that the Western neoliberal economists propose. While the Chinese partially inherit the Western faith in using market forces to solve environmental crises, they believe that the market itself lacks the power to jumpstart a green economy and that the government should play the leadership role and use more propaganda to educate the public about environmental affairs. For example, Ren Zhixiang (2007) proposes that the government should use extensive propaganda to enhance the "green consciousness" of the people, because an

environmental awareness is the precondition to green consumption. Hong Kong marketing scholars Chan and Lau (2004) also propose that the green marketers should:

[...] increase their investment in consumer education so as to further raise the environmental consciousness of their target customers [...] they should consider sponsoring environmental education in schools, and forming alliances with the government and/or environmental groups to promote the ethics of “green” consumption through various propaganda vehicles, such as television and radio broadcasts, exhibitions and seminars. (307)

In a more radical way, Lv Huicong and Yan Jun (2003) completely distrust businesses’ ability to initiate a structural shift in market economy and envision a “government-led” green marketing revolution that includes the environmental education of the masses, the stipulation of environmental laws, and the innovation of green technologies. It seems that China is the case in which the neoliberal version of commercial environmentalism does not sell. Since the market lacks the ability to solve the environmental crises alone, an external political force—the government—must intervene to support the greening of the business sector. The high ratio of governmental propaganda to commercial advertising in China’s environmental discourse testifies to this common faith in governmental intervention.

#### Criticisms against Green Advertising/Marketing

Aside from the challenges from China, the neoliberal ideal of green marketing also meets many dissenting voices from American intellectuals.

The first group of criticism disapproves of the accuracy of most green advertising claims. During the early stage of green marketing in the U.S., false environmental claims flooded the market. After sampling 250 green ads, Kangun, Carlson, and Grove (1991) found that 58% of them contained misleading or deceptive claims. In *Toxic Sludge Is Good for You!* (1995), Stauber and Rampton probed underneath the glamorous appearance of public relations campaigns to uncover corporations' actual environmentally destructive practices. Such corporate abuse of green claims was called "greenwashing," a term coined by Jay Westerveld in 1986 to describe hotels' practice of putting green placards in their rooms. To control factual falsehood in green advertising, FTC started to enforce regulations on advertising's environmental claims in 1996. But since then, corporate "greenwashing" took on more sophisticated forms, either by making fuzzy environmental claims or by representing the companies' performance in a highly biased way. For example, as Smith (1998) points out, while Shell Chemicals' advertising is "congratulating itself for its contribution to village life in Africa," the company is also selling products "consistently associated with environmental degradation" (124), something they of course fail to mention.

Critics not only question green marketing's truthfulness on the side of production but also criticize its effects on the side of consumption. Several analyses show that, more often than not, green consumerism leads to new rounds of excessive consumption rather than the reduction of consumption.

Meister and Brown (2006) argue that green consumerism “may increase public awareness about environmental issues [but] it also increases public demand for nature ‘as a product,’ whereby nature becomes a reflection of consumer desires” (98). Alex Williams in *The New York Times* (2007) also points out that “green” labels take the guilt away from consumption (a hard-won result from the environmentalist movement) and make people consume more than they normally would have. He calls this effect a “SnackWell’s moment:” “Confronted with a box of fat-free devil’s food chocolate cookies, which seem deliciously guilt-free, they consume the entire box, avoiding any fats but loading up on calories.” Criticizing another phenomenon of “conspicuous green consumption,” Monbiot (2002) points out that green products have become the new status symbols of the bourgeois class. By producing a whole “lifestyle obsession” with wealth, beauty, and spirituality, green marketing is usually set to satisfy bourgeois consumers’ “eco-narcissism.”

The questionable motives for green consumption (e.g. guilt-complex, narcissism, or obsession) also lead to questionable social impacts. Critics suspect that the consumption process is directing people’s energy away from political activism and committing them to trivial commodity choices and lifestyle changes (Williams 2007). However, “the things causing climate changes are more caused by politics and the economy than individual behavior [...] it has to do with mass transit, housing density. It has to do with

the war and subsidies for the coal and fossil fuel industry.” (Michel Gelobter, quoted in Williams 2007) By relegating environmental responsibilities from politicians to consumers,<sup>4</sup> green consumerism deflects the public’s attention away from the economical and political roots of the current environmental crisis. Another negative social impact is also observed: instead of uniting the society to combat environmental crisis, it deepens the existing class division and worsens social inequality. As the bourgeois eco-carnival continues to destroy the environment, the working class and minority groups living in poor neighborhoods tend to be the ones that are subject to environmental hazards. Also, the clamorous bourgeois green culture drowns out the voices of grassroots environmental activists and alienates the working-class from the popular basis of environmentalism (Monbiot 2002, Smith 1998). This environmental inequality also exists on a global level—between affluent consuming nations in Europe and North America and poor producing nations in Asia, Africa, and South America.

Overall, most of the critics cited above challenge the popular “consciousness-raising” or “awareness-raising” rhetoric which marketers and business technocrats resort to. Being “environmentally conscious” does not always lead to intended behavioral changes; sometimes it might even induce opposite social and ecological effects, such as overconsumption, class-division, and continued environmental exploitation. The gap between consciousness and behavior—between what we *think* we are doing and what we are *actually*



*doing*—makes it necessary for us to ask, again, the question of **desire**. Desire is the motivating force that drives our actions but largely remains unconscious. It always frustrates our seemingly rational plans and distorts them into something else. To foresee the future of global environmentalism, it is important to supplement the current critique of green consumerism with a theory of desire and examine what motivates or fails to motivate the environmental movements in different countries and cultural historical contexts.

An implicit theory of desire can already be identified in traditional media criticisms of advertising. When Jhally (2000) and Janus (2002) criticize advertising as manipulative tools used by corporations to manufacture mass desires, they first suppose that desires are not natural but are rather socially generated and symbolically structured—a point I highlight above and completely agree with. However, their arguments also assume that desires can be mass produced and infinitely replicated through mass communication—like material objects on an assembly line. For example, in “Cloning Consumer Culture,” Janus (2000) argues that transnational advertising spread homogenous values (such as wealth, happiness, youth, and beauty) to the Third-World countries, supplant their indigenous cultures, and make the locals aspire Western high-consumption lifestyles. This homogenization thesis, however, is based upon an insufficient view of desire: It presupposes that *desire coincides with discourse*; in other words, desire

exists entirely within the field of representation and can be read from the explicit content of the Western media text. This view ignores the historical “stickiness” of desire—its tendency to be deeply rooted in the particular cultural histories of indigenous groups—and underestimates the resistance that dominant global discourse meets in local cultures and communities.

Holding a similar conceptualization of desire, the current criticisms of green consumerism also tend to downplay the possibilities of finding agency in dominant consumerist discourse. For example, Smith (1998), Monbiot (2002), and Williams (2007) all point out that the “feel-good” benefits offered by green consumerism induce overconsumption. They mourn the loss of the “old-school environmentalism of self-negation” and “the Carter-era environmental message of sacrifice” (Williams 2007). By juxtaposing the 1970s political environmentalism with the 1990s commercial environmentalism, these critics suggest that consumerism and activism are two mutually exclusive modes of action, and that there are only two ways to “save the planet”—in the store or on the streets. Favoring the sacrificial, militant-styled activism and condemning the cheerful, pleasure-seeking consumerism, critics seem to support the use of *pain* rather than *pleasure* to motivate future environmentalism. The only way out of consumerism, they insist, is to “give up things” (Monbiot 2002). Green consumers, in Smiths’ (1998) eyes, are innocent defenseless “goats,” misled by the myth of green marketing to the “edge of the environmental apocalypse.”

By separating pleasure-seeking consumerism with sacrificial activism, these critics nevertheless make the error of equating psychological motivations with their behavioral outcomes. They are overly concerned with green consumerism's "external" effects on collective behavior or the natural environment and view desire only as an instrument of mass mobilization. However, if we turn towards the "internal" questions of subjectivity and ethics, we see that desire cannot be boiled down to a simple dualistic opposition between pleasure and sacrifice. Instead, it moves in a dialectical fashion; every strong affect embodies its own negation (from love to hate, awe to terror, or pain to pleasure). The dialectical nature of desire allows us to conceptualize the possibility of resistance inherent in popular culture itself—as John Fiske (1989) argues, dominant discourse embodies its own resistance through the subversive pleasures it generates.

To better theorize the agency in consumer culture, we need a more elaborate theory of desire to articulate the relationship between desire, discourse, and subjectivity. For this purpose, I turn to psychoanalysis, and in particular to the Freud-Lacan-Neo-Lacanian line, which I argue is particularly useful in examining the impacts of advertising discourse on the psychodynamics of consumer desire and the vicissitudes of subjectivity. A highly flexible and viable theoretical system, today's psychoanalysis owes its monumental heritage to Freud—stretching from the studies of individual psychopathology to social psychology—but was later expanded by Lacan, who

related psychoanalysis to linguistics, philosophy, mathematics, and other disciplines. In recent decades, Neo-Lacanianists such as Žižek, Copjec, Salecl, Fink, and Stavrakakis extend the scope of psychoanalysis from the reified space of clinical analysis to politics, cultural criticism, and feminism, among many other disciplines. On the one hand, the Neo-Lacanianists insist on the important role language and communication play in structuring human desire; on the other hand, they preserve the Freudian heritage and hold that desire is fundamentally transgressive—that it is produced by the Law to transgress the Law. In other words, desire does not coincide with discourse but exists as the excess of discourse and falls outside the field of representation. This view annuls the possibility for desire to be completely manipulated or replicated. Also, it suggests that the critics should look for the structure of desire not in the overt content of a media text but through the gaps, holes, nodes, and seams of the symbolic structures of the text.

Following their trails, this dissertation uses a psychoanalytically-informed method to read Chinese and American environmental advertisements and analyze how these texts shape the desires to participate in environmentalism. I argue that psychoanalysis is particularly suited for this dissertation project, as it is a critical methodology traversing multiple disciplinary fields, from medical therapy, literary and ideological criticism, even to ecological critique. The next section traces the theoretical lineage from Freud, Lacan, to the Neo-Lacanianists and previews its key concepts that

will appear in my later analysis. Because a theory must be constantly adapted and modified to maintain its practical viability, I also discuss the challenges and criticisms that push the theoretical evolution of psychoanalysis and its application in different fields.

### Psychoanalysis as Critical Methodology

Psychoanalysis can be considered as a critical methodology in multiple senses of the word. According to Raymond Williams (1978), the word “critical” has two meanings: first, it pertains to *criticism*, which refers to commentaries on literature, denoting a form of judgment (especially unfavorable, fault-finding judgment); second, it relates to *crisis*, which was initially a medical term, referring to the turning point of a disease or the decisive moment in a course of events when immediate action is needed (Williams 1976).

Psychoanalysis is “critical” in both its medical and literary connotations: on the one hand, it is a medical practice that responds to some psychosomatic crisis of the patient and tries to change the course of the disease; on the other hand, it is a form of textual criticism because it reads the patient as a text, finds “faults” with it (abnormal, pathological phenomena), and seeks the cause of these “faults.” In Frankfurt School’s critical theory, the word “critical” takes on a third meaning, referring to the discursive practices of leftist, political, counter-hegemonic agenda. Psychoanalysis has also proven its adroitness in this field: Critics (such as Frankfurt school member Herbert

Marcuse) often use it to read cultural texts and identify social and political crises in order to perform acts of intervention.

Before dabbling into the various disciplinary avatars of psychoanalysis, I must note that its basic methodology, as introduced by Freud (in Breuer and Freud, 2000), is to find “faults” (symptoms) in textual constructions and interpret their cause(s). In examining hysterical patients’ narrations about their illness, Freud focuses on the mistakes, gaps, incongruence in their accounts; these are the *symptoms*—secret passageways to a separate, unknown mental state, i.e. the *unconscious*, where *desires* and wishes are repressed and stored. To free these repressed desires from the unconscious, Freud invents the “talking cure,” which is to verbalize the *traumatic event* that triggers the *repression* and thereby remove the symptoms. Freud’s subsequent work (1980; 1990; 1990) continue to search for the traces of the unconscious desires in symbolic constructions, such as dreams, jokes, slips of the tongue, acts of forgetting, bungled actions, and other everyday psychopathologies. Establishing that the unconscious state exists in every individual (mentally ill or healthy) and every psychological state (pathological or normal), Freud is able to use his knowledge about psychopathological cases to explain the function of a “normal” psyche.

After acknowledging the continuity between normality and pathology, Freud (2000) builds his theory of sexuality. He argues that cases such as *neurosis*, *psychosis*, and *perversion* are all caused by unresolved residues of

infantile sexuality. While an infant's sexual pleasure is amorphous and malleable, the process of socialization localizes his/her pleasures into isolated bodily organs—i.e. *partial objects*—such as the breast, phallus, or anus. Pressures of socialization, epitomized by *parental inhibitions*, alienate the infant from his/her primal instincts and inaugurate her/his lifelong pursuit of the lost objects which embody the promise of the primal unity. Based on the tension between instincts and inhibitions, Freud (1990) conceptualizes the structure of the psyche, which is composed of the *id* (the reservoir of primal instincts), the *superego* (internalized social inhibitions which function as a judge or a censor), and the *ego* (the binding factor between the *id* and the *superego*, often used together with the Self) (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973). These three psychic agencies conflict, clash, and negotiate with each other, which stage various psychical dramas in our lives.

Freud's theories of sexuality and the structure of the psyche often receive criticisms about their universalizing tendency and their lack of concern for the cultural, historical, and linguistic specificities of the cases. This problem is exacerbated when psychoanalysis is appropriated by literary criticism. The so-called orthodox Freudian criticism gained a bad reputation for turning Freudian concepts into "ahistorical and systematizing categories" (Jameson 1977). The critics look for particular "symbols" in a piece of literature and match them with privileged interpretive schemes: "find the devouring mother, detect the inevitable castration anxiety, listen, between

the syllables of verse, for the squeaking bedsprings of the primal scene” (Crews, 1975). Premised on a structuralist ideology, this reading method aims at dismantling the surface of the public literary text to uncover the author’s private, hidden psychic reality. As this method “remain[s] locked within the categories of the individual and of individual experience” (Jameson 342), it also deprives psychoanalysis of the ability to account for the social historical dimension of the text.

One way to problematize the structuralist ideology of orthodox Freudianism is to question the mediating role of language in both 1) the critic’s interpretation of unconscious desires and 2) the constitution of these unconscious desires of the subject. First of all, the oversight of the first issue immediately brings an epistemological difficulty for Freudian criticism: if the unconscious is really unconscious, as its name designates it to be, how can it ever be spoken by language? How can the critic make claims about the ontological content of the unconscious? The key to solve the first issue lays in the exploration of the second—the crucial role language plays in structuring the unconscious, a question that Freud never explicitly confronted. By and large, Freud explains the psychic apparatus with a *hydrodynamic* model rather than a *topographic* model. For him, the unconscious is a repertoire of repressed energies, blind drives, and primal instincts, while language only functions as the fabric of consciousness where the eruption of unconscious instincts appears in the domesticated form of symptoms. But if language



always remains external to the unconscious, any effort to explain its contents would be substituting the particularity and heterogeneity of psychic history with universal accounts. Sole reliance on the hydrodynamic model makes reductionism and dehistoricization inevitable.

In arguing that “the unconscious is structured like a language,” French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan sets out to solve this problem. He denies the existence of pre-linguistic, pre-social, primal instincts and conceptualizes the unconscious as a product of socialization, an effect of language. This idea removes the last bit of positive essence in Freud’s conception of the individual and flattens the depth model of the psyche (a primal id vs. a social ego) into a symbolic network in which one stream of signifiers happens to repress another. Consequently, the conventional divide between surface and truth, the social and the individual, the public and the private, is deconstructed; to replace the now “dead” individual, Lacan proposes the notion of the *subject*—a subject that is alienated by language, a subject that is nothing but an irreconcilable split, a subject who desires to rejoin with itself but never can (Fink 1995).

Now, if there is no hidden core of desire to be uncovered behind the open surface of the text, if the subject is nothing but an effect of language, what should the critic be looking for? The answer is: the symbolic play of the text which gives rise to the subject’s desire in the first place. Refashioning Freud’s analysis of condensation and displacement in the dream work, Lacan

emphasizes that rhetorical devices, such as metonymy and metaphor, are the key ways through which the subject's desire is structured. Realizing that the unconscious is structured through rhetorical mechanisms allows the critic to conduct rhetorical analysis of the psychic process and study the *topology* of desire (i.e. the unconscious structure of desire) (Jameson 1977). Instead of mining the author's private desire which exists before the text, psychoanalysis now examines the rhetorical mechanism through which the text uses to structure the desire of the subject, a desire that has nothing private about it.

The fall of the "Berlin wall" between the individual and the social opens up new space for the application of psychoanalysis—social and cultural criticism. One of the dominant trends is the alliance between psychoanalysis and Marxism, as exemplified by the Frankfurt school member Herbert Marcuse who argues that capitalism is a mechanism that exerts repression on humans' liberating and constructive instincts—Eros. According to Jameson (1977), however, the Frankfurt School's cultural criticism goes to the other end of the spectrum from the Freudian literary criticism: As the latter privileges individual case history over cultural and social generalization, the former favors too much a global model of repression and leaves little space for local historical accounts. To avoid being entangled in the tug of war between the individual and the social, we should turn to Lacan's three orders: the *imaginary*, the *symbolic*, and the *real*.

In the Lacanian triad, the imaginary refers to “illusion, fascination and seduction” (Evans 82). Loosely corresponding to Freud’s concept of the ego, it is constituted during the mirror stage when the motor-impaired infant identifies with his reflection and obtains a coherent body ego. The symbolic is a structure of exchange relationships in the social world that cut across the imaginary order; it primarily includes language, but also refers to the Law and other structures. The real is opposed to both the imaginary and the symbolic: Being the generating principle for the other two orders, the real “emerges as that which is outside language and inassimilable to symbolization” (Evans 159). The real is often mistaken as commonsensical, everyday reality, but it is not. According to Lacan, what we commonly perceive as everyday reality exists in the order of the imaginary while the *real* refers to the psychic principles that underlie these imaginary and symbolic constructions. These three registers prevent psychoanalysis from being stuck in the previous dilemma between the individual and the social (an opposition which is essentially an imaginary construction) and proposes a type of criticism that analyzes the relations between the symbolic structure of the text (the relationship between the Self and the Other) and the real (the fundamental split in both the subject and the object).

The Lacanian triad (imaginary-symbolic-real) is useful in interpreting various psychic phenomena. In particular, many cultural critics use it in conjunction with the notion of *fantasy* to explain the function of ideology.

Fantasy is a term already present in Freud. It describes an imaginary scene that the subject fantasizes in order to fulfill, in a distorted way, a wish that is inhibited in reality or repressed from consciousness. In Lacan, the concept of the fantasy becomes radicalized and is deemed indispensable in the constitution of the subject: it is the symbolic construct that shelters the subject from the trauma of loss of being so that he or she can effectively enter social life. Cutting across all three Lacanian orders, fantasy springs from a trauma in the *real*—the loss of being by being cut off from some primordial unity, also known as *castration*—which generates an overbearing sense of anxiety that drives the subject to seek shelter in the *symbolic* order and it interfaces with the subject in the form of the *imaginary*. Ubiquitous in our everyday lives, fantasy includes the routine narratives that we live by on a day-to-day basis from self identity, everyday reality, to common sense, scientific knowledge and—especially as the Neo-Lacanian critics points out—ideology.

The notion of “ideology as fantasy” is firstly appropriated by the Neo-Lacanian to supplement a popular theory of ideology by the French Marxist Althusser, who sees it as an act of interpellation, an authoritarian hail that makes the subject submit to a paramount power. But the interpellation model also leaves a crucial question unanswered: What makes one so ready to be “interpellated?” Using Lacanian psychoanalysis to interpret Althusser, Jameson (1977) defines ideology as “the ‘representation’ of the Imaginary

relationship of individuals to their Real conditions of existence” (394). This definition still tends to retrogress to a classical structuralist argument which views ideology as “false consciousness,” a symbolic mask that veils the material interests of the ruling class. It takes ideology as symbolic misrecognition of the real social-economic relations but considers the ideology itself as *not* real. To address this problem, Žižek (1989) points out that ideologies are not just symbolic fictions but are themselves rooted in the *real*. Ideology *is* fantasy—a symbolic shield structured around the subject’s *real* nothingness of being. Because the ontological status of the subject is radically empty and powerless, he or she becomes so readily interpellated by ideologies which promise to shield him or her from the traumatic nothingness of being.

Continuing to lay out the differences between Althusser and Lacan, Žižek points out that while for the former ideology is simply an “epistemological confusion” which remains at the level of *knowledge*, for the latter it operates at the level of *practice*, which depends on a type of collective “non-knowledge,” i.e. the collective unconscious. The dimension of the unconscious is exactly the step that Althusser omits, the step between interpellation (the act of hailing) and identification/subjectivation (the subject’s “internalization” of power). Taking the subject’s unconscious as a point of departure, psychoanalysis not only reads the overt content of the ideological text (the imaginary) but looks for its connection to the *real*—the *objet petit a*—which is also embodied in the symbolic relationship of the text.

A term refashioned from Freud's *partial object*, the Lacanian *objet petit a*, or simply called the *object*, refers to the primal object of drives lost along the process of socialization (the list of objects, according to Freud, includes the phallus, the breast, the feces; Lacan adds the gaze and the voice). In every ideological text, the lost object is restaged, which sets in motion the movement of the drives. As the drives circle around the objects, they generate *jouissance*, an extreme type of enjoyment which is reminiscent of the subject's primal sexual satisfaction (44). *Jouissance* is dialectical in nature: it is extremely pleasurable, but it also tends to be overwhelming and almost painful; it is enormously attractive, but when experienced without any symbolic mediation, it can also be horrifying and repellent. *Jouissance* is what passionately attaches the subject to an ideological text. Due to its excessive nature, it can only be enjoyed when the subject is kept in a safe distance from it by the form of a fantasy. Without this protective shield, the subject encounters the horrifying kernel of his or her desire and experiences intense anxiety.

How can the critic identify the Lacanian object, around which *jouissance* circulates, in an ideological text? Žižek goes back to the original Freudian method: find the *symptom*. Just as Freud looked for mistakes, gaps, and inconsistency in a textual construction, a Lacanian critic should look in an ideological text for a "certain fissure, an asymmetry, a certain 'pathological' imbalance which belies [its] universalism" (21). Belonging to

the order of the *real*, the Lacanian object is a surplus existence produced through the act of signification and thus can be identified through a discontinuity or lack in the symbolic order. The concepts of the object and *jouissance* distinguish psychoanalysis from “nothing-outside-the-text” poststructuralism. While discourse analysis is common among poststructuralist or deconstructionist readings, the analysis of the *real* enjoyment produced during the discursive process is utterly unique to psychoanalysis itself.

Probing deeper into the ontological aspect of psychoanalysis—the objects, drives, and *jouissance*—Copjec (2004) articulates a new theory of history to fend off accusations against psychoanalysis for being ahistorical. She first criticizes the nominalists (such as Foucault and Butler) whose deconstruction of origins, foundations, and universals flattens history into a plane of particularities with no “outside.” Then she theorizes an “outside”—the partial drives that endlessly encircle their lost objects by constantly splitting them and multiplying them. It is this operation that constitutes the immortal and heterogeneous ground for history. Instead of reducing history to nothing but historical narratives, Copjec conceives history as “phylogenetic inheritance (which means something like ‘an unconscious rather than ego transmission of the past’)” (91). She finds a metaphor for the “phylogenetic inheritance” in one of Kara Walker’s silhouettes: it portrays four black women, each one suckling another’s breast, showing that history is the

succession of partial objects mediated by the endless movement of the immortal drives. In this conceptualization of history, there is no longer any clear distinction between one's personal history, family history, and the history of a social group. History is so heterogeneous and fractured that it cannot be articulated into any historical narratives. But on the other hand history can be passed on through the multiplication of objects and the inheritance of the structure of *jouissance*. History is the real.

In light of this unique approach to history, this dissertation reads Chinese and American environmental advertising and tries to interpret the unconscious structures of *jouissance* which are embedded in the particular histories of these two countries. These different sets of objects, drives and enjoyments refuse to be assimilated into universal narratives (such as the corporate utopian discourse of global eco-consumerism) and show up as symptoms in popular media phenomena (such as the absurd absence of the hybrid in American hybrid car advertisements, foreign car manufacturers' failed attempt to sell hybrid cars in China, etc.). These symptoms mark the spots where resistance toward the global hegemony of transnational capitalism comes from. While I am aware that critics might read such cross-cultural comparative analysis as reductionist or ahistorical, I believe that this dissertation is not overly so because, as Lacan emphasizes, there is nothing private or personal about our desires. Structured by language and symbolic actions, they are primarily a social (but not universal) phenomenon



and thus can be read by analyzing the public discourse circulating in popular culture. If there is any universal tenet that psychoanalysis does promote, it is that there is nothing universal about our desires because they are always constituted by the heterogeneous local histories.

### Chapter Outline

Chapter two formulates my general critique of green consumerism. I first analyze the previous attempts to align psychoanalysis with ecology and point out their tendency to ignore the important splitting function language performs in structuring the psyche and the human-nature relationship. Driven by a desire to eliminate the irreducible split between conscious/unconscious, nature/culture, these theorists promote the idea of holism, in which both the human psychic system and the ecosystem should be perfectly balanced and harmonious with each other. I point out that such a pursuit of holism not only fails to provide a productive psychoanalytic critique of ecology but also coincides with the discourse of popular ecology which tries to purge waste (e.g. trash, pollution, unused energy) out of an apparently harmonious and, in fact, utilitarian ecosystem. Applying Lacan's theory of the fantasy, I argue that the kernel of enjoyment that sustains green consumerism is the waste or devastation of nature. In consumer society, waste is a necessary condition of enjoyment. However, since a system cannot hold up without censoring its libidinal foundation (Žižek 1997), the ideological fantasy of green consumption must censor "wasteful" consumption

by promoting recyclable or energy-saving products in order to protect the libidinal foundation of consumption—waste/destruction—from being questioned. I suggest that environmental critics should lead green consumers to confront the *real* of their desires and reroute their impulse for environmental change through non-commercial means.

Chapter three grounds my analysis of American green advertising in a psychic milieu of fear and anxiety, which has resulted from the alarming discourse of environmental apocalypse in the Western public sphere. I analyze a series of green corporate image ads produced for companies such as GE, Shell, and BP to examine how they construct the fantasies of ecological harmony, civic responsibility, and sustainable future to appease the apocalyptic anxiety of the society. I use the Lacanian theory of the gaze to examine how these ads walk the fine line between “fantasy” (a signature feature of advertising) and “vision” (a rationalistic and authoritative outlook into the future). I argue that these “corporate visions” not only invite the consumers to see nature from a corporate perspective as only a collection of usable resources but also perform a therapeutic function for the American public by substituting an unimaginable apocalyptic abyss with a prosthetic future of economic sustainability and ecological harmony.

To examine the historical conditions under which green advertising rose in China, chapter four begins by studying its predecessors—governmental propaganda posters and environmental NGO’s public service

ads. I look at Mao's "nature-conquering" propaganda posters in the 1950s-1970s, the state-centered, patriotism-driven "environmental protection" posters in the 1980s-1990s, and foreign environmental NGOs' apocalyptic-flavored public service ads in the 21st century. Conceptualizing nature as the enemy of socialist development, Maoist propaganda waged an ideological battle against nature which offered China, a country frequently inflicted by natural disasters, an empowering fantasy to protect it from its traumatic encounters with nature. After Mao's death and the collapse of this fantasy, the public experienced a deep crisis of faith in collective ideals. State-centered environmental propaganda attempted to articulate environmentalism with the new rising protective fantasy—individualism and economic prosperity—but found little success. Foreign environmental NGOs' public service ads use both civic responsibility and apocalyptic appeals to promote environmental causes. However, due to the widespread political cynicism and the lack of the Western apocalyptic tradition, the Chinese public is still slow in undertaking environmental actions.

In chapter five, I focus on one of the main products of global green consumerism—hybrid gasoline-electric cars—and launch a close comparison between Chinese and American hybrid car advertisements. Cars are deeply embedded in the fabric of modern capitalism and hybrid cars are quick to assume the same role of the rising green economy. By juxtaposing a series of advertisements for Toyota Prius, Lexus Luxury Hybrid, Buick-Lacrosse

Hybrid, etc., I show that while American hybrid car ads erase the car's body (which has become a symbol of guilt and apocalyptic anxiety) from the images of ecological harmony, Chinese hybrid car ads accentuate the luxury and sleek "physique" of the car (which functions as a symbol for individual autonomy and social status). This textual/visual analysis is supplemented by a comparison of the market sales of hybrid cars in China and the U.S. in order to gauge the effects of these ads. Finally I outline the different structures of desire underlying American and Chinese green advertisements and discuss their implications for the future of environmentalism in these two countries.

The conclusion summarizes the main arguments of the dissertation and points out that environmentalism is driven less by a love for raw, extra-discursive nature than by the symbolic relationship between human subjects. I suggest that we sublimate our drives, that which occupies the ontological status in our existence, and stay faithful to the objects that inaugurated our desire.

CHAPTER II  
WHEN PSYCHOANALYSIS MEETS ECOLOGY: WASTE,  
ENJOYMENT, AND THE *REAL* OF GREEN CONSUMERISM

The materiality of communication has never been more at stake than in the study of environmental communication. Inaugurated by Christine Oravec's 1981 essay "John Muir, Yosemite, and the Sublime Response," this recently burgeoning field examines how symbolic representations of the "environment" produce effects in human culture, which in turn affect the natural environment. Focusing on the intricate connections between human symbolic actions and their environmental impacts, environmental communication reminds us of "the very *material consequences* of our communication choices" (Cox, 2006, 5).

Such concerns for materiality are raised to address an exigency—the impending environmental crises where one must intervene in order to avert catastrophe. Cox (2007) calls environmental communication a "crisis discipline," a field that is defined by crisis and driven by urgency (5). He aligns it with new studies such as conservation biology, environmental sociology, toxicology, and conservation psychology, all of which aim to "offer recommendations for management or intervention to protect imperiled species, biological communities, or ecosystems" (6). Under the pressure of a crisis, one particularly feels the urge to "get real"—to find the "real" cause in order to make "real" changes. While these different "crisis disciplines" share

the common urge to “get real,” they tend to disagree with one another on what counts as “real.” Currently there are three different conceptualizations of the “real” (or materiality). They are ecological materiality, political-economic materiality, and psycho-cultural materiality.

First, environmental scientists and policy-makers ground their “real” in ecological materiality. They hold that ecological crises primarily take place in an objective, scientific reality which can be solved by making technological innovations or improving scientific management skills. As a dominant trend in public environmental discourse, this view is supported by an unwavering faith in technical rationality, as if all aspects of the Earth’s ecology can be subject to scientific control. According to Timothy Luke (1997), the current discourse of geo-economics is grounded in this belief. By articulating ecology with economy, industrialists and technocrats use notions like “wise-use” or “sustainability” to gain legitimacy for their continued exploitation of natural resources. A similar trend can be observed in academia, where the bias toward ecological materiality only “affirms the need for hard disciplines in elaborate programs of productivism” (5). Indeed, when environmental crises are merely conceived as problems occurring in objective reality, the more “material” an academic discipline is, the more likely it will be favored by governmental funding and social respect.

Some environmental communication scholars, however, challenge this hegemonic view of the “scientific real” by studying the symbolic

representations of the ecological system in popular environmental discourse. Arguing that they are nothing but simulations of ecological reality, these scholars attack the political and economic interests that underlie these popular representations. Deluca and Demo (2000), for example, analyze the sublime representations of pristine nature in Carleton Watkins's 1860s photographs of the Yosemite Valley which contributed to the birth of preservationism. They point out that such sublime, pristine "nature" cannot be found in reality and only exists as a rhetorical construction. DeLuca (2001) argues that since nature has always been mixed up with, inhabited by, and changed by humans, the so-called pristine wilderness is only a culturally constructed icon used by the privileged class to keep indigenous people away from their homelands, among other things. In a similar vein, Toby Smith (1998) analyzes the harmonious imagery of nature in corporate green image campaigns and contends that they are merely fabricated illusions used to promote corporate hegemony in the new environmental movement. By disarticulating the hegemonic liaison between ecology and political-economy, these critics believe that environmental crises are not so much problems in objective, scientific reality but rather manifestations of social conflicts and economic inequality.

While environmental communication scholars seem to disagree with environmental scientists and policy-makers, they actually share a common assumption with the latter group—that an objective, "real" ecosystem exists

outside of its symbolic representations. Viewing communication as merely an obfuscator of truths and reality, they operate within the logic of what Paul Ricoeur calls the “hermeneutics of suspicion”—that the critic should expose the deception in language and symbolic representations in order to destabilize the obvious ideological meanings they produce. This impulse to “demystify” ideology can be traced to the long tradition of Marxist ideological critique, which is often criticized for its political-economic determinism. When applied to ecological critique, it might lead to a similar problem: it tends to reduce ecological crises to merely socioeconomic conflicts and thereby decrease their level of urgency. Such an effect often leads to the endless postponement of environmental actions, as in a clash between “environment and jobs” where priority often tends to be given to the latter (Cox 2010, 354).

Yet ecological crises cannot simply be treated as political-economic conflicts. Much larger in scale and higher in complexity, they can neither be solved by political-economic critique alone, nor by a purely scientific or technical approach. For this reason, we need to look into a third dimension of materiality—psycho-cultural materiality. Located at the heart of our consumerism-driven economy, our psycho-cultural pathologies can not only lead to social and economic inequality, but can also induce environmental destruction and ecological disasters. For a theory of psycho-cultural materiality, I turn to psychoanalysis, which is also a “crisis discipline” and is dedicated to making interventions during critical times (see chapter one).



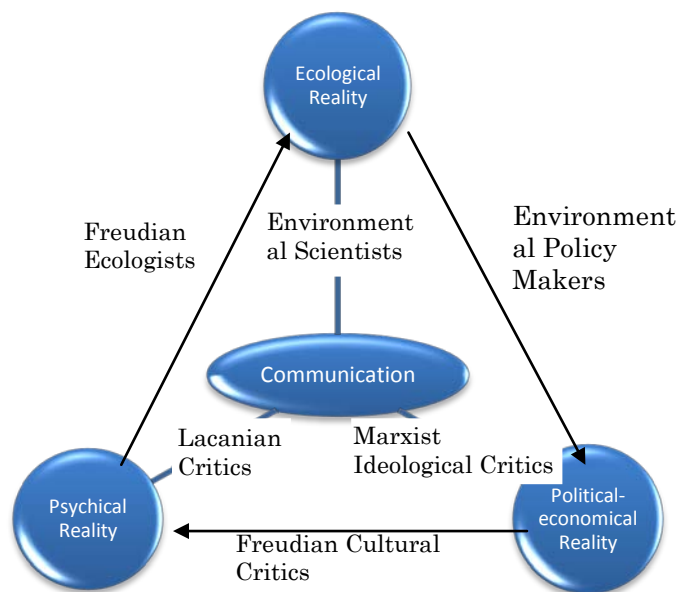


Figure 1 Three Conceptualizations of the "Real"

While environmental scientists and eco-Marxist critics alike ask whether our perceptions of ecological crises are scientifically real or ideologically constructed, a psychoanalytically-informed critic should ask: “What are the real crises in our cultural psyches?” and “What kind of ethical act should we adopt in response to that psycho-cultural exigency?”

The rest of this chapter will apply psychoanalysis to the practice of ecological critique, as well as pointing out the possible pitfalls of this application. As mentioned in Chapter one, a rigid and formulaic use of psychoanalytic terms (like orthodox Freudian criticism) might lead to psychological reductionism. The solution I offer is a Lacanian one: by taking into account the mediating role language and communication play in structuring

the human psyche, the critic is able to legitimately formulate a typology of desire by analyzing the rhetorical techniques of popular media texts. When applying psychoanalysis to ecological critique, we should also preserve the primacy of language and communication in determining our psycho-cultural reality. In the current debates between environmental scientists and eco-Marxists, communication has been understood as either an epistemological tool to know about objective ecological reality or an ideological tool to distort the public's knowledge about objective ecological reality. A psychoanalytically-informed critic, however, holds that communication and symbolic actions are themselves *real*—they weave together the ground of our psychic reality and structure the ways through which we derive enjoyment from our environmental actions.<sup>5</sup>

#### First Encounter: Freud and Ecology

When first applied to ecological critique, psychoanalysis is used by theorists to articulate a type of continuity between the “real” physical environment and the “real” psychic environment. One example is the work of Killingsworth and Palmer (1997), who use Freud to analyze the discourse of “environmentalist hysteria”—a phrase commonly used to condemn the alarming rhetoric of environmental activists. According to Freud, mind and body are interconnected. In the case of hysteria, the patient's psychological mind-blocks are manifested in somatic symptoms while somatic symptoms can also be treated by “talking cures.” This mind-body continuity constitutes a single

affectional system, which is mediated by the movement of the psychic energy—libido. Here, the human mind is no longer a Cartesian sovereign agent; it becomes a “dynamo” whose libidinal energy can be only partially managed by the ego while the rest forms the unconscious, which occasionally shows up as bodily symptoms.

Proposing an analogy between the psychic system and the ecosystem, Killingsworth and Palmer suppose that if the Earth were a human body, then the “technological or instrumental understanding of Earthly existence can be said to represent only the conscious mind, the *ego* of Western civilization” (37). The ego of civilization represses the Earth’s body, whose excess energy forms the “great Earth unconscious” (such as the “minds” of the animals and plants, 48). Emitting “a cry of pain [that] can break the public habit of inattention,” “hysterical” environmentalists (like Rachel Carson and Paul Erhlich) can be understood as the return of the repressed “Earth unconscious,” i.e. the symptom, which shows up in the public consciousness of Western civilization.

One problem, however, arises in this analogy between the psychic system and the ecosystem, as these two systems are not completely equivalent. In Freud’s theorization of the psyche, the symptom—the repressed libidinal energy—appears as involuntary and unintentional interruptions of consciousness (such as muscle twitches, delusions, dreams, or slips of the tongue). In the case of the ecosystem, however, the symptom—

the hysterical rhetoric of environmentalism—appears as carefully planned speech acts to disrupt the collective consciousness, i.e. the “ego of Western civilization.” By equating these two types of symptoms, Killingsworth and Palmer read the rhetoric of environmentalists as an involuntary, unconscious cry, but by doing so they ignore the crucial role that language and symbolic structures play in constituting the rhetoric of the environmentalists.

This oversight continues in Killingsworth and Palmer’s later rhetorical analysis of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962). They point out that in Carson’s book the Earth’s body is constantly paralleled to the human body. On the one hand, Carson writes that the Earth aches like the human body through the “scarred vegetation and weeping trees”; on the other hand, she explains that “there is also an ecology of the world within our bodies [...] and this inward ecology is deeply connected to the world outside our bodies through the cycles of energy exchange” (170-86). Viewing nature and the human world as a unified energy system, Carson criticizes positivistic modern science for separating this unified system by casting the objectifying gaze onto nature. As a remedy to this mistake, she proposes a type of ecological holism: “Her hope is rather to reunite the moral, the aesthetic, and the technical imagination of humankind [and she suggests] a holistic approach to a reunified mind and body of nature [...] the holism of new ecology.” (47). Throughout Killingsworth and Palmer’s analysis of Carson, they simply parallel Freudian psychoanalysis with ecological holism but fail

to truly engage in an efficient psychoanalytic critique of holism to analyze how linguistic and rhetorical techniques are used to structure the social imaginary of holism.

In a similar attempt to inform ecology with psychoanalysis, Wolfgang Ley (2007) writes from a tradition of German thinkers who use a psychosocial lens to see the relationship between civilization and nature (e.g. Richter 1979; Kerberg 1975; Seidler 1994; Kuchenhoff 1997). Ley establishes a causal connection between two “natures:” one is “our inner, psychosomatic human nature,” and the other is external ecological nature (1285). When the former loses balance, the latter also becomes chaotic. He writes,

the major mishaps in our dealings with the natural world [can be interpreted] as a socially generated form of destructive narcissism, an unwillingness to acknowledge the autonomous integrity and libidinally cathected intrinsic value of natural objects—including the integrity and value of the indivisible somatic and psychological structures and dynamics of human nature (1286).

Ley’s project bears great resemblance to that of Killingsworth and Palmer. Both see the psychic system and the ecosystem as a unified system of energies. Both see the task of a psychoanalytically-informed ecological critique as tackling the blockage, obstruction, and imbalance of energies in these two systems. Both believe that these two systems should together form a *holistic whole*. From a strictly psychoanalytic standpoint, however, this move towards holism is problematic. As I will point out later, the libidinal (sexual) energy circulating in the human psychic system is radically different

from the physic energy rotating in the ecosystem which can be stored, exchanged, and utilized in many ways. Also, the move towards holism imposes a normative state of equilibrium on Freud's conception of the psyche and wrongfully designates the goal of psychoanalysis to be the restoration of harmony between the mind and the body, the consciousness and the unconscious.

### Holism and Waste in the Discourse of

#### Popular Ecology

By promoting a notion of holism between the mind and body, humans and Earth, Killingsworth, Palmer, and Ley's projects seem to be complicit with the agenda of the dominant discourse of popular ecology. For example, Luke (1997) writes that today's geo-economics promote a type of ecological management which aims to rationally manage the natural ecosystem as a whole. This desire to control the "whole" was first generated in the 1960s, when a picture of the whole Earth was taken by Apollo 10 in space and soon became widely circulated in society. Applying Foucault's analogy of the panopticon, Luke calls this "holistic" view "astropanopticism," which turned the Earth into an object of rational management in a more sophisticated manner than did earlier industrial methods. "Earth [was] redefined as 'the global environmental and developmental system' in which what was once God's wild Nature becomes technoscientific managerialists' tame ecosystems" (9). The discourse of ecological management also emphasizes a type of

interconnectedness between the whole and its parts. *Our Common Future*, a publication by The World Commission on Environment and Development, states: “We can see and study the Earth as an organism whose health depends on the health of all its parts, which gives us the power to reconcile human affairs with natural laws and to thrive in the process” (197; quoted in Luke, 1997). This view coincides with the eco-utopia which Carson, Killingsworth, Palmer, and Ley portray—a utopia of ecological holism where the human psyche and the Earth’s “body” blend in perfect harmony.

As Luke continues to point out, this “holistic” vision of the Earth promoted by eco-management is in fact supported by the rationale of utilitarianism:

The infrastructuralization of the Earth reimagines it as a rational responsive household in which economically action commodifies everything, utilizes anything, wastes nothing, blending the natural and the social into a single but vast set of household accounts whose performativities must constantly weigh consumption against production at every level of analysis from suburbia to the stratosphere in balancing the terrestrial budgets of ecological modernization. (10)

We should note here how Luke sequences the three concepts “commodifies everything, utilizes anything, wastes nothing.” This linguistic choice is not a haphazard arrangement. First, the commodity form is established upon the fetishistic structure of utilitarianism; second, utilitarianism is constituted by the elimination of waste; then, it logically follows that the commoditization of a natural ecosystem entails a rejection of waste. In other words, it is only

through the exclusion of waste that the rational, utilitarian appearance of the eco-commodity system can be sustained.

The repulsion against waste is not only observed in the discourse of eco-management but is also shared by other components of popular ecology. For instance, the two main imperatives of contemporary environmentalism—pollution and waste reduction (eliminating solid, liquid, and gaseous waste) and resource conservation (minimizing the waste of natural resources)—contain at their core the impulse to eliminate waste. To minimize waste and maximize use, numerous green technological products are invented and become available on the market, such as decomposable product packaging, reusable shopping bags and water bottles, energy-saving light bulbs and electronics, etc. The rejection of waste is also considered necessary to the maintenance of individual well-being: From pollutant-free organic foods, best-selling “detox” medicines, to pseudo-spiritual self-help books and popular yoga courses, the entire New Age philosophy-inspired consumer culture displays an urge to flush the negative energies or waste materials from the otherwise harmonious mind-body ecosystem. What brings the idea of holism to an extreme is an eco-dancing club recently opened in the Netherlands that installs large “buttons” on the dance floor which are connected to an electric generator.<sup>6</sup> As the drunken revelers dance, their kinetic energy is transferred into electricity to supply the energy needs of the whole club. One cannot help but marvel at the “brilliance” of the eco-club’s designer, who tries



to convert the psychical energies derived from human enjoyment into a quantifiable, physical energy which can be transported, circulated, and utilized in a mind-body/human-nature “ecosystem.”

### Second Encounter: Lacan and Ecology

The discourse of popular ecology presents a rosy picture of a holistic ecosystem where the mind and the body, humans and nature are rejoined in harmony. But is this ever possible? Can humans really enjoy a completely balanced eco-equilibrium? To answer this question, I go to Lacan who provides a theory of the economy of human enjoyment. First of all, Lacan strictly opposes the ideal of holism. In fact, the word “holism” has already debunked its own lie in its spelling—instead of “whole-ism,” it is spelled as “hol-ism” (Bruce Fink, 1996, simply calls it “hole-ism”). Tracing the Western fantasy of harmonious nature back to the Romantic tradition, Lacan asserts that “the Freudian discovery teaches us that all natural harmony in man is profoundly disconcerted” (S3, 83). For him, humans and nature are structurally split—in the same sense that consciousness is split from the unconscious, or, the Self is split from the Other. In psychoanalysis, this split has many names, such as castration, the incest taboo (in Freud), or the phallic function (in Lacan). But Lacan insists that the split is *irreducible*. Evans writes, “The unconscious system is not merely that which is outside the field of consciousness at a given time, but that which has been radically separated from consciousness by repression and thus cannot enter the

conscious-preconscious system without distortion” (217). In other words, what separates the unconscious from the rest of the mind is what fundamentally constitutes the mind. To undo this split is to destroy the mind altogether.

Thus, what is missing in Ley, Killingsworth and Palmer’s interpretations of psychoanalysis is not that the mind is split, but that the split is *irreducible*. While they read the hysterical rhetoric of environmentalists as symptoms of objective ecological reality, they ignore psycho-cultural reality and assume that the psychic system and the ecosystem are continuous with each other. This understanding of psychoanalysis has already strayed away from Freud towards Jung. Throughout Freud’s career, he rigorously fought against Jung for his monism (one kind of energy circling in the universe among humans, living organisms, and nature) and insisted on the dualism of energies—that libido should be distinguished from biological or physical energies. Following Freud, Lacan purposefully makes a distinction between the psychoanalytic *real* and the raw, extra-discursive reality that cannot be integrated into the symbolic universe. He situates the *real*—one of the three basic registers—at the center of the symbolic. Although the *real* cannot be represented in the symbolic system, it is the generating principle, thus, the absent center of the entire symbolic system.

What about the raw, extra-discursive reality that is supposed to be the object of scientific inquiry? Žižek (1997) points out that the “scientific Real” is

inaccessible because the “sexual Real” always thwarts our knowledge about the former. The “sexual Real” is a product of the symbolic order:

What separates us, humans, from the “real Real” targeted by science, what makes it inaccessible to us? [...] This Real is for Lacan the Real inscribed into the very core of human sexuality: “there is no sexual relationship,” human sexuality is marked by an irreducible failure, sexual difference is the antagonism of the two sexual positions between which there is no common denominator, enjoyment can be gained only against the background of a fundamental loss.<sup>7</sup>

Given the difference between the fundamental premises of psychoanalysis and ecology, we cannot define our task as psychoanalyzing the ecosystem (as “the depth-psychological potential of ecology” suggested by Ley), nor theorizing an ecology of the human mind (as “the deep-ecological potential of psychoanalysis” by Ley, or the “ecology of the mind” by Kalle Lasn, 2000). Insisting on the irreducible effects that language and symbolic actions produce on the human mind, psychoanalysis must be critical of the way through which the “whole” ecosystem is made intelligible to us through symbolic mediation of the discourse of ecology.

#### A Lacanian Critique of the Waste Problem

Using Lacan to critique the rejection of waste in eco-consumerism, I argue that waste is the necessary condition of enjoyment. It is the horrifying kernel of desire hidden behind the fantasy of a balanced ecological/economic system. First, waste is located at the heart of the notion of consumption: The etymological root of the word “consumption” means tuberculosis, referring to

the gradual destruction or wasting away of the body (Smith 1998). In studying the lives of the 19th century *nouveaux riches*, Veblen (1923) discovered “the great economic law of wasteful effort,” which drove the rich to squander material resources in order to mark their social status. Bringing conspicuous consumption to a mass-society level, modern marketing generates consumer desire by wasting materials in packaging products or wasting human resource in the production of advertisements. Consequently, they produce the biggest “waste”—the brand—a pure symbol which has no utilitarian value. Waste is not only embedded in the act of consumption; it is also what structurally makes consumption enjoyable. Applying Lacan, since human enjoyment (*jouissance*) can only be derived from an irreducible split (we can only enjoy an object after submitting it to a commodity exchange system and sacrificing its use value), it is only through excluding waste that the whole commodity system can be sustained.

Critics of green consumerism often advise consumers to treat commodities as nothing more than their utilitarian value. For example, a San Francisco based anti-consumerist group, the Compact, vowed to live an entire year without buying anything new, except for bare essentials like medicine and food (Jones 2006). For them, the ethics of consumption lie in the adherence to the raw, use value of things and the biological needs of the body. In the same utilitarian spirit, the Wise Use and Property Rights movement in the U.S. also claimed to put natural resources to human use without wasting

a bit (Helvarg 2004). However, given that the symbolic law of enjoyment determines the necessity of waste, to eliminate waste is actually to disable enjoyment. Since waste is structurally inscribed in the core of our desire, human enjoyment and a completely balanced ecosystem cannot coexist. It is impossible to restore a purely “harmonious” (actually utilitarian) relationship between the consumer and the commodity, or between the society and the ecosystem.

Yet this is not to say that the utilitarian discourse of the anti-consumerist group and the Wise Use movement leave no room for enjoyment. On the contrary, by proposing to eliminate waste, they disavow their own irreducible split and relocate waste/enjoyment in the position of the Other. This operation of disavowal is characteristic of what psychoanalysis calls perversion: the perverse subject refuses all recognition of his own lack/desire and treats himself as an object of the Other’s desire. Having eliminated all uncertainties, the pervert always knows what the Other wants: “[He] places himself in the real, the only place where nothing is lacking, where knowledge is certain” (Copjec 1994, 109). The eco-utilitarians display these very symptoms of perversion: they at once disavow their own lack (“we have no desires,” “we live without wasting anything”) and externalize their lack in the Other (“we save natural resources for the consumption of future generations”—here the idea of the “future generations” occupies the position of the Other). Placing themselves in the place of knowledge, they claim to

know exactly what their biological needs are and exactly what natural resources are worth. Meanwhile, going by their assumption, future generations are always passively waiting for help and will starve to death without today's conservation efforts.

What is the structural relationship between utilitarianism and waste/enjoyment? To answer this question, we must first pay attention to *pleasure*, a concept which psychoanalysis purposefully differentiates from *enjoyment*. First, pleasure is commensurate with use. In critiquing the early philosophers of utilitarianism (such as Jeremy Bentham and Gilbert Durand), Copjec (1994) states that “pleasure was from the beginning taken as fundamental—*as long as it could be used*” (82). These philosophers equated the principle of utility with the principle of pleasure and proposed that “use is pleasurable” (82) and “pleasure is useable” (85). However, underneath their fantasy of utilitarianism, Copjec argues, lies “the supposition that there is an Other who enjoys a certain and useless pleasure” (113). The “useless pleasure” is what psychoanalysis calls enjoyment, or *jouissance*. In the perverse fantasy of utilitarianism, the *jouissance* of the Other is both “affirmed and denied when [...] it is retroactively posited as cause of the subject's desire (115). *Jouissance*, or the “useless pleasure,” is a surplus existence that cannot be represented within the symbolic system. Within the perverse universe of eco-utilitarianists, it cannot be counted as useful by being converted into positive physical energy (like the drunken dancer's

kinetic energy turned into electricity). Being the biggest waste itself, *jouissance* is the dimension where psychoanalysis lays its ethical principles in. Copjec (1994) writes, the psychoanalytic subject that is “subject to a principle *beyond* pleasure, is *not driven to seek his own good* [...] This obliges psychoanalysis to reformulate its ethics on the basis of another principle, that of the death drive” (87). She suggests that the proper way to treat *jouissance* lies in the ethics of sublimation, which I will discuss later in the conclusion chapter.

### The Economy of *Jouissance* in the U.S.-China

#### Relationship

If *jouissance* cannot be represented by the symbolic system, where can a critic find its surplus existence in an ideological text? The answer is: it lies in the symptoms, which are shown as logical gaps and structural incongruence in the text. For instance, Luke (1997) points out that the discourse of American geopolitics simultaneously follows two contradicting logics: on the one hand, the U.S. must shoulder the responsibility to protect the harmonious ecosystem of the world; on the other hand, the U.S. must do so in order to win the ferocious international war on natural resources:

Partly a response to global economic competition, and partly a response to global ecological scarcities, today's geo-economic reading of the earth's political economy constructs the attainment of national economic growth, security, and prosperity as a zero-sum game. [...] It also assumes material scarcity is a continual constraint. (5)

The coexistence of these two contradicting logics perfectly exemplifies what Žižek describes about the “two faces” of the Law: when seen in the open, the Law appears to be a universal and impartial system; but when one looks at from its “obscene underside,” one see that the secret kernel where it derives its enjoyment is usually violent, antagonistic, and monstrous. In this case, while the U.S. is positioning itself as the protector of a harmonious global ecological order, the country actually tries to reassert its hegemony in a new geo-political order and deprive other countries of the ability to extract natural resources. This antagonistic core of hegemony is externalized and experienced as a constant fear that an “enemy” will always try to steal our resources. In response to this fear, geo-politics successfully “transforms through military metaphors and strategic analogies what hitherto were regarded as purely economic concerns into national security issues of wise resource use and sovereign property rights” (4). The supposition of an enemy allows geo-economics to enlist help from political and militarist powers, which further belies the proclaimed fantasy of a harmonious global ecological order.

For the U.S., China is a typical “enemy” of this kind. Having always been diligently covering China’s political, economic, and environmental scandals, American mainstream media intensified their hostile reporting during the countdown to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. CNN, ABC, Associated Press, and Reuters frequently ran news associating China with images of



belching smoke stacks, smog-clouded cityscapes, and automobile-congested streets. These images are also accompanied by apprehensive language depicting China's environmental degradation as a global threat—e.g. “China overtakes the U.S. as the world's largest CO2 emitter”,<sup>8</sup> “As China goes, so does global warming,”<sup>9</sup> “China's growth could exceed planet resources.”<sup>10</sup> Echoing the historical Sinophobic discourse in the west, these new environmental talks of the “China threat” even evoked the horrific imaginary of the Christian Apocalypse: “What's going on in China is quite simply the most important story anywhere in the world... There is no point trying to downplay this; there is an ecological apocalypse unfolding in China right now” (Porritt 2006; quoted in *People and the Planet*, 2006).<sup>11</sup>

Simultaneously portrayed as a competitor for natural resources and a threat to the safety of the world's environment, China embodies the structural impossibility of the American dream of global eco-harmony. Put in psychoanalytic terms, China is the *symptom* of the geopolitical discourse of the U.S.: by blaming China for polluting the global environment or exhausting the world's resources, certain American media can direct attention away from the country's internal environmental problems. Moreover, since blame can only be placed on a supposedly free subject, these criticisms also suppose that the Chinese are firstly “free” and that they “choose” to ruin the global environment. This rhetorical move is described by Žižek as an *empty gesture* of choice, which is often employed by the

hegemonic power of economic globalization. For example, affluent Western capitalistic countries often express compassion for Chinese sweatshop workers by exposing their horrendous working conditions, but at the same time, they repetitively blame China for stealing their jobs. This strange combination of jealousy and compassion follows this logic: “Chinese sweatshop workers, you can always quit your job and opt out from this capitalistic exploitation; but you don’t, so we can blame you for stealing our jobs.” The empty gesture of choice creates the appearance that the third-world subjects are in fact “free” and thus can be made responsible for their own exploitation and also for the ruin of the American economy and the world’s environment.

Since symptoms expose the structural impossibility of an ideological fantasy, efforts are constantly made to cover them up to maintain the coherence appearance of the fantasy. For the same reason, the U.S. tries vigorously to *environmentalize* China. It does so by stipulating environmental treaties, employing media surveillance over China’s environmental performance, dispatching international environmental NGOs (such as Greenpeace and WWF) to help China establish her own NGOs, and spreading green consumerism (exporting hybrid cars and organic foods) to China’s consumer market. However, according to Luke (1997), to “environmentalize” a group or a country is first of all to manage and control them: “an environmental act [...] is a disciplinary move. Environmentalism

[...] strategically polices space in order to encircle sites and subjects captured within these enveloping maneuvers, guarding them, standing watch over them, or even besieging them.” (11) In other words, by exporting environmentalism into China, the U.S. actually tries to contain the country with a network of eco-political power that it weaves.

Yet, no matter how hard the fantasy tries to mask the symptom, the symptom—directly connected to the *real*, a site of radical otherness—always returns and brings around an intense sense of anxiety. When confronted with the radically unknown desire of the Other (which is in the *real*), the technocrats of American geo-politics have to ask the unnerving question: What if the Chinese don't want to “go green”? What do they really want? And even more preposterously: what if the Chinese want to “go green,” but they want it for a complete different reason from us? This neurotic anxiety can be observed in the international media war prior to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, where some Western media not only zestfully expose China's environmental scandals but also denounce its government's “green” efforts (e.g. last-minute car-ban, the proposal to build an entire Green City in Dongtan) as tokenistic and short-lived. Here we see the paradox of the U.S.'s desire: they claim to demand a “green” China, but when China makes an enormous effort to be “green,” they are still unsatisfied.

Likewise, when preparing for the Olympics, China also encountered the neurotic question about the mysterious desire of the West: What do they

really want as they criticize our environmental conditions? Do they want to see us “going green” or do they just want to nitpick our performance during the Olympics, one of the most glorious moments of our country? Sprung from the suspicion of hostility, Chinese official media such as CCTV (China Central Television) and the Xinhua News Agency busily declared the “green” features of the Olympics and showcased the imported, state-of-the-art eco-gadgets used to equip the venues (from energy-saving stadiums, organic diet for athletes, to hybrid cars for commuting, etc). These news reports oozed national pride, dazzling the audience with China’s forward leadership in environmental affairs. China’s new “green fantasy,” as a component of the discourse of national prosperity, is structured around the antagonistic gaze of the West. In order to maintain this “green fantasy,” China must tuck away all the “symptoms,” such as smog, sand storms, and traffic congestions from the Western eye in order to avoid confronting the horrifying kernel of their desire—the ultimate fear that the Western critics are actually right.

After analyzing the ideological fantasies of both sides, we can detect an economy of enjoyment (*jouissance*) structuring the U.S.-China relationship: while China takes enjoyment from making excessive “green” efforts to win world respect, the U.S. interprets China’s excessive efforts as a threat to its own hegemonic power. No matter what China does, the U.S. will never be completely satisfied. The reversed is also true: China does not want to lose anything that the U.S. enjoys taking away, no matter how little the thing is

worth economically or geographically (that was partially why Western countries' support for Tibetan independence annoyed so many Chinese). According to Copjec (2004), this is what envy is: instead of envying the actual object which the Other possesses, one envies the *jouissance* that the Other derives from the object. Since international hegemonic struggles are primarily structured by envy, there will always be a scarcity of *jouissance* underlying the fantasy of global eco-political harmony. Also, due to this scarcity of *jouissance*, countries will necessarily *misrecognize* each other's desire: As China obsessively pursues the "green fantasy" to fulfill the desire of the West, it fails to realize that what the West enjoys is in fact its problems, i.e. the symptoms that China fails to cover.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, no matter how the U.S. tries to impose its environmental agenda on China (by exporting eco-gadgets through GE or dispatching environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace or WWF), China will always take up these offerings for a reason different from what the U.S. wants. Thus, the desire for "green" is, ultimately, incommunicable across cultural and national boundaries.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analyzed the previous attempts to align psychoanalysis with ecology and pointed out their tendency to ignore the important function language performs in structuring the psyche and the human-nature relationship. Driven by an urge to eliminate the split between conscious and unconscious, nature and culture, these theorists turned to

promote holism—a normative harmony in the “ecosystem” between the mind and body, nature and culture. I considered this pursuit of holism an uncritical use of psychoanalysis and pointed out its complicity with the dominant discourse of popular ecology and green consumerism. Driven by a desire to purge waste and wasteful consumption from an otherwise harmonious ecosystem, this discourse is based upon a fetishistic structure of utilitarianism, which tries to turn all natural resources into exchangeable commodities.

Evoking Lacan, I emphasized that the split between nature and culture, conscious and unconscious is irreducible. This important splitting function of language inaugurates *jouissance*, the psychic enjoyment which functions as the “battery” of every ideological system and constitutes the materiality of our being. Since an ideological system cannot sustain itself without censoring its libidinal foundation,<sup>13</sup> our consumption-driven culture can only appear “sustainable” by purging the so-called wasteful consumption from an otherwise harmonious universe to ensure the continuous running of the capitalistic machine of mass production and consumption. The kernel of enjoyment of green consumerism, thus, can inevitably be found in *waste*. Green conspicuous consumers, who obsessively purchase “environmentally friendly” products, derive enjoyment from the symbolic surplus of social status at the expense of the wasted materials. Environmentally-conscious Western media, who fantasize a perfectly balanced global ecosystem, take

enjoyment from hysterically criticizing China—the “*waste* basket” of global capitalism—for ruining the world’s environment. Furthermore, the perverse eco-utilitarianists (anti-consumer groups and “wise use” advocates) pinch every ounce of natural resources to maximize their use so that future generations (the Other of their utilitarian universe) can waste and squander these resources.

By now it should be clear that psychoanalysis examines the *real*, sexed enjoyment of environmental communication. But its approach to “sex” differs from the previous endeavors to bring “sex” into ecological critique.

Attributing our attitudes towards nature to gender differences, ecofeminists blame environmental destruction on a male-dominated social structure and call for a return to “the pre-patriarchal affinity with nature” (e.g. Daly 1978, Griffin, 1978). Under the banners of ecofeminism and New Age spirituality, marketers criticize the masculine mindset of environmental management (McDonagh & Prothero 1997; Merilainen, Moisander & Pesonen 2000) and suggest the idea of “matriarchal marketing” by infusing “*optimism, spirituality, activism, and fun* [emphasis added] into the conduct of research and our view of the market” (Scott & Penaloza 2006, 66). The “aesthetic turn” of green marketing, exemplified by brands such as Burt’s Bee, Tom’s of Maine, and the Body Shop, is a materialization of such “matriarchal marketing.” These brands articulate aesthetics with environmental ethics

and combine the benefits of individual wellbeing with social responsibility (Todd 2004).

While ecofeminists are cheerfully injecting beauty or fun (wasteful enjoyment) into popular environmentalism, critics however warn the danger of having too much “fun” with environmentalism. Questioning the populist idea that “environmentalism must be sexy,” Phaedra Pezzullo (2006) criticizes movies that use sexy Hollywood stars to represent anti-toxic activism (e.g. *Erin Brockovich* and *A Civil Action*). She argues that they tend to “overarticulate” environmentalism with sexiness and thus dilute the environmentalist message. In particular, she points out that *Erin Brockovich* (2000) reinforces the paradigm of second-wave “power feminism,” a movement that encourages women to claim sole responsibility for the improvement of their lives, which is the hegemonic product of a more sophisticated patriarchy. Other feminists also criticize the gendered representation of nature in popular culture and media imagery, suggesting an unbiased representation of nature (e.g. Roach 2003).

Wavering between the enthusiasm to “sex up” environmentalism and the fear of “over-sexing” it, the feminists seem to be stuck in a dilemma. But this dilemma in fact comes from their definitions of “sex.” “Sex,” for the ecofeminist marketers, is a set of socially obtained characters attributed to a certain gender (masculinity means seriousness and rigidity; femininity means fun and flexibility). For the feminist media critics, “sex” refers to the



socially constructed representations of a certain gender (e.g. Julia Roberts' large breasts and John Travolta's dance moves are sexually attractive to the audience). Both definitions consider "sex" as a cultural construction whose traits can be described and enumerated<sup>14</sup> and thereby still linger on the level of the *imaginary*. Adding these imaginary constructions of "sex" to the environmentalist discourse indeed might drown out the original message, as both take place on the level of consciousness instead of the level of the unconscious.

Lacan, however, conceptualizes sex differently. For him, sex is neither a biological act for the purpose of reproduction, nor a set of imaginary, describable, cultural traits. Instead, sex refers to the structure of *jouissance*, which is embedded in the subject's unconscious relation to the symbolic order. Belonging to the realm of the *real*, sex cannot itself be represented but functions as the generating principle of our symbolic discourse. Moreover, sex can never be reciprocal or complementary. "There is no sexual relationship"—this famous Lacanian maxim is proven by the fundamental antagonistic relationship between China and the U.S.: although both countries are taking enjoyment from each other, they are never enjoying the same thing. There is no symmetry or equilibrium in the dimension of *jouissance*.

Based upon Lacan's definition of sex, we see that a psychoanalytically-informed ecological critique would not suggest spin in more "sexed" or aestheticized imagery to make environmentalism popular. Nor would it

suggest to “neuter” nature by eliminating all of its gendered representations to avoid sexism. Instead, it suggests that we stay attuned to the structures of our desire, the split that separates us from nature and from our unconscious, and never renounce that fundamental split which constitutes our being.

Copjec (1994) writes: “The [psychoanalytic] subject does not surrender its desire in order to gain the rewards society offers as incentives; instead, the subject maintains its desire rather than succumb to these ‘pathological’ motives for giving it up” (94). Instead of surrendering to the tamed pleasure of eco-utilitarianism, psychoanalysis asks us to adhere to the excessive enjoyment of *jouissance* and sublimate it by remaining faithful to the lost objects of our desire.

CHAPTER III  
FROM APOCALYPSE TO UTOPIA: THE THERAPEUTIC  
FUNCTION OF GREEN CORPORATE ADVERTISING IN  
AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL CULTURE

This chapter contextualizes American green advertising by examining its discursive and affective conjunction with the rhetoric of radical environmentalism in the United States. I explore how green corporate advertising, primarily structured as utopian narratives (Feller 2004), functions as a response to the apocalyptic rhetoric that has dominated the American environmental movement since the 1960s. I examine the economy of desire that underlies apocalypse and utopia—two opposite types of social imaginary—and explore their dialectical relationship with each other. While much work has been done on apocalyptic or millennial rhetoric (e.g. Brummett 1984; O’Leary 1994; Killingsworth and Palmer 1996), most scholars focused their analysis on apocalyptic literature and social commentary but overlooked the power of images in shaping our imagination of the end of the world. Centering on the visual dimension of the apocalyptic discourse, this chapter uses the Lacanian theory of fantasy to study how images are used to create a unique type of subjectivity. The study of apocalyptic rhetoric also lays out the cultural, historical, and psychical conditions under which corporate utopian discourse emerged and this allows

us to investigate the therapeutic function green corporate advertising performs for the American public.

I begin by studying the apocalyptic imagery in public service ads sponsored by environmental NGOs (*Greenpeace*, *WWF*) and examining how they resonate with the apocalyptic references in popular environmental media such as Hollywood movies (*The Day After Tomorrow*, 2012) and celebrity documentaries (*Inconvenient Truth*, *The Eleventh Hour*). Then I compare the apocalyptic imaginary of environmental crisis to the utopian imaginary constructed in green corporate advertising. I analyze the economy of desire that underlies these two radical visions about the future—one by radical environmentalists, one by corporations—and show how this set of dialectical contradictions is deeply rooted in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition of the West.

### The Best of Times and the Worst of Times

Apocalypse and utopia are two extreme narratives through which we imagine the future of the human society. Stephen O’Leary (1994) defines apocalyptic rhetoric as the “discourse that reveals or makes manifest a vision of ultimate destiny, rendering immediate to human audiences the ultimate End of cosmos in the Last Judgment” (6). The term “apocalypse” derives from Greek Ἀποκάλυψις or *Apokálypsis*, which means “lifting of the veil” or “revelation.” Originated as a literary genre in the Judeo-Christian Bible (e.g. Book of Daniel, Book of Revelation), it is usually associated with an

eschatological final battle and a vision of the world in great turmoil and chaos. Presenting a completely opposite image, utopia is, according to Goodwin and Taylor (1982), “an elaborate vision of ‘the good life’ in a perfect society which is viewed as an integrated totality [...] such a vision transcends normal idealism, and is inevitably at variance with the imperfections of existing society” (16). The Greek version of “utopia” means “not-place” (οὐ, “not”, and τόπος, “place”) which emphasizes the unrealistic and otherworldly character of this vision. It is often connected with the English homophone “eutopia,” derived from the Greek εὖ, “good” or “well”, and τόπος, “place”, to show the double meaning. While both apocalypse and utopia function as critiques of the social status quo, they deliver two visions that are polar opposites from each other: the former envisions total destruction and complete chaos in the world (as Brummett summarizes, “apocalyptic holds that the world will end with a bang,” 1984, 84) and the latter pictures an idealistic society that has eliminated evil, war, and poverty, and exists in perfect order and harmony.

However, the best of times is always also the worst of times: the social imaginary of the apocalypse and utopia usually exist side by side, sprung by the same historical events. According to Darrell Fasching (1993), the Holocaust and the nuclear age are examples of such. He points out that the discovery of atomic power simultaneously “promises us a utopian world of abundance” and “threatens the total annihilation of the human race.” The

irony rising from the ambivalence between great hope and great fear, writes Fasching, is a byproduct of human technology. Jaap Verheul (2004) also explores the dialectic between utopian dreams and dystopian nightmares within American culture and identifies their unique relationship with American ideologies and cultural temperament: “the future-oriented and forward-looking nature of American society and the sense of liberty, possibility and promise make it susceptible to utopian daydreaming or dystopian shivering” (3).

The bifurcation of the apocalyptic and utopian rhetoric also occurs in response to the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century environmental crisis. American environmental rhetoric since the 1960s has been characterized by the apocalyptic imaginary. Killingsworth and Palmer (1996) argue that landmark literatures such as *Silent Spring* (1962), *The Population Bomb* (1968), and *Remaking Society: Pathways to a Green Future* (1990) all appropriate the apocalyptic framework to warn the American public of the impending, severe environmental crisis. Apocalyptic narratives threaten the audience with images of calamity and urgent time limits in order to create a sense of emergency for them to take immediate action. Different from the religious apocalypse which contains the promise of a beyond, environmental apocalypse tends to evoke fatalism and generate the so-called “Chicken Little syndrome”—a sense of despair or passivity which blocks the audience from actions (Shabecoff 1996). In the early 1970s, after environmentalists

harvested some policy success (e.g. the National Environmental Policy Act and the Earth Day), they toned down the apocalyptic urgency of their rhetoric, gradually rejecting a fully radical transformation of society and shifting their strategy from “utopian social engineering” to the so-called “piecemeal social engineering” (Popper 1966). However, the apocalyptic narrative was revived since the 1990s when the topic of global warming heated up in popular media. For the next two decades, end-of-the-world talk and images began to pervade mass media. They appear from the front cover of Time magazine to the Hollywood’s blockbuster *The Day After Tomorrow* and Al Gore’s *Inconvenient Truth*. Now apocalyptic rhetoric is no longer a counterhegemonic discourse but a full-fledged, dominant ideology.

Meanwhile, an alternative framing to the environmental apocalypse started to appear in the popular media since the 1980s: this new discourse converts the threat of doom into a celebration of the dawn of a new utopian society, where humans, nature, and technology coexist harmoniously.

Environmental crisis, under this extremely optimistic light, no longer seems fearful but appears hopeful or even “fun.” Frederick Buell (2003) describes this major discursive transition from apocalypse to utopia:

Radical natural and social disequilibrium turned into opportunities, not closures; they became the energizing motor for human innovation and evolution, not the meltdown of the earth. Risk and instability suddenly became exciting and creative, the signs of a renaissance, not a *Weltuntergang*. Going out of control did not mean the degradation of the biosphere but a way to evolve faster. Chaos appeared not as a feature of apocalypse but as something that was good for us. (214)

He calls this inflation of confidence demonstrated in mass media “the culture of hyperexuberance,” a play on William Catton’s (1980) “the culture of exuberance” which describes an older cultural ideology of progress and natural resource exploitation that lasted throughout American history to the 1960s. This new culture of hyperexuberance, writes Buell,

had little or none of the innocence of the culture of exuberance—a culture that didn’t realize or admit that it had filled its limits and gone out of balance. [It] accepted as its foundation exactly what environmental crisis elaboration held: that people were already beyond their limits, out of balance and in disequilibrium with nature. It accepted these premises and sought to alchemize them into possibilities, not horrors, yet a sense of catastrophe persisted nonetheless, not despite that alchemy so much as *within* and *through* it. (216).

This culture of hyperexuberance bears the vivid imprints of American corporate capitalism: “It appeared across a wide swath of American popular culture, marked corporate styles. [...] It helped birth a whole new postmodern school of futurist fantasizing, bring a new emphasis on visioning to corporate culture, product design...” (215). According to Feller (2004), corporate environmental reports are a typical example of this uprising cultural trend. She examines the glossy brochures that discuss a company’s environmental performance—which are distributed among shareholders and made available to the public through the company’s websites—and argues that these environmental “reports” function as narratives that unfold a free-market *utopia* with attempt to revision environmental issues (58). While claiming to be “reports” that are assumedly objective and authoritative, they



are not subject to governmental regulations and are created by the companies themselves. In a sense, these environmental “reports” are small-scale advertising campaigns, touting the company’s environmental awareness and social responsibility events to the public. Ironically, most of these reports are issued by the “usual suspects”: electronics, pharmaceuticals, energy, petroleum, or chemical manufacturing industries—all industries that have been significant polluters of the environment. “Presenting a utopian narrative, rather than a conventional argument or apology,” writes Feller, corporations suggest that “environmental issues are governed by ideology as much as by science, simply by demonstrating that an alternative is conceivable” (69). In these simple words, Feller spells out the psychoanalytic idea of ideological fantasy as wish-fulfillment: simply by projecting an image of a utopian future, corporate rhetoric attempts to temporarily satisfy the public’s desire in order to forestall criticism.

To further explore the corporate discourse of environmental utopia, I will later zoom in on a more prominent element of corporate image campaigns—advertising, which is usually launched in mass media to supplement environmental reports and to reach out to a wider public. Green corporate advertising is a bolder exemplar of the utopia discourse: it usually portrays a vision of an idealistic society where humans, technology, and nature exist in harmony. The peaceful and harmonious vision it sees of the future forms a drastic contrast with the violent and anxiety-inducing imagery

displayed in apocalyptic rhetoric and demands our critical attention. In the following sections, I will compare green corporate ads with the public service ads sponsored by environmental NGOs (such as Greenpeace and WWF) to trace this pronounced discursive transition in American environmental culture. I ask these following questions: How does this “sublation” from the apocalyptic to the utopian take place? What are the rhetorical strategies that make it happen and how do they transform the old affect of fear into the new affect of hope, excitement or even fun? How does this transformation restructure the economy of desire underlying popular environmental discourse?

Environmental Public Service Ads: Shock Therapy  
or “Climate Porn”?

The most prominent feature of apocalyptic rhetoric is the representation of extreme disaster, and one of its goals is to achieve a shock effect in the audience and awake them to the impending crisis. However, due to their enormous scale, environmental disasters are hard to envision and thus are frequently portrayed metaphorically through other popular disaster imaginary. One of the most common metaphors of the environmental disaster is the nuclear disaster—whose outbreak for the first time made the extinction of mankind conceivable to the human imagination. According to Killingworth and Palmer (1996), Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* was one of the earliest to draw the parallel. Written during the Cold War in 1962, *Silent Spring*



Figure 2 “Bomb” Ad for Greenpeace

Caption: “Stop the catastrophe.”

Source:

[http://www.adforum.com/affiliates/creative\\_archive/2007/ACT/reel\\_detail2.asp?ID=12660072&TDI=VDCub0eus6&PAGE=10&bShop=&awcat=&ob=&awid=](http://www.adforum.com/affiliates/creative_archive/2007/ACT/reel_detail2.asp?ID=12660072&TDI=VDCub0eus6&PAGE=10&bShop=&awcat=&ob=&awid=)

explicitly aligned the destructive powers of nuclear science with agricultural science and the book’s success was to a large extent due to its resonance with “the public’s growing uneasiness over science and the military in the Cold War era, when the threat of Armageddon seemed ever more real” (27). This following ad by Greenpeace also uses the nuclear apocalypse as a metaphor for the environmental apocalypse—but its unique visual nature makes it deserve our attention.

In this ad titled “Stop the catastrophe” one first sees a mushroom cloud, an iconic image of the nuclear sublime, representing the massive destructive power of the nuclear weapon that could annihilate the human

race. Then one realizes that the mushroom cloud is actually a gigantic and luscious tree. A man is standing underneath the tree, waving an axe trying to cut it down. Compared to the small size of the man, the tree appears to be as large as a scale of the sublime, suggesting an analogous relationship between the natural sublime and the nuclear sublime, threatening to engulf the puny man at its foot. The uncanny resemblance of a tree (an icon of nature) to a nuclear bomb (an icon of technology and man-made destruction) might momentarily lead to a confusion of affect: Should we love it or should we fear it? Should we ponder its beauty or should we run away? In a sense, this ambivalence has already been registered in the experience of the sublime. According to Edmund Burke (1757), the sublime is an intense passion composed of both horror and wonder when one encounters massive and powerful objects. Yet the nuclear sublime is different from the nature sublime that Burke experienced during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is, writes Peter Hales (1991),

a particular sublime [...] not the response of self-eradication and humility that had characterized Edmund Burke's sublime, nor the optimistic American version, wherein this emotion had served to link wild American nature to a divine covenant between God and American culture. Instead [it] represented the furthest extreme of a twentieth century American version of the term, its translation from terror to tourism. [It] introduced a new atomic aesthetic to Americans, one that converted holocaust to parlor show, and responsibility to mere response (12).

If wonder and horror are dialectically related like two sides of a Mobius Strip, then the nuclear icon represses the latter and accentuates the former: It

brings about “the ‘awe-struck’ reactions of the observers” and leaves “a concurrent and complete repression of the horror down below” (12).

This ad tries to transpose a nuclear sublime back into a nature sublime by staging the uncanny. The uncanny refers to a feeling of strangeness when one encounters something both foreign and familiar at the same time.

According to Freud (1919), the feeling of familiarity occurs in a foreign object because it reminds one of some repressed content that is forbidden from

entering into one’s consciousness. In this case, what is repressed is the fact that the mushroom cloud, though it has already been constructed as an icon of technological, man-made disaster, is also a manifestation of *natural* power.

Simply by looking at the name of the nuclear explosion, “mushroom cloud,” and one is able to detect the natural aspect of it. In studying the historical

formation of the “mushroom cloud” into a nuclear icon, Hales (1991) points

out that many observers of the nuclear explosion describe this man-made destruction as a natural event, “a living thing, a new species of being, that

was analogous to other living things—sun, meteor, a mushroom, a

decapitated monster, and finally, a beautiful, delicate, roseate flower” (12).

This description “bridged a previous gap between what was human and what was natural—the atom bomb became a man-made marvel of nature, and

thereby the question of responsibility for the effects of the explosion remained slippery” (10). In other words, in order to lay responsibility on human

subjects, the natural, uncontrollable aspect of the nuclear power must be

repressed from public consciousness. Therefore, as the image of the mushroom cloud gradually sediments into a popular icon, it loses the original ambiguity and tends to be only acknowledged as a man-made, technical disaster.

Nevertheless, this ad brings this repressed content into consciousness. A mushroom-cloud-shaped tree is a double-layered metaphor; it reminds us that, on the one hand, nature can be as destructive as the nuclear power and, on the other hand, the nuclear power itself is a manifestation of the force of nature. Like Zhuangzi who dreamt about being a butterfly and woke up wondering if the butterfly is dreaming of being him (mentioned by Lacan in his *Four Fundamental Concepts* 1978), this double-layered metaphor shows the ultimate indeterminacy between a human/technical disaster and a natural disaster. This indetermination thus brings out the unconscious feeling of horror that has been suppressed in the nuclear sublime.

The man at the bottom of the tree, who is trying to chop down the tree/mushroom cloud, is also an ambiguous figure. The purpose of his action is unclear: it looks like he is trying to destroy nature, but meanwhile he is also destroying the man-made monster (the nuclear explosion). The vagueness of his intention is not clarified in the title “stop the catastrophe” either. Nevertheless, this ad might not be aiming for constructing one clearly defined meaning. According to Arthur Berger (2007), contemporary ads are usually designed for short periods of exposure to achieve the goal to bypass

the audience's consciousness and, thus, many capitalize on offering an intense visual experience rather than delivering a clearly stated message (xvii). Likewise, the spectator might not need much thinking to interpret this ad, although it is sponsored by a nonprofit organization. The horror derived from the sublime depiction of disaster and the feeling of strangeness produced from the uncanny is enough to grip the audience and interpellate them into the rhetoric of environmental apocalypse. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Slavoj Žižek states that ideology does not reason; it operates on the level of the unconscious—not the utmost interior unconscious but the radically external unconscious that is materialized into our everyday experience. In a good reference to our current discussion of the religion-flavored apocalypse, Žižek explains how religious ideologies are integrated into our daily life:

When we subject ourselves to the machine of a religious ritual, we already believe without knowing it; our belief is already materialized in the external ritual; in other words, we already believe unconsciously, because it is from this external character of the symbolic machine that we can explain the status of the unconscious as radically external—that of a dead letter (43).

In this sense, the unconscious adoption of apocalyptic environmentalism takes place during Westerners' day-to-day, repetitive exposure to the apocalyptic sublime through various religious, political, or entertainment rhetoric. This ritualistic and unconscious nature of the apocalyptic experience suspends the conscious and deliberative ability of the American public

towards environmental issues. It interpellates them by stabbing at their softest spot—the fear and thrill towards Armageddon that is engrained in this country’s historical and religious tradition.

Another frequently used metaphor for the ecological apocalypse is the Titanic—the gigantic boat that sank in 1912 that has dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> century western apocalyptic imagination in numerous poems, books, and movie adaptations (see Bergfelder and Street 2004). This ad “We are all together,” sponsored by WWF, evokes this monumental icon to warn the audience about the impending ecological disaster. It presents an enormous boat that has been destroyed beyond recognition. Its surface is jam-packed



Figure 3 "Sinking Boat" Ad for WWF

Caption: “We are all together. Do your bit.”

Source: <http://www.advertolog.com/wwf/print-outdoor/we-are-all-together-190435/>



with skyscrapers, smokestacks, space shuttles, oil refineries, cooling towers, coal-burning plants, etc. The boat serves as a metaphor for the Earth, a place of human vanity and contrivance that is predestined to sink to the bottom of the ocean. The narrative of this ad, together with the highly contrived 3D computer graphic technology, reminds one of the popular Hollywood movie *Titanic* (1997) by James Cameron—a movie that ironically uses the sublime visual technology to mock the doomed fate of the technological sublime.

If we zoom in further to the ad, more details become visible: the boat is composed of different segments which correspond to the major industrial countries culpable of environmental destruction: the left section represents the Western developed countries (we see the Empire State Building and Eiffel Tower), the middle section stands for China (the Great Wall), and the right section stands for the Middle East (the pyramids and oil drilling platforms). Each country is participating in polluting the global environment—through either burning coal, launching rockets, or dumping polluted water into the ocean. Highly reminiscent of Buckminster Fuller’s notion of the “Spaceship Earth,” this ad projects a rearranged geopolitical map onto this symbolic earth and vividly demonstrates how all countries are environmental “criminals” and should share responsibility in taking actions. These countries, now shown in a miniature version, evoke an inverted sublime, which allows the subject to exchange position with the object and experience the same effects of the sublime. The title reads: “We are all

together, do your bit.” This line reminds us of another Hollywood disaster movie *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) whose poster asks the viewer: “Where will you be?” By directly addressing to “you,” it makes the viewers locate themselves on this boat and personally identify with the fate of the boat.

Extreme depictions of disasters, argued by many critics of apocalyptic rhetoric, might lead to fatalism in the audience. Shabecoff (1996) argues that environmental apocalypse often generates the so-called “Chicken Little syndrome” in the audience. Ereaut and Segnit (2006) accuse environmental alarmists of presenting problems of incommensurable size with possible solutions, making the audience think “the problem is just too big for us to take on.” But this is if the audience takes the represented disasters as real predictions of their destiny. Ereaut and Segnit point to a larger problem—that the frequent cinematic references might make environmental rhetoric indistinguishable from Hollywood films and be interpreted as fiction rather than reality:

Its sensationalism and connection with the unreality of Hollywood films also distances people from the issue. In this awesome form, alarmism might even become secretly thrilling – effectively a form of ‘climate porn’. It also positions climate change as yet another apocalyptic construction that is perhaps a figment of our cultural imaginations, further undermining its ability to help bring about action. (7)

The phrase “climate porn,” coined by Ereaut and Segnit, expresses the sexual nature of the excessive enjoyment one derives from watching images of disasters. As pointed out in Chapter two, the kernel of our desire is

fundamentally violent and monstrous and it feeds on the waste or destruction of Nature. However, this enjoyment can only be maintained when the subject is kept a safe distance from its horrifying kernel by a symbolically constructed fantasy (such as the fictional form of Hollywood disaster movies). Once the protective shield is gone, the subject is forced to confront the real—the utterly unimaginable, deep abyss of uncertainty—that engenders mass anxiety in the society.

According to Lacan, anxiety creates unrest and stimulates change in the sociopolitical order. This was indeed the case when the rhetoric of environmental apocalypse first emerged in the American society during the 1960s and stirred up a vibrant social movement. After its reemergence in the 1990s, however, the apocalyptic narrative tends to be reframed in the form of fiction (as with Hollywood disaster movies which sensationalize disasters) or the form of political debates (with “skeptics” and “supporters,” see Banning 2009) so that the public needs not confront the impending disaster as real (in a Lacanian sense). Adopting the visual styles of Hollywood movies, some environmental NGOs’ ads also are prone to be interpreted as an alarmist fantasy or a “hysterical cry” out of their political discontent (a similar effect is noted by Killingworth and Palmer in the phrase “environmental hysteria”). When taken as mere fiction or a partisan statement, apocalyptic rhetoric fails to evoke public action but instead represses anxiety deep into the cultural unconscious.

The apocalyptic rhetoric used in American environmentalism has a direct correlation with the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. Religion constructs a type of subjectivity that has dominated Western societies long after their secularization. By religion, I do not mean a universal experience when one encounters the limit of knowledge and undergoes, as Freud calls it, an “oceanic feeling.” More than a sublime experience that makes one turn to God, religion is a set of discursive practices that wield ideological control over the actions and thoughts of the population and, in this case, their imagination of the future of the world.

The Judeo-Christian Bible is rife with apocalyptic references and they become the rich repertoire of environmental rhetoric. This ad by Greenpeace



Figure 4 "Ocean Defenders" Ad for Greenpeace

Caption: “A life raft for 6.6 billion people. Come on board.”

Source: [http://adsoftheworld.com/media/print/greenpeace\\_ocean\\_defenders\\_2](http://adsoftheworld.com/media/print/greenpeace_ocean_defenders_2)

evokes the tale of Noah's ark, a narrative about the end of the world, salvation, and the chosen people which all contribute to an apocalyptic subjectivity. The image portrays a post-apocalyptic world when the earth has entered the third ice age and the ocean is mostly frozen. A boat (this one is not cursed, but blessed) is sailing alone in the midst of the boundless, ice-covered ocean. The title reads: "A life raft for 6.6 billion people. Come on board: [www.ocean.greenpeace.org](http://www.ocean.greenpeace.org)." The contrast between the vast ocean and the small rescue boat evokes a profound solitude as it assumes everyone else in the world is dead and only the passengers on the boat have survived. In the biblical tale of Noah's ark, God has made up his mind to destroy the Earth because humans are violent, wicked and have corrupted the Earth. Due to his faith and righteousness, however, Noah is chosen by God to survive from the catastrophe and God also gives the order to save a few others. Here Greenpeace places itself in the position of Noah—the faithful and righteous prophet—who can save the rest of us from the impending environmental apocalypse. But similar to the religious narrative, the ad contains an implicit threat as it asks an underlying question: "Do you want to be on this boat? Or, do you want to end up in the frozen ocean?" In other words, if you're not with us, then you're dead.

"One versus 6.6 billion" indicates the extreme exclusivity of boat, producing for its passengers a fortunate feeling of being "chosen." The idea of the "chosen people" is a signature feature of many religious traditions, from

Judaism, Christianity to Islam, and it has always been closely articulated with American nationalism. Sometimes connected with ethnocentrism, the notion is often used to assert one group's arbitrary superiority over others because of some higher will. In this case, Greenpeace and its followers are evidently the "chosen" ones. But chosen by whom? Certainly not by God as a religious character, for environmentalism is largely a secular movement. In the secular world, though God has disappeared as a concrete, sacred figure, He still remains as an empty point of gaze judging people's thoughts and actions. In secular environmental discourse, this empty position is usually occupied by Nature, a gestalt of ecological principles that assumedly rewards the environmentally-friendly and punishes the environmentally-hostile. In a sense, religion is still dominating the cultural unconscious of the secular society. Back to the previous point, the lucky feeling of being "chosen" is, to a large extent, dependent on knowing that there are others who are "not chosen." This ties us to a tricky religious paradox that: God loves everyone, but he saves only a few. And who are the final few? No one really knows. Since there is always uncertainty in God's desire, this uncertainty functions as a constant source of anxiety for the religious and continues to motivate their loyalty. Likewise, the ultimate fickleness and unpredictability of Nature drive the environmentally conscious ones to constantly examine their actions according to what the environmentalists "preach" to be the way to redemption. According to psychoanalysis, this relentless self-censorship from

the position of the Other fits the description of neurosis. What the neurotic subject tries by all means to avoid is to come face to face with the ultimately unknown desire of the Other—the object-cause of his desire—so he tries all means to avoid it by incessantly doing things that they assumed to be desired by the Other.

### Corporate Green Advertising as Environmental

#### Utopia

While apocalyptic rhetoric presents a catastrophic vision of the earth, corporate green advertising, however, constructs a hopeful and exciting vision of a utopian society in which everything exists in ecological harmony. This utopian discourse is an important component of what Buell (2003) describes as the “culture of hyperexuberance” and is also symptomatic of the green consumerism phenomenon emerging in American society. According to Roper’s Green Gauge poll, consumer “procotting”—buying products from companies perceived as having good environmental track records—has become a key way through which many Americans express their concern for the environment. Many scholars (Luke 1997, Smith 1998, Monbiot 2002) have criticized green consumerism for hijacking the effects of radical environmentalism and channeling public energies into apolitical, consumptive activities rather than militant political actions. How exactly does this hijacking take place? How are these utopian visions related to the apocalyptic visions, both symbolically and affectively? How do they address

the pervasive anxiety of the American public and what kind of a psychic function do they perform? These questions may be answered through a close examination of the visual and verbal strategies used in these ads.

According to Cox (2006), corporate green advertising can be divided into three categories according to the different functions they perform: 1) product promotion 2) image enhancement and 3) image repair. Product-promotion ads use environmental claims and eco-labels to add a symbolic edge to products that are otherwise similar in quality. Image-enhancing and image-repair ads attempt to change the overall public perception of a brand or a company, because a positive public image can provide a general platform to sell various products. Here I will focus on the second and third categories of green advertising because they do not have an immediate goal to sell any particular products and are more representative of the cultural ideologies I seek to analyze.

I will begin by analyzing General Electric's "Ecomagination" campaign. As a "company long known for dumping chemicals" (*Time* 2009), GE launched their "ecomagination" campaign in 2005 to promote their energy-efficient technology products and construct the corporation's public image as socially responsible. This campaign became highly successful: GE reaped \$17 billion in revenue in 2008 and its "clean" locomotive production, wind turbines, and compact light bulbs were all sold out in the same year. The revenue of GE's environmental technology units are growing faster than GE's total revenues.



The success of this campaign serves as a powerful proof of how its rhetoric chimes with the general cultural desires pervading American society.

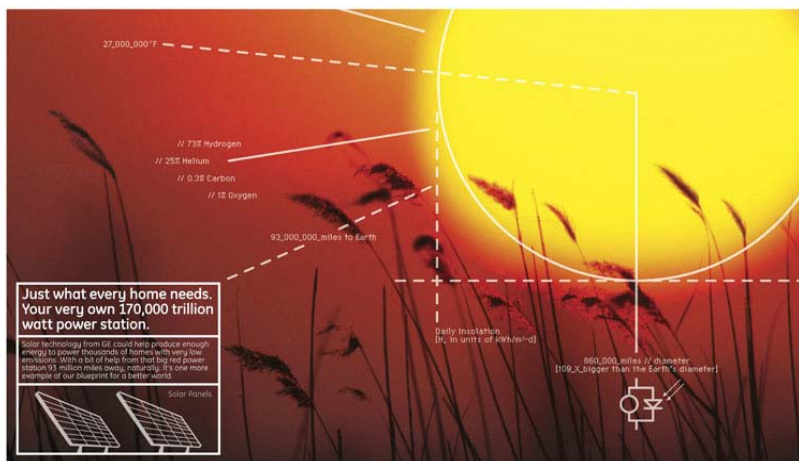
First of all, the slogan of the campaign is intriguing. It welds together the chic term “eco” and the word “imagination”—one of those “i-” words (“imagination,” “innovation,” “invention,” or “ideas”) that regularly appear in environmental corporate rhetoric—but ironically loses the “i.”<sup>15</sup> The “[i]magination without the ‘i’” provides an overall interpretive framework for the rhetoric of this campaign and (inadvertently) provides a postmodern critique of the ideology of “imagination.” “Imagination” has long been subjected to critical examination in western intellectual history. While the meaning of the word varies, the bottom line is, summarized by Joshua Gunn (2003), that it is something that is *not* real: it departs from reality in favor of human creative thought (41). Gunn evokes Richard Kearney’s (1998) work on imagination and outlines three paradigms in the shifting meaning of the word: 1) the Aristotelian stage when imagination (*phantasia*) is considered as “mimetic” of the world; 2) the modern stage when it refers to the “productive” or “creative” ability of the human mind; 3) the postmodern stage when it is considered as “parodic” and “fragmented” as it is a result of socialization and enculturation. While the second stage (the modern stage) assumes an autonomous, humanist subject who has a full range of agency to invent and create, the third stage (the postmodern stage) is marked by the deconstruction of the humanist subject and the gradual dissolution of

imagination into the concept of imaginary. Slightly differing from the word imagination, the imaginary is a “complex concept informed by insights from sociology, psychoanalysis and Althusserian Marxism” and refers to “a social field of deceptions [...] any conception that connotes completion, perfection, or symmetry” and is “always already structured by the symbolic (or linguistic) order” (43).

In GE’s “ecomagination” campaign slogan, the word “[i]magination” is intended to be interpreted in the modernist meaning of this word, as creation or invention. “Ecomagination” refers to the innovative capacity of modern technology that can help solve our current environmental crises (from pollution to energy to resource shortages). While it is easy to interpret the literal meaning of this slogan, I will problematize it by raising two questions. First, why is the ideology of “imagination” so passionately embraced in American culture? Americans admire ideas like “imagination,” “innovation,” and “creativity.” This probably in part owes to the country’s expansionist history which valorizes adventures into the unknown and the rebellious spirit that breaks routines and breaches conventions. Americans love the idea of “change,” simply as an alternative to reality or status quo—Obama’s campaign says “change;” academic publications always discuss the ways to create “social change;” but there are no specifications added as to whether it is to change for the better or for the worse. (In Chinese culture “change” is never so positive a word.) Americans also highly value the importance of

thought and regard it as significant as action: As long as you can think of it/imagine it, it can be done.

The second question I ask is: How is the scientific/technological “imagination” portrayed in this ad and how does it differ from the “fantasy” or “illusion” which advertising is notably recognized to be? Many cultural critics have pointed out the fantastic, illusory nature of advertising. Named the “magic system” by Raymond Williams, the ad industry is notoriously known to manufacture unrealistic promises which are instantly debunked in examples like buyer’s remorse. Having grown immune to this critique, however, modern advertisements sometimes openly acknowledge their illusory nature and purposefully exaggerate their diversion from reality. Williams observes in the British culture during the 1940s-1950s “the development of a knowing, sophisticated, humorous advertising, which acknowledged the skepticism and made claims either casual and offhand or so ludicrously exaggerated as to include the critical response” (186). So the question is, how does GE’s discourse of “eco-magination” situate itself between the extreme claims of ludicrous fantasy and the solemn promises of reality? How does it represent the imagination of a scientific community as a “realistic” vision about the future, instead of the whimsical thoughts of a few daydreamers? (Imagine if they call it “ecofantasy,” their credibility will be seriously reduced. But by calling it “ecomagination,” the campaign indulges the consumers in the pleasure of fantasizing, while pretending to be an



ecomagination.com

Figure 5 "Solar Power" Ad for GE

Slogan: "Imagination at work."

Copy: "Just what every home needs. Your very own 170,000 trillion watt power station. Solar technology from GE could help produce enough energy to power thousands of homes with very low emissions. With a bit of help from that big red power station 93 million miles away, naturally it is one more example of our blueprint for a better world."

Source: <http://ge.ecomagination.com/news-media/advertising-and-images.html#/print-advertising>

"objective" representation of the corporation's imagination.) How does it address the desires of the American public who have already been interpellated by the apocalyptic rhetoric?

With these questions in mind, I will analyze two "ecomagination" ads, both of which remotely address the discourse of global warming which has stirred up mass anxiety in the American society. One ad portrays the sun—which could become scorching hot and burn us—and the other is of the ocean, which could rise and flood all the coastal cities. The interesting thing is,

although these ads actually sell energy-saving technology to help solve the energy crisis, they also address the public unconsciously about another worrisome crisis of global warming. In popular culture the line between one environmental issue and another (e.g. energy crisis, global warming, air and water pollution, deforestation, loss of biodiversity etc.) is very blurry. Most issues tend to be lumped under one category “environmental crises” and are portrayed through the same type of alarmist/apocalyptic or pacifist/utopian strategy. This provides the possibility for me to analyze the economy of desire that underlie the general system of popular environmentalism.

This first ad “Solar Power” features a close-up shot of a beautiful sunset (or sunrise). Instead of being glaringly bright or scorching hot (which will remind one of the fearful sunbeams that contribute to global warming), the sun seems very mild and temperate. In the foreground, a few wild grasses waver gently in the breeze, signifying a harmonious relationship between the sun and the life on Earth. If one looks closer, one realizes that the size of the sun is significantly larger than what it can be observed from anywhere on the earth. This visual cue suggests that this image is not a view of the human eye, but of a high-power camera or telescope. A set of straight and circular lines are drawn on and around the sun; they point towards the mathematical formulas surrounding the sun which measure its size, diameter, chemical composition, distance from the earth, and so on. These thin white lines constitute the appearance of an industrial blueprint—a type of technical

drawing frequently used in modern architecture or engineering. Invented in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, blueprint was a photographic process that prints white lines on a blue background to document a particular design. <sup>16</sup> Now this term usually refers to any detailed outlines or plans for action. This ad is not literally “blue,” but it preserves the white lines. These lines imply a sense of incompleteness, inviting the audience to fill up the empty space between them with the natural imagery in the background. At the bottom-left corner of the image sits the copy and beneath the copy one sees a sketch of two solar panels. Drawn with the same white lines—to cohere with the overall theme of a “blueprint”—these solar panels face the direction of the sun, ready to absorb the sunlight and harness its mighty power.

A simple semiotic reading would argue that this ad tries to construct a utilitarian fantasy of technology putting natural resources to use. These white lines represent the scientific gaze which “cuts up” nature and frames it as a supply for human use. The sun is presented as a tamed object of consumption, capable of providing “what every home needs.” It is also turned into a privatized commodity, becoming “your very own... power station.” Corbett’s (2002) critique of green advertising illustrates exactly this point: “Advertising commodifies the natural world and attaches material value to non-material goods, treating natural resources as private and ownable, not public and intrinsic” (146).

But the fantasy of technology here is structured a little differently than the usual fashion. It does not contain any larger-than-life portrayal of technological artifacts (as technology usually is represented in modern Chinese propaganda posters through popular icons such as rockets, planes, smokestacks, or electric power lines). Instead, it uses the form of a “blueprint” to dematerialize technology, reducing it to a mere gaze, a technical, utilitarian way through which the corporation views Nature. Although the ad claims to sell solar panels, it shows no actual pictures of them, but an abstract sketch. This strategy, together with the overall campaign theme of “ecomagination,” can be read as a corporate defense against the environmentalist critique of technology (e.g. the previous Greenpeace ad of the nuclear tree). How can technology cause harm if it is nothing but a blueprint (or pure imagination) that has no material consequences? Hegemonic in nature, this ad shows a seemingly harmonious fusion between technology and nature and tries to reconcile two opposing discourses. Although the traditional eulogy of technology seems to have made a concession and ceded its concrete form, it now presents itself as a lack and invites the audience to fill up the empty space with their own imagination. As Salecl (1994) points out, this is a strategy of *symbolic identification* instead of *imaginary identification* and in fact wields a more resilient type of power (139).

There is more to be said about the gaze upon nature. So far in this analysis I have used the term “gaze” in a sense commonly used in feminist film studies (or in the Sartrian/Foucauldian sense): it is a gaze placed in front of the picture, guiding the spectator to look at the image from a specific way. In this sense, this ad contains the corporate gaze and the consumers are called on to identify with the corporation’s technical, utilitarian way of viewing nature. Our analysis, nevertheless, can go further by questioning why this identification takes place and what kind of psychic economy conditions the subject to identify with the corporate view. Lacan’s reconceptualization of the gaze can help us do that.

The Lacanian gaze, emphasized by Copjec (2004), is located not in front, but behind the image: It is a hole in the image that gazes back at the subject and makes her or him seen. In this ad, the gaze comes from the sun—a big bright burning light ball that one avoids staring at. The sun is the perfect illustration of the Lacanian concepts of the Real, the gaze, or the object-cause of desire.<sup>17</sup> No one can directly look at the sun, because it can blind us. But it always stares back at us, like a gigantic eye in the sky, making us seen and being able to see everything else. In this ad, the audience gains a glance of the sun itself, a near encounter with the Real, which evokes an experience of the sublime. The rhetorical power of the sublime has long been appropriated by environmentalism. DeLuca and Demo (2000) point out that wilderness is the sublime object of preservation discourse; in the same



vein, the sun functions as the sublime object of the global warming discourse:<sup>18</sup> It is the source of immense heating power that threatens to warm up the Earth, melt the icebergs, and drown those living on Earth. Although in this ad these lethal sunbeams are already subdued and tamed, they still grip the audience unconsciously through a repressed fear, like the elongated skull in Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* (Lacan 1977a, 89), that drives the subject to seek shelter in the fantasy of technical rationality. These simple white lines in GE's ad contain a promise to harness the horrifying sun and turn it into an endless reservoir of energy. (It turns a natural sublime into a technology sublime.) Moreover, the ad claims that the harnessed solar energy will be "*just* what every home needs," no more and no less. The "just right amount" speaks in a compensatory way about the impossibility to moderate the *jouissance* (enjoyment) that encircles the sublime object of this fantasy. Lacan mentions that the object (in this case, the sun) produces a "surplus enjoyment" (*plus-de-jour*) (Fink 1997: 100): it is either too much (as in the case of global warming) or too little (as in the case of energy crisis). The excess and the lack combine to form an economy of desire which drives the subject to endlessly circle around the object and never get satisfied. When Corbett (2002) writes on advertising's utopian representation of nature, she argues that ads "idealize the natural world and present a simplified, distorted picture of nature as sublime, simple, and unproblematic" (150). With the help of psychoanalysis, we see that the

sublime nature portrayed in these ads is by no means simple, much less unproblematic. Despite their simple appearance, these representations of nature are set to evoke a whole spectrum of affects from fear to pleasure, from horror to wonder, most of which are experienced unconsciously.

The second ad “Water” depicts a beautiful day on the sea: the undulating surface of the water sparkles in the sunlight, giving off a feeling of vastness and adventure. The copy is located in a text box on the upper-left corner and underneath it one sees a sketch of the GE product—desalination membrane—whose surface is cut up and folded out to show the interior structure. The sketch draws one’s eyes downwards to another illustration below, which shows the desalination process: the membrane basically filters away the “cations” and “anions” in seawater and only lets H<sub>2</sub>O molecules go through. This illustration is laid on top of the background image of the sea, inviting one to imagine the membrane containing the violent currents so they would not overflow. Two downward-pointing arrows are drawn to gravitate the whole image downwards (if upwards it might conjure up the traumatic imagery of the rising sea levels).

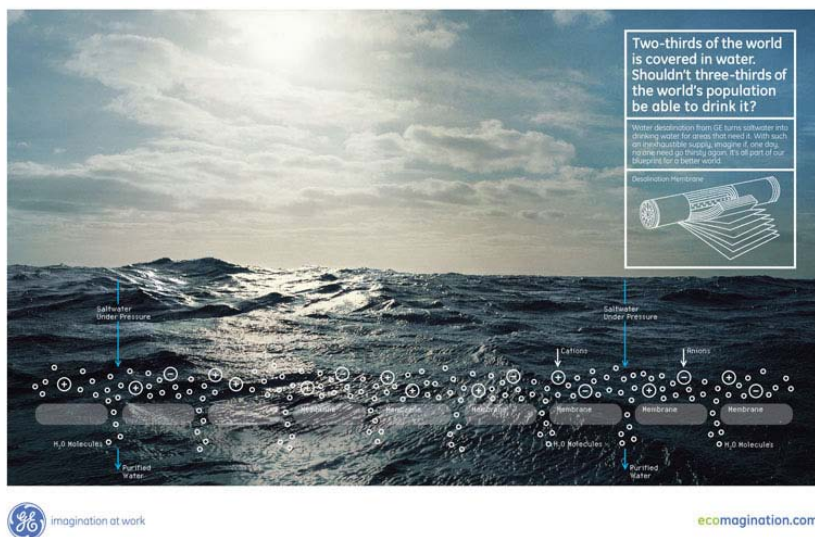


Figure 6 "Water" Ad for GE

Slogan: "Imagination at work."

Caption: "Two thirds of the world is covered in water. Shouldn't three-thirds of the world's population be able to drink it? Water desalination from GE turns saltwater into drinking water for areas that need it. With such an inexhaustible supply, imagine if, one day, no one need go thirsty again. It's all part of our blueprint for a better world."

Source: <http://ge.ecomagination.com/news-media/advertising-and-images.html#/print-advertising>

The sea is another sublime object of the global warming discourse. From the news images documenting the melting of the polar icecaps to Hollywood's apocalyptic movies portraying the deadly hurricanes (e.g. *The Day After Tomorrow*), the American public has been repetitively warned about the dangers of the rising sea levels. The most unpredictable body in nature, the sea curiously draws so many humans to admire its capriciousness and volatility. When we are enjoying the sight of the sea, however, there lies a deep fear in us that it would swell up, overwhelm us, and flood our homes.

To avoid awakening this fear, this ad shows the sea in its most contained and stable state, so one can conceive it as an inexhaustible supply of clean water. This vision of turning the boundless sea into a basin of tamed water is unquestionably utopian. It portrays an idealistic vision of an orderly and harmonious world which does not exist in reality. Although Feller (2004) contends that corporate utopian discourse is not strictly utopian because it does not contain so much social critique as traditional utopian rhetoric does, I believe that both perform the same function as the unrealistic wish-fulfillments for a discontented public. The difference is that while corporate utopia denies its fictionality, traditional critical utopia accentuates or even exaggerates its distance from reality.

This brings us back to the previous question of how GE's "eco-magination" ads situate themselves between the claims of ludicrous fantasy and the solemn promises of reality. In the two ads above, "imagination"—a supposedly unrepresentable human mental function—is represented through the format of a blueprint. A method to copy drawings so they can be distributed to, and followed by a large group people, blueprint suggests the notion of collectivity as well as elitism. It stands for the shared vision of a community instead of the whimsical imagination of an individual. Blueprint as a social imaginary is situated in the middle point between reality and fantasy: on the one hand, it departs from reality by emphasizing the imaginative, creative ability of human thought; on the other hand, it hinges

onto reality by promising action. It implies both “imagination” and “action,” representing a reality that is not yet, but is in the making.

But who is actually doing the work of imagining? The ad suggests that GE’s scientists and product developers are the ones who are imagining—in a modernist sense as the work of creation and invention—and the audience can rest assured that the future will be harmonious and unproblematic. Yet one could also argue that the audience is actually the ones imagining: they have to fill up the empty space between the contour lines with their own utopian imaginary of a perfect nature-technology harmony. This imagination process, from a postmodern standpoint, is highly parodic, fragmented, and lacking in agency: it patches up bits and pieces of preexisting cultural imaginary (from the sublime nature to the sublime technology) into a collage and produces nothing new or original by itself. After losing the “I,” the “decapitated” imagination grows a new “head:” its new prefix of “eco-” brings in a different sets of social imaginary from ecological harmony to economic sustainability. Arguing from a Lacanian view of the imaginary, I argue that something new is produced during the parodic process of making the “eco-magination.” First, images are never just plain, raw images isolated by themselves. As Christian Lundberg (2004) reminds us, the imaginary is always already structured by the symbolic. This means that images are always linked, grouped, or separated from each other by a certain symbolic order. This symbolic order represses some images and accentuates others, producing a particular

psychic economy that regulates the subject's enjoyment, i.e. the *jouissance*. Every time the symbolic order has changed, an excess of enjoyment, *jouissance*, is produced. In this case, these “ecomagination” ads repress the apocalyptic imaginary in favor of the utopian imaginary—this operation allows the audience to distance themselves from the horrifying objects of their desire and continue to derive enjoyment from them within their new eco-fantasy.

GE's “ecomagination” campaign is representative of many corporate utopian ads which are replete with talks about “imagination,” “invention,”



Figure 7 "Common Interest" Ad for Total Chemicals

Source:

<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/gruentransfer/stories/s2538437.htm>

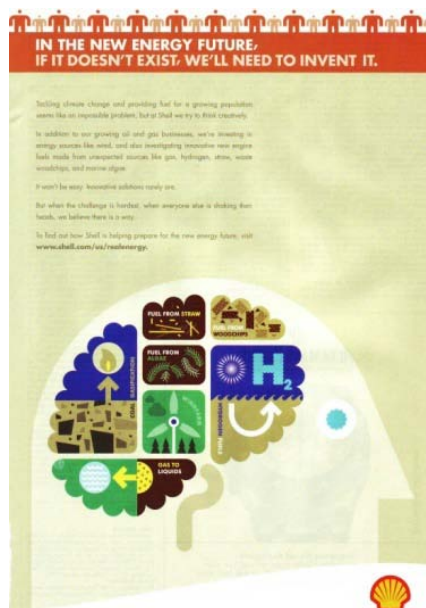


Figure 8 "Prepare for the New Energy Future" Ad for Shell Oil

Source:

<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/gruentransfer/stories/s2538437.htm>

“innovation,” “ideas,” etc. For example, this Shell Oil Company ad features a similar slogan, “In the new energy future, if it doesn’t exist, we’ll need to *invent* it,” coupled with an image of the human brain signifying the idea of creativity. The Total Chemical Resources ad writes “Common interests: *Imagine* if confronting climate changes and solving energy needs were inseparable.” It also features a bifurcated image with a melting iceberg and a metropolitan scene mirroring each other. These images epitomize the psychoanalytic theory of repression and vividly represent the dialectic of desire that circulates between apocalyptic and utopian imageries.

### What Will the Future Think of Us: Lacan’s

#### Future Anterior

Though appearing to be worlds apart, apocalyptic and utopian rhetoric share a significant commonality—both are extreme predictions about the future. The discourse of future has permeated popular environmental discourse. “Future” has become a buzzword in corporate green advertising as if the more frequently a company drops this word the more socially responsible it appears. Why is popular environmentalism so fascinated with the future? What is the function of the idea of future in determining our present actions? How is our fascination with the future symptomatic of the psychopathologies of American corporate capitalism? What kinds of subjectivity does a future-oriented culture have and how does it differ from a

past-oriented culture? I will evoke Lacan's notion of the future anterior to answer these questions.

Americans' obsession with the future can be traced to the modernist ideology of progress and development or the Judeo-Christianity's linear progressive view of history. But the tendency to act in anticipation of the future is not just a culturally, historically specific phenomenon; it is a necessary psychological and temporal process through which the subject is constituted. In Lacan's article "Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty" (1946), he explains this process through the concept of the future anterior. The future anterior, also called the future perfect, refers to a tense in the French language describing an action that "will have been" completed at a future point of time. Bruce Fink (1997) relates this grammatical tense to Freud's notion of "deferred action, retroaction, or ex post facto action:"

a first event ( $E_1$ ) occurs, but does not bear fruit until a second event ( $E_2$ ) occurs. Retroactively,  $E_1$  is constituted, for example as a trauma; in other words, it takes on the significance of a trauma ( $T$ ). It comes to signify something that it in no way signified before; its meaning and efficacy have changed (64).

This is to say that signification always requires two points of time, one in the past/present and one in the future, but the past/present will not take on any meaning until the future takes place. Thus, in a sense, the future has already happened before the past/present. This inversed timeline for signification is what Lacan calls the "logical time:" different from the physical time which



flows in a forward linear fashion, logical time ties a knot in physical time and makes a detour. In the *Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), Žižek writes,

the paradox consists in the fact that this superfluous detour, this supplementary snare of overtaking ourselves ('voyage into the future') and then reversing the time direction ('voyage into the past')... is, rather an internal condition, an internal constituent of the so-called 'objective' process itself: only through this additional detour does the past itself, the 'objective' state of things, become retroactively what it always was. (57)

Due to the retroactive nature of signification, “voyaging into the future and back” becomes a necessary condition of any action and constitutes the ground for subjectivity.

During the 2009 Copenhagen climate meeting, the future anterior has been used as a powerful rhetorical strategy by the radical environmentalists



Figure 9 "Barack Obama" Ad for Greenpeace and Tcktcktk

Slogan: “Copenhagen 2009. Act now – change the future.”

Caption: “I’m sorry. We could have stopped catastrophic climate change... We didn’t.”

Source:

[http://weblog.greenpeace.org/climate/2009/12/world\\_leaders\\_apologise\\_for\\_cl.html](http://weblog.greenpeace.org/climate/2009/12/world_leaders_apologise_for_cl.html)

to try to influence policy makers. As the world leaders arrived at the Copenhagen International Airport, they were greeted by a series of ads from Greenpeace and TckTckTck, which featured older versions of themselves apologizing for their failure to act on climate change (Grandia 2009). For example, this ad portrays an aged Barack Obama in year 2020. The grey-haired American president wears a solemn expression on his face; his eyes stare blankly into nothingness in deep contemplation. His look embodies the gaze of the future, judging and giving meaning to our present actions. Different from other examples of the apocalyptic rhetoric, this ad does not stage a specific catastrophic image of the future. Instead, it abstracts the future into an empty point of gaze—a gaze looking back into history in a remorseful attitude that makes the world leaders reexamine their present actions. At the bottom of the ad, the slogan reads: “Copenhagen 2009: Act now – change the future.” It implies that the catastrophic future is yet hypothetical and changeable in order to avoid giving off a sense of desperation. Since the future is never certain, it functions as the unknown desire of the Other which sets the subject’s desire in motion.



Figure 10 "Baby" Ad for WWF

Slogan: "WWF. For a living planet."

Caption: "Consuming the Earth is consuming our future."

Source: <http://www.stillad.com/wwf-baby-1238.htm>

What will the future think of us? This is a question resonating in a wide variety of environmental ads. Many of them also use children as another embodiment for the gaze of the future. This WWF ad pictures a crying baby crouched on a baking plate, garnished with miscellaneous fruits and a big apple stuffed in his mouth. This image is appalling because it treats a human child as a suckling pig who is ready to be shoved into the oven. The child's eyes are wet with tears, silently crying for help. The title reads: "Consuming the Earth is consuming our future." Children are what Lacan calls, the *objet petit a* of our desire—their desire sets our desire in motion. What most

parents concern about is not just their children's wellbeing but, above all, what their children want from *them*. Thus, nothing can move parents more than a pair of tearful eyes of their children crying for help. Another reason why children are constantly used is because they are the most vulnerable spot of their parents. Easily susceptible to harm, children embody the ultimate uncertainty in the future which provokes a deep anxiety in parents.

The way how corporate green advertising uses children, however, is to achieve rather different goals. This ad comes from American Chemistry



Figure 11 "Blue-eyed Girl" Ad for American Chemistry Council

Slogan: "Essential<sub>2</sub>ahhh!"

Caption: "It is the plastic pipes. The chlorination technology. The things that help make water safe and refreshing. It is American Chemistry."

Source: <http://pattricejones.info/blog/archives/317>

Council's public relations campaign called "essential<sub>2</sub>". This campaign features slogans such as "essential<sub>2</sub>cleanair," "essential<sub>2</sub>life," and "essential<sub>2</sub>economy," in order to inform the public and policy makers about the chemistry industry's contribution to communal health and safety. Titled as "essential<sub>2</sub>ahhh!", this ad pictures an adorable toddler drinking a glass of water. Her eyes are clear and innocent; she is gulping the water unsuspectingly, showing her complete unawareness of whether her water contains pollutants or not. The vulnerability of the girl strikes the vulnerable spot of parents, who always have worries about not being able to protect their children. In seeking escape from these worries, they are motivated to entrust themselves to the American Chemical Council, the supposed guardian of public health and safety, as stated by this ad. Thanks to the ACC, the girl is able to make a satisfying "ahhh!" sound when drinking water and it is all because: "It is the plastic pipes, the chlorination technology, the things that help keep water safe and refreshing. It is American Chemistry." By this logic, any other chemical products of the ACC must also be protective of public health and thus one must freely consume them without any worries.

Both using children as a stand-in for the future, the above two ads try to deliver two opposite messages: one is anti-consumption, and the other is pro-consumption. Yet there seems to be an affective continuity between them. In discussing how advertising creates consumer desires for a product/brand, Stavrakakis (1997) lays out two steps of this process: first, the ad tries to

evoke some existential lack of the consumers and stir up their unconscious anxiety; then, it offers a protective fantasy to cover up this anxiety and connect the product/brand to it. These two steps are taken so that the consumers would metonymically associate the lack for this particular product/brand with their own existential lack, which now suddenly appears to be solvable with just a simple purchase. The previous ad by the environmental NGO WWF accomplishes the first step of this process—it restages the public's unconscious insecurities by metaphorically portraying an apocalyptic future for their children. The second ad by the corporate group AAC does the second step—it appeases the public's anxiety by presenting a utopian future of a healthy and safe living conditions for their children. When we juxtapose the apocalyptic and utopian rhetoric, we see that they both circle around the same question: What will the future think of us? While the former directly confronts the audience with this question, the latter represses this question into the unconscious by positivizing the future into a concrete image that is sure to come. Apocalypse and utopia are dialectically related to each other: they are structured by the same economy of desire that circulate around the same object—whether it is the unpredictable sea, the uncontainable sun, the unsafe child, or the undecided future. This set of dialectic leads to the high intertextuality between these two types of rhetoric: When the apocalypse implicates a utopian vision, the utopia also harbors an apocalypse. The meaning of the dialectic, emphasized by Lacan, is not the

Hegelian idea of the *Aufhebung* (sublation)—which implies an idea of progress—but revolves around “the avatars of a lack” (*Écrits*, 837). In the empty eyes of the future, we are able to see ourselves.

### Conclusion

What is the therapeutic function for this new fantasy of corporate “vision”? As argued above, green corporate image ads rise in response to a large-scale apocalyptic anxiety in consumer society. Future, in the apocalyptic rhetoric of environmentalism, is nothing but a black hole, a horrifying abyss of uncertainty. To appease mass anxiety, green corporate advertising not only tries to make consumers forget the current environmental crises, but also supplies a “prosthetic future” for the consumers—a fantasy with a depth of time built into it.

Moreover, this “prosthetic” future is guaranteed by another fantasy of the omnipotence of science and technology. Corporations position themselves in the locus of scientific knowledge (the “subject supposed to know”), and thus appear as powerful leaders in a time of crisis. According to Žižek, the scientific drive is unrepresentable: it is an uncontrollable real which runs its own course. Therefore, the fantasy of omnipotent science does not really refer to the fact that science is omnipotent but that it is able to make humans omnipotent and fulfill the human will. Yet the gap between human will and the excessive, untraceable course of the scientific drive has to be covered in this fantasy.

Finally, corporate utopian rhetoric also differs from the apocalyptic environmentalist rhetoric in terms of its religious dimension. While apocalyptic rhetoric contains frequent references to the Judeo-Christian tradition (structured by concepts like guilt, redemption, punishment), corporate rhetoric usually resorts to the New Age spiritual movement (featuring concepts like harmony, holism, celebration). Despite the obvious thematic differences between their religious affiliations, I argue that in fact consumer culture's recourse to the New Age movement is still dialectically related with the previous Christian subjectivity, which has been deeply embedded in American culture. In Chapter five, I will tackle this issue and point out how the Christian guilt and redemption still function as the unconscious structure that supports the green consumerist discourse.



CHAPTER IV  
CHINESE VISUAL ENVIRONMENTAL DISCOURSE FROM  
1949 TO PRESENT: FROM MAOIST PROPAGANDA  
POSTERS TO NGO-SPONSORED PUBLIC SERVICE ADS

This chapter situates Chinese green advertising in context of the national trends in industrialization and modernization from 1949 to present. I examine the historical representations of nature and the environment in the country's official environmental discourse to identify the dynamics of desire that underlie these shifting public discourses. I look at Mao's "nature-conquering" propaganda posters in the 1950s-1970s, the state-centered, patriotism-driven "environmental protection" posters in the 1980s-1990s, and environmental NGOs' apocalyptic-flavored public service ads in the 21st century. Through tracing the structures of desire that have motivated Chinese environmentalism in the past sixty years, this study will shed light on the burgeoning green consumerism phenomenon in contemporary Chinese society as well as illuminating China's future relationship with the environment.

I examine propaganda posters and public service ads as the object of my analysis for several reasons. First, they were, and still are, ubiquitous in the Chinese society and function as one of the main ideological apparatuses of the Chinese government. Second, they descend from the same line of visual aesthetic tradition as commercial advertising, providing a type of diachronic

continuity for conducting historical analysis. The kinship between propaganda and advertising is evident. Lasswell (1937) defines propaganda as “the technique of influencing human action by the manipulation of representations.” According to this definition, advertising is certainly a type of propaganda.<sup>19</sup> But before advertising—the commercial form of propaganda—entered China in the late 1980s, political propaganda was the dominant form of social persuasion and mass mobilization. It constituted a unique type of subjectivity in the Chinese public which was partially carried over into contemporary consumer culture. Zhao (2008) writes about the relationship between commercial advertising and political propaganda in modern China:

Advertising is itself a form of propaganda for the market system, and it rivals, if not replaces, political propaganda as the dominant form of mobilization speech and subjectivity making. The appropriation of Maoist political slogans by the advertisement industry, demonstrated vividly by Barme, is perhaps not surprising. Though Maoist political propaganda and current commercial propaganda differ in content, there are similarities in the structure and ideological consequences of both discourses. (85)

Due to the historical continuity between Chinese political propaganda and commercial advertising, I am able to examine the ideological and affective structures of the former in order to understand the types of desire that support the latter. In the following analysis, I use a combination of semiotic, rhetorical, and psychoanalytic methods to analyze the structures of desire that underlie the environmental discourse in China and shape the Chinese

people's relationship with nature. I employ a combination of historical, semiotic, and psychoanalytic methods, the last of which I argue particularly provides a useful account of the relationship between symbolic text, subjectivity, and desire.

Conceptualizing nature as the enemy of socialist development, Maoist propaganda promoted an ideological battle against nature which not only motivated several decades of nationwide environmental destruction, but also restructured the Chinese public's symbolic relationship with nature.<sup>20</sup> Its deep impact on both the physical environment and the cultural psyche had repercussions long after its demise. My analysis shows that Mao's "anti-nature" propaganda was unfortunately effective because its voluntarism offers China, a country frequently inflicted by natural disasters, an empowering fantasy to protect it from its traumatic encounters with "nature."<sup>21</sup> After the death of Mao and the collapse of this fantasy, the public experienced a deep crisis of faith in collective ideals as well as governmental authority. State-centered environmental propaganda during the Reform Era continued to use patriotism—a collective ideal—to promote environmental causes. Failing to articulate with the new rising protective fantasy—individualism and economic prosperity, they obtained little success. Environmental NGO's public service ads use a combination of civic responsibility and apocalyptic appeals to promote environmental causes, but

due to the widespread political cynicism and the lack of the Western apocalyptic tradition, these ads are still slow in harvesting effective results.

### Vicissitudes of Chinese Propaganda Posters

Chinese Propaganda posters are widely studied as a form of political art. They usually “contained political and ideological exhortations to behave and think in a specific way [...] in the form of quotations from the writings of Mao Zedong, slogans formulated by the Party in line with the current policy, or large visual representations of a future Communist Utopia” (Landsberger, 1995, 11-12). Depending on the different scale of circulation, there are two types of propaganda posters: The first type is the “‘low-end use’ visual propaganda” that were “printed in large quantities and sold through the national network of Xinhua (New China) bookshops” (12). Mass produced to be displayed in the intimate sphere of millions of households, these posters facilitate Chinese Communist Party’s (shortened as CCP in the following text) centralization of power on a national scale and the infiltration of political control into traditional family units.<sup>22</sup> These nationally distributed posters became largely extinct after China’s economic reform in the 1990s, as governmental propaganda moved to electronic media such as film, radio, and TV. The second type of propaganda is “designed for use on the huge billboards located along the streets and avenues of China’s urban areas” (11). These posters are locally-produced by residential offices to uphold community morals and build community spirit. They still survived until today.

The main persuasive approach propaganda posters adopt is **role-modeling**, the portrayal of heroic and idealistic figures as behavioral models for the rest of the population to emulate.<sup>23</sup> Landsberger points out that this method of mass control contains legacies from both Confucianism and Leninism. On the one hand, Confucianism assumes that “human nature is essentially good” (*renxing benshan*) and believes that “human beings automatically would be inclined to modify their own behavior when confronted with examples of impeccable moral qualities” (18).<sup>24</sup> Lenin, on the other hand, adopts a Marxist framework and believes that proletarians do not naturally know their class interests and need to be given “the correct interpretation of their immediate and long-range goals” (25). This role-modeling view of communication makes Chinese politics “always look on the bright side of life” by “strongly inclining towards concentrating on positive examples rather than on problem areas or lagging sectors” (Pye 1986, 226).

Maoist propaganda posters thrived over four decades, from the 1930s to 1970s, bearing witness to key historical events from the Civil wars, Anti-Japanese war, establishment of People’s Republic of China (shortened as PRC for the rest of the chapter), Korean War, Anti-Rightist Movement, Great Leap Forward, and Cultural Revolution. These posters mainly adopted the folk, aesthetic techniques of Chinese New Year Prints. These prints usually feature traditional mythological figures (such as the “Door God,” “Kitchen God,” or “God of Longevity”) and are to be glued all over the walls in rural

households<sup>25</sup> during the New Year festival to express “wishes for happiness and good luck” (Landsberger 22). Maoist propaganda posters replaced these mythological figures with Mao’s portraits or other heroic figures. After China entered the Four Modernization Era in 1978, the topics, contents, and aesthetic styles of propaganda posters experienced a dramatic change. But this role-modeling view of communication—automatically assuming human desires as mimetic and emulative—continued to support Chinese official propaganda throughout the reform era and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### Mao’s Anti-Nature Propaganda

According to Shapiro (2001), the nationwide environmental destruction during the Maoist times was not committed unintentionally due to the lack of knowledge about natural laws. Instead, it was deliberately planned to rebel against the traditional Chinese discourses of “nature” and to violate the environmental knowledge accumulated from thousands years of agricultural and civil engineering practices. As a country historically plagued by numerous natural disasters, China was no stranger to floods, draught, earthquakes, or forest/grassland fires.<sup>26</sup> The deadliest of these disasters were the floods: the central China floods of 1931 killed 2 to 4 million people and the 1887 Yellow River flood reached a death toll from 0.9 to 2 million. To rationalize their traumatic encounters with nature, the Chinese developed a variety of philosophical thoughts suggesting a proper relationship between human and nature. Shapiro outlines three main schools of thought:

a Daoist tradition that tended toward accommodation to nature's way, a Buddhist tradition of reverence for all living beings, and a Confucian tradition that actively sought to manage, utilize, and control nature. [...] Of the three, the anthropocentric Confucian tradition, which leans toward mastery of nature, has been by far the dominant one. (7)

Shapiro holds that Mao's campaigns of socialist construction showed heavy influence from the third type—Confucian thought—which proposed to manage, utilize, and control nature.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the Confucian legacy, Mao's thought was also marked by a Marxist conflict-centered worldview. For Mao, this conflict not only existed in class relations but also applied to the relationship between human and nature. During his youth, Mao wrote in his diary: "To struggle against the heavens (*tian*) is endless joy, to struggle against the earth (*di*) is endless joy, to struggle against people (*ren*) is endless joy" (Shapiro, 9). After the establishment of the PRC, CCP's "external" enemies such as the Japanese and Western imperialists or the Kuomintang party were temporarily conquered. Thus, Mao's war-oriented mindset propelled him to wage battles against "interior" enemies such as the counterrevolutionaries, rightists, and most importantly, "nature" (*tian*), one of the most fearful objects to the Chinese people.

In Mao's plenary address at CCP's 8<sup>th</sup> National Congress in 1956, he gave pep talks to the nation's socialist construction campaign by quoting an ancient Chinese proverb "Man must conquer Nature (*Ren ding sheng tian*)" to wage a war against Nature. This saying immediately became a national

slogan and was frequently quoted in official newspapers, small group meetings, and on propaganda posters. Given the low literacy rate of the country's population, the pithy nature of the slogan made it a particularly efficient medium to disseminate ideas and its aural nature allowed for easy play upon polysemy and homonyms (both are common linguistic phenomena in the Chinese language). At a glance, a slogan “war against Nature” seems illogical, because one cannot wage a war against an inanimate object or status.<sup>28</sup> According to Salecl (1994), wars are inter-subjective games with the goal of defeating another subject's will to resist; thus, to wage a war against something, one must first subjectify it. In Mao's case, such subjectification is made possible through the polysemy of the Chinese character *tian* (nature).

*Tian*, whose meaning is as rich as the English word “nature,” is not a complete equivalent to it. While this character literally refers to the “**sky**,” it has three other connoted meanings in the Confucian tradition: first, a personified highest sovereign—**God** or **Emperor**; second, a supernatural power that is the source of spiritual being but is not necessarily personified—used interchangeably with **Fate**; third, what we now call a materialist, objectivist **nature** that is independent from the spiritual world (Zhao and Guo, 1988). The polysemy of this character provides mental shortcuts for meanings and affects to be transferred from one to another—as Lacan says, desire is always structured through rhetorical techniques such as metaphor and metonymy.<sup>29</sup> In this case, the double meaning of *tian* (both the highest



dominating power and the materialistic nature) allows Mao to transfer the country's historical antagonism toward feudalist emperors or imperialist rulers to "nature"—which functions as a metaphor for the former and, thus, becomes the object of violence. The character *tian* functions as what Lacan calls *point de capiton*, or nodal point—an overdetermined word which has multiple meanings condensed behind it and which sutures together several libidinally invested pre-ideological elements. Suturing together historical class aggression with the nation's fear towards nature, *tian* achieves and overdetermination of affects and makes Mao's anti-nature propaganda highly successful.

As mentioned above, Maoist propaganda techniques heavily drew upon the communication scheme of role-modeling, a technique evidently used in, for example, a 1960s nationwide agricultural campaign called "In Agriculture, Learn from Dazhai" (*Nongye xue dazhai*). This campaign, which eventually led to severe ecological disasters in China, called on the whole nation to apply the terraforming methods of Dazhai, a model agricultural production brigade, to transform all mountainous lands—despite the differences in agricultural terrains and climates—into the same terraced fields.<sup>30</sup> The visual power of propaganda posters was heavily enlisted to mobilize this campaign, which is exemplified by the following two posters.

Entitled “Not depending on the sky (*bu kao tian*)” and produced during the Cultural Revolution in the early 1970s, this poster portrays a lush, neatly organized terrace field. A long irrigation duct draws water from the foot of the hill to the top, cutting across the image from the lower-left to the upper-right corner. A closer look reveals that this eye-catching irrigation channel connects two red-roof houses located on the foot and the top of the hill respectively. The lower house has the slogan “Man must conquer Nature”

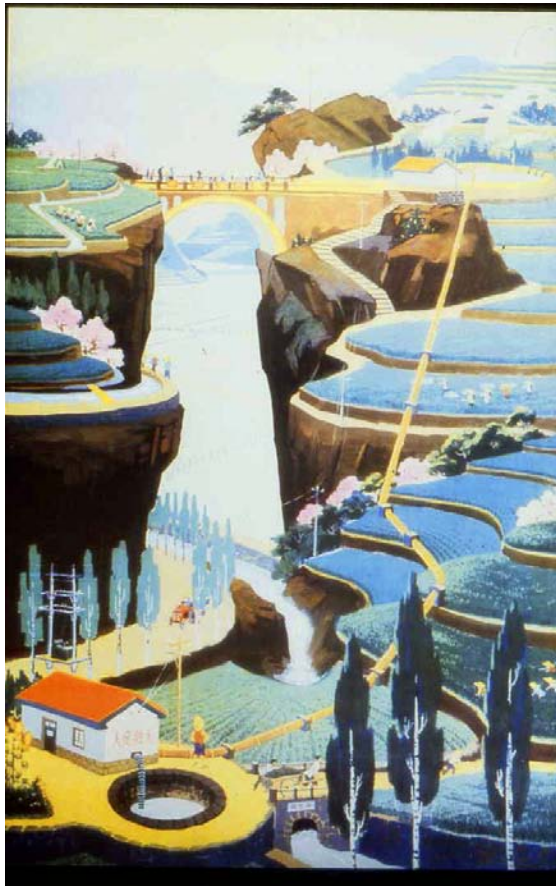


Figure 12 "Not Depending on the Sky" Propaganda Poster, 1972

Source: [http://www.china-posters.org/gallery/main.php?g2\\_itemId=89](http://www.china-posters.org/gallery/main.php?g2_itemId=89)

written on its wall. Next to the house stands a man with a straw hat with his back turned to the viewer, looking up. This man, whose face is blocked from view, becomes the abstraction of the “Man” in the slogan—the “Man” who conquers Nature. We are invited to identify with this man’s gaze upwards toward another house whose own slogan reads “Long Live Chairman Mao.” The intention of the author is obvious: “Chairman Mao” literally supplants the “sky” or Nature and becomes the utmost authority of one’s actions. The title of the poster, “Not depending on the sky/Nature” conveys a similar meaning: agricultural development does not depend on natural laws but on the leadership of Mao. In other words, Mao’s Godlike omnipotence conquers nature.

According to the propagandistic view of communication as role-modeling, the image establishes audience identification by presenting an idealistic agricultural utopia which would supposedly generate the spectator’s desire to emulate. The traditional feminist theory of the gaze, if applied here, would add that the straw-hat man’s gaze invites the spectator to view this rural natural scene in a triumphant and domineering manner. However, the Lacanian gaze, i.e. the cause of the viewer’s desire, according to Copjec (2004), is not the gaze in front of the picture, but the gaze behind the picture that is looking at the viewer; since the viewer cannot pin down the origin and intention of the gaze, he or she is triggered to ask the hysterical question “What do you want from me?” This backward gaze is the

unconscious support for the structure of desire for the whole image. In this picture, this backward gaze does not come from man, but from nature. It can be found in the lower middle section where a small stream of river runs diagonally from the center to the lower-right corner of the image. This tame-looking river—which can otherwise bring horrific and traumatizing floods—functions as the unconscious gaze that registers the fear and uncertainty of the spectator, making her wonder “what do you want from me so you wouldn’t come wreak havoc in my fields?” Luckily, such fear is fended off from consciousness in this image by a protective fantasy of the triumphant human will. If one looks closely, the downward flowing river runs perpendicularly to the long and conspicuous irrigation tract and is visually “crossed out” by the latter. Two water tracts form an “X” shape at their intersection, visually doubling the negation of natural laws by the human will (verbalized in the slogan “Man must conquer Nature”) (Judith Williamson talks about this visual doubling in *Decoding Advertisements*, 1978). Such a layout offers the spectator a sense of security and protected her from her unconscious fear of fickle and unpredictable “nature.”

In another poster, entitled “Move mountains and make new land” (*Yishan zaotian*) (1977), the fantasy of the invincible human will is also unconsciously supported by the gaze of nature. In this image, a gigantic dam, large as to the scale of the sublime, slices the nearby mountain in half (interestingly, this figure of the dam is also related to the taming of



Figure 13 "Move Mountains and Make New Land" Propaganda Poster, 1977

Source: [http://www.china-posters.org/gallery/main.php?g2\\_itemId=684](http://www.china-posters.org/gallery/main.php?g2_itemId=684)

water/floods). At a distance, dozens of tractors are busy plowing an enormous land artificially leveled from a mountainous terrain. On the top of the dam writes the slogan “Foolish old man removes mountains - Reform China” (*Yugong yishan, gaizao zhongguo*). “Foolish old man removes mountains” (*Yugong yishan*) was the title for Mao’s 1945 speech at CCP’s 7<sup>th</sup> National Congress, and was another widely circulated propaganda slogan during the Cultural Revolution. It derives from an ancient Chinese fable about a stubborn farmer, *Yu Gong* (translation: “foolish old man”) who determined to manually dig away two mountains that blocked the entrance to his house. Instead of changing the location of his house, he insisted on enlisting the power of his infinite line of descendants to eventually remove the mountains. This fable spells out the uniqueness of Mao’s voluntarist

philosophy<sup>31</sup>: although one individual is powerless, an infinite number of individuals can overcome the seemingly *impossible* obstacles and fulfill human will. In Mao's original 1945 speech, the "two mountains on top of the Chinese people" were referred to as "imperialism" and "feudalism". However, the anti-nature propaganda campaign abandoned the metaphorical meaning of the "mountain" for its literal meaning and targeted social aggression against the actual mountains in order to "transform" China.

Figure 13, portraying a hectic worksite, perfectly exemplifies the "Yu Gong" type of human-nature relationship: human can triumph over Nature not as individuals, but as a collective. This painting adopts the aesthetic style of Socialist Realism—the dominant style in Soviet Union propaganda since the 1930s and also popular in CCP's propaganda posters since the Civil War (Landsberger 36). It candidly shows the drastic size difference between the humans and the mountains without visually exaggerating the size of the people. This realistic approach glorifies human power through showing, at the center of the image, a conspicuously large incision into the gigantic mountain. The enormous cut contrasts with the puny men in the background and leaves the viewer wondering about how this feat could ever be accomplished. The barren and desolate incision of the mountain functions as, in Lacanian terms, a *stain*—a semiotic or logical incoherency in the image that produces the feeling of discord and makes the viewer see herself as "out of place."<sup>32</sup> It serves as evidence that "the impossible has happened." It

knocks the viewer out of her “old” aesthetic of the natural sublime and astounds her with the power of the “new” industrial sublime.

Interestingly, one main reason for today’s environmental inaction in China is the difficulty in bridging the *impossible* gap between the “powerless” individual and the “powerful” social collective. The public lacks the motivation to participate in the environmental movement because they fail to imagine the accumulative impacts of individual (either destructive or protective) actions on nature. This propaganda poster, nevertheless, uses the mutilated body of “nature”<sup>33</sup> to successfully bridge the chasm between the individual and the collective and establishes the type of collective agency which is urgently needed today.

The 1970s-era propaganda posters also appropriate other icons of industrialization (in addition to dams and terrace fields) to construct the industrial sublime. They include construction sites (e.g. “Battle song of the Huai River;” “More prosperous everyday”), oil refineries (“In industry, learn from Daqing”), tractors (“Learning from experience”), electric power lines and industrial chimneys (“Tall rising-chimneys”).<sup>34</sup> The industrial imagery continues to remain in CCP’s propaganda throughout the Four Modernization Era in the 1980s and the economic reform in the 1990s. These miscellaneous representations of the industrial power can be read, I argue, as a continuation of Mao’s anti-nature socialist campaign that appropriated the traditional Chinese fear and awe towards the sublime nature to enable the

public imagination of the industrial sublime. According to Shapiro, the Chinese's anti-nature attitude, cultivated by Mao's politics, had repercussions long after Mao's death:

The Maoist experience continues to affect contemporary political life through the people's 'crisis of belief' in socialism, their mistrust of Communist Party leadership, and their turn toward materialism, short-term profits, and apparent venality in human relations, all of which encourage rapid and unsustainable exploitation of nature (14).



Figure 14 A Variety of Maoist Propaganda Posters in early and mid 1970s

Left: "The battle song of the Huai River," mid 1970s [http://www.china-posters.org/gallery/main.php?g2\\_itemId=693](http://www.china-posters.org/gallery/main.php?g2_itemId=693)

Upper-middle: "Becoming more prosperous everyday," 1972  
<http://www.iisg.nl/landsberger/vis.html>

Lower-middle: "On the banks of Yangzi River, Daqing blooms," 1975  
<http://chineseposters.net/gallery/e13-411.php>

Right: "Tall rising chimneys change the skyline," 1974  
<http://www.iisg.nl/landsberger/lao.html>



More than a manifest political mission, Mao's anti-nature ideology serves as a symbolic fantasy that regulates the unconscious economy of desire of the Chinese culture during the country's modernization process.

### Early Environmental Propaganda during the

#### Maoist Time

Although the discourse of nature had long existed in Chinese history, the discourse of the environment was relatively new. The word “environment” (*huanjing*) did not start to take on its contemporary ecological implication until the concept of “environmental protection” (*huanjing baohu*) was introduced from abroad in the early 1970s (which I will elaborate in the next section). The literal translation of the word “environment” (*huanjing*) refers to “surrounding conditions” or the “conditions of the surrounding area.” This term is instantaneously anthropocentric as it only concerns what encircles the center of human activity. In CCP's propaganda from the 1950s to the 1970s, “environment” (*huanjing*) was often used together in a phrase with “sanitation” (*weisheng*)—as in “environmental sanitation” (*huanjing weisheng*)—to refer to the conditions of city sanitation and public health. Mainly focusing on the promotion of public cleanness and personal hygiene, CCP's early pro-environmental posters only concerned the welfare of the very immediate human environment and thus were able to coexist “peacefully” with Mao's anti-nature propaganda without ideological conflicts.<sup>35</sup> For at least two more decades, this narrow notion of the “environment” continued to

circulate in governmental pro-environment posters, with themes such as no littering, no spitting, and the elimination of four pests (rats, flies, mosquitoes, and sparrows<sup>36</sup>) which were largely structured around the social imaginary of “cleanness” and the elimination of “waste.”

Early environmental posters during the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1976) usually adopt the appeal of military patriotism—just like many other propaganda posters of the times—to politicize and collectivize the issue of sanitation. In this poster titled “Push the patriotic sanitation movement towards new heights” (*Ba aiguo weisheng yundong tuixiang xin gaochao*) (1973), we see four militant figures standing in heroic postures in front a large red flag, which reads “Get mobilized, care about sanitation, reduce



Figure 15 "Push Patriotic Sanitation Work to New Heights" Propaganda Poster, 1973

Source: <http://www.maopost.com/>

diseases, and improve health levels” (*Dongyuan qilai, jiangjiu weisheng, jianshao jibing, tigao jiankang shuiping*). These four supposed sanitation “role-models” represent different ages, genders and careers to demonstrate that sanitation is a patriotic duty for every member of the socialist country. They include a male worker (implied by his uniform), a female peasant (her straw hat), and a Young Pioneer (a member of the communist mass youth organization symbolized by the red scarf on his neck) who form a triangular shape in the center of the image. This visual stability symbolizes a type of solidarity among these social groups. Their bold poses suggest bravery, as if they were vanguards charging on the battle field who have just heard the trumpets blown. This sense of military urgency is coupled with a smoke-puffing, rapidly moving train on the left side of the image. One can imagine its whistling sound approaching from afar which echoes, through an effect of synesthesia, with the poster’s title “towards new heights” to create a sense of emergency. On the right side, a female sanitation worker wears a spraying kit on her back and is in the middle of spraying pesticides. Her sprayer is pointed up into the air, like a loaded gun, ready to “shoot” all the “enemies” of the battle of sanitation—from cockroaches, mosquitoes, to flies and mice. The train on the left and the sprayer on the right set up a visual symmetry, suggesting that industry and sanitation are not incompatible but instead share the same goal which is to subdue the forces of nature for the sake of socialist development. Using visual icons and aesthetic techniques from



Figure 16 "Do Good Environmental Sanitation Work, and Keep the City Looking Neat and Clean" Propaganda Poster, 1975

Source: <http://www.maopost.com/>

wartime propaganda, this poster tries to invest the society's revolutionary passion in the "patriotic sanitation movement."

As the Cultural Revolution drew to an end, environmental posters started to abandon the collectivistic appeal and adopted a more individual and personalized approach. They no longer depict industrial or militaristic labor scenes with patriotic passion in full swing, but tend to feature close portraits of individual role-models to reflect a more subtle and intimate emotional state. In particular, images of children are used extensively to serve as behavioral models for adults.<sup>37</sup> For example, this poster titled "Improve environmental sanitation, maintain the cleanness of the city" (*Gaohao huanjing weisheng, baochi shirong zhengjie*) (1975) shows two

schoolgirls trying to dissuade some adults from spitting in public. Both girls wear badges that read the “Little Red Guards,” signaling their political allegiance to the government and their adherence to their civic duty. They are smiling innocently; eyes directed upwards, indicating that the guilty party left out of the picture is an adult (or adults). In the background on the right a sepia-colored portrait of a street scene in Shanghai is visible. A sanitation worker is cleaning the street with a street sweeper. The sepia treatment of the image provides a feeling of nostalgia, as if the clean environment is a distant dream of the past.

The use of children—the master symbol of innocence—as the spokesperson of the environment is a distinct rhetorical maneuver. Once children, the adult-viewers are likely to identify their long lost innocence (and other youthful qualities such as patriotic passion, political conviction, or idealistic visions) in these girls and feel melancholic over this loss. Yet the lost cause of melancholia, in a Freudian sense, usually remains unconscious and is often misrecognized as something else in the subject’s consciousness. In this image, the lost purity of the children is mirrored by the lost purity of the environment. This allows the viewers’ melancholia to be converted into a mournful loss for a clean environment. This strategy exemplifies a shifting trend in environmental propaganda in the late 1970s, when personal and introspective appeals became increasingly dominant and sanitation was relegated from a collaborative social project to an individual civic

responsibility. This transformation is symptomatic, to a certain extent, of the gradual change in social affective economy towards the end of the Cultural Revolution. It also foreshadows the rise of individualism in China in the next few decades.

### Environmental Propaganda in the Era of Four

#### Modernizations

As stated before, “environment” in Chinese (*huanjing*) has been understood as a matter of sanitation and hygiene, and it did not start to take on its modern implications until 1972 when the Chinese delegates participated in United Nations’ Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden. Soon after PRC gained admission into the UN in 1971, the ministry of foreign affairs started to prepare for the Human Environment Conference (Wang 2005, 200). Adhering to the Chinese understanding of the “environment,” they naturally turned the task of selecting delegates over to the ministry of public health. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai perceived the conceptual difference between the Chinese and the West and decided to reselect the delegates from the ministries of industry, agriculture, forestry, etc. At the conference, the delegates heard for the first time the English phrase “environmental protection”—a non-sequitur to the Chinese who had only heard “environmental sanitation” (*huanjing weisheng*) before. They struggled to translate the phrase accurately, but due to the lack of a corresponding Chinese term, they decided to call it literally “environment

protection” (*huanjing baohu*). The meaning of this phrase was opaque to most of the Chinese: Since when has the environment become a victim? Who are we protecting it against? Why should we care about the environment at all? These questions were left unanswered throughout the 1970s since the country was in the middle of a political turmoil and environmental issues were far down the priority list of the government’s agenda.

During the Era of Four Modernizations (1978-1989), Deng Xiaoping came into power and adopted the Open Door Policy. Western culture flooded in and challenged the existing political ideology. Forums were cautiously opened up for nationwide discussions about the traumas that the Cultural Revolution had inflicted on the nation. As a result, many people became incredulous towards governmental propaganda and grew cynical towards socialist and collective ideals. This “crisis of faith” prompted a return to the most significant Confucian tradition—the centrality of the family. As mentioned above, Mao’s militaristic propaganda broke down the basic family unit by infiltrating the intimate sphere of households with class ideologies.<sup>38</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, people were forced to “affirm [political] standing” (*jianding lichang*) and “draw clear lines” (*huaqing jiexian*) with their family members who were labeled as class enemies. After the reform, the idea of the “big, socialist family” started to disintegrate and the interests of the “small family” gradually regained priority in social lives.<sup>39</sup>

The cynicism toward collective ideals and the return to the priority of the nuclear family threatened to destabilize the country's highly centralized political system. In order to reestablish the legitimacy to rule, CCP's propaganda tried to rearticulate socialism with new ideologies, such as economic development (through the discourses of prosperity, science and national security) and national pride (by commemorating ancient Chinese history and reviving certain cultural traditions). To quell the growing antagonism and restore social order, propaganda posters no longer contained hyperbolic, grandiose representations of heroes. Instead, they featured "normative illustrations of social order, traffic safety, birth control, and advertising for Chinese and foreign products" (Landsberger 78).

The concern for the environment reemerged during this period as a necessary component of the maintenance of social order. In 1981, CCP launched the Socialist Spiritual Civilization campaign and promoted the slogan "Five stresses and four beauties" (*Wujiang simei*).<sup>40</sup> The four beauties referred to the "beauty of the mind" (*xinlingmei*), "beauty of the language" (*yuyanmei*), "beauty of behavior" (*xingweimei*), and the "beauty of the environment" (*huanjingmei*). "Environmental beauty," listed last, was still defined in the traditional way as the "sanitary condition of individuals, households, working areas and public spaces" (Landsberger 75). However, sanitation was now juxtaposed with an individual's inner spiritual beauty and conceived as an externalization of the latter. This move expanded the



scope of environmentalism from a task of *cleaning* to a matter of *beautifying* (or even *edifying*), which was to become characteristic of the new era (under Mao's rule the pursuit of cosmetic beauty had been condemned as bourgeois spiritual corruption).

Under the framework of beautification, a new theme was added to the Chinese environmental discourse—tree-planting. China's awakening to the ecological values of trees was preceded by a long history of deforestation. Though this history can be dated back to the feudal times, the major damage, according to Shapiro, was done through three waves of deforestation during the modernization period: First, during the Great Leap Forward, forests were cut down to fuel furnaces for the backyard steel campaign.<sup>41</sup> In the Cultural Revolution, the agricultural role-modeling campaign called on farmers to clear-cut mountainsides and hills and to convert them to terraced fields. The third wave of deforestation took place after the rural economic reforms in 1980, as the new household-responsibility system contracted public lands to individual families and allowed them to exploit forest resources uninhibitedly. Deforestation in China created or exacerbated numerous “natural” disasters—from floods, draughts, sand storms, and soil erosion—causing great human and material losses. After Mao's death, tree-planting was put on the government's agenda. In 1979 the Standing Committee of the Fifth People's Congress set up March 12 (the date that Sun Yat-sen passed away) as the Arbor Day calling on the Chinese of all ethnicities to engage in

afforestation. In 1981 People's Congress initiated the national tree-planting campaign, stating that all able-bodied citizens over the age of age 11 were obligated to plant three to five trees every year. <sup>42</sup> Soon after that, propaganda posters on the theme "Greening of China" became pervasive. Many of them capitalized on the aesthetic value of trees to human society, but a few of them began to demonstrate an appreciation—albeit vague—for the ecological value of the trees as well. It was during this historical point that the discourse of "nature" and the discourse of the "environment" started to merge.



Figure 17 "Mobilize Yourself to Plant Trees and Flowers to Beautify Our Environment" Propaganda Poster, 1983

Sources: <http://www.maopost.com/>

The poster entitled “Let us take actions, plant trees and flowers, beautify the environment” (*Dajia dongshou, zhishu zaihua, meihua huanjing*) (1983) features a young woman watering flowers in a balcony. She stands in upright, gazing admiringly at her beautiful flowers while carefully holding a watering can with both hands (reminiscent of the heroic figures in the “role model” posters). The color of her sweater matches the color of the flowers, implying that the beauty of the flowers is a reflection of her beauty. The woman is enclosed in her own balcony, working alone to fulfill her individual civic duty. In the background we see skyscrapers rising out of a forest, with birds flying overhead, implying a harmony between the natural beauty of the woods and the economic prosperity of the city. The title’s call to “beautify the environment” suggests that trees and flowers are planted only for the purpose of decoration. They exist to improve the quality of human life and thus are auxiliary to human existence. But here one can see some difference from the 1970s sanitation campaign: the “environment” now no longer means the sanitary condition of city; instead it refers to an overall aesthetic ambience that concerns both the material and spiritual welfare of human beings. While sanitation is an ultimately deductive concept—focusing on the reduction of dust, litter, or pests—an aesthetic ambience is additive and aims at the edification of the mind and the enhancement of lifestyles. The differences between the early 70s patriotic sanitation movement and the 80s “socialist spiritual civilization” campaign suggest that, the motivations for

environmentalism in China might have started to shift from cathartic revolutionary heroism to a type of bourgeois self-reflexive emotionality.<sup>43</sup>

In “Let us take actions,” we still see vestiges of the traditional socialist realism technique; yet with the influx of Western cultures, new aesthetic approaches started to appear in propaganda posters. Landsberger observes that mixed media technologies, such as computer design programs, were introduced to substitute the brush and the pen. More importantly, the traditional Chinese realistic style of representation, such as the *gongbi* strokes (meticulous brush technique), was replaced by a Westernized, impressionistic, non-representative, and abstract way of visualization (90). An example can be found in the following poster, “Greening the Motherland” (*Lvhua zuguo*) (1982).

In this poster, what first catches the eye is the image of the Great Wall, the master symbol of China, outlined in a leaf shape and sprawling on top of the forest-laden mountains. A fleet of egrets are flying out from the mountaintop. The large “leaf” is placed above the curved rainbow, which resembles a hand. The slogan “Greening the Motherland” is positioned symmetrically to the “hand.” One attuned to the symbolism of this poster can read it like a Freudian dream: let us use good wishes (rainbow) and actions (hand) to support the patriotic (Great Wall) tree-planting (leaf and the lush forests) movement to make our Motherland immortal (egrets). Although patriotism is still the central theme, the aesthetic technique used here differs

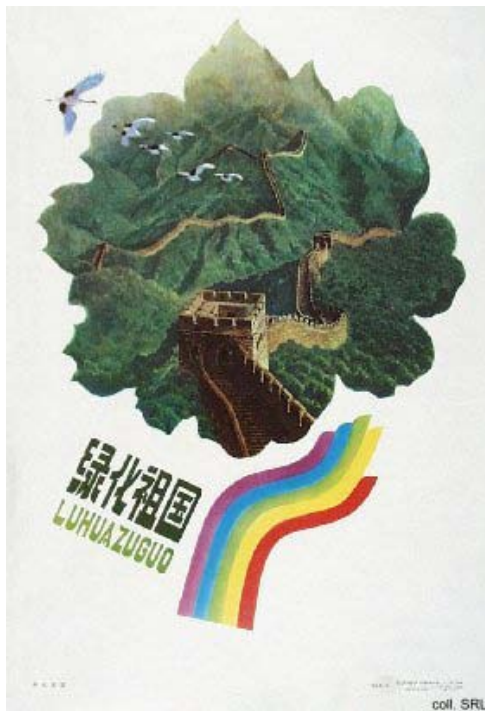


Figure 18 "The Greening of China" Propaganda Poster, 1982

Source: <http://www.iisg.nl/landsberger/hj.html>

largely from the traditional style of role-modeling. It no longer contains concrete human models or explicit behavioral instructions. Rather, it assembles abstract symbols into something like a rebus, which requires active interpretation on the viewers' part. Instead of offering the viewers a specific *demand* to follow, this type of propaganda places them at the open end of the meaning-making process and lets them wonder about the uncertain *desire* of the Other (the country, or the CCP government).

This new aesthetics speaks for a new power dynamic between the government and the citizens in the post-Mao society. When various economical, political, and cultural constraints are lifted up, individuals are

encouraged to pursue their own lifestyles and governmental control appears to retreat. Ideology is no longer as passionately embraced as during Mao's time, but becomes what citizens pay "lip service" to and keep a cynical distance from (Harris 1980, 61). This political cynicism works side by side with the resurgent Confucianism, which not only upholds the importance of the family but also preaches a hierarchical view of the society in which the responsibilities of the ruler and the subject are strictly demarcated. This leads to a loss of affect towards collective ideals, such as patriotism, socialism, and communism. Meanwhile individuals are increasingly preoccupied with their own private economic welfare and are no longer engaged in public or political affairs. Peter Hessler (2008) comments on this neoliberal tendency in China:

The Communist Party's main strategy has been to unleash the energy of the people, at least in the economic sense. In today's China, government is decentralized, and people can freely start businesses, find new jobs, move to new homes. After a century of powerful leaders and political turmoil, Chinese history has become the story of average citizens. But there are risks when a nation depends on the individual dreams of 1.3 billion people rather than a coherent political system with clear rule of law. China faces an environmental crisis... For many Chinese, if a problem doesn't affect them personally, it might as well not exist. (46)

The meeting of Confucian tradition and the government-imposed neoliberal economic policy creates a curious combination of authoritarian rule and consumer capitalism in contemporary China—i.e. authoritarian capitalism—that many Western scholars marvel about (e.g. Gat 2007).

The third poster (1984), “Protect the forest, green the Motherland” adopts a similar abstract, impressionistic aesthetic, but shows some conceptual development in the notion of the environment. On the left side of the image one sees barren, sterile rocks. Next to the rocks, a young woman is holding a baby tree in her palm, staring intently into the air while her long and lustrous hair morphs into vast forests that sprawl across the right side of the poster.<sup>44</sup> The title, placed conspicuously atop the forest, indicates that the motivation for tree-planting is, again, patriotism. This poster sends a message to the viewer: let us plant a tiny tree and wish that our little act of greenness will turn our Motherland from a barren place into lush forests. Just like the previous two examples, this poster does not offer any ecological explanation as to why the Motherland needs to be “greened.” But the word



Figure 19 "Protect Our Forests and Green Our Motherland" Propaganda Poster, 1984

Source: <http://www.maopost.com/>

“protect” does signal some conceptual development that the once-alien notion of “environmental protection” (introduced from abroad in the early 1970s) has gradually seeped into China’s official environmental discourse. “Protect” shows that nature is no longer the enemy of socialist development, but a victim whose welfare is aligned with the welfare of the socialist country. While it is unclear in the poster whom we are protecting nature from, the notion of “protection” hints at the threatened status of the socialist regime by the fragmenting forces in society.

Indeed, the post-Mao society is becoming increasingly heterogeneous, divided by income gaps, generation gaps, and ethnic gaps. As social antagonism and class conflicts rise, the Chinese have become harder to be interpellated by any grandiose, utopian ideology and thus treated as a whole.<sup>45</sup> The society displays tendencies to return to a pre-Communist divisive state—described by Sun Yat-sen as “a plate of scattered sand grains” (*yipan sansha*)—in which the Chinese would never join or unite with each other. This lack of social adhesiveness may owe to the CCP government’s adoption of pragmatism—a traditional feature of Confucianism—in its economic reform policies after renouncing Mao’s idealistic, utopian political program (Pye 1986). During the age of the waning collective ideals, the appeal to patriotism leads to the ultimate feebleness of environmental propaganda: Since nature is not loved in its own right but is merely a stand-in for the country, it goes through the same fate with all collective properties



and is left at the disposal of any individual who seeks to find riches. Framing environmentalism as a patriotic cause in fact works against the goal of environmentalism, leaving it to the oblivion of the Chinese public. Environmental communication urgently calls for new ways of subjective identification.

Official Environmental Propaganda from the 1990s  
to Present

After the 1989 Tiananmen Square incident, political cynicism continued to spread in the society, making the country drift further away from its collectivist ideologies. Landsberger writes that during this period “propaganda posters had lost most of their previous staying power” (14). They gradually disappeared as nationally distributed publications, but still remain as locally produced posters that are displayed in all kinds of communal spaces. Meanwhile, the CCP has

[...] turned to other media, particularly the electronic media of radio and television, to propagate behavioral norms [...] these media were no longer employed as tools of class struggle, but as tools for modernization, symbolically and functionally contributing to the economic and ideological dimensions of reform. (15)

As a topic vital to China’s modernization, environmental protection gradually comes from the periphery to the center of governmental propaganda. In the new-era environmental propaganda, the word “environment” is still occasionally linked with its old connotations—sanitation, beautification, nationalism. But it also starts to take on a new ecological undertone, in which

humans are considered as an organic component of the ecosystem and should strive to return to the primordial ecological harmony. This ecological turn in environmental propaganda was closely associated with the import of the sustainability discourse from the West. According to Wang (2005), the notion of “sustainable development” entered China early in 1987 (164). In 2003 the CCP government proposed the party slogan “Scientific Outlook on Development” that claimed to “put people first and aim at comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable development.” “Sustainable development” is associated with the popular imagination that China can simultaneously maintain its current pace of modernization while curbing its environmental deterioration. In CCP’s propaganda, this discourse of sustainability is also intertwined with the discourse of “harmony”, which entails a broader scope of meanings— from ecological balance to socio-political stability: In 2006 at the annual plenary session of the CCP policymaking Central Committee, Chinese President Hu Jintao emphasized the party’s faith in “Creating a harmonious society”. Yet the official rhetoric of harmony showed less of an ecological concern about nature than an ideological attempt to ease the rising social antagonism that resulted from China’s modernization.

The following four environmental propaganda posters, photographed by the author in 2008 on the streets and subways of Shanghai, are good exemplars of this new ecological turn. The poster on the left is titled “Let nature gain a permanent patch of green” (*Rang ziran duo yipian yonghengde*



Figure 20 A Variety of Environmental Propaganda Ads in the 21st Century

Source: Outdoor posters from the streets of Shanghai, pictures taken by the author in June 2008.

*lv*). Here nature is no longer indicated by the Confucian character “*tian*” but by the Daoist term “*ziran*,” meaning “self so; so of its own; so of itself” (Slingerland 2003, 97). It implies that nature is neither a transcendental sovereign power nor a product of creation, but an independent self-existing entity that forms a totality on its own. This shift from the Confucian to the Daoist tradition not only disassociates “nature” from its previous implications of religious fatalism and class oppression, but also links it to the notion of self-sufficiency and allows one to view nature as a coherent eco-system. The ecological view of nature is reaffirmed by the eye-catching picture of the globe, reminiscent of the photograph of the earth taken by Apollo 8 which gave birth to the Western eco-managerial gaze of nature (as stated in Chapter II). Behind the globe, a clearly-photoshopped image of forests (note

the unrealistic green coloring) shows the influence of western aesthetics and computer graphics technology. Next to the globe lie three pseudo-poetic lines which read like a modern advertising slogan: “Clean nature, approach nature, return to nature (*jiejing ziran, jiejin ziran, huigui ziran*).” “Clean” “approach” and “return” epitomize the three developmental stages in the evolving meaning of the “environment”—sanitation, beautification, and ecological harmony. The juxtaposition of these three distinct meanings suggests that the remnants of traditional environmentalism have never been left behind; they coexist with new discourses and form a hybrid conceptual blend between the old and the new, the East and the West.

The ecological turn is also accompanied by a global turn, which represents environmentalism as a movement extending beyond national boundaries. Many ads at this stage tone down the patriotic or nationalistic appeals and try to demonstrate the global nature of the cause. The four posters, for example, use images of the globe (as in the posters on the left and on the lower-centre) and the bilingual translations of the slogans (as used in the posters on the right and on the lower-center) to show environmentalism as an international enterprise. However, these posters overall apply visual strategies that severely lag behind contemporary Chinese’s aesthetic taste, which have been relatively westernized through the imported cultural products like Hollywood movies and foreign advertisements. This makes one wonder whether these bilingual posters are designed to address the Chinese

public, or to reassure foreigners who find themselves in the Shanghai subway about the environmental awareness of the Chinese. In these posters, one does not see the alarmist visions frequently used in western public service ads, nor do they contain the ecological utopia portrayed by corporate green ads. They often use clichéd and negligible iconic images (e.g. trees, leaves, flowers, oceans, dolphins) to illustrate the words and embellish the poster and nothing more. Compare to these disaffected official environmental posters, environmental NGOs-sponsored ads provide an alternative type of visual rhetoric that appeals to the more up-to-date aesthetic taste of the Chinese public.

#### Environmental NGO-Sponsored Public Service Ads

Starting in the 1990s the CCP loosened its political control and let environmental NGOs appear in civil society. In 1994, Friends of Nature (FON) was registered as the first domestic NGO in China, signaling the beginning of a dramatic transformation in the character of environmental activism in China. By 2008, there were reportedly 3,539 environmental NGOs in china, “including government-sponsored ones, grassroots ones, branches of international organizations as well as school environment societies” (Yao 2008). Environmental NGOs are frequently considered by western scholars as the seeds for the future democratization of China (e.g. Economy 2005). But these organizations clearly operate differently “from the 1989 student protest movement and spiritual organizations like Falun Gong,

which were prepared to defy government restraints and to exert their autonomy from state control” (Tang & Zhan 2005). According to Economy (2005), environmental NGOs do not propose political challenges to CCP’s authority and instead cooperate closely with the government:

China’s State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA) generally works very closely with environmental NGOs. Environmental NGOs agitated for SEPA to be included in the Go West campaign leading group, supported the call for a green Olympics, worked with SEPA on an energy efficiency campaign, and serve as SEPA’s eyes and ears at the local level.

These NGOs perform a crucial role mediating between the state and international organizations, and between local traditions and foreign cultures. The public service ads they sponsor feature both Chinese and Western cultural themes and aesthetic styles, and are attracting more and more media attention. On the one hand, these ads inherit many persuasive strategies from their Chinese governmental propaganda (their ideological and aesthetic predecessor) and enlist the older appeals of patriotism and civil responsibility to support environmental activism. On the other hand, international NGOs such as WWF or Greenpeace, renowned for their radical rhetorical strategies, also try to translate the Western sensationalist, apocalyptic visual styles into China.



Figure 21 WWF Ad

COPY: Classmate Wang Ruihui kept his home air-conditioner temperature at 26°C during the whole summer, saving electricity 155 degrees each year. This equals the reduction of 155 kilograms of CO<sub>2</sub> emission.

(Smaller font:) Start by doing the little things, and you too can become an energy-saving hero. To know more about energy-saving tips or WWF's energy-saving public events, please visit [www.20to20.org](http://www.20to20.org).

Source:

[http://www.redvi.com/Graphic\\_design/post\\_art/1166\\_2.html](http://www.redvi.com/Graphic_design/post_art/1166_2.html)



Figure 22 WWF Ad

COPY: Classmate Cai Wei replaced the three lamps at her home with energy saving bulbs, saving electricity 207 degrees each year. This equals the reduction of 207 kilograms of CO<sub>2</sub> emission.

(Smaller font:) Start by doing the little things, and you too can become an energy-saving hero. To know more about energy-saving tips or WWF's energy-saving public events, please visit [www.20to20.org](http://www.20to20.org).

Source:

[http://www.redvi.com/Graphic\\_design/post\\_art/1166\\_3.html](http://www.redvi.com/Graphic_design/post_art/1166_3.html)

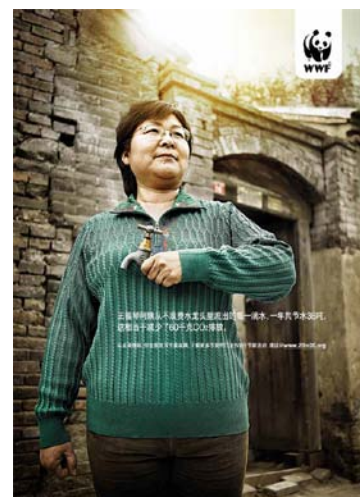


Figure 23 WWF Ad

COPY: Aunt Wang Fuqin never wastes one drop of water from her tap, saving 36 tons of water each year. This equals the reduction of 60 kilograms of CO<sub>2</sub> emission.

(Smaller font:) Start by doing the little things, and you too can become an energy-saving hero. To know more about energy-saving tips or WWF's energy-saving public events, please visit [www.20to20.org](http://www.20to20.org).

Source:

[http://www.redvi.com/Graphic\\_design/post\\_art/1166.html#](http://www.redvi.com/Graphic_design/post_art/1166.html#)

These ads, sponsored by WWF employ the appeal of patriotism commonly seen in Chinese governmental role-modeling propaganda. The first ad portrays a schoolboy solemnly holding an air-conditioner remote to his chest and looking loftily into the air. The boy is chubby, reminding one of the chubby babies found on traditional New Year Prints. He wears a school uniform (student), a red scarf (Young Pioneer) and an arm patch with three strikes (his school rank as class president), suggesting academic excellence and leadership among his group. He stands in front of a *hutong*, a typical Beijing neighborhood alley, which represents Chinese folk culture instead of modern western culture. The copy calls him an “energy-saving hero.” The boy’s heroic gesture parallels that of a revolutionary hero in Maoist propaganda, but instead of holding a gun or a rifle in his hands, he clutches the remote. By replacing the gun with the remote, this ad stages environmentalism as a patriotic battle, just as the early environmental propaganda did in the 1970s. But this battle is no longer to be fought in the public realm, but rather in one’s own home (this alteration attempts to balance the full-on revolutionary patriotism with the family-centered ideology that the post-Mao society is returning to). The next two ads were of similar design: they portray a young schoolgirl and a middle-aged woman holding respectively a compact florescent light bulb and a water faucet to their chests. Both women raise their heads up high, looking into the distance with a somewhat enchanted expression on the face. What are these three “energy-



saving heroes” looking at? A future Communist Utopia, perhaps? An economically prosperous and politically strong China? Or a future state of ecological harmony between human and nature? The spectator is left to decide for themselves what exactly their revolutionary ideals are.

The return to a patriotic theme and traditional Chinese cultural imagery in these ads might seem puzzling at first. As mentioned above, state-sponsored, patriotic-themed environmentalism in the 1980s-90s achieved little success due to the pervasive political cynicism and Western cultural influences. However, if we look at the timing during which these new-patriotic ads appeared, the riddle will be solved: This set of ads was published just before the 2008 Beijing Olympics, a watershed moment when nationalism reemerged and Chinese cultural identity was reasserted. Prior to the opening of the Olympics, the Tibetan protests coupled with China’s poor environmental record provoked suspicion and hostility from the Western world. This antagonism from without unexpectedly bonded the Chinese society from within: it rekindled the patriotic passion of the people—especially the idealistic “angry youth” who were yet to be exposed to the corruption of the political system (see Forney 2008). This moment was comparable to the time when Mao’s anti-nature campaign was running in full-tilt; both moments witnessed a vibrant surge of patriotic passion under the pressure of an external “enemy.” Lacan (1977) calls this phenomenon “ex-centric”: that a libidinal system is held up by excluding an element which is

in fact at the center of this system. While Mao's socialist campaign was supported by excluding the gaze of a "monstrous" nature, China's new patriotism was sustained by rejecting the "suspicious" gaze of the West. During the 2008 Olympics, both the Chinese government and the general population made strong efforts to better environmental conditions in order to prove that the Westerners were misinformed about China's environmental degradation. This notion of "ex-centricity" sheds light on the previous riddle about the look: As these three "energy-saving heroes" raise their heads high and stare haughtily into the air, they are really averting the suspicious gaze of the West—which is the key motivation for their environmental activism—but unfortunately also the direct source of their anxiety (as in the case of the "angry youth").

Aside from reflecting traditional Chinese cultural sentiments, environmental NGO ads try to translate the Western, apocalyptic-flavored rhetoric into Chinese culture. This translation, however, meets with several obstacles. First, lacking the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Chinese do not have the religious imaginary of the Apocalypse through which they can imagine a global-scale ecological catastrophe. China's longstanding ruling ideology—Confucianism—is pragmatic at heart and fundamentally agnostic about transcendental issues. Its mainstream religion—Buddhism—contains a cyclical perception of time and conceives prosperity and destitution as inevitable as the changing of seasons. Although the influence from Daoism



Figure 24 "Fish" Ad for WWF

Source: <http://www.advertolog.com/wwf/print-outdoor/stop-climate-change-before-it-changes-you-fish-202439/>

allows the Chinese to conceptualize the global/ecological nature of environmentalism, they still have difficulty picturing the end of the world and the extinction of our species. Second, Chinese political propaganda often has a tendency to “concentrate on positive examples rather than on problem areas or lagging sectors” (Pye 1985, 226). This habit of “always looking on the bright side of life” (as in role-modeling posters) not only suppresses political criticism but also leaves the Chinese unaccustomed to an argumentative, polarized, and sensationalistic media culture observable in the West.

How do NGO ads translate the notion of the apocalypse to China, despite these cultural and political differences? A comparative case can be

found in the World Wildlife Federation's "Stop climate change before it changes you" campaign. Created by an ad agency in Belgium, this ad is widely distributed in Western media, showing a man "with a fish head, a sign of an ironic evolutionary turn that might occur if climate change Arctic melting continues at the current alarming rate."<sup>46</sup> The mutated human body conjures up a post-apocalyptic imagery, which is pervasive in Western sci-fi novels and movies. It belongs to the category of the post-human which, according to Jameson (2004), includes either a super-intelligent robot threatening human existence (as in the *Terminator* series of films), or a mutated human body as a result of selective evolution. Both signal the coming extinction of the human species and are thus apocalyptic imageries.

This sight of the mutant human fish is highly disturbing. Although it simply puts together two ordinary objects—a human body and a fish head—this amalgamation produces an uncanny object that arouses deep anxiety. After the subject identifies with the familiar human body, the gigantic fish head placed disproportionately on top breaches this identification and threatens to shatter the subject's coherent body-ego. This image visualizes the unconscious fear described by Žižek (2007) for the "undead" death drives—the alien part that takes over the whole body and persists beyond the normal life span of the human organism:

[...]what Freud called "death drive" [is] an uncanny excess of life [...] an "undead" urge which persist beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, of generation and corruption. [...] This excess inscribes itself into the human

body in the guise of a wound which makes the subject "undead," depriving him of the capacity to die (like the wound on the ill boy's stomach from Kafka's "A Country Doctor"): when this wound is healed, the hero can die in peace.

The "undead-ness" of the death drives describes the horror triggered by the idea of evolution that changes in our environment will turn future generations into odd and repugnant beings. The horrendous imaginary of the post-human, however, yields a strange pleasure as well. While disgusted and appalled, one simply cannot look away.<sup>47</sup> This is the same type of unconscious drive that attracts people to "freak shows" at circuses; it makes one want to revisit, time and time again, the disturbing imaginary of the distorted body. Žižek (2007) writes:

This is why Freud equates death drive with the so-called "compulsion-to-repeat," an uncanny urge to repeat painful past experiences which seems to outgrow the natural limitations of the organism affected by it and to insist even beyond the organism's death - again, like the living dead in a horror film who just go on.

Originally referring to an organism's tendency to self-destruct, the Freudian notion of the death drive can also be understood as a strange urge to return to psychic traumas in order to derive an excessive and almost painful pleasure, the *jouissance*.

When the Chinese branch of BBH (an international ad agency) translated this WWF campaign into China, they preserved the anti-climate change message and the post-apocalyptic bodies. Because the Chinese do not have the apocalyptic tradition, these ads bypass religion and go through the



Figure 25 "Fish" Ads for WWF, China

Source: <http://www.ddc.com.cn/news/article.php/10982>

backdoor of evolutionary science to achieve identification. Uniformly taught in public schools, colleges and universities, evolutionism is publically accepted as scientific truth in China, functioning as an ideological support for CCP's Marxist materialist worldview. Evolutionism is usually preached to forestall people's query of human origins, but in these ads it is propagated as a way to imagine human future. While maintaining the Western apocalyptic framework, these ads also cautiously modify several details to appeal to the Chinese aesthetic taste. First, Asian bodies are used to induce better audience identification. Second, the mutated body parts become less conspicuous and less shocking. Instead of displaying a fish head, these ads feature a woman with fish gills<sup>48</sup> on her neck and a man with a dorsal fin on his back. These bodily mutations are local; in fact they look more like postmodern artistic ornaments (future apparel for the humans, perhaps) rather than invasive aliens that threaten to eat up the human body. Such a

modification is done partially because of the heavy censorship in Chinese media which keeps out images that are too graphic or too sensational. But another reason might be the stylistic choice—that the modified image now evokes less of an apocalyptic anxiety than an aesthetic enjoyment of the Western avant-garde. The nude bodies also suggest an artistic forwardness associated with the West, a supposedly radical feature that traditional Chinese culture forbids.<sup>49</sup> By accentuating the Western-ness of these bodies, these ads call on the Chinese to not only see the apocalyptic imaginary but also *see what the Westerners see* in the apocalyptic imaginary. This simple cultural translation produces something extra, something that does not exist in the original version of the ad, which is the *Western gaze*. The gaze functions as the cause of the Chinese audience's desire, making them curious about what they cannot fully see in this image—the part that has been blocked off by Chinese traditions and media censorship—and thus passionately attaching them to the Western apocalyptic imaginary. In viewing the ads, two types of enjoyment (*jouissance*) can be generated: one derives from the uncanny—from taking enjoyment to be the “monster;” and the other derives from the exotic—from taking enjoyment to be the “Westerner.” But since *jouissance* always tends to be uncontrollable, these ads risk the chance for these enjoyments to go beyond limits and be dismissed by the Chinese audience for being too weird or too Western. This doubled enjoyment can also be found in the Chinese's love for Hollywood disaster

movies such as *The Day After Tomorrow* or *2012*, which help to introduce the Western gaze into China's public environmental discourse.

One more point should be made about the change in the ads' copy: Comparing to the original, succinct "Stop climate change before it changes you," it now reads, "Year 2050, many coastal cities will be submerged under water because of the rising sea level. In face of global warming, must humans turn into this? For an easier solution, please go to [www.wwfchina.org](http://www.wwfchina.org)". This translation does not assume the Chinese audience's knowledge about the global warming crisis and explains its implications in simple terms. It also uses the easily comprehensible phrase "global warming" instead of the more scientifically correct "climate change." Since the discourse of global warming is less contested as a political ideology in China, these ads are able to present it as an objective fact, while also achieving audience identification with this otherwise disaffected piece of scientific information. Overall, the Chinese versions of the WWF ad focus on translating the original meanings of the Western ad while avoiding a complete replication of the original visual experience. These translations not only present to the Chinese audience the uncanny images of the environmental apocalypse but also subject them to the Western gaze and invite them to see the "apocalypse as the West sees it".



Eco-Nationalism and Green Consumerism in  
Contemporary China

The two sets of WWF ads analyzed above are not just isolated incidents and the Western gaze indeed boosted China's passion for environmentalism. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we saw a dramatic surge of eco-discourse in Chinese official and non-official media. Especially before the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, governmental media such as CCTV (China Central Television) and the Xinhua News Agency avidly peddled the idea of the "Green Olympics": news reports were rotating day and night showcasing the imported, state-of-the-art eco-gadgets used to equip the Olympic venues—from energy-saving stadiums to hybrid cars for commuting. In 2007, Shanghai municipal developers declared their ambition to build the world's first "eco-city" in Dongtan, Chongming Island—a "zero-carbon" city which will be "powered by energy captured from sun, wind, biofuels and recycled organic material" (MacLeod 2007). These excessive efforts are mostly made to demonstrate China's international leadership in environmental affairs. The influence of the Western gaze in this sudden surge of eco-nationalism is evident, because as soon as the Olympics were over, the grand eco-city project has been reported to be postponed indefinitely (Fox 2010).

China's passionate pursuit of national pride in the eyes of the West can be traced to a desire that is deeply entrenched in history. Having long been

proud of its historical imperial power in East Asia, China became an object of imperialism itself during its modern encounter with the West which

begin[s] with China's defeat in the Opium Wars in the mid-nineteenth century and the shameful treatment of Chinese in America. The process reached an understandable high point with Japan's successful industrialization and subsequent invasion and occupation of China during World War II, which was in many ways psychologically more devastating than Western interventions, because Japan was an Asian power that had succeeded in modernizing, while China had failed (Schell 2008).

This shameful past is remembered in mainstream Chinese literature as “one hundred years of national humiliation” (*bainian guochi*). To a large extent, China's contemporary struggle for modernization and Westernization is motivated by this discourse of humiliation, i.e. the loss of pride, which plays a key role in shaping China's evolving collective identity. The search for the lost pride particularly explains the passions of the “angry youth,” who avidly defended their country's integrity during the 2008 Tibetan protest. However, the lost object of Chinese nationalism—pride—is never a thing that has existed in material reality as such. This fundamental loss is more of an effect of discourse than an effect of actual historical events. Since the younger generation never personally experienced the humiliating part of the history, they became passionate supporters of nationalism through repeated exposure to such historical narratives through textbooks, documentaries, movies and other popular media. A product in the psychological reality, the lost object is a knot in our desire that is tied by and through our symbolic encounter with

the Other. In the discourse of Chinese nationalism, the subject relates herself to the Other (in this case, the Western imperialist) in a hysterical relationship—by continuously victimizing herself and blaming the Other for the traumas that she has gone through. Victimization is a common strategy used in China’s international politics. As Schell (2008) points out,

[h]ighlighting their country’s history as a victim of foreign aggression led Chinese leaders to rely on what Gries calls ‘the moral authority of their past suffering’ [...] China’s suffering at the hands of foreigners became a badge of distinction [since] the most ‘oppressed’ by imperialism [appears to be] the most incipiently revolutionary.

The “moral authority of past suffering” can be also observed in how China negotiates its way out of its responsibility to curb carbon emission and lays the blame on the U.S. and other Western developed countries.<sup>50</sup> Here we see the relationship between discourse and history—it is not that history is constructed by the positive content of discourse, but that it is constituted by what discourse excludes, or does not have. Pride, the lost object that had never existed in positive reality (like a MacGuffin in Hitchcock’s movies), becomes the generative principle of history. History repeats itself by encircling the same lost object and this repetition makes up for the continuity in the evolving Chinese national identity.

China’s grand ambition to “go green,” however, is not all bad news for the West; it lets Western capitalists see a different type of “green”—the

“green” of money—by developing into a potentially huge market for environmental goods and services:

The World Bank estimates that between 1995 and 2004, China will require about \$100 billion of infrastructural investment in water conservation, treatment, and sanitation. The market for environmental goods and services, already estimated at around \$4 billion, is growing rapidly (Economy 1999, 16).

China’s demand for green products not only comes from the state and infrastructural project contractors, but from the consumer sector as well. At the intersection between governmental propaganda and domestic and international NGO ad campaigns, Chinese consumers have demonstrated their increasingly heightened environmental awareness. According to Liu (1994), a growing number of affluent and educated consumers have begun to appreciate the importance of eco-friendly purchases. Green marketing optimists even believe that their degree of environmental concern is comparable with that of consumers from developed countries (Ye 2000, Chan and Lau 2004). Consequently, various versions of eco-friendly consumer products, mostly imported, start to emerge in China; they range from CFC-free refrigerators, energy-saving light bulbs, mercury-free batteries, all-natural detergents, to organic foods and hybrid cars.

But do the Chinese economic elites “buy into the environmental movement” for the same reasons as American middle-class yuppies do? The answer is a “no.” If we juxtapose the appeals used in eco-consumerism and governmental environmental propaganda, we see that the former resorts to

Chinese people's long-standing fascination with Western culture (the idea of Western supremacy) and the latter appeals to national pride (the idea of China supremacy). According to Chan and Lau (2004), Chinese consumers' attitude toward green products is very likely to be affected by the product's country of origin, and Japanese, American, and European products are usually preferred over domestic ones (Li, Fu and Murray 1997). Although the pursuit for national pride and the preference for foreign products seem to be two opposite types of motivation, they are both centered upon the gaze of the West. Since the drives circle the object and turn around, *to desire* the Other is always *to be desired* by the Other. Thus, the desire to be westernized is only the flip side of the desire to be recognized by the West.

The desire to live a Westernized lifestyle, however, does less in driving the Chinese to eco-consumerism. Instead, it tends to make them aspire to the traditional Western-style excessive consumption. In 2007 *Chinese Youth News* conducted a survey among urban youth about their attitudes toward sustainable consumption (Zhang 2008). They found that the aspirations of Chinese youths (between 20-40 years old) were highly similar to those of their Western equivalents. Their answers to "my No.1 wish" were: owning a large house (38%), travelling abroad (21%), and owning a private car (12%). Although this generation mostly grew up bombarded with socialist, nationalistic propaganda and had only been briefly exposed to Western consumerist ads, their survey results were surprisingly comparable to a

survey done among British youths in 2006. To probe into their views about sustainable consumption, the researchers deepened the inquiry into one consumer item—the private car, an ambivalent object of desire for both its environmental hazards and conspicuous value. According to the report, 84% of the Chinese youth think cars are the main source for urban air pollution, but 85% of them still will or might purchase private cars. This seemingly contradictory result shows that although many Chinese consumers are aware of the country's environmental degradation, their environmental awareness tends not to directly translate into eco-consumerism. Since most Chinese regard cars as a key symbol of individual social status, they are unwilling to sacrifice self-identity for the social good (also in the survey 78% place the responsibility of environmental protection on the government). These conflicting psychical forces speak volumes about the weakness of the popular eco-talk “raise environmental awareness,” because apparently raising awareness does not dictate any actions. The next chapter will focus on hybrid cars, one of the leading products of green consumerism, and compare their advertisements in the U.S. and China.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I trace the shifting structures of desire underlying two predecessors of green advertising—governmental propaganda posters and environmental NGO public services ads—and their relationships with China's contemporary phenomenon of eco-consumption. First, Mao's anti-

nature propaganda called on the whole nation to participate in a full-on socialist construction campaign, which had detrimental effects on the environment. This propaganda was successful because, on the one hand, it provided a fantasy of industrial and agricultural prosperity to the Chinese to protect them from their past traumatic encounters with “nature”; and on the other hand, it helped transfer the country’s historical antagonism towards feudalist emperors and imperialist rules to “nature,” which functions as a structural limit that sustains the libidinal system of socialist collectivism. These two meanings of “nature” are condensed in one polysemic character, “*tian*,” an important nodal point in Mao’s anti-nature ideological campaign.

Initially separated from the discourse of nature, the early stages of official environmental discourse during the 1970s defined the “environment” as issues of “sanitation” and “beautification.” After Deng’s economic reform in the late 1970s, previously-repressed social antagonism became radicalized in Chinese society and collectivistic ideals started to disintegrate. However, the 1980s’ “environmental protection” propaganda continued to use patriotism—one of the obsolete collectivistic ideologies—but harnessed little success in motivating the public to take environmental actions.

Since Deng’s open-door policy in 1992, Western cultural influences swarmed into China and brought about a new type of environmental discourse which presented it as a global and international enterprise. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, environmentalism reached a highpoint as the Beijing Olympic

Games approached: Governmental propaganda demonstrated China's ambition to become the world's "green" leader and environmental NGOs also ran public service ads that rode the renewed wave of eco-patriotism and eco-nationalism. Both portray environmentalism as an object of national pride, a benchmark for modernity, and a sign of aesthetic forwardness. I argue that what underlies China's new surge of eco-nationalism is a hysterical structure of desire that subjects China to the suspicious gaze of the West. The Western gaze functions as the cause of China's pride and honor, as well as anxiety and insecurity; it powerfully motivates the Chinese environmental movement, but also alienates the Chinese from their own desires and limits their passions to the correction of appearances where others can see.

Studying history helps shed light on the future. For example, the ideological residue of Mao's propaganda still has broad-reaching impacts on the way contemporary Chinese amass wealth. Adopting an exploitative, utilitarian attitude towards nature, Mao's anti-nature campaign looked at pristine wilderness as a "wasteland" (*huangdi*) that was "ugly, barren, poor, and threatening" (Feng 2007). Thus, Mao dispatched 17 million urban youths during the Cultural Revolution to transform the "wasteland" into farmland (Shapiro 2001). However, long after Mao's rule was over, the Chinese labor force, freed from socialist planning, still seemed to apply the same exploitative methods to extract natural resources in order to get rich.



Discourses have lingering effects in our unconscious and lead to repetitive actions throughout history. Another example can be found in the fact that the concepts of “sanitation” and “hygiene” from early environmental propaganda still linger in the Chinese popular consciousness. From hybrid gasoline-electric cars, organic foods, to green shopping bags and BPA-free water bottles, contemporary green consumerism is still structured by this repulsion against contamination. The “environment” is still considered a superficial concept, an appearance that is to be cleaned and have the waste or contamination eliminated—no matter if they are the “four pests,” dust, trash, and phlegm, or air, water pollution and pesticides. This infatuation with cleanliness, however, ultimately limits the Chinese imagination for environmentalism and creates a conceptual obstacle for them to receiving the Western holistic notion about the ecosystem as a whole.

CHAPTER V  
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF HYBRID CAR  
ADVERTISEMENTS IN THE U.S. AND CHINA: DESIRE,  
GLOBALIZATION, AND THE ENVIRONMENT

This chapter compares American and Chinese green advertising by focusing on one consumer product—the hybrid car. As one of the leading products of eco-consumerism, the hybrid car is emblematic of the “greening” of the automobile industry, an industry that is firmly embedded in the fabric of American capitalism. Cars and American culture are deeply intertwined on multiple levels. Fordism—a term coined by Antonio Gramsci for a method to improve the productivity of car manufacturing—was promoted widely to form the industrial society of mass production and consumption. “What’s good for General Motors is good for America,” these words uttered by Charlie Wilson, the former chairman of General Motors in the 1950s, have become one of the greatest urban myths in American business history. As the most dominant form of transportation in the U.S. (Sheller and Urry 2000), cars also have significant implications in everyday social life. They function as social links between family, friends, and communities; they are one of the most prominent symbols of individual identity and social status; they were also, up until recently, the mainstay of the American economy.

As the waves of modernization sweep across the world, country after country are developing an “automobility culture” similar to the U.S. Urry (2004) sees the car culture “as ‘viral’, emerging first in north America and then virulently spreading into, and taking over, most parts of the body social within pretty well all corners of the globe,” and to some degree, “the poorer the country the greater is the power of this virus” (see Verrips and Myer 2001; Young 2001). This “car virus” is spreading especially fast in China, a burgeoning consumerist society with a rapidly growing demand for private and convenient means of transportation. Over the past two decades, the Chinese government has built thousands of miles of new highways, allowing the rising middle class to commute to their suburban homes and travel recreationally to the countryside (Fan 2008). Car aficionados have organized hundreds of driving clubs throughout the country. Drive-through fast food restaurants, drive-through car washes, and even the old-style drive-in movie theaters are also appearing in China (Fan 2008). As ABC News reporter Mark Litke (2002) comments, “the China car craze has become a mirror image of America’s automobile experience.”

While the Chinese are passionately embracing a Western, car-centered lifestyle, the automobile industry in the West has undergone large structural changes. In early 1990s, car manufacturers, under pressure from environmentalists, consumers, and governments, began selling mass-produced hybrid electric vehicles with allegedly less environmental

impacts.<sup>51</sup> Hybrid cars, together with the growing trend of eco-consumerism, were widely hailed as an efficient environmental solution by the green marketers. When the Prius was introduced as the first hybrid model to China in 2006, the same high hopes were touted by the marketers and the government. During the same year, the country overtook the U.S. to become the world's largest car market and it also topped the world's CO<sub>2</sub> emission list as the biggest producer of greenhouse gases. As the rapidly-expanding middle class continued to purchase private cars, many Chinese officials hoped that hybrids would mediate the environmental impact of all these new vehicles and thus implemented new rules to promote hybrids.<sup>52</sup>

Yet the marketers and the government have been disappointed: Chinese car consumers did not purchase many hybrids. Toyota's Prius, whose sales reached almost 300,000 in the U.S. in 2007, only sold around 300 cars in China and had to slash its price by 8% in 2008. Honda's situation is even worse. What has prevented the Chinese from buying hybrids? What does the hybrids' failure in China mean for a possible global-scale eco-consumerist movement? While the answers to these questions are no doubt multilayered, involving economic, technological, infrastructural differences, this essay mainly focuses on the cultural and ideological factors that interrupt the translation of hybrids' appeals to the Chinese consumer.

Superficially, there seems to be an explanation to the hybrid's failure in China. Qu (2009) from *People's Daily* attributes it to the lack of

environmental awareness of the general population, with the assumption that once people's environmental consciousness is heightened they will purchase hybrids automatically. However, consumption is not primarily a rational and conscious activity. In *The Strategy of Desire (1960)*, Ernest Dichter points out that "many of our daily decisions are governed by motivations over which we have no control and of which we are often quite unaware" (12). In this study, I explore the unconscious desires that motivate (or fail to motivate) hybrid car consumption in the U.S and China by looking into print and TV ads. Using a combination of historical, rhetorical, and psychoanalytic methods, I ask the following questions 1) How do American and Chinese advertisements use visual, acoustic, and semantic strategies to structure different consumer desires for the hybrid car? 2) How are these desires related to the country's particular cultural-historical conditions? 3) How do these ads translate the appeals of "environmentally-friendliness" from one culture to another and what kinds of ideological, cultural, and psychical differences resist this translation?

### The Driving Subject and the Psychic Function of Traditional Car Advertisements

Before analyzing the structures of desire embedded in hybrid car ads, one must first examine their predecessors—traditional car advertisements—and the psychic function they perform in relation to the unique type of subjectivity shared by drivers cross national and cultural borders. First,

despite their many differences, both American and Chinese automobile cultures seem to share a common ideological belief that cars can provide individuals with freedom or autonomy. Freedom, a popular Western liberal ideograph, is frequently used in China and the U.S. to describe the experience of owning a car. For instance, the Shanghai manager of General Motors calls the rise of the car culture in China “a revolution” because it gives people “more freedom [and] more decision-making power” (Litke 2002). A founder of a Chinese Car Club talks about his passion for cars: “I really like what the car brings to my life—convenience, *freedom*, flexibility, a quick rhythm. I can't imagine life without it [emphasis added]” (Fan 2008).

But how “free” or autonomous does the car make us? One shall first dissect the meaning of the prefix “auto-” in the word “automobile.” According to Urry (2004), “auto-” captures a double-sense, both of the sovereign Self as in “autobiography” or “autoerotic,” and of objects or machines that possess a capacity for spontaneous movement, as in “automatic” and “automaton.” The duo-meaning of “auto-” exposes a paradox, which is typical of the human-technology relationship: on the one hand, the car seems to assert the freedom of the Self by giving the individual total control of his or her mobility; on the other hand, it negates the Self by running independently from human control.<sup>53</sup> This paradox of “automobility” contributes to a driver’s ambivalent relationship with the steering wheel: when safely held in one’s hands, it can bring tremendous pleasure; underneath this pleasure, nevertheless, there lies

a disturbing anxiety about the possibility of losing control. Seen within a Lacanian framework, the always present possibility of losing control is the *real* of driving; it generates the thrilling effect which makes driving fun but it must be repressed by an ideological fantasy (the driver being in complete control) so that it would not stir up intense anxiety. An example of this anxiety can be found in the public's panic reaction to a Prius that allegedly sped out of control on a California highway in 2010. In describing a video which only showed the aftermath of the Prius incident, an expert of crisis management said that

People are going to see this video and assume they've seen the car out of control. They really haven't seen the car out of control. It doesn't matter if they think they did. It's planted in their heads. That part of the damage is done (Spagat 2010).

The crisis manager explained the Lacanian concept of the *real* in very simple words: The *real* needs have no connection with our realistic experiences or physical sensations. Structurally embedded in our heads, it scares us by what we don't see, instead of what we see. In this case, the anxiety about the car accelerating out of control has been planted in many drivers' minds as they were initially learning driving; it can easily be awoken and turned into a conscious nightmare by incidents like the 2010 Toyota recall scandal.

Both potentially pleasurable and anxiety-inducing, the driving experience gives rise to a new type of subjectivity. First, the driver must identify with the body of the car, whose large volume and high speed empowers him or her by expanding the physiological limits of the human

body. The driver is also freed from traditional time and space constraints, now capable of going to many places very quickly. However, this new subjectivity also entails new constraints. For example, the human body must first be highly disciplined by being tightly strapped onto the car seat. Enclosed in a moving, cocooned capsule, the driver's physical senses to the outside world are dulled. The steel structure of the car blocks his or her view and the loud noise from the engine overwhelms other sounds that the driver might hear. Other constraints imposed on the driver include large infrastructural limits such as scarce parking, traffic jams, injuries and deaths in traffic accidents, and last but not least, environmental pollution.

The psychic function of automobile advertisements, on the other hand, is to make consumers forget these moments of anxiety and direct them to the pleasures of driving—the ability to control oneself, others, and nature. Many



Figure 26 Hummer Print Ad, 2006.

SLOGAN: The new H2, like nothing else.

SOURCE:

[http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2006/12/22/why\\_do\\_global\\_warming\\_and\\_peak\\_oil\\_skeptics\\_speak\\_out\\_against\\_their\\_own\\_economic\\_in](http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2006/12/22/why_do_global_warming_and_peak_oil_skeptics_speak_out_against_their_own_economic_in)



traditional car ads feature large images of a car's bold outlook, usually with a sharp contour singling it out from its background (see Figure 26) to visually disconnect it from the environment. These images construct a fantasy of individual autonomy which functions as a symbolic shield to protect the driver from confronting the *real* of the driving—that actually he is strapped to the seat, like the infant in Lacan's mirror stage metaphor, barely able to coordinate his motor activity or control all the movements of his car.

### Environmental Rhetoric Inflates the Driving "Self"

The visual rhetoric of radical environmentalism, nonetheless, challenges the ideological fantasy of the car as a sign of individual autonomy. Take, for example, the ad entitled "Black Cloud." Derived from an

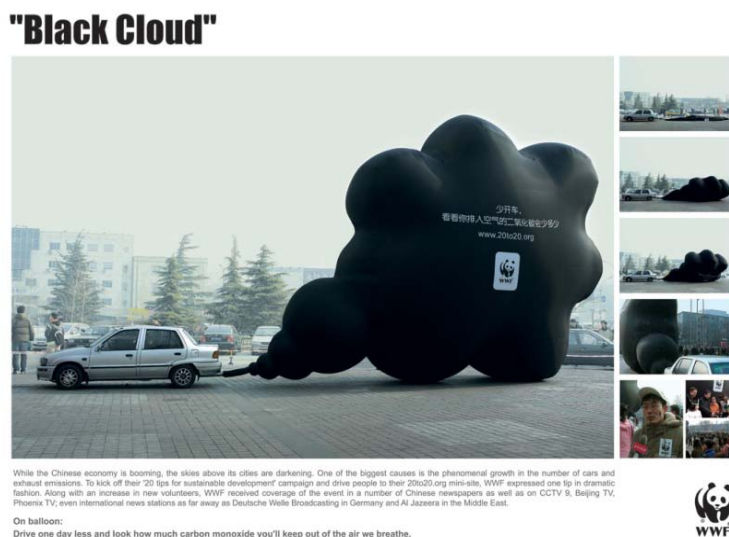


Figure 27 WWF Print Ad: "Black Cloud," 2007

SLOGAN ON BALLON: Drive one day less and see how much carbon dioxide you'll keep out of the air we breathe.

SOURCE: <http://adsoftheworld.com/files/images/wwfblackcccloud.jpg>

environmental media event in Beijing sponsored by WWF, this ad shows a car with a huge black balloon attached to its exhaust pipe which was kept running for a whole day. As the balloon slowly inflated into a gigantic blob, the slogan printed on the balloon becomes visible: “Drive one day less and see how much carbon dioxide you can keep out of the air we breathe.”

This ad breaches the totality of the car’s body by bringing its exhaust—the toxic “excrement” of the car—into sight. The “excrement” is the waste, the constitutive exclusion of the ideological fantasy of driving being “free” (autonomous) and the very condition that makes driving “fun” (enjoyable) in the first place. However, when the repressed returns, it produces traumatic effects. As this horrendous black balloon stares the viewer in the face, it creates what Žižek describes as the experience of watching an overflowing toilet: When the waste comes back up, one has a traumatic run-in with the *real* of the fantasy. Metonymically related to the *real* of driving, the sight of car’s “excrement” forces the driver to confront the initial uncoordinated feelings of the body and powerfully undoes the fantasy of individual autonomy constructed by traditional car ads.

Encountering the *real*, according to Žižek (1989), leads to an experience of “subjective destitution:” it throws the subject out of his or her established position in the ideological fantasy, and into an empty space devoid of any meanings or motives for action (116). Although very debilitating, this experience signals that the individual is at the cusp of

realigning his or her ideological positions. Thus the WWF ad does not stop here but moves on to reinterpellate the individual. “Drive one day less and see...” This slogan appears at the climactic moment of the one-day event and offers a new promise for subjectivity. “[S]ee how much CO<sub>2</sub> you can keep out of the air we breathe:” these words propose a new fantasy of individual agency and reinsert the subject into the symbolic order. This new fantasy is structured around “we”—the abstract social collective—whose demands one must strive to meet. The “we,” i.e. the superego, says “Thou shall not drive.”

The superego, in a psychoanalytic sense, banks its power on guilt, a feeling of lack when one fails to meet its standards of action. But in a highly car-dependent society like the U.S., “Thou shall not drive” is a nearly impossible demand. According to Urry (2004), the system of automobility coerces a great number of people into driving. Giving up driving usually means for them to give up jobs, relationships, or basic life sustenance (shopping for grocery, paying bills). In describing American’s nearly total dependence on automobiles, Waller (2005) points out that in the exodus from New Orleans, whether one had access to a car and enough money for gas directly decided one’s chance of survival. Moreover, in the aftermath of the hurricane, many who were evacuated to trailer-parks were segregated from the society because they did not have a car to get to where the jobs are. The fundamental cause of these social problems is eventually spelled out by Waller:

[...] while we can choose to buy hybrids or cut down on trips to the grocery store, the hard truth is that, in a suburbanized country, there is only so much Americans can do to reduce their car usage. To make a living, they have to work. And to get to work, the vast majority of Americans have to drive.

Incapable of meeting the demand of the superego (or we may call it, “supereco”), the driving subject is often haunted by guilt, blaming him/herself for taking the freedom to drive, a freedom which he or she never actually had. Žižek (2007) calls the offer of freedom an *empty gesture*, one way through which ideology wields power:

This paradox of willing (choosing freely) what is in any case necessary, of pretending (maintaining the appearance) that there is a free choice although effectively there isn't one, is strictly codependent with the notion of an empty symbolic gesture, a gesture—an offer—which is meant to be rejected.

Since “Thou shall not drive” is virtually impossible in a car-dependent society, it ensures that the driving subject feels guilty and tries to redeem himself. In the same vein, the feeling of guilt suffuses American environmentalist discourse, which contains a long list of injunctions such as “Thou shall not \_\_\_ [fly, eat meat, use Styrofoam cups, buy candescent light bulbs, etc].” This guilt-centered subjectivity is characteristic of the Western Judeo-Christian religiosity: it promotes a type of self-criticism and self-cruelty, instead of directing attention to the structural problems of the socioeconomic system.

## The Disappearing “Self” in American Hybrid Car

### Advertisements

The guilty consumers who cannot opt out of their driving lifestyle seek a way to cope with their guilt. This psycho-cultural lack creates a huge market for “environmentally-friendly” cars in American society. Since the popular imaginary of the car as a sign of individual autonomy is now damaged, American hybrid cars erase the Self from the picture in order to construct a new fantasy of social/collective harmony.

The first example I analyze is a print ad for Toyota Prius, the top selling hybrid brand in the U.S. as of 2010. Titled “Zero emission,” this ad was published in 2007 and created by the ad agency Dentsu. It features a natural landscape with a “tree” in the center—a clichéd visual icon for environmentalism. But a closer look reveals that its “trunk” is made of naked human bodies which evoke a feeling of Eden-like purity. The “tree” is bathed in natural sunlight and seems calm and harmonious. Using human bodies to displace the body of nature, this ad appropriates an old rhetorical strategy of radical environmentalists (such as Julia “Butterfly” Hill who lived on a tree to prevent it from being logged, see *Image Politics* by DeLuca 1999), in order to achieve identification with nature. When dominant commercial discourse uses the same rhetorical strategy, it however stages an inverted affective economy of tranquility instead of anxiety.



Figure 28 Toyota Prius Print Ad: “Zero Emissions,” 2007.

**SLOGAN:** We are committed to preserving the delicate balance between man and nature.

**COPY:** We’ve come a long way since we launched our first hybrid car 10 years ago. But our goal goes beyond reducing exhaust emissions. We apply innovative environmental solutions to every aspect of the vehicle’s life cycle; from design, manufacture and use, right through recycling. It’s the only way to reach our ultimate aim: zero emissions.

**SOURCE:** <http://agencyspy.wordpress.com/2007/08/31/toyotas-new-hybrid-print-ads/>

The slogan couples with the visual tranquility to construct a fantasy of human-nature harmony. However, a Lacanian reading does not stop at identifying the overt content of the ideological fantasy but probes deeper for the relationship between the subject and his or her object-cause of desire (the fundamental fantasy). Guided by this goal, we notice that the Prius is conspicuously absent from this ad. Erasing the car from a car advertisement is not a haphazard choice but is directly related to the subject’s desire. As stated before, the post-environmental subject feels guilty about his or her

inflated presence for “over-clouding” the collective social space. Thus, by obliterating the car’s body from an image of harmony (an authoritative, “superegoic” look into what the society is supposed to be), this ad obliterates the Self from the critical gaze of the superego (the gaze as the subject’s object-cause of desire) and temporarily frees the subject from guilt.

The fundamental fantasy here—that the subject tries to hide itself from the gaze of the Other—is one of the formulas for neurosis. The problem of the neurotic lies in the fact that, on the one hand, he subjects himself to the authority of the Other and on the other hand refuses to be the object of the Other’s *jouissance* (“No *jouissance* for the Other!”—Fink 1997, 128). In this case, the eco-subject tries all means to diminish the Self in the critical gaze of the Other, so that he can deprive the Other of all possibilities to derive *jouissance*. (“You’re not getting the satisfaction from me...”) In this game of hide-and-seek, the Other is split into two: one is the overt imaginary of a harmonious social collective; the other is the object-cause of desire—the sadistic gaze of the social collective that judges me and punishes me for being not “green.” Meanwhile, the eco-subject is also split: one is the *conscious ego* that fulfills communal responsibility so he can be appreciated and acknowledged by the harmonious society; the other is the *unconscious subject* that wishes that he did not even exist in this world or rather was already dead.

This structure of desire fits what Lacan describes as obsessional neurosis. The obsessive, in Freud's case of the Rat Man, performs compulsive rituals to prevent a terrible disaster from happening. Lacan adds that the obsessive often troubles himself with the existential question "Am I dead or alive?" In Seminar IV, Lacan writes,

What is an obsessive? In short, an obsessive is an actor who plays his role and assures a certain number of acts as if he were dead. The game he gives himself over to is a way of sheltering himself from death. It is a lively game that consists in showing that he is invulnerable [...] The game is played out in front of an Other who watches the spectacle. The obsessive himself is merely a spectator here; the very possibility of the game and the pleasure he takes in it lies therein. (27)

In other words, for the obsessive, "while his ego participates in the games—that is, in the spectacle staged for the Other—his desire, his unconscious desire, remains on the sidelines as if it did not exist." (Fink 2004, 28) By staging the game in front of the Other, the obsessive is not only alienated from his own unconscious desire, but is also separated from the desire of the Other. Fink (1997) emphasizes that "[T]he obsessive takes the object for himself and refuses to recognize the Other's existence, much less the Other's desire" (119). Thus, the solution he takes to relieve his existential crisis is extremely solitary: the obsessive copes with his guilt internally and refuses to enlist help from others.<sup>54</sup>

Compulsive rituals, fear of disaster, individualistic actions, and guilt—these symptoms all seem to apply to the affluent, educated yuppies of green



consumerism. Troubled by the question of human existence, they make ritualistic purchases of “environmentally-friendly” products to prevent some environmental catastrophes from happening. Though claiming to advocate a collectivist and altruistic cause, they adopt an individualistic and solitary mode of action—consumption. They tightly hold onto the object (the punishing gaze of the society) to keep their desire alive while refusing to confront the desire of the others.

According to Fink, the obsessive always picks the impossible standards to strive for (e.g. a perfectly harmonious society, a completely balanced ecosystem), so that his object can always be “lost,” his desire always unsatisfied, and his guilty pleasures always persisting. “Desire is impossible in obsession, because the closer the obsessive gets to realizing his desire, the more the Other begins to take precedence over him, eclipsing him as subject” (Fink 124). The obsessive much rather deal with the particular, explicit *demand* of the Other than the amorphous, uncertain *desire* of the Other. He favors a long list of specific behavior instructions to follow (“50 simple things you can do to save the Earth,” “21 practical ways to help the environment,” “How to save the environment at home,” etc.) because he ultimately fears human contact and is afraid of venturing into the unknown land of the Other’s desire.

The second ad I analyze is a 30-second TV commercial for Prius called “Why Not?” It is produced in 2007 by Dentsu America, New York. The scene is set on a vast prairie at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. Accompanied by slow-paced Native American music, three people dress like pioneer settlers enter and start to build a Prius from branches, grasses, and mud. Then we see the Prius slowly disintegrating and eventually disappearing completely. The Rockies, the Indian music, and the pioneer settlers combine to evoke a nostalgic feeling of American Westerns and suggest the cooperative spirit of community builders. Prius, as the commercial implies, embodies a type of communal and ecological harmony between humans as well as between



Figure 29 Toyota Prius 30-Seconds TV Commercial: “Why Not,” 2007.

VOICE-OVER: “Can a car company grow in harmony with the environment? Why not? At Toyota, we’re not only working toward cars with zero emissions. We’re also striving for zero waste in everything else we do. ... The best way to have an impact on the environment is to have as little impact as possible.”

SOURCE: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21940503/ns/business-autos/>

human and nature. The “technique of erasure” discussed above is used here as well. But in this commercial, the camera movement used to stage this disappearing act is intriguing: it first makes a 360 degrees circle around the Prius—like a magician turning around his cart showing that he is not hiding anything—then, it uses a time-lapse technique (displaying the quick motion of normally slow-moving objects like the sun, clouds, terrains and so on to show the passage of time) as the Prius slowly disintegrates. This camera movement creates a panorama in both space and time; it establishes another fantasy of totality—not of total visibility but total *in*visibility—so the guilty subject can eliminate the fear for car “waste” and dodge the critical gaze of the “supereco.” The new eco-subject seeks another kind of “freedom” or autonomy from the environment—when the environment does not leave him, he leaves the environment. Meanwhile the disappearing car also covers the physical reality that the Prius is made of steel and will eventually get relegated to the garbage dump.<sup>55</sup>



Figure 30 VW Polo Blue Motion Print Ads: "Dali" and "Magritte"  
 SLOGAN: "Absurdly Low Consumption"

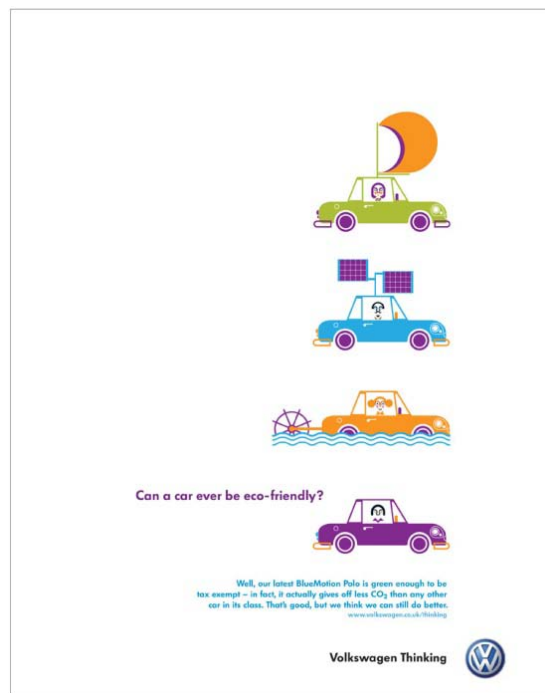


Figure 31 VW Polo Blue Motion Print Ad: "Volkswagon Thinking"  
 Slogan: "Can a car ever be eco-friendly?"



Figure 32 Toyota Prius Print Ad: "3rd Generation New Prius"  
 SLOGAN: The 3<sup>rd</sup> generation prius. Good ideas grow. Literally.

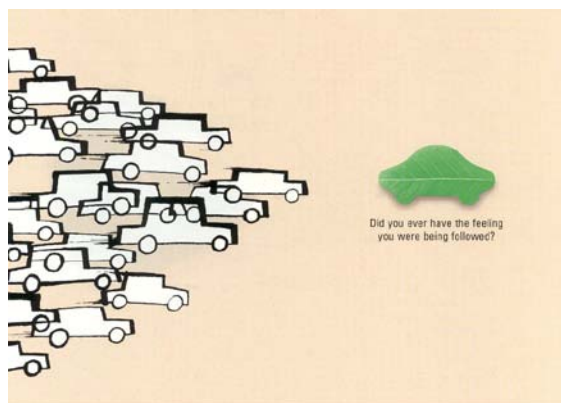


Figure 33 Toyota Prius Print Ad: "Today. Tomorrow"  
 SLOGAN: Did you ever have the feeling you were being followed?

The erasure of the car's body has become a major rhetorical technique used in Western hybrid car ads. More examples can be found in the preceding ads for Toyota Prius, Lexus Hybrid, Honda Hybrid, VW Polo Blue Motion, and others. These ads either displace the car with a tiny and modest icon (such as a leaf, a piece of post-consumer cardboard, or an innocent form of cartoon), or mesh the car with other objects so it becomes almost indistinguishable from its visual environments. This "technique of erasure" reduces the guilt that has been attached to the popular imaginary of car, and allows the unconscious subject to "play dead" in front of the "superego."

Interestingly, when reading these ads, we find their conscious messages and unconscious desires in less than common places. Instead of digging deeper into the ad's meaning to find the subject's unconscious desire, we see that it is actually manifested in the open—through the overt visuals of advertising. Meanwhile, the conscious message of the advertisement is not shown directly through the image but is able to be derived through a semiotic reading. This illustrates the point that Lacan (1988) makes in his essay about *The Purloined Letter* that the secret of desire lies in the surface of the text—it hides itself by not hiding at all.

Back to the case of the hybrid car consumers: their unconscious desire to "play dead" also sheds light on the whole obsession with "zero" in American consumer culture: from Coke Zero to zero-calories snacks<sup>56</sup>, from zero-emission cars to zero-carbon homes, from SunChips' compostable bag leaving

zero waste to the famous “No Impact Man” Colin Beavan (who lived a year with NO toilet paper). Green consumers display a tendency to self-reduction which is typical of the Judeo-Christian subjectivity. Psychologically and institutionally, environmentalism has taken the place of religion in the secular world. Asma (2010) draws a vivid parallel between Christianity and environmentalism:

Instead of religious sins plaguing our conscience, we now have the transgressions of leaving the water running, leaving the lights on, failing to recycle, and using plastic grocery bags instead of paper. In addition, the righteous pleasures of being more orthodox than your neighbor (in this case being more green) can still be had—the new heresies include failure to compost, or refusal to go organic. Vitriol that used to be reserved for Satan can now be discharged against evil corporate chief executives and drivers of gas-guzzling vehicles. Apocalyptic fear-mongering previously took the shape of repent or burn in hell, but now it is recycle or burn in the ozone hole. [...] There are also high priests of the new religion, with Al Gore ("the Goracle") playing an especially prophetic role.

The symptoms that Asma outlined here, such as guilt, self-righteousness, and apocalyptic fear, can all be traced back to obsession. To treat obsession, writes Fink (1997), the patient must be made to confront in the *desire* of the Other, which will rupture his solipsistic fantasy. In the case of environmentalism, this means to break the interpersonal walls and participate in community decision-making. According to Jon Gertner (2009), lab tests and anthropological research in Columbia University show that collaborating more might be the solution to environmental inaction:

We enjoy congregating; we need to know we are part of groups [...] it gives us inherent pleasure to do this. When we are reminded of the fact that we're part of communities, then the community becomes sort of the decision-making unit. That's how we make huge sacrifices.<sup>57</sup>

Magically, when responsibilities are shared, motivation for environmental actions not only grows exponentially, but also turns from despair to “elation, rather than the guilt, anger and horror behind most environmental activism” (Mooallem 2009, 30). In psychoanalytic terms, it is only through encountering the desire of the Other that we are capable of desiring by ourselves.

### Futurism as the Western Gaze in Chinese Hybrid

#### Car Advertisements

Before analyzing Chinese hybrid car advertisements, we must examine China's historical relationship with the automobile, as well as the various socio-economic roles cars play in Chinese culture. The automobile was introduced to the Chinese much later than when it became popular in European and American societies. The alleged “first car” brought into China was a foreign tribute given to the Empress Dowager Cixi of the Qing Dynasty in 1901 by the politician Yuan Shikai.<sup>58</sup> Another contender for the “first cars” in China was two American cars brought to Shanghai by the Hungarian Li Enshi (Leine) in 1901. He was said to drive them around on the streets of Shanghai and created a huge buzz.<sup>59</sup> Whichever was the first, we see that cars, as exotic foreign goods (*bolai pin*), have always been associated in China

with the “representative publicity” of the feudal lords and Western imperialists, who were on the top tier of the highly stratified society.

The first Chinese-made car was manufactured by Liaoning Powder Mill in 1931 under the order of General Zhang Xueliang. Named “People’s Livelihood Model #75,” this car was made by modeling after an imported American car. In 1956, the People’s Republic of China produced the first truck—the “Liberation Truck”—and for the next three decades, China’s auto-manufacturing industry mainly produced trucks, buses, jeep, and mini-vans, all of which are cargo vehicles or vehicles that carry large groups of passengers. Meanwhile, small passenger cars were only the privilege of governmental officials. In 1958 the first domestically produced sedan, the “Red Flag Sedan” (*hongqi jiaochē*), was manufactured to be used by central party leaders during official ceremonial occasions: it became a national spectacle and a symbol of the highest-level communist leadership.

In the 1980s when foreign cultures flooded into China, imported media products exposed the Chinese to the car-centered American culture. The earliest American TV imports such as *Knight Rider* (1982-1986), *Hunter* (1984-1991), and *Growing Pains* (1985-1992) showed the protagonists driving on a day to day basis; they chased villains in cars, solved criminal cases in cars, and became intimate with each other in cars. In particular, David Hasselhoff’s *Knight Rider* portrayed a super high-tech, impenetrable race car with artificial intelligence that accompanied him in various adventures.



This super car became engrained in the memory of a generation of the Chinese audience who grew up in the early 1990s. Zhao (2007), a blog writer, recalls how he wished to own Hasselhoff's car as a kid:

During 1995 when I was still in primary school, every Tuesday at 7:30pm I had to tune in to CCTV2 and wait for the *Knight Rider* to come on... Simply looking at these posters makes me feel nostalgic. Those years all my dreams were to own that omnipotent, talking, super NB<sup>60</sup> car.

Zhao was definitely not alone. His aspiration was shared by many Chinese who had watched that TV show. Long before they were able to afford a private car, these TV programs enhanced their desires to own one, as a sign of the Western lifestyle, which also generated discontents about their existing means of transportation. Daniel Lerner (1973) describes this phenomenon as the “revolution of rising frustrations” which proposes that, in third world countries, people’s exposure to Western-produced media products “create aspirations so out of proportion to an individual’s potential to satisfy them (given social structural limits) that frustration is created” (Hornik 1977, 389). When most of China was still commuting through public transportation and being crammed like sardines on buses and metros, their ability to glance at the “other side of the world” only frustrated them. This psychic function can be better described, in psychoanalytic terms, as alienation and repression: it on the one hand alienates the desires of the Chinese from their own lifestyles and, on the other hand, forces them to repress their alienated desires because they are impossible to be realized due to social-economic constraints.

The private car, long overdue in the life of the Chinese, finally became affordable to the rising economic elites in the 1990s. At first, many bought cars for reasons of “face”—to show off their wealth and social status to neighbors and friends. “Face” (*mianzi*), as Hu (1944) points out, refers to “a reputation achieved through getting on in life, through success and ostentation” (45). This pursuit for personal reputation was deeply embedded in Chinese traditions but was interrupted by Mao’s egalitarian communism for more than half a century. The concept returned after China’s economic reforms in 1978, and was expressed in mass consumerism as a form of extravagant spending based mainly on imported goods, from cigarettes and liquor to home electronics and cars (Zhao 1997). The link between foreignness/exoticness and “face value” is especially prominent in the car market. According to Doctoroff (2005), the majority of Chinese consumers prefer Western and foreign cars despite the fact that the Chinese automobile industry is protected by the government’s economic policies. Wang and Yang (2008) point out that Chinese car consumers’ brand perception and purchase intention are significantly influenced by the automobiles’ country of origin.

As the cost of owning a car continues to decrease in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, young urbanites start to buy them mostly for fun and the experience of “freedom” and “independence.” Campanella (2008) argues that the Chinese are particularly attracted to the appeal of “freedom” because

in a society where travel was once highly restricted and much of life circumscribed by the state, driving your own

car—wherever and whenever you wish—offers a compelling sense of agency and self-determination. [...] It may well be that the car is a kind of placebo for freedoms yet ungained in China (218).

In other words, since the lack of a car metonymically stands in for the lack of political freedom in China, as soon as it becomes available in the market it is passionately pursued with the full force of the repressed social libido.

Substituting political changes with the change of consumer products is a phenomenon observed worldwide during the global spread of consumerism. Janus (1993) mentions that transnational advertising repetitively preaches Western cultural themes such as “happiness, youth, success, status, luxury, fashion” to mask social conflicts and class differences in developing countries. We can add one more theme to this list: “freedom”—a typical Western ideology imported into China that is embraced through consumerism.

In the last decade or so, cars gradually become one of the essential commodities in urban China which one must own to live a “good life.” Louisa Lim (2009) from NPR states, “Back in the 1980s, young married couples in China aspired to own a bicycle, a sewing machine, a watch and a radio. These days, many Chinese men believe they must first own a car, house and a laptop before they can think about getting into a serious relationship.” As cars are turning into more of a common household commodity in China, consumers have started purchasing them for diverse purposes and are no longer driven by the pure fascination with their foreignness/exoticness. Wu (2008) points out that most car ads begin to adopt the “g-localizing” strategies



“education”). But Wu adds that foreign car companies tend to use more global/modern appeals in their ads while Chinese car manufactures are more likely to adopt local and traditional appeals.

Realizing the significance of the car in Chinese culture allows us to better dissect hybrid car ads. Figure 34 shows an ad, published in 2007, which introduced the first hybrid electric car, the Prius, to the Chinese market. In this ad, one observes a striking difference from its American counterparts (see for example Figure 28, pg. 186)—the “in-your-face” kind of presence of the car. The car’s physical presence takes up 1/6 of the ad, doubled by the reflection which further increases its size. Its chrome outlook seems sleek and shiny and its mirror image is wrapped by fluorescent lines to look technologically advanced. Coupled with the streamlined design of the car, these features suggest futurism—a significant Western artistic style employed in painting, film, architecture, industrial design, and fashion, among others. Futurism emphasizes speed, technology, youth and the triumphant of humanity over nature. It is marked by a radical break from the past (Marinetti 1973). The slogan on the upper right corner reads: “Prius: The car belongs to today, the heart belongs to tomorrow.” This offers a cue to read the visual layout of the ad, which is split in half—the half inside the mirror stands for “tomorrow” and the half outside represent “today.” Here Lacan’s mirror stage effect is seen twice: first the consumer’s ego is doubled by the car, and then the image of the car is split into the present car and the

future car. The future car is what the consumer aspires to, but between it and the consumer stand two “mirrors”—one is the mirror in the ad and the other is the ad itself. These two “mirrors” are placed next to each other to create an illusion of infinity, as if the space and time around the car has become endlessly stretchable. The consumer is invited to imagine unlimited development down the road of modernity and technology. Similar to the conventional car ads in the West, this ad presents the car as an extension of the driver’s ego, signifying his or her individual autonomy in space, time, and socio-economic status.

The environmental value of the hybrid, however, is rarely represented in the image. In the half image of “tomorrow,” one sees a slightly bluer sky, and brighter clouds. At the far left of the image, a tiny bit of green is visible, looking like the garnish on a hamburger platter. Here the environment appears to be a decoration for the urban outlooks with no intrinsic value on its own. Such an imaginary of the environment originates from the government’s “environmental beautification” propaganda in the 1980s, which has deeply impacted the Chinese public’s impression of environmentalism. The same tendency to trivialize environmental values can also be observed in the product introduction: The Prius is called “the car of tomorrow,” but the ad does not specify what kind of “tomorrow” it is. Is it the “tomorrow” of environmental harmony? Or economic prosperity? Or technological development? The answer is unknown. But whatever it is, the ad suggests

that it “has not stopped amazing the automobile world.” Here it seems that “tomorrow” is simply an empty signifier that stands for whatever that lies ahead on the road of modernity. But whatever lies ahead is to be judged by the “automobile world”—namely, the affluent, car-centered, Western cultures. “Tomorrow” matters to the consumers not because of the concrete vision it presents to them, but because of the Western gaze that it introduces into their intersubjective universe, the gaze that judges and criticizes their commodity choices for being too dated, too “yesterday.”

The ad continues by describing the car’s features that benefit the individual driving experience (“smooth and powerful acceleration” and “quiet and harmonious driving atmosphere”) and the mentions only in passing its environmental value (low “gas consumption and car emission”). Putting individual welfare before social good is a deliberate choice of the advertiser to address the rise of individualism in the Chinese society. But this seemingly “selfish” individualistic appeal is perhaps more honest than the “collectivistic” appeal that Western hybrid ads boast about. The ad is at least open about the true motivation for eco-consumption, which is to make the individual “feel good,” instead of hiding the ultimate narcissistic nature of consumption under the name of social good.

The second ad (see Figure 35) is for the RX 400h, a hybrid luxury SUV, combining elements seen as both “environmentally friendly” and detrimental to the environment. Despite the dramatic decline of SUV sales in the U.S.,

they still saw a 43% rise in China in 2008 and a steady increase of 12% in 2009. Other large, high-emission gas-guzzlers also fared well in China. At the verge of cancellation, GM's notorious Hummer was bailed out by a Chinese car company who sees a prosperous future for it in China (*China Daily* 2009). Chinese drivers do seem to love SUVs. A Hummer H2 owner told to a reporter from the *Washington Post* that: "In China, size matters. People want to have a car that shows off their status in society. No one wants to buy small" (Cha 2008). His words show that the body of the car functions as an extension of the driver's ego and owning a large car becomes a statement of power and social status.

To address Chinese consumers' obsession with "big", this ad displays an unabashed, full-sized image of the luxury SUV. The design of this vehicle also evokes futurism: it is silver, has tinted windows, and a streamlined shape. It is also surrounded by radiating "swoosh" lines, suggesting extreme speed. Similar to the mirroring effect used in the Prius ad, the SUV is also reflected on the ground. One can see the bottom of its interior motor system, which is again highlighted with fluorescent lines. The frequent use of reflective surfaces suggests that the Chinese might like to see the car from as many angles as possible. In fact, Chinese ads have a general tendency to emphasize product appearance, a trend which has been attributed, according to many marketers (e.g. Zhao and Shen 1995, Chan 2004), to China's tradition of pragmatism. For example, Chan (2004) argues that pragmatism



makes the consumers care more about the utilitarian value of the product than the abstract idea attached to it, thus the ads tend to hyper-represent the appearance of the product. Yet this claim can be problematic, because scrutinizing the product's appearance is often not to show its utility but to seek its conspicuous value. The so-called pragmatism only disguises the consumer's obsessive structure of desire, which makes them strive for the

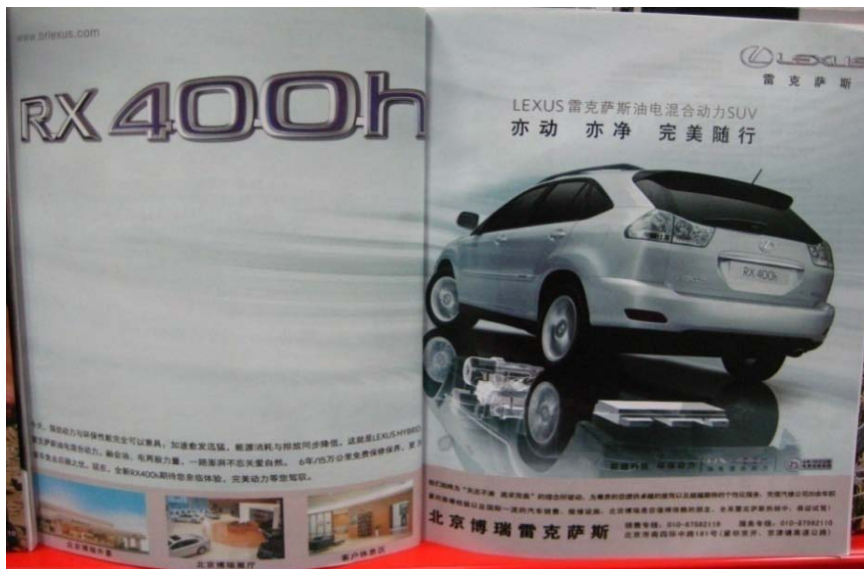


Figure 35 Lexus Hybrid SUV Ad, 2008.

SLOGAN: Mobile and “clean” (homonym with “be still”), it travels with perfection.

COPY: Today, powerful movement and environmental excellence can coexist perfectly: the faster the acceleration, the lower goes its energy consumption and emission. This is the Lexus Hybrid. It fuses two types of force—gas and electricity—and surges down the road without ignoring nature. 6 years/150,000km's free guarantee service also saves you a lot of worries about maintaining your favorite car. Right now, the brand new RX400h awaits you to experience it personally. Its perfect way of movement awaits you to acquire.

Source: *Global Entrepreneur*. June 20, 2008. Issue 159.

product's perfection and precision in the eyes of the (Western) Other.

The environmental aspect of gas-electric hybrid technology is not mentioned at all in the image portion of this ad, but is addressed in words. The slogan reads, "Mobile and clean, it travels with perfection" (*yidong yijing, wanmei suixing*). The first half of the slogan plays on the homonyms of *jing*, which could either mean be "clean" or be "still". "Mobile and still" (*yidong yijing*) is a phrase derived from classic Chinese literature, which praises the dialectical beauty between movement and stillness.<sup>61</sup> By evoking classic Chinese prose, the slogan seems to balance the Western modernist appeal saturating the image. Also, it boils the environmental value of the hybrid down to one word: "clean." This word reduces the car's impact on the ecological system to a mere matter of cleanness or dirtiness, which echoes another conceptual framework in traditional governmental propaganda—the framework of sanitation. Though popularized three or four decades ago, old social imaginaries still have residual effects on contemporary culture and are evoked from time to time by commercial advertising.

The third ad (Figure 36) I select is for Buick's Lacross Hybrid. This ad does highlight the environmental value of the hybrid car, however in a completely different way from its Western counterparts. It shows the car driving on a road leading away from a futuristic city—represented by the silhouette of skyscrapers in the background—into a vast green forest in the foreground. The road flies over the forest and has a smooth surface (again)



Figure 36 Chinese Buick LaCrosse Hybrid Ad, 2008.

SLOGAN: H-plan: Take off right now, and return to the pure world in your heart

COPY: ECO Intelligence Motor: Starting from today, visit Buick dealership's display hall to test drive the LaCrosse Hybrid Electric Car, or log on to Buick's official website "H-plan" page to pick out your favorite scenic spot, and you will have chance to enjoy the "pure tour." Dialog with nature, gather greenness.

Source: <http://info.china.alibaba.com/news/detail/v5003463-d1002780769.html>

that reflects the bottom of the car. Where the road comes from stands a gigantic O<sup>2</sup> sign, suggesting the abundance of oxygen which one can enjoy after escaping from the city into nature. The flying road and the large O<sup>2</sup> sign demonstrate the ad's effort to mimic surrealism, another Western style diverging from China's traditional aesthetics of socialist realism. Right next to the sign is the slogan: "H-plan: Take off right now, and return to the pure world in your heart." At the bottom of the ad, there are a few pictures of the "pure world"—all natural scenery spots in the southwest region of China that

affluent urban car owners are encouraged to spend their vacations in. By calling on the urban rich to visit the not-yet-polluted land of the rural poor, this ad exacerbates the already serious environmental inequality along class and geographical lines.

Compared to the last two ads, this Buick ad contains more explicit environmental references, in both images and words. The green trees, blue sky, and the oxygen sign construct a fantasy of eco-utopia—a “pure world” where people from severely polluted cities can escape into. This eco-utopia contrasts with the silhouette of skyscrapers in the background which triggers urbanites’ frustrating experiences with pollution: walking in the street and having bus exhaust pumped right into your face, rarely being able to see a blue sky or a forest, wearing a white shirt and watching it turning black within a week (these are all derived from the author’s personal experiences). While this ad timely addresses the public’s increasing environmental concerns, it however proposes an extremely individualistic solution: Run away! Escape into pristine nature all by yourself! Instead of marketing the hybrid as a “silver bullet” for saving the environment, it portrays it as a “parachute” or “escape pod” for the urban rich to flee from all the industrial pollution and explore their private eco-utopia, which is only to be enjoyed alone.

To a certain extent, the utopia portrayed here parallels the one presented in American hybrid car ads—both construct a fantasy of human-

nature harmony to cover the rising social anxiety about environmental pollution. But these two utopias evoke different imaginaries: while the American version is envisioned through the *erasure* of the Self, the Chinese version is portrayed as the *expansion* of the Self. They are also supported by different structures of desire: the former encircle a paternalistic Other (society) that blames the subject for his or her failure to follow its impossible injunction; the latter features a subject that blames the paternalistic Other (society) for its malfunctions. This contrast fits the psychoanalytic distinction between obsession and hysteria: Both being cases of neuroses, the obsessive and the hysteric are both subjected to symbolic *castration*, but the hysteric, according to Fink (1997), blames the Other for her castration, whereas the obsessive is far more inclined to blame himself (262). Towards their castrated (repressed) desires, “obsessives react with guilt and aversion, whereas hysterics react with disgust or revulsion” (117). In the case of eco-consumerism, such castrated (repressed) desires find their embodiments in waste or pollution—the excluded center of the ecosystem which generates secret enjoyment through the thrilling tales of the ecopocalypse. Towards the ideas of waste or pollution, the eco-obsessive responds with guilt, self-blame, and solitary redemption, but the eco-hysteric responds with disgust, complaint, and escapism. Both will much rather keep their symptoms than confronting the truth of their desire, which is to continuously exploiting nature and destroying the environment.

The next ad for the Honda Civic Hybrid (Figure 37) takes on a more ecological view of the car's environmental impacts and it starts to bear more resemblance to Western hybrid car ads. This ad features the blue arc of the earth in the background, suggesting a holistic view of the ecosystem

**HONDA**  
The Power of Dreams

**Honda HYBRID**  
本田混合动力, 如何让  
**1+1=3?**

高效 i-VTEC 发动机      薄型 DC 无刷电机

**Honda IMA**  
INTEGRATED MOTOR ASSIST

高效 i-VTEC 发动机和薄型 DC 无刷电机的完美结合, Honda 的混合动力系统, 根据行驶状况智能地控制发动机和电机, 实现最佳燃油效率和驾驶乐趣。  
Honda 希望, 清洁地球环境与极致的驾驶乐趣能共存。  
目前, Honda 混合动力车型在全球已获有畅销口碑。  
搭载 IMA 系统的混合动力车型 Honda Civic Hybrid, 现已登陆中国市场。

Honda Hybrid 混合动力, 发动机和电机组合的 3 大优势

**1+1=3**

- 1. 更高驾驶乐趣**  
搭载 i-VTEC 发动机, 提供强劲动力, 提升驾驶乐趣。  
搭载 DC 无刷电机, 提供平顺加速, 提升驾驶乐趣。
- 2. 更佳经济性**  
搭载 i-VTEC 发动机, 提供强劲动力, 提升燃油经济性。  
搭载 DC 无刷电机, 提供平顺加速, 提升燃油经济性。
- 3. 更环保**  
搭载 i-VTEC 发动机, 提供强劲动力, 提升环保性能。  
搭载 DC 无刷电机, 提供平顺加速, 提升环保性能。

更多详情请浏览: <http://www.honda.com.cn/cv>      本田汽车(中国)投资有限公司

Figure 37 Chinese Honda Hybrid Ad

SLOGAN: "Honda HYBRID, how does it make 1 + 1 = 3?"

COPY: Honda IMA (Integrated Motor Assist): High-power i-VTEC engine and slim DC brushless electric motor's heavenly combination; Honda's IMA hybrid power system controls the engine and the electric motor according to the driving condition and greatly unites environmental performance and driving pleasure. Honda hopes that the clean earth environment and the extreme driving pleasure will coexist permanently. Currently, Honda Hybrid has already sold 400,000 cars worldwide, Civic Hybrid, installed with the IMA system, is now selling like hot cakes throughout the country.

exemplified by the 1968 Apollo 8 shot of the globe (see Chapter II).

Underneath the earth-arc of the earth is placed the car's body, whose large size is blown out of proportion and looks almost like another planet. This strategy exaggerates the hybrid car's positive impact on the entire ecosystem and makes the latter's problem appear manageable and controllable through a simple commodity purchase. The slogan asks "Honda HYBRID, how does it make 1 plus 1 equal three?" This counterintuitive question leads one to continue to read the copy. The copy heavily employs technical jargon (such as "IMA," "i-VTEC," "slim DC brushless motor") to mystify the hybrid electric technology, because for the obsessive, the more impenetrable an object it appears, the more desirable it becomes. To further the mystification, the ad displays a daunting, complicated-looking engine. A single engine all by itself is rarely seen in reality, but it does fulfill the Chinese's obsessive desire to scrutinize the car from inside and out. The copy also highlights the popularity of the model around the Western developed world ("Honda Hybrid has already sold 400,000 cars worldwide") to further stimulate the Chinese's desire for the desire of the (Western) Other.

To sum up the Chinese ads analyzed above, they each contain different levels of environmental appeals and different conceptualizations of the "environment"—beautification, sanitation, or ecology—which can be traced back to traditional governmental environmental propaganda. Despite the differences, they share the following features: first, they all contain full-sized

displays of the car's body and try to maximize visibility of its inside and out by mirroring or dissecting interior mechanical parts. Second, they hyperrepresent the technological advancements of the hybrid car through computer-generated backgrounds, opaque technical jargon, and futuristic and surrealist art designs. Third, they usually capitalize on the car's popularity and high sales figures overseas to tailor to the Chinese consumer preference for foreign goods. Fourth, environmental values of the hybrid car are mostly expressed through words, and the image portion is used to promote individual identity and modern technological rationality. In an image-centered media culture where advertising frequently use visual power to directly address the audience's unconscious, this verbal bias in articulating hybrid's environmental appeal implies the shortsightedness of advertisers in only raising consumers' environmental consciousness instead of connecting environmentalism to the cultural unconscious of the Chinese.

As mentioned before, cars are becoming a common household commodity in China and the new economic elites have to update their cars to distinguish themselves from other car owners. If so, then what kind of unconscious desires are these hybrid car ads addressed to? By portraying the hybrid car as another Western innovation that the new economic elites should acquire to reassert their identity and social status, these ads try to cover up their unconscious loss from political castration (by the state) and



cultural alienation (by Western media) as well as the loss of touch with the natural environment.

### Why Don't The Chinese Buy Hybrids?

Hybrids are not well received in the Chinese market. In 2007 Toyota only sold just over 300 Priuses in China, but its global sales are close to 200,000 (*Lohas* 2009). Reasons for hybrid's current failure in China are multifaceted, including the lack of government subsidy or tax support, high price, its yet-to-be-mass-produced core technology (*Information Times* 2009). The low sales record of the hybrid cars, however, does not necessarily discredit the advertisements analyzed above as legitimate symptoms of cultural desires. In fact, their efforts to accentuate hybrid's conspicuous value and popularity in the West did manage to attract a large number of consumers during the initial stage of their campaigns. According to *Lohas* (2009), when Prius first appeared in the Chinese Toyota dealerships in 2006, many contemplators showed up and stood in long lines to test drive the car. Many seemed amazed by the hybrid technology, but very few ended up buying it.

Why did consumers' initial fascination fail to develop into a sustained interest? Why do Chinese economic elites refuse to embrace the hybrid car as how they passionately pursue other Western novelties? What makes them resist the long-standing idea of Western supremacy and prevents them from buying wholesale into Western eco-consumerism? Chan (2004) attributes this

to the Chinese tradition of pragmatism, which makes consumers judge a product's worth by its utilitarian value instead of idealistic values (environmental appeals assumedly belong to the category of idealistic values):

[T]he traditionally “pragmatic” Chinese [...] philosophical teachings are based on the practicalities of everyday ethics, politics, and social relations, the Chinese people have long been characterized by pragmatism and realism (Sue and Kirk 1972). Classical psychological research has demonstrated that, compared with Americans, Chinese people have a tendency to evaluate ideas according to practical and utilitarian values (Hellersberg 1953), and are therefore more likely to emphasize the informational contents of advertisements, rather than the entertaining features (Zhao and Shen 1995).

However, the so-called “pragmatism” of the Chinese is by no means based upon a system of pure utilitarian values, as there is no such thing as pure utility (see the critique of utilitarianism in Chapter two). Baudrillard (1988) dissolves Marx's initial distinction between the use-value and the exchange-value and boils them down to one category—sign-value—a term revealing the ultimate intersubjective nature of commodity value which has no grounds in “objective” reality or “biological” needs. Copjec (2004) writes that utilitarianism “believ[es] naively that complete satisfaction is attainable by anyone who, unimpeded by bad fortune, sets about realizing a rational plan” (168), but this ideal Other who amasses complete satisfaction from a perfectly rational plan does not exist. In a sense, utilitarianism is a fantasy conditioned upon a fundamental misrecognition of the “structure of pleasure—which as Freud taught, is only ever partial, never complete” (168).

If there is no such thing as utility to measure hybrid car's "practical" values against, then Chinese consumers' "pragmatic" resistance towards Western eco-consumerist discourse must rise from some alternative, intersubjective value system. To find out about this alternative value system, we must listen to the Prius owners in their own words.

In an interview with the reporter of *New Finance Economics* (Ding 2008), a Prius owner identified as Ms. Song said that when she purchased the car in 2007, none of her family and friends thought much of it. They complained that she could have bought a much higher-capacity car at this expensive price. After driving for a year, she found Prius' biggest advantage being its low gas consumption. But one day when she was racing with a friend on highway, her car lagged far behind her friend's VW Passat, which cost about the same price. Ms. Song said, "Due to the Prius' low engine capacity, when it accelerates to 120 km/hr, it is obviously lacking power. Comparing with my friend's car, I feel that I have lost face (*mei mianzi*)."

Another consumer also expresses a similar concern, as well as a disliking of Prius' not-so-large body: "Spending ¥300,000 on a car with a 1.5L engine is really not worth it. Besides the car has such a small body. It is no different from other two door cars. If you buy a Reiz with this much money, how much magnificent air (*daqì*) will you gain!" (Ding 2008) To clarify, Toyota Reiz is a high-power mid-size sedan with a V6 engine and all-wheel drive. It is also sold in the Japanese market under the name Mark X.

These consumer words demonstrate that this so-called “pragmatic” philosophy of the Chinese is really based upon a value system constituted through an intimate web of family and friends relationships. For example, when Song adventurously bought the Prius, she was disturbed by the disapproval from her family members. Then she raced cars with her friend on highway and felt shamed for losing to the friend who was probably gloating over his “correct” product choice. It seems that even narcissistic pursuits of individual identity and social status (to gain “face” and “magnificent air”) are actually to seek approval from this closest social circle; meanwhile, any commodity choice that fail to obtain their approval tends to be impugned as “impractical” and “not worth the price.” Thus, it is this powerful interpersonal group dynamic, but not pragmatism or utilitarianism, which can function as resistance toward Western advertising and media influence.

### Conclusion

After close readings of American and Chinese hybrid car ads, we see that the American ads use the technique of disappearance extensively. They eliminate the car—a guilt symbol connected with air pollution, global warming, and energy crisis—and form a new fantasy of social harmony to provide emotional redemption for the eco-consumers. The Chinese ads, on the other hand, significantly downplay the environmental values of the hybrid and the collective good it does for the society. Instead, they portray the hybrid technology as another symbol for a modernized, Western lifestyle which will

augment the owner's individual ego and social prestige. Guilt versus pride: this distinction can be traced to the religious traditions of the two cultures—Christianity versus paganism—which is nicely laid out by Steve Asma (2010):

For the pagans, honor and pride were valued, but for the Christians it is meekness and humility; for the pagans it was public shame, for Christians, private guilt; for pagans there was a celebration of hierarchy, with superior and inferior people, but for Christians there is egalitarianism; and for pagans there was more emphasis on justice, while for Christians there is emphasis on mercy (turning the other cheek). Underneath all these values, according to Nietzsche, is a kind of psychology—one dominated by resentment and guilt (Asma 2010)

How can we use psychoanalysis to characterize the psychological difference between the Christian guilt and the pagan pride? Through reading American and Chinese hybrid car ads as cultural symptoms, we see that when the American eco-consumers seek to *eliminate the Self*, their Chinese counterparts long to *expand the Self*. In the former case, the subject looks up to a (paternalistic) society that blames himself for failing to fulfill his social responsibility; in the latter case, the subject blames the society for not doing its job and thus ruining his/her personal enjoyment. At a glance, we cannot fail to notice the irony that a culture famous for individualism (i.e. American culture) sees eco-consumption as a collectivist calling, but a culture known for collectivism (i.e. Chinese culture) tends to consume eco-products for individual benefits. However, if looking beyond the superficial claims of these “collectivistic” or “individualistic” appeals, we see that Americans pursue their “collectivism” in an isolated and individualistic way—consumption.

They refuse to acknowledge the fact that in order to save the society from catastrophe they have to engage in real social communal relationships instead of just paying money at the cash register. On the other hand, the Chinese seek a type of “individualism” which is highly dependent on the desires of the close community around them. They relentlessly pursue “face value” and “magnificent air” in their commodity choices in order to seek approval or admiration from their friends and family members.

As mentioned above, the American consumers display symptoms of obsession. The obsessive is often troubled by the existential question “Am I dead or alive” and performs compulsive rituals to avoid terrible disasters from happening. By comparison, the Chinese consumers are more characterized by hysteria. The hysteric is not concerned with existential questions (as much the obsessive is) but is bothered by a different type of question “Am I a man or a woman?” Unsure of her sexual position, she is entrapped in the intersubjective web of the Other’s desire and confused about which subjective position she should identify with. Likewise, the Chinese are constantly captured between the desire of the West and the desire of the family—even in their love for Western products, it is not known if they aspire to a Westernized lifestyle or if they love Western products *because* other Chinese love it. Meanwhile, pragmatism and utilitarianism are used as symbolic shields to prevent them from realizing their subjection to the Other’s desire.

In the face of impending environmental crisis, American eco-consumerism is dominated by guilt and aversion, while its Chinese equivalent is underpinned by feelings of disgust and revulsion. The psychoanalytic remedy for obsession is to force the patient to confront the uncertainty in the Other's desire, while the hysterical should be treated by realizing the nothingness of the Other's desire—that the Other is just a construction. These structures are deeply embedded in a country's cultural historical contexts. Although the Americans have gone green, the Chinese would not follow suit—because their unconscious desires are real, not subject to change.

## CHAPTER VI CONCLUSION

An ancient Chinese proverb tells the story of three Buddhist monks trying to carry water from the foot of a hill: “One monk will shoulder two buckets of water, two monks will share the load, but add a third and no one will want to fetch water.”<sup>62</sup> This story mocks the fact that antagonistic group dynamics stagnates collective action, which I believe illustrates the quagmire of today’s global environmental movement. The countries that refuse to share responsibilities in international climate conferences, the governments who postpone environmental actions for quicker economic development, and the people who dismiss ecological crises as “all politics, no science,” are all like these three monks. Their environmental inaction is driven less by a lack of love for raw, material nature than by an antagonistic relationship with each other. Meanwhile, the reverse is also true: most people that actively partake in environmental actions (such as the militant environmentalists, or the conspicuous green consumers) derive a large part of their motivation from the symbolic relationship amongst human subjects. Since our desire for nature is constituted by the splitting function of the symbolic order, we cannot return to the primordial harmony between humans and nature, as many utopian environmentalists suggest. Instead, we should deal with the irreversible split of our own desire—which weaves together the materiality of our being—and learn to symbolically coexist with others.



In light of this idea, this dissertation has outlined the structures of desire that motivate (or fail to motivate) the environmental movements in the U.S. and China with the hope of treating the different psychopathologies embedded in these two cultures. I did so by analyzing advertising—the professional media system designed to stimulate mass desire (and a system recently understood to be an efficient tool in promoting popular environmentalism). To contextualize American green advertising, I first examined environmental NGOs' public service ads. Their apocalyptic vision of environmental calamity, punishment, and redemption, I argued, evoke a type of religious subjectivity deeply rooted in the Western Judeo-Christian tradition. In particular, these ads induce an experience of the religious Sublime which arouse fear and anxiety in the American public and drive them to seek shelter in the utopian rhetoric of corporate green advertising. By constructing a fantasy of human-nature harmony and ecological utopia, corporate green advertising allows consumers to distance themselves from the traumatic kernel of their desire—the desire to destroy and be destroyed by Nature—and continue to derive enjoyment from it under the protection of this new eco-fantasy.

When analyzing the predecessors of Chinese green advertising—governmental propaganda posters—I argued that Mao's socialist propaganda successfully promoted nationwide destruction of nature by providing an empowering fantasy to shield the Chinese from their traumatic encounters

with nature. Deng's economic reform unleashed historically repressed social antagonism. It disrupted the ruling ideology of socialist collectivism and in its place erected a new ideological fantasy of economic prosperity and individual well-being. Still associating environmentalism with patriotic appeals, official environmental propaganda harnessed little success and saw the continued destruction of nature in the next three decades. Meanwhile, international environmental NGOs entered China and introduced the Western apocalyptic-styled rhetoric into Chinese media. Although their efforts successfully boosted the public's awareness about environmental protection, they ultimately presented environmentalism as an avant-garde Western ideology, which was not to be pursued for a love of nature in its own but for a desire to emulate Western modernity and to claim China's international hegemony.

In a side-by-side comparison between Chinese and American green advertising, I focused on the advertisements for hybrid gasoline-electric cars, one of the pillar products of the green capitalistic economy. My analysis showed that while most American hybrid car ads erase the car—a guilt symbol associated with environmental pollution and resource exhaustion—from a fantasy of ecological harmony, their Chinese counterparts exaggerate the size of the car—an individual status symbol—and downplay the hybrid's environmental values which could benefit the society. Ironically, we see that American culture which is known for its individualism consider “green” as collectivistic, but Chinese society—a typical collectivistic culture—purchases

“green” for individualistic purposes. To solve this riddle, I probed into the affective economies undergirding these two sets of ads—guilt and pride, which mark the difference between Christianity and paganism. Driven by a guilty conscience and a fear of disaster, American eco-consumers ritualistically purchase green products to exchange for a moment of mental peace. They demonstrate symptoms of obsession: Since the obsessive would rather follow direct behavioral instructions than confront the uncertain desire of the Other, the eco-consumers adopt consumption—an extremely individualistic and solitary solution to environmental crises. By comparison, Chinese eco-consumers display symptoms of hysteria: Less concerned about her existential crisis, the hysteric is always entrapped in the webs of the Other’s desire and confused about which subjective position she should identify with. Likewise, Chinese eco-consumers are stuck pursuing the shifting desires of the West and of their family and close friends. When these two reference systems conflict, they evoke the fantasy of utilitarianism and pragmatism to cover up their subjection to the Other. Their response to environmental crises is not guilt but disgust—which leads to the common urge to escape the polluted society into their private utopias.

Despite the modern, Western appeals used in Chinese green advertisements, Chinese consumers still do not purchase as many green products as Americans do. Seeing the stagnating growth in green consumerism, Chinese government and scholars believe that green

advertising and marketing cannot stand on their own; instead they need an important supplement—governmental propaganda campaigns—to jumpstart the green economy. As a country where Western commercial environmentalism does not sell, China can be read as a symptom of global neoliberal capitalism. Although the transnational advertising industry tries to spread a universal vision of green consumerism around world, this universalizing scheme meets its resistance in China and fails to produce the anticipated economic or ecological results. This shows that advertising, in spite of its dazzling visual power and excellent outreach capability, is not a full determinant of consumer desire. Instead, the desires allegedly “created” by advertising are embedded in a society’s particular cultural-historical conditions and thus cannot be universalized. In the introduction section, I argued that the emergence of American green marketing was overdetermined by three social movements occurring in the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s—the environmental movement in the political realm, the neoliberal movement in the economic realm, and the New Age movement in the religious and cultural realm. By contrast, Chinese green marketing rose in a very different historical background, which I will reiterate in the following paragraphs.

First, in the political realm, China never experienced a powerful environmental movement as the U.S. did. Lacking a democratic tradition, Chinese politics are deeply influenced by Confucianism, which proposes strict

social hierarchy and demarcates the responsibilities of the ruler and the subject. This belief extricates ordinary Chinese citizens from being concerned about public issues such as the environmental crises. Mao's propaganda from the 1950s to 1970s preached socialist egalitarianism and called on the Chinese to participate in collective actions, but these actions eventually coalesced into a collective violence against nature. The post-Mao Chinese society relapsed into the Confucius tradition and citizens again became indifferent toward public affairs. Most citizens believe that environmental protection is the government's business (Zhang 2008).

Differences in the cultural realm also prevent the smooth adoption of green consumerism by China. Western media often argue that the world's environmental apocalypse begins from China, but the Chinese public, lacking the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, is alien to the notion of the apocalypse. The country's mainstream religion, Buddhism, contains a cyclical perception of time and conceives prosperity and destitution as inevitable seasonal change. Its longtime ruling ideology, Confucianism, elaborates on everyday philosophy but is fundamentally agnostic about transcendental issues. Although transnational advertising tries to import Western apocalyptic rhetoric to Chinese media, they are received as more of a western avant-garde aesthetic style than a disturbing religious fear.

Lastly, in the economic realm, China's burgeoning capitalism has not reached the stage of mass consumerism which has paved the road for green

consumption in the West. As mentioned above, China's rapid economic development polarizes the society into the poor and the rich. The poor, comprising most of the population, are still struggling to enhance their very low living standards. As users but not consumers, they seek to fulfill needs instead of desires and thus have no demand for expensive status-symbols such as green products. The rich, including a relatively large group of rising middle class, on the other hand, can distinguish themselves by any conspicuous consumption and do not need to purchase green products to make themselves stand out. Overall, the majority of Chinese consumers, poor or rich, place their immediate personal welfare ahead of environmental degradation—except under the condition that environmental degradation has influenced their individual well-being. As a consequence, the meaning of “green” in China generally refers to a product's benefits for *individual consumer's health improvement* instead of its contribution to *public environmental protection*. Also, the green products currently available in China are mainly limited to food and certain luxury goods, such as home electronics, furniture, and cars.

After analyzing these cultural, political, and ideological differences between China and the U.S., we realize that there is no universal recipe for the environmental problems we encounter. Locally centered and heterogeneous in nature, ecological crises are overdetermined by various problems in our psycho-cultural, political-economic and scientific realities.

Thus the solution must also be integrated from these three registers. Without ruling out the legitimacy of the measures taken in the other two registers, this dissertation employs psychoanalysis to examine the cultural pathologies manifested in Chinese and American green consumerism. Although I acknowledge the impossibility to make definitive arguments about collective psyches, I hope to raise a few important points about Chinese and American cultural distinctions that have led to some baffling problems which environmental activists and policy-makers have encountered. Due to the limited space in this dissertation, I was only able to analyze a relatively small sample of environmental advertisements before deriving relatively general claims about cultural differences between “the Chinese” and “the Americans.” In my future research, however, I would make up for this deficiency by incorporating a more diverse array of research objects (such as environmental documentaries, websites, mailing lists, public policies, etc.) and applying a more multi-layered methodology (such as participant observation, interviews, and surveys) to enrich this cross-cultural comparative analysis.

After acknowledging this weakness of my project, I still believe that generalization is indispensable in a comparative analysis and should be done strategically from time to time. In fact, the tendency to generalize might be inherent in the notion of “comparison” itself: In order to compare and differentiate, one must first categorize and identify. If we think in the poststructuralist way and insist that every individual is ultimately different

from another, then society or culture will turn into of an infinite plane of differences which eventually renders every individual the same.<sup>63</sup> But must we choose between over-generalization and over-differentiation? Not necessarily. A way out of this dilemma, proposed by Copjec (2004), is to identify the common **absence**—instead of the common **positive essence**—in a collective phenomenon. For instance, when trying to identify the common ground among American environmental advertisements, I focused on their common exclusion—waste and pollution—which are not only absent from these ads but also are structurally expelled from them. By comparing the affective economies (guilt and repulsion) that relate a system to its exclusion (waste/pollution), I was able to read Chinese and American cultural differences in a symptomatic—instead of a positivistic—way.

Overall, I argue that psychoanalysis has taught us four lessons through this dissertation. First, intertextuality: Green advertisements cannot be interpreted alone without considering their relationship with the rhetoric of radical environmentalism and governmental propaganda. Freud argues that nothing happens by accident; there is always a reason behind every act, thought, and feeling. In the same vein, advertising does not simply turn “green” because of corporations’ good will; it does so in order to fulfill a psycho-cultural desire of an alarmed and anxious public. Second, intersubjectivity: Nature is always already mediated by symbolic relationships and our needs are always already contaminated by the



excessiveness of desire. Since there is no access to pristine nature inside and out, what drives environmentalism is not our love for a raw, materialistic nature or an instinct to fulfill our pure, biological needs, but our intersubjective relationship with the (real and imagined) others in our lives. Third, indeterminacy: Meaning is indeterminate—advertisers can never fully control how consumers would interpret the green ads. Also, desire is indeterminate—both advertisers and consumers are always guessing, supposing, and speculating the desires of the Other and their own desires rise from this very uncertainty about the Other. This uncertainty rules out the possibility for full ideological control or deception and opens up the space for resistance and counter-hegemonic politics. Fourth, impossibility: Since the kernel of human enjoyment is made of waste, destruction, and excessive *jouissance*, the utopian dream of human-nature harmony is impossible. Through insisting on the irreducible split between humans and nature, psychoanalysis rejects any type of utopian politics in the environmental movement. Instead, it persists in the ethics of the unconscious and argues that we should deal with our incompleteness on a day-to-day basis and never give up on our impossible desire.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “The Challenge of Copenhagen: Bridging the U.S.-China Divide”  
<http://www.e360.yale.edu/content/feature.msp?id=2159>

“In China, Pelosi Calls for Cooperation on Climate” May 27, 2009  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/28/world/asia/28pelosi.html>

The New York Times editorial : “Climate Trap” June 15, 2009  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/16/opinion/16tue2.html>

<sup>2</sup> See “The New Yorker” entry on [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org). Access on May 29, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> 1976. *Ecological Marketing (Educational workshop series)*. American Marketing association. [http://www.amazon.com/Ecological-marketing-Educational-workshop-series/dp/0877570760/ref=sr\\_1\\_2?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1271013361&sr=1-2](http://www.amazon.com/Ecological-marketing-Educational-workshop-series/dp/0877570760/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1271013361&sr=1-2)

<sup>4</sup> Fitchett and Prothero (1999) argue that the consumers have to do their part in protecting the environment (namely, purchase green products), just as the politicians, activists, policymakers, and bureaucrats play their part in shaping the policy.

<sup>5</sup> These three distinctive views of communication are summarized in the work of Nastasia & Rakow (2004) who classify them as a “theory of knowledge,” a “theory of power,” and a “theory of being.”

<sup>6</sup> “Green’ nightclub plans unveiled: A new nightclub in the Netherlands plans to offer clubbers an environmentally-friendly night out - in part by having them power the place through their dancing.” Wednesday, 15 November 2006. Accessed through:  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6147410.stm>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.lacan.com/zizalien.htm>

<sup>8</sup> “China overtakes the U.S. as the world’s largest CO2 emitter”  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2007/jun/19/china.usnews>

<sup>9</sup> “As China goes, so does global warming”—NYT Dec 16, 2007

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/16/weekinreview/16revkin.html?scp=28&sq=china+environment&st=nyt>

<sup>10</sup> “China growth path could exceed planet's resources”—Associate Press, 16 Sep 2009

<http://www.usnews.com/articles/science/2009/09/16/china-growth-path-could-exceed-planets-resources.html>

<sup>11</sup> “China is facing 'environmental apocalypse’” <sup>12 Sep 2006</sup>

<http://www.peopleandplanet.net/doc.php?id=2838>

<sup>12</sup> In American media’s fetishistic pursuit of China’s lip-syncing scandal during the 2008 Olympics opening ceremony, we see a perfect case of hysteria that enjoys ruining the enjoyment of the Other.

<sup>13</sup> Žižek’s (1997) example is that military policies like “Don’t ask, don’t tell” came into existence because the homoerotic economy in the Army cannot hold up without censoring homosexuality (24).

<sup>14</sup> Copjec has made the similar criticism of Butler’s take on sex.

<sup>15</sup> Ironically, the “i” turned up on all the iPods, iPhones, iPads, and other i-products.

<sup>16</sup> The blueprint process first coats the paper with a photosensitive compound; then it exposes parts of the compound to strong light which will turn blue; finally it washes away the un-reacted compound and leaves white lines on the paper.

<sup>17</sup> For a sublime experience with the sun, see Danny Boyle’s movie *Sunshine* (2007): On a mission to ignite the dying sun, the psychologist of the spaceship crew loves sitting in the observation room and staring at the sun. He wants the computer to turn the light up but the computer says, “If you let 4% of the sun’s light in, it will burn your retina, the brightest the human eye can tolerate is 3.1%.”

<sup>18</sup> The global warming narrative is the best illustration of the Lacanian theory of the fantasy. A terrifying real (the Sun) is shielded by the protective fantasy (the atmosphere). When the fantasy falls apart by a symptom (CO<sub>2</sub>), our reality is shaken and we are struck by anxiety.

<sup>19</sup> Sut Jhally writes, “20th century advertising is the most powerful and sustained system of propaganda in human history.” See “Advertising at the Edge of the Apocalypse”:

<http://www.sutjhally.com/articles/advertisingattheed/>

<sup>20</sup> Shapiro listed a series of Mao’s environmental blunders which include: encouraging birth and persecuting the demographer Ma Yinchu who advised to control China’s population, the wasteful “backyard” steel campaign during the Great Leap Forward, unscientific and unsustainable agricultural practices which led to the three years famine (In the 1980s, the Chinese official media called it “three years of natural disasters”—this shows how “nature” has always been politicized in China, used as a political alibi or a negative limit of human power), damming shallow rivers to create reservoirs which soon dry out, misapplying the “Dazhai” model throughout China by turning hills into arable land, creating the Panzhihua steel complex which induced industrial pollution of the air, water, and soil, devastating tropical rainforests in Xishuangbanna for rubber plantations, etc.

<sup>21</sup> Here I do not mean an encounter with the objective, brute “nature” as such—which does not exist—but a trauma encounter discursively constituted as “natural disasters.” The trauma that is repressed/disavowed here is not the actual natural disasters but the discourse of fear for the monstrous “nature.”

<sup>22</sup> Just as how the origin of the Western printing press precipitated the loss of the local community and contributed to the simultaneous rise of nationalism and individualism.

<sup>23</sup> Considering the kinship between political propaganda and advertising, this role-modeling technique is also shared by Western consumer advertising.

<sup>24</sup> Since the Han dynasty (206 BC- 220 AD), Confucianism has been employed by the feudalist rulers’ as the main ideological state apparatus. The Han politician Dong Zhongshu preached Confucius’ “three cardinal guides” (*san gang*)—monarch guides subject, father guides son, husband guides wife—and established centralized control by subordinating all people to authority figures at one level above them. The subsequent dynasties followed suit and adopted the method of “model emulation” to maintain political power (19). Similarly, Mao envisioned a society in which “the advanced acting as models for the intermediate, and the intermediate as models for the backward, all of society would develop through emulation.” (26).

<sup>25</sup> They were everywhere from “the front gates, doors onto the courtyard, walls of a room, besides a room’s windows, or on the water vat, rice cabinet, granary, or livestock fold” (Wang Shucun 1985: 5) Wang Shucun (ed.), *Ancient Chinese Woodblock New Year Prints* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1985).

<sup>26</sup> China is one of the countries that are most affected by natural disasters. It had 6 of the world’s top 10 deadliest natural disasters among which the top 3 occurred in China. *China Daily* quotes figures from the Ministry of Civil Affairs: “Natural disasters have affected on average 200 million people and cost 100 billion yuan (\$12.05 billion) a year in China” ([http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-10/08/content\\_270061.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/en/doc/2003-10/08/content_270061.htm)).

<sup>27</sup> “When the stables were burnt down, on returning from court, Confucius said, ‘Was anyone hurt?’ He did not ask about the horses.” *Analects* X.11, tr. Arthur Waley

<sup>28</sup> This is why George W. Bush’s “war against terror” sounds absurd.

<sup>29</sup> This point is stated in Lacan’s essay “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud.”

<sup>30</sup> Here we see the environmental consequences for cultural crises lamented by the Frankfurt School such as mechanical reproduction (Benjamin) or homogenization of mass desires (Adorno). Natural environment and our psychic environment are indeed connected.

<sup>31</sup> Shapiro (2001) explains: “Mao’s voluntarist philosophy held that through concentrated exertion of human will and energy, material conditions could be altered and all difficulties overcome in the struggle to achieve a socialist utopia” (3).

<sup>32</sup> In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan explains the stain through a discussion about the painting *The Ambassador*. He emphasizes that the stain is an eye that gazes at me all the more in that it does not see me, thus stains the mirror.

<sup>33</sup> By contrast, Western environmental rhetoric often uses images of the “wounded” body of nature and calls the spectator to identify it with one’s own body.

<sup>34</sup> Landsberger writes that “seemingly horror images in the eyes of today’s environmentalists, [...] belching smokestacks were seen as proof of the success of socialist construction.”

<sup>35</sup> Recycling waste materials have been another popular topic for governmental propaganda, they were simply considered as a socialist virtue of frugality instead of an environmentalist action. This confirms Stavrakakis’ point that the elements of today’s so-called “environmentalism” are all retroactively sutured together from preexisting discursive elements.

<sup>36</sup> Sparrows were considered as a pest during the Four Pests Campaign between 1958 and 1960 and were killed in massive quantities by peasants. Their killing had caused an ecological imbalance which exacerbated the three years famine. After 1960, the killing of sparrows was brought to a halt after the National Academy of Science found their ecological benefits, but the slogan “eliminating the four pest” persisted a few more decades to call for the killing of rats, flies, and mosquitoes.

<sup>37</sup> Landsberger argues that the use of children as a role-model inverts the traditional hierarchy of the society which puts grownups in shame. I however offer a rather different interpretation for the rhetorical function of children.

<sup>38</sup> “The militarization of society,” writes Shapiro, “was one strategy in the Party’s attempt to break up the traditional Confucian family structure and create a ‘new socialist man’.” (6)

<sup>39</sup> This has also explains the rampant nepotism in Chinese politics.

<sup>40</sup> The five stresses refer to the stresses on decorum, manners, hygiene, discipline, and morals. The four beautifies are the beauties of the mind, language, behavior, and environment. The three loves are the loves for the motherland, socialism, and Chinese Communist Party.

<sup>41</sup> Shapiro writes, “By 1959, the people have no grain, and in 1960 and 1961 there was a great famine. So Mao said ‘open the wilderness to plant grain’ ... The forests were cut without restraint so as to plant grain in the mountains” (10).

<sup>42</sup> “News background: Our Country’s Arbor Day and the Volunteer National Tree-planting Movement” : [http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2009-03/11/content\\_10993060.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/newscenter/2009-03/11/content_10993060.htm)

<sup>43</sup> See Richards' distinctions of the carnivalesque versus self-reflexive emotionality.

<sup>44</sup> We should notice that each one of the three posters include a fleet of birds flying in the air. What is the semiotic significance of birds? Birds are signs of freedom—spirit. Hope. They fly in groups, symbolizing collective action in synchrony.

<sup>45</sup> The 2008 Olympics is when the Chinese was reunited in the name of national pride—here we see that patriotism doesn't always exist, it is summoned by emergency and threat.

<sup>46</sup> "Mutant Human Fish – 'Stop climate change before it changes you' campaign" [www.trendhunter.com](http://www.trendhunter.com)  
<http://www.trendhunter.com/trends/manfish-wwf>

<sup>47</sup> Like in *Seinfeld* a person stared at a painting of Kramer and said, "He is a loathsome offensive brute, yet I can't look away!"

<sup>48</sup> Curiously Lacan (1977) also talked about the death drive as lamella, a gill-shaped being in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.

<sup>49</sup> Yet nudity is always tolerated in single-sex public spaces such as public baths or public locker rooms.

<sup>50</sup> "China leads accusation that rich nations are trying to sabotage climate treaty: Angry statement from 131 countries at climate talks in Bangkok claims rich nations are rejecting historical responsibilities" 5 October 2009. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/oct/05/climate-change-kyoto>

"Consuming nations should pay for carbon dioxide emissions, not manufacturing countries, says China" [guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk), Tuesday 17 March 2009. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2009/mar/17/climate-change-china>

<sup>51</sup> Though the actual environmental impacts of hybrid cars have already been contested; see: "Earth-Friendly Elements, Mined Destructively" By Keith Bradsher; December 25, 2009.  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/26/business/global/26rare.html? r=2>

52 The Prius became the first hybrid vehicle manufactured in China under China's national hybrid vehicle certification system, which came into effect on October 1, 2005. <http://www.funponsel.com/blog/news/first-hybrid-cars-in-china-the-toyota-prius.html>

53 Langdon Winner has made the point about technology running increasingly out of human control in his book *Autonomous Technology*.

54 In the Freudian infant-mother metaphor, the obsessive is the infant who is separated from the mother's breast (object) but then recognize the breast as forever lost—he refuses to acknowledge the fact that the breast is still a part of the mother (Other). See Fink 118-119. The obsessive refuses to acknowledge the breast comes from the mother.

55 Bob Garfield from Ad Age expresses his incredulity: “Striving isn't accomplishing, and it strikes us as a bit disingenuous to be selling some unattainable vision of the future when the present includes such eco-whores as the Toyota Land Cruiser, which is to sustainability what a Czech brothel visit is to chastity.” [http://adage.com/garfield/post?article\\_id=121747](http://adage.com/garfield/post?article_id=121747)

56 Even bottled water now are tagged as “zero calories” food.

57 Jon Gertner. 2009. *The New York Times Magazine*, Apr 19.

58 “One hundred years of turmoil: the Life of Empress Dowager's Car.” Chinese Automobile Pictorial. 1996.

59 “The vicissitudes of Chinese Automobile History.” [www.chetx.com](http://www.chetx.com)  
[http://bbs.chetx.com/149/57\\_921039\\_921039.htm](http://bbs.chetx.com/149/57_921039_921039.htm)

60 NB is the short form for *niu bi*, a Chinese colloquial expression meaning “unbelievable.”

61 “*Tizhu gongfu jingdezhai*” by Fang, Hui in Song Dynasty.  
<http://wenda.tianya.cn/wenda/thread?tid=376e937ff7874b24>

62 China Org. “China Org.” “Three Monks.” Retrieved on 2007-01-10.z

63 In *Imagine There's No Woman* (2004), Copjec has discussed this poststructuralist dilemma of absolute difference equaling absolute sameness.



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