"I hope they really evolve into a different species from us": Human-Nature Disconnection, Eeriness, and Social Class in Han Song's "Submarines"

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Abstract: Human-nature disconnection is commonly seen as one of the major problems caused by modernization with many in the industrialized world advocating for people, and especially children, to spend more time in contact with nature. In this paper, I argue that the 2014 short story "Submarines" by the Chinese SF writer Han Song (b. 1965) challenges this widespread idea of a "return to nature" while calling attention to the links between environmental problems and class politics. I further argue that the story accomplishes this via the "eeriness" that Li Guangyi sees as the most apparent feature of Han Song's literary style as well as by invoking the critical realism of Lu Xun (1881–1936), making the story an example of the "generic hybridity" of SF that Cara Healey has previously examined. As such, I contend that "Submarines" does not present the reader with ready-made answers, but instead offers a way to think about how ecological crises intersect with inequality.

Keywords: Chinese science fiction, eeriness, Han Song, Lu Xun, nature-deficit disorder, social class

1. Introduction

In a world where herds of submarines seem to be a more common sight than shoals of fish, a group of children that live in an unnamed city dive into the Yangtze River to encounter their migrant counterparts, who have somehow

adapted to life under the river's polluted waters. Finding the lifeworld of the newcomers incomprehensible and even disturbing, the city children return to the surface, where they later join a crowd of urban residents watching passively from the sidelines as a mysterious disaster befalls the submarines. Such is the plot of Han Song's (b. 1965) short story "Submarines" ("Qianting" 潜艇, 2014), a previously under-researched work of contemporary Chinese SF that uses its estranged setting to explore questions of environmental degradation and of inequality between social classes.

With multiple ecological and social crises drawing attention to the problems of a highly technologized way of life, the idea of a "return to nature" has become appealing for many, particularly in the industrialized and urbanized parts of the world. Disconnection with the natural world is seen as especially lamentable in the case of children with concepts like Richard Louv's "nature-deficit disorder" or NDD (Louv 36) used to describe how loss of physical contact with nature (in particular during childhood) can lead to mental and physical health problems. Although scholars, such as Elizabeth Dickinson, have criticized NDD and similar discourses for promoting "a fall-recovery narrative" that centers on a return to an idealized past and for ignoring the impacts of social inequality (Dickinson 315 and 330), the nostalgic images associated with the idea of living "closer to nature" still seem to give such discourses considerable rhetorical power.

In this article, I examine how "Submarines" challenges "return to nature" discourses in the Chinese context. Based on an examination of the interactions between diegetic estrangement, naturalization, and defamiliarization in the story, I demonstrate that "Submarines" utilizes literary estrangement in a way that seems atypical for SF in order to establish an eerie atmosphere that not only allows for multiple interpretations of its marvelous elements, but also casts tropes found in NDD narratives into an ironic light. By comparing the parallels between Han Song's story and the works of pioneering Chinese realist writer Lu Xun (1881–1936), I will also show that "Submarines" is marked by a generic hybridity of SF and Chinese critical realism through which it calls attention to the links between environmental problems and unequal economic and social relations. As such, I argue that "Submarines" is a useful avenue for what Dickinson calls "inward expansion" and offers a way to grapple with complex and pertinent questions about how social and cultural systems create ecological crises and inequality.

2. "Nature-deficit disorder," China, and SF

To illustrate the discourse around children and disconnection with nature, I now turn to the concept of "nature-deficit disorder" (hereafter NDD) and Elizabeth Dickinson's incisive analysis of it. Coined by journalist Richard Louv in his 2005 book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* as "a catchphrase and medical diagnostic metaphor" (Dickinson 316), the term NDD "describes the human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses" and suggests that these can be ameliorated through "positive physical connection to nature" (Louv 36). In the United States, Louv's book became a *New York Times* bestseller, and his

message has been widely embraced by both activists and public organizations, such as the US Forest Service (Dickinson 316).

A Chinese translation of *Last Child in the Woods* was published in the People's Republic of China in 2010. The translation effort was organized by China's oldest environmental NGO, Friends of Nature (*Ziran zhi you* 自然之友), whose chairman Yang Dongping warned in a new foreword to the book that China's exam-centric education system would help usher in "a complete rupture in the connection between youth of the Internet age and Nature" (Efird 1144). Science teacher and environmental education pioneer Liu Guochun has expressed similar sentiments with the following pithy comment: "I grew up in nature. My students are growing up in the classroom" (1443). Although these examples are not necessarily representative of wider popular opinion, they show that NDD and similar ideas resonate among environmentalists in contemporary China as well as the West.

However, while the benefits of being out in nature may seem commonsensical and do have at least some basis in empirical research, Dickinson points out that Louv's account evokes "a fall-recovery narrative – that children are separated from nature and must return" (315). According to Dickinson, such narratives can in turn "reify the human-nature split, obscure environmental justice, influence irresponsible behavior, and normalize contemporary conditions and relationships," for example, by ignoring environmental degradation in the past or by elevating only certain kinds of childhoods (321). Therefore, while the efforts of Louv, Yang, Liu, and others to counter the negative effects of disconnection with nature are certainly commendable, NDD discourse should be approached critically, and alternative frameworks for understanding such disconnections should be sought.

For a perhaps more nuanced perspective on disconnection with nature and environmental degradation in contemporary China, I next turn to Chinese SF, specifically to Han Song's short story "Submarines." The idea that Chinese SF is especially well-suited to shedding light on Chinese society has previously been advanced by scholars such as Mingwei Song, who has examined how Chinese SF is able to represent an "invisible," otherwise unrepresentable social reality ("Representations of the Invisible" 552), and Cara Healey, who has analyzed how Chen Qiufan's novel *Waste Tide* (*Huangchao* 荒潮, 2013) specifically illuminates the complex phenomenon of ecological destruction ("Estranging Realism"). In the following three sections, I analyze "Submarines" along similar lines by examining how the story's eerie atmosphere, ironic echoes of NDD tropes, and parallels to the critical realist works of Lu Xun facilitate reflection on the links between environmental degradation and unequal economic and social relations.

3. "Submarines," estrangement, and the eeriness of the (un)natural

Recounted in the first person by an unnamed narrator recalling their childhood, Han Song's short story "Submarines" gives an account of the presence and eventual disappearance of a fleet of submarine-dwelling migrant workers in a city along the Yangtze River. Amid speculations that the migrants might be

developing into a new civilization, the narrator and their friends dive beneath the surface of the river, finding their peasant counterparts well-adapted to underwater life. In the end, however, a fire of unknown origin spreads among the submarines while the city's entire native population passively observes the destruction, after which the migrant workers stop coming to the cities of the Yangtze.[1]

Han Song is widely considered one of the major authors of contemporary Chinese SF (Isaacson 4; Healey, "Madmen and Iron Houses" 517; Song, "After 1989" 8), and his works have been variously described as "intensely political" and "couched in layers of allegory" (Liu 112), "dark and experimental" (Cigarini 20), and exhibiting his "eerie imagination and fulsome language" (Wang 26). Arguing for the uniqueness of Han Song's style among Chinese SF authors, Li Guangyi has suggested that "no phrase captures Han Song's writing better than 'eerie' (*guiyi* 诡异)" and that "the most apparent characteristic [of this eeriness] is its indeterminacy." To support this claim, Li notes that Han Song's stories commonly feature "mysterious images" that are explained either not at all or only inconclusively with the narrative also bringing up alternative possibilities for them (29). In this section, I argue that in a similar fashion, "Submarines" hinges upon the indeterminacy between the natural and the unnatural, which significantly complicates the idea of a "return to nature."

In order to better understand how this eerie indeterminacy is realized in "Submarines," I employ Simon Spiegel's theorization of the different forms of estrangement to examine how they are used in the story. In his challenge to Darko Suvin's definition of SF as the "genre of cognitive estrangement" (Suvin 3–15), Spiegel argues that on a formal level, science fiction "*does not estrange the familiar, but rather makes the strange familiar*" (Spiegel 372, emphasis original). Spiegel justifies this claim by breaking down Suvin's concept of "estrangement" into the three related but separate categories of "diegetic estrangement," "naturalization," and "defamiliarization" (375–376) and by arguing that "first-degree defamiliarization" (which operates on the formal level and does not depend on the prior use of naturalization) is in fact rare in SF (378). However, I argue that in "Submarines" all three of these elements are in fact present in an uneasy yet productive tension, which contributes to the story's eerie atmosphere.

First, let us consider diegetic estrangement, where "a marvelous element is introduced into a seemingly realistic world" (Spiegel, 375). In "Submarines," the most obvious example of this "marvelous element" (Suvin's "novum") are the eponymous vessels themselves, although less by virtue of their actual technical capabilities than of their prevalence and the fact that they have apparently been built by hand by ordinary craftspeople and farmers. Perhaps even more marvelous are the children of the migrant workers, who have seemingly adapted to underwater life in an accelerated form of evolution that would seem highly improbable in terms of real-world biology. In either case, both elements clearly exist in the otherwise more or less realistic world of the

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[1] In this article, references to the story will be mostly to the 2019 English translation by Ken Liu ("Submarines"), except when it is necessary to point out significant differences between the Chinese original ("Qianting") and the translation.

story and therefore fit unproblematically within the category of diegetic (not formal) estrangement.

However, in terms of naturalization, which Spiegel defines as the "process of normalizing the alien" (376) where a work "'behaves as if' its novum were normal and plausible" (377), "Submarines" presents a more complicated picture. To an extent, both the submarines and the aquatic children are indeed treated as "plausible" in that they are tentatively explained with reference to science and technology. Yet these explanations are presented to the reader as merely unconfirmed rumors and speculation circulating among the city residents, and indeed, they seem to raise more questions than they answer. For example, no explanation is offered for what may have caused the accelerated evolution of the peasant children, nor for how the city children are able to have a spoken conversation with them underwater. Rather than being fully naturalized and therefore presumably "accepted" (Spiegel 377) by the implied audience, the marvelous elements of the story instead remain "mysterious images" (in Li Guangyi's sense) that allow for multiple interpretations.

Finally, there is defamiliarization, or "the formal-rhetorical act of making the familiar strange" (Spiegel 376), which, unlike diegetic estrangement, is not meant to indicate that the world of the story is actually different from our own. In "Submarines," this is most apparent in unusual descriptions of diegetic elements, such as when the narrator refers to the stinking trash strewn across the surface of the river as "an unforgettable, lovely sight" (121), or when the submarines are compared to "wisps of rain-soaked clouds" (115) or to "a pack of hungry, silent wolves in the deep of winter" (121). Notably, despite Spiegel's claim that defamiliarizing the novum in SF "contradicts the genre in certain ways" (378), it is in fact the novum of the migrant workers' submarines that is made strange (or stranger) by the narration in the latter two examples.

It is this formal estrangement of marvelous and incompletely naturalized diegetic elements that helps explain the eeriness of "Submarines": the reader is not only kept unsure of whether the given techno-scientific justification for the novum (that the submarines are simply clever pieces of folk artisanship) is true within the world of the story, but also actively directed to think of alternative points of reference, such as animals and weather phenomena. The defamiliarizing language thus casts a shadow of indeterminacy over the submarines that renders them eerily (un)natural and makes it unclear whether they should be seen as examples of human encroachment on nature, a blurring of the line between the artificial and the biological, or perhaps even in some sense the *super*natural.[2] As such, in the next section I will examine in more detail how "Submarines" builds upon this eerie indeterminacy in order to portray environmental degradation and in doing so challenges the assumptions underlying NDD discourse.

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[2] While a detailed discussion of the relation between Han Song's "mysterious images" and the supernatural is beyond the scope of this article, it is perhaps worth noting that Han Song has expressed a certain amount of skepticism over the ability of science to fully explain natural phenomena: "Human knowledge and powers are limited, and because of this we should maintain an eternal reverence for the boundless universe" (qtd. in Li Guangyi 31).

4. The ironies of "nature-deficit disorder" and the pervasiveness of environmental degradation

The image of children playing in a polluted river filled with vaguely animalistic submarines also naturally leads us to consider how "Submarines" deals with questions of environmental degradation and children's lack of connection with the natural world. In her insightful article on Chen Qiufan's SF novel *Waste Tide*, Cara Healey argues that while "ecological destruction at times exceeds realism's expressive capabilities" ("Estranging Realism" 8), *Waste Tide* is able to capture the enormity of ecological devastation through science-fictional estrangement. In this section, I argue that "Submarines" uses its eerie indeterminacy to draw attention to environmental degradation similar to *Waste Tide*, but at the same time, also questions certain tropes found in NDD narratives and similar discourses through ironic juxtaposition and inversion.

The parallels between "Submarines" and NDD narratives are evident from the very first line, which also provides the framing of the story. According to Dickinson, one of the central features of NDD discourse is a trope that she terms "when I was young" after the phrase frequently used by adults to begin accounts in which "they sentimentally depict their ideal childhood experiences." In NDD discourse, the trope is specifically deployed in stories about "how modern childhood has negatively changed," evoking a fall-recovery narrative (320). In "Submarines," the narrator likewise starts their description of the riverside trip that opens the story with the words *xiao shihou* 小时候 (Han, "Qianting" 76), which might be translated as "when I was little" or "when I was a child."[3] As in NDD discourse, the phrase evokes a kind of childhood that belongs to the past and not to the narrator's present, an implication that is confirmed when the final lines of the story reveal that the submarines no longer travel along the Yangtze River.

However, the story's parallel to the "when I was young" trope is also an ironic one since instead of recalling an encounter with some wonder of the natural world (such as migrating animals), the narrator tells of going to see the migrant workers' submarines.[4] This outing is later followed by the narrator and their friends going for a swim in the Yangtze – a form of playing outside that might spark nostalgic memories in some, were it not for the detail that it takes place in a thoroughly polluted (yet still somehow "lovely") river. Unlike the typical "youth of the Internet age" that Yang Dongping refers to in his preface to *Last Child in the Woods*, the city children of *Submarines* clearly do spend time exploring the world outside their classrooms, but their explorations hardly fit into Louv's conception of "positive physical connection to nature" and may, in fact, even threaten their health.

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[3] Although the Chinese original does not specify the gender of the narrator, the phrase appears in Ken Liu's English translation as "as a boy" ("Submarines" 115).
[4] While this is not referred to in the narration, the setting of the story in the Yangtze region would suggest that the submarines might have taken the place of the possibly extinct *baiji* or Chinese river dolphin specifically. The English translation makes this connection more explicit by describing the subs as arriving to the city "in herds and pods" (Han, "Submarines" 115), while the original uses the less specific phrase *chengqun jiedui* 成群结队, "in large numbers" (Han, "Qianting" 76).

The juxtaposition of the "natural world" and the lifeworld of the city children is made more explicit in their encounter with their migrant counterparts, which also recalls the practice of naming promoted by Louv as an important tool for reconnecting with nature (Dickinson 327). In "Submarines," naming is foregrounded in a brief yet significant exchange between representatives of both groups, prompted by the "leader" of the city children asking the peasants whether the latter have ever seen a car:

> Finally, a look of curiosity appeared on the face of one of the peasant children. "A car? What's that?" His voice was barely a whisper. I thought he looked like a creature out of manga.
>
> "Ha, I knew it!" Our leader sounded pleased. "There are so many types of cars! Honda, Toyota, Ford, Buick... oh, and also BMV and Mercedes!"
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> "We don't know what you're talking about," said the peasant kid, his voice hesitant. "But we've seen lots of fish. There's red carp, gold carp, black carp, sturgeon, oh, and also white bream and Amur Bream!"
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> Now it was our turn to be nervous. We looked around but didn't see any fish. Our teachers had taught us all fishes in the Yangtze had gone extinct, so were the peasant children trying to trick us? Where could they have seen fish?
>
> "I hope they really evolve into a different species from us," muttered our leader. (120)

In this passage, both children demonstrate their skill in naming things that are relevant for their own lives with the similarity of phrasing underlying the contrast between their circumstances. Being more familiar with car brands than aquatic animals and apprehensive at the idea that the Yangtze might still contain fish, the city children certainly appear to be "nature-deficient" in Louv's sense. Conversely, one might assume that their rural peers are "closer to nature," as they are simultaneously knowledgeable about fish species and ignorant about modern technology. However, it must be noted that the apparent precondition for this knowledge of the "natural" world has been biological adaptation to living in the polluted (and thus "unnatural") waters of the Yangtze, which have marked their very bodies.

Instead of representing the possibility of a "return to nature" or even a remnant of an idyllic "pre-fall" time, the aquatic migrant children of "Submarines" function more as a reminder of the pervasiveness of environmental degradation, which by not discriminating between humans and non-human organisms challenges the "human-nature binary" (Dickinson 329) that NDD discourses evoke. Moreover, this pervasiveness means that at least for those in a similarly underprivileged position as the migrants of the story, environmental degradation may be a reality that one must simply adapt to, instead of something that one might have the opportunity to lament from a distance. In light of this, the narrator's defamiliarizing description of the trash-filled river as a "lovely sight" also gains a new significance: if there is no real "nature" left for children to explore and play in (as Louv and many others would prefer them do), are they not justified in finding enjoyment and beauty in what is actually there?

5. Generic hybridity, social class, and echoes of Lu Xun

As previously mentioned, one of Dickinson's major criticisms of NDD discourse is how its assumptions can obscure environmental justice and issues of power, including how environmental degradation relates to class politics (Dickinson 321–322).[5] By contrast, contemporary Chinese SF has often foregrounded questions of class difference and inequality. For example, both Cara Healey and Hua Li have analyzed how Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide* comments on the status of migrants working in China's waste processing industry. Li reads the novel as portraying what Rob Nixon has termed "slow violence," an attritional form of violence that occurs "out of sight" and principally affects those already afflicted by poverty. More broadly, this kind slow violence is also made visible in documentaries such as Wang Jiuliang's *Beijing Besieged By Waste* (*Laji weicheng* 垃圾围城, 2011), which focuses on the ecological and social impact caused by the landfills surrounding China's capital and the city's continuous expansion. In this section, I show how "Submarines" also approaches environmental degradation from a class-conscious perspective. However, in order to fully understand how class and environment issues intersect in "Submarines" and the challenge that its social commentary offers to NDD discourses, the story should also be considered in light of its parallels to the critical realist works of Lu Xun, often dubbed the "father of modern Chinese literature."

To clarify my approach, it is perhaps necessary to address the concept of "science fiction realism" that has been prominent in Chinese discussions of SF in recent years. Originally proposed by SF author Zheng Wenguang in 1981 and gaining new prominence after it was brought up in a speech by Chen Qiufan in 2012 (Peng 77), the framework of "science fiction realism" posits a somewhat nebulous connection between (social) reality and Chinese science fiction. Chen Qiufan, for example, has proposed that science fiction realism is a "style" (*fengge* 风格) that can encompass subgenres, such as space opera and cyberpunk, and that the difference between it and other forms of SF (such as formulaic Hollywood SF movies) is a matter of "truthfulness" or "authenticity" (*zhenshixing* 真实性) (39). Meng Qingshu holds that Chinese science fiction realism both "grasps reality holistically from a three-dimensional viewpoint" and "uses science fiction to reflect the future, showing deep concern for humanity" (72), while Peng Chao considers science fiction realism to have the three characteristics of "manifesting a shocking experience … combining exploration of the universe and reflection on humanity," "using metaphor to see clearly the social changes brought by science and technology," and "paying close attention to the relationship between science and technology and humanity, surpassing anthropocentrism and reflecting on the ultimate meaning of 'human' from a post-human perspective" (77).

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[5] In the Chinese context, one example of this obscuration might be the idea that Chinese children are (in Liu Guochun's words) "growing up in the classroom." While undoubtedly rooted in the realities of China's education system and its heavy emphasis on preparing for exams, this broad generalization ignores groups with limited access to formal education, such as the children of migrant workers, and thereby privileges middle-class viewpoints.

While the above formulations do help understand why many recent readers and critics are drawn to Chinese science fiction (including the works of Han Song, which Chen, Meng, and Peng all reference in their discussions), as definitions they are broad enough that "science fiction realism" seems to almost become a near-synonym for contemporary literary SF. Moreover, being focused on affirming the connection between SF and "reality," they do not offer much elucidation of the relationship between contemporary SF and the Chinese tradition of literary realism. As such, rather than trying to classify "Submarines" as either an example or a non-example of "science fiction realism," I focus on analyzing the genealogical connections between Han Song's story and the works of Lu Xun to help bring to light the political themes of the story.

The influence of Lu Xun on contemporary Chinese SF and Han Song especially has been noted by multiple scholars. Jia Liyuan even describes the latter as "an inheritor of the May Fourth tradition of cultural criticism and enlightenment as represented by Lu Xun" (104). In turn, Cara Healey has argued that Lu Xun is "foundational to contemporary Chinese sf" ("Madmen and Iron Houses" 512) and highlighted parallels between his works and SF stories such as Han Song's "The Passengers and the Creator" ("Chengke yu chuangzaozhe" 乘客与创造者, 2006). Healey regards these as examples of generic hybridity in which contemporary Chinese SF "combines, subverts, and reinterprets conventions of mainstream modern Chinese realism and Western science fiction subgenres" ("Estranging Realism" 2). I now adopt a similar approach by first comparing "Submarines" to Lu Xun's short story "My Old Home" ("Guxiang" 故乡, 1921), after which I will specifically look at Lu Xunian motifs in the climax of Han Song's story.

As in several other works by Lu Xun, the protagonist of "My Old Home" is an "urban-educated intellectual returning to his ancestral village" (Healey, "Estranging Realism" 9), in this particular case "with the sole object of saying goodbye" to his family's old house (Lu Xun, "My Old Home" 171). While there, he briefly reunites with his childhood friend Runtu, the son of an employee of the protagonist's family and his guide to the wonders of the countryside. However, the former camaraderie between the two has now been replaced by "a lamentably thick wall" (189) with Runtu treating the protagonist not as a friend, but as a master. Although depressed by this change, at the end of the story the protagonist realizes that his nephew and Runtu's son have already formed a bond similar to the one the two men once had and expresses hope that the two boys would not be driven apart or have to settle for unsatisfying lives like the previous generation: "They should have a new life, a life we have never experienced" (197).

As can be seen from the above, both "My Old Home" and "Submarines" hinge on an encounter between children from two different social classes, and both stories are wholly or partially framed as the recollections of the now grown-up and urban-educated viewpoint character. Moreover, the peasant child characters of both works are very well-informed about the natural world. Runtu demonstrates knowledge of various animals ranging from birds and seashells to a melon-stealing mammal that he calls "zha," while the aquatic migrants are familiar with different kinds of fish, as previously mentioned. Conversely, in both stories adult intellectuals maintain their difference from the

peasants by viewing them through a rationalizing, science-based lens: the protagonist of "My Old Home" secretly laughs at the adult Runtu for worshipping "idols" (197), and in "Submarines" a curious few, "mostly artists and poets" (Han, "Submarines" 118), speculate about the evolving civilization of the migrants and wish to study their folklore and customs.

However, there are also significant differences or inverted parallels between the two works. While "My Old Home" features the same milieu and characters at different points in time with the protagonist's introspective reflections on their changes forming a large part of his narrative, the narrator of "Submarines" restricts themself to recounting their childhood impressions, which limits the amount of information revealed to the reader and contributes to the story's eerie atmosphere. Moreover, while "My Old Home" centers on an urban resident coming to revisit their old family home, "Submarines" makes no mention of a connection between the city-dwellers and any ancestral lands in the countryside. Instead, Han Song's story has the peasants coming to the cities to work in "the dirtiest and most physically demanding jobs in exchange for the lowest and most uncertain wages," with the submarines acting as their temporary homes and as a replacement for the fields that they have lost to "local governments and real estate developers" ("Submarines" 119). In this manner, "Submarines" explicitly links the effects of China's rapid urbanization to environmental injustice and the socioeconomic exploitation and marginalization of the rural poor while also evoking familiar discourses about migrant workers' ability to suffer hardships or "eat bitterness" (*chiku* 吃苦).[6]

Perhaps most importantly, "Submarines" appears much less hopeful about the ability (or willingness) of children to look past class divisions than "My Old Home." In Lu Xun's story, the protagonist is very much impressed by Runtu's "strange lore," comparing the peasant boy favorably to his sheltered former friends ("My Old Home" 179), and both he and his nephew easily bond with Runtu and his son, respectively. The city children of "Submarines" are similarly confronted with the realization that the peasant children know more about nature than they do. Yet, they react to it with disquiet rather than admiration, and their further attempts to play with the migrants are stymied because the two groups do not know any of the same games. Instead of "new life" in Lu Xun's sense of a more equal society, the encounter between the two groups points towards the inception of "new life" in the form of an aquatic off-shoot of humanity that may have nothing in common with the land-based one: "It was like a picture of fish and shrimp versus cattle and sheep – was that the future?" (Han, "Submarines" 120).

The lack of reconciliation between classes is further highlighted in the climax of "Submarines." A fire of unknown origin destroys the anchored submarines, which for some reason do not try to escape the flames by simply diving under the surface.[7] The narrator observes both this destruction, thinking with "shock and worry" about the peasant children, and the either excited or

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[6] For an examination of the evolution of this concept up to the early 2010s, as well as its relevance to attitudes towards rural-to-urban migrants, see Griffiths and Zeuthen.

[7] Although the narrator does not comment on whether the fire was accidental or intentionally set, their musings about how the river seems to be "defying the physical properties endowed by nature" and on whether "another fantastic fire was burning underwater" (122) might be interpreted as suggesting the use of an incendiary weapon that cannot be extinguished with water, explaining why the subs are unable to save themselves.

dulled reactions of the other city-dwellers, who have gathered "to witness the death of alien creatures in the river, to watch as the uninvited guests achieved total freedom" (122). At the same time, the narrator notes that witnessing the fire does not actually make them feel "sad or mournful" or that it has any effect on their own future (122–123), making it ambiguous to what extent they are different from the other residents of the city.

This kind of tension between the loner and the crowd is also a well-known motif in the writings of Lu Xun, such as in his description of an execution scene in the preface to his 1923 collection *Call to Arms* (*Nahan* 呐喊), where he "diagnoses the cruelty and numbness of the masses turning on their own as one of the primary illnesses of the Chinese" (Healey, "Estranging Realism" 13). More specifically, the execution account is connected to the climax of "Submarines" by references to the apathetic or numb expressions of the onlookers and to the event itself as a "spectacle" (Lu Xun, "Preface" 7) or "show" (Han, "Submarines" 122). In addition, the focus on children in the scene both as the victims of the mysterious fire and as the ambiguously innocent viewpoint character also recalls the end of "A Madman's Diary" ("Kuangren riji" 狂人日記, 1918), with its famous call to "save the children" (Lu Xun, "Diary" 53) from being corrupted by China's "cannibalistic" traditional culture. While "Submarines" makes no reference to literal cannibalism, Han Song alluded to this motif in an interview with Chiara Cigarini in 2014 (the same year that "Submarines" was published) when describing the role that aliens play in his stories:

> … on one hand, it's like the Western world is the alien. On the other hand, it's like we (the Chinese people) are the aliens. We're alienating ourselves from our hearts; in this sense Chinese people are themselves becoming monsters. We're eating everything: the environment, our culture, our people. (Cigarini 22)

At this point, I return to the "mysterious image" of the submarines and their specific significance in the context of class division and Han Song's other works. Mysterious means of mass transportation feature prominently in several of Han Song's stories, such as the novels *Subway* (*Ditie* 地铁, 2010) and *High-Speed Rail* (*Gaotie* 高铁, 2012) and the short stories "Security Check" ("Anjian" 安检, 2014) and "The Passengers and the Creator." However, unlike the trains and airplanes of these stories, or the Western and Japanese car brands listed by the "leader" of the city children in the passage quoted in section four, the eponymous vessels of "Submarines" do not appear to represent high-tech, high-speed modernity or foreign influence in China. Instead, they are constructed from cheap materials (such as scrap metal, fiberglass, and plywood) and painted in styles that are noted to reflect a sense of humor typical of the peasants. Moreover, the urbanites find no evidence that the submarine makers had received foreign aid or inspiration from Western culture, such as from the works of Jules Verne (Han, "Submarines" 117–118).[8] At the same time, their

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[8] The crude and low-tech quality of the submarines also invites comparison to Han Song's "Regenerated Bricks" (*Zaishengzhuan* 再生砖, 2010), where the eponymous bricks are made from the rubble and bodies left behind by an earthquake, mixed with wheat straw. However,

ability to hide underwater and surface unexpectedly recalls Carlos Rojas' reading of the buried and hidden subway in Han Song's 2010 novel as comparable to the unconscious (36–37). These aspects reinforce the importance of the ambiguously "unnatural" submarines as also representing a peasant culture and way of life whose presence is devalued and rejected by the city-dwellers, who respond to it as an unwelcome reminder of their own role in the "slow violence" against the environment and the rural population.[9]

Based on the above, it would seem fair to say that Han Song sees disconnection with nature and environmental degradation in a Lu Xunian fashion, that is, as a symptom of a wider phenomenon of alienation, which also includes inhumanity towards one's fellow citizens. In "Submarines," moreover, this inhumanity specifically manifests along class lines and is explicitly linked to the displacement and economic exploitation of the rural-to-urban migrants. As such, unlike the forms of NDD discourse that Dickinson criticizes, Han Song's story calls attention to not only how environmental degradation affects different social groups unequally, but also to how it should be understood in conjunction with the marginalization and dehumanization of those most vulnerable to its effects.

6. Conclusions

In this article, I have examined how "Submarines" challenges the idea of a "return to nature" found in NDD and similar discourses by using a literary toolkit. Through the interaction of diegetic estrangement, naturalization, and defamiliarization, the story establishes an eerie atmosphere where tropes found in NDD narratives are cast in an ironic light that highlights their limitations. At the same time, I have shown that this eerie indeterminacy does not prevent "Submarines" from being read through the lens of generic hybridity. This helps understand how the story evokes the legacy of Lu Xun in order to call attention to the connections between environmental degradation and social inequality, issues that critics like Elizabeth Dickinson see as missing from NDD discourse.

Given the parallels between Han Song's story and the works of Lu Xun, who famously wrote of giving up the study of medicine so that he might change the spirits of his fellow citizens through literature ("Preface" 9), it might be tempting to place the ethical and political dimensions of "Submarines" in direct opposition to the way NDD discourse has emphasized the physical and mental health benefits of connecting with nature. However, instead of this kind of positioning of literature as "spiritual medicine," I would prefer to view

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unlike the subs, the regenerated bricks are designed by an urban architect and treated as high art (including being well-received at a European art biennial) before they eventually enter industrial mass production.

[9] My reading here is similar to Hua Li's observation that the migrant waste workers in Chen's *Waste Tide* "embody everything that the socially and financially privileged classes … seek to repress and banish" (280). However, while the urbanites in Chen's novel live "at a distant remove" (279) from the waste workers and their polluted worksites, in Han's story the submarines and their inhabitants are associated with the trash-filled river passing through the city itself, underlining the way that China's urban middle-class has viewed migrants as "unwanted, *polluting* elements in the city" (Griffiths and Zeuthen 163; emphasis added).

"Submarines" in terms of what Dickinson has called "inward expansion," which she describes in the following way:

> Inward expansion calls on adults to address the cultural, economic, and political systems that contribute to alienation [from nature], notably concerning issues that are missing from Louv's conversation—poverty, racial segregation, cultural alienation, environmental racism, and rampant overconsumption. Louv and educators call for children to be outside and active in nature places; I call on adults to first be reflective in our inner unknown spaces, perceiving the psyche and cultural practices as frontiers. (330)

While Dickinson does not describe in detail how we might work towards inward expansion, I would posit that "Submarines" provides a useful avenue for this kind of practice, and that this is at least in part because of its productive combination of eerie ambiguities and critical realist social commentary. At the same time as Han Song's "mysterious images" allow readers to form their own interpretations of how and to what extent the world of "Submarines" differs from ours, the story's explicit references to contemporary Chinese social realities and invocations of Lu Xun clearly position environmental degradation as a political and moral question that is also linked to the way societies treat marginalized groups. As such, rather than any kind of panacea, the story might be compared to the dark, polluted waters of a river that can show us both the external results of our destructive way of life and an eerily distorted image of our ways of thought, allowing us to recognize ourselves and to reflect on the way that we should relate to others and to our world.

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