
Jerry Zee opens *Continent In Dust: Experiments in a Chinese Weather System* with a scene from the home of the Tai family, who are awakened in the middle of the night by a dust storm. They rush to contain the sand swirling in the courtyard of their government-issued house, built as part of an anti-desertification project to resettle herding households from Northern China’s pastureland areas known to be a key source of dust emissions. Zee draws attention to Aunty Tai as she appears to dance with her broom in a choreography of movement with wind and sand. Aunty Tai is not simply sweeping in a struggle against environmental forces, but is caught up in the cyclone of sand (p. 4). Sand shapes the rhythms of life for Aunty Tai and her family: their evacuation from their pasturelands, their participation in forestry programmes to plant trees to suppress dust, their care of their home to stake claims of ownership in the resettlement village. Here, too, Aunty Tai is participating in ‘the rise of China’, where rapid development is as much about territorial upheaval, atmospheric exposures and meteorological events as it is about politics and economics.

This opening is a brilliant set-up for the book, because *Continent in Dust* is all about movement. It tracks the path of dust loosened from the desert in the Alxa Plateau to toxic air breathed in by residents of Beijing to aerosol particulates marked as distinctly ‘Chinese’ travelling downwind on cross-continental winds. It approaches late socialist governance in China as a field of political experimentation open to possibility and transformation rather than a system defined by order and control. It zooms in on intimate ethnographic moments like Aunty Tai’s broom dance and then it zooms out to show how they are part of larger processes of statecraft, environmental policy and planetary politics. It attends to the ever-shifting entanglements between geologic materials,
bodies, socialities, atmospheres, ecologies, infrastructures and politics. And as an anthropological provocation, it encourages scholars to be ‘swept into’ the complex, contradictory and more-than-human ways that worlds and relations are made, as opposed to restrained narratives that hold ‘tempests in teacups’ (p. 28) by ‘gathering perspectives that will cohere into a single stable truth’ (p. 29).

Indeed, reading this book is to be swept up into new approaches to looking at a wide range of phenomena and concepts. Zee’s richly layered and lyrical writing encourages a radical openness of perspective and a willingness to suspend commonly held ideas about contemporary China, environmental politics and the Anthropocene. The book’s central subject and organising frame is the substance that aeolian physicists in China called *fengsha* [wind-sand]. *Fengsha* is the blown sand that Aunty Tai sweeps and is swept into; it is a flowing substance that shapeshifts: ‘sometimes a field of mobile dunes, sometimes lung-penetrating particulate suspension, sometimes hemispheric dust event’ (p. 11). What is important about *fengsha* is its capacity for phase shifts. It is never a singular thing, but always constituted through relations with winds, landscapes, urban spaces and bodies, with a temporality that is in constant flux. From different ethnographic vantage points, Zee traces how *fengsha* can be both in place and out of place, settled and unsettled, visible and invisible, benign and toxic. Zee is masterful at exploring these simultaneities and multiplicities, employing a creative writing style that engages with the nature of *fengsha* itself by juxtaposing ethnographically and theoretically rich chapters with ‘apparatus’ that signal phase shifts in Zee’s own thinking and analysis.

The book is organised into three parts – ‘Wind-Sand’ (Part 1), ‘Fine Particulate Matter’ (Part 2) and ‘Continent in Dust’ (Part 3) – with each exploring an aspect of dust politics. Part 1 examines state-led attempts to engineer social and environmental landscapes in northern China to prevent the uplift of land into the sky. Zee illuminates the adaptive and experimental quality of engineering here, where practices are oriented to work with geophysical, meteorological and biological processes at varying timescales. This take on governance in China is important and offers a welcome contrast to the plethora of accounts of China’s top-down, anthropocentric approach to human–environment relations. Part 2 explores the airspaces and atmospherics of life in downwind Beijing. Zee engages with the rallying slogan, ‘Breathing together, sharing a common destiny’ (p. 141) used by newspapers to mark Xi Jinping’s solidarity with the people of Beijing by going maskless in public on a day in the city when particulate matter concentrations (PM2.5) reached extremely hazardous levels. Through engagement with residents, artists, architects and activists, Zee attends to what it means to breathe, together, in a city, and what
this common destiny looks like for bodies, health and politics. Air pollution emerges as a ‘fact of life and breath in Beijing’ (p. 185), with the urban form taking shape in relation to the voluminous qualities of air. Part 3 addresses ‘China’s rise’ as an emergent geophysical, meteorological and geo-economic condition at the planetary scale. It focuses on ‘China’s dust’ as it moves across national and international airstreams, raising urgent questions about global governance of matter that is impossible to contain. We also see how particulates can be charged with affective sentiments, ranging from anxieties about Asian pollutants to calls for friendship in atmospheric diplomacy.

Zee calls *Continent in Dust* an ethnography of China’s ‘meteorological contemporary – the transformed weather patterns whose formation and fallouts have accompanied decades of breakneck economic development’ (p. 8). What is so marvellous about this book is that Zee invites readers to engage with China’s ‘meteorological contemporary’ in different ways. For scholars and students of China, the book provides an innovative, multi-dimensional look at what 40 years of Reform and Opening have generated on the ground, in the air, in bodies and in international politics. Zee challenges us to think about late socialism in China not as a temporal moment or transitory stage into a different political-economic form (i.e., capitalist), but as an experimental system ‘through which the state and other political actors encounter and change with environmental materiality’ (p. 24). Moreover, geographers and anthropologists interested in climate change, atmospheres and environmental politics might find themselves looking for the ‘meteorological contemporary’ in other spaces where ‘weather and world-systems pattern into one another’ (p. 213).

More than anything, *Continent in Dust* is an essential intervention into recent writings about the arts of living amid planetary uncertainty, precarity and ruin. Reading this book is like seeing the blue sky emerge from a dust storm’s haze. Jerry Zee shows us how to reorient our senses and conceptual toolkits to see onto other possible worlds. Things may not always be fully clear, but, like weather systems, change is always imminent.

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