Regrowing Divine Trees: Zhai Yongming's "The Eighth Day" as a Reflection on the Intellectual and Ethical Ecosystem of Posthuman Eden

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Prologue

> *And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had made; and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had made . . . But there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground. And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And the Lord God took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it . . . And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it. For in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die"* (Genesis 2:2, 6-9, 15-17).

Thus begins one of the most widely known accounts of the origins of the Anthropocene. Its anonymous author compiled thousands of years of people's wisdom and struggles with transcendence into a dense and tense, yet surprisingly coherent, chronological Biblical narrative that subsequently leads to the banishment of the first couple from Eden and the first archetypical murder: a fratricide committed by Cain.

On the eighth day	第八天
we created a biological myth	我们创造了生物神话

On the eighth day	第八天
scientists replaced God	科学家取代了上帝 (99)

Zhai Yongming 翟永明, in her 2009 three-part poem "The Eighth Day" (第八天), augments the Genesis narrative, as if to prevent the first, foundational act of mimetic violence, as René Girard famously interpreted fratricide. She takes up the Biblical story at the point where the banished Adam and Eve stand alone, confused, stripped of everything, facing an unknown land. Frightened and humiliated, but determined to take matters into their own hands, they start thinking about how to recreate the paradise on earth out of the vast wasteland's rocky soil. Other creatures are no longer obligated to obey and serve them as in God's garden, and are only waiting for an opportunity to strike their heel (Gen. 3:15). As new generations populate the earth, they conquer further territories, domesticate more dangerous species, and invent more efficient tools that allow them to subjugate the world to their will. In their ambition and unswerving self-confidence, they get ahead of themselves. Everything rolls forward so fast that before they can even manage to come to terms with their own tribal and intertribal issues—including, for instance, their biologicity and gender inequalities—they are confronted with the growing variety of nonbiological factors and nonhuman agents that gradually populate their natural, cultural, and political environment: humanmade species, humanoids, bodiless artificial intelligence, and so forth:

eating transgenic food	吃着转基因食品
watching transgenic art	看着转基因艺术
writing transgenic texts	写着转基因文字
we live in a huge laboratory	活在一间巨大的实验室
seeing no trees no woods	不见木不见森林
no Tai Mountain and no Earth	不见泰山也不见地球
only maps of genomes	只见一张基因排序图
with new species on them	显现出新物种
Are they sheep? Or worms?	它们（他们）是羊？是虫？
Plants? Or bacteria, perhaps?	是植物？是菌类？
Dolly? Mary? Anybody?	是多利？玛丽？张三李四？
We must learn to fraternize with them.	我们必须学会与他们称兄道弟 (99)

Looking at the inventory of new species and at the proudly displayed products of our "huge laboratory" on the one hand, while reading

media accounts of bloody wars across the world on the other, one cannot but ask "why"? If we are so successful in imitating the Creator's technical skills, why are we doing such a poor job of imitating His love and goodness? Why, having possessed such advanced scientific knowledge, are we succeeding in regrowing the Tree of Life outside of Eden, yet our Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is still nothing more than a freaky, misshapen, bare dwarf? Shouldn't we finally pay more attention to this one as well? We will never make a paradise on earth if we care only about half of its "fauna," because the "cognitive" and the "moral" tree species develop best in symbiosis to provide one another with food, minerals, and shadow; to kill or distract each other's parasites; and to regulate one another's growth.

And yet, Zhai, aware of the many dark sides of civilizational development, does not want to act as a moralist who hastens to scold humans for their hubris or feed them with apocalyptic stories of God's revenge, like the Tower of Babel or the forty-day flood. Skipping the whole Old Testament with its complex ethical codes and laws, she proposes an enhanced "new covenant" of the posthuman era in which Jesus's Commandment of Love extended to all species echoes strongly, and which returns later several times throughout the poem like a magical spell: "We should learn to fraternize with them." Those introductory lines may give the impression that Zhai's work will be a poetic reinterpretation of Donna Haraway's famous manifestos for companion species and cyborgs, but the development of the "eighth day scenario," dispels this impression. As the poem unfolds in a style that increasingly resembles the dark grotesque, the magical spell gradually loses its charm. It turns first into a warning, then into a complaint, and, finally, into a cry for help by a human being in the forest of overgrown, mutated trees of life--a human being from whom the basic freedom of choice between life and death, the blessing and the curse, has been taken away in the world of obligatory life, which, in its passivity, is not much different from death, and in an obligatory blessing, that quickly turns into a curse of spiritual inertia. Sparing the reader elaborate sermons, theories, and theologies, the poet sends her textual alter ego on a time-travel mission to probe into the posthuman future and records her experiences and observations for others to draw conclusions from her adventures.

Without spreading herself too thinly, Zhai goes straight to the fundamentals, never dodging the most essential big questions: is it still possible to draw the boundary between life and death? (the remainder of part one of the poem); what is the nature of consciousness and its relationship to nature and biological life, on the one hand, and to spiritual reality, on the other? (part two); what is the (proper) relationship between (artificial) intelligence, heart, mind, and conscience, and how to establish it in humanmade organisms? (part three). The text does not attempt to give final answers. Rather, it constitutes a satellite image of a certain stage in Zhai's oeuvre, which began roughly at the threshold of the 2000s, at which point she has been regularly tackling these questions one by one in different literary forms and different contexts. She not only tries to identify pitfalls but--as behooves an engineer by profession and former employee of the prestigious Southwestern Institute of Physics--also makes good use of the frequently misused modern developments, including advanced technology, to fix problems she observes through a high-resolution poetic periscope, to allude to another poem from her recent output, "A Submarine's Sorrow" 潜水艇的悲伤 where she declares her readiness to come to the rescue of a confused humanity:

When necessary and when not necessary	有用或无用时
my submarine is on duty	我的潜水艇都在值班
its lead gray body	铅灰的身体
hides under the surface of a shallow pond	躲在风平的浅 水塘 (197)

In the following sections, I unpack the above three Big Questions I abstracted from "The Eighth Day" in the broader perspective of Zhai's work and in the other contexts that the poem mobilizes, as well as various associations that it inspires, to sketch a broad critical landscape of the intellectual and spiritual ecosystem of the world *anno hominis* 2021 and its future fates.

Between Life and Life

The central metaphor of the "eighth day" is, of course, anything but a new idea. The Jewish myth of the seven days of creation preserved in the book of Genesis is arguably the most broadly known, although certainly not the only, version of the more universal foundational

archetypal meta-myth of humankind,[1] in modern secular language referred to with the general term "intelligent design" of the universe. This is often used interchangeably, although not correctly, with the much less neutral "creationism," which, in turn, invokes derogatory connotations as a set of backward superstitious beliefs that ignore all achievements of the human mind since Darwin, or even Copernicus. Terminological and ideological nuance aside, this meta-myth, deeply ingrained in the intuition and imaginations of people of many cultures across the world for many centuries, has constituted the main point of reference—be it implicit or explicit, positive or negative—of popular and academic historiosophies in which human history is more or less explicitly rendered as a mere sequel to the divine masterpiece.

The most influential religious version of this sequel to the myth of creation is Christianity, which adopted and popularized the Jewish tale of origins, overwriting it with the narrative of Salvation history. The eighth day, according to Christian theology, began with the arrival of Jesus, and his cross is the new Tree of Life which will stand firm until the symbolic ninth day, that is the day of Parousia. Everything that is happening between these two moments is a cosmic battle for human souls in which the ultimate redemption of humankind is at stake. The most influential secular sequel is modern Western(-style) science, which still identifies itself largely against the religious worldview: in early times, mostly as a complementary, rational way of approaching God and revealing His mysteries; nowadays, rather as a tug of war between humans and God, and a series of persistent attempts at pushing the divine element out of history. These two scenarios—the secular and the sacred—have developed simultaneously, and their mutual clashes and temporary overlaps have propelled the progress of Western civilization and other cultures influenced by it, carrying their boat forward but also wildly swaying it and causing existentialist nausea or brutally jettisoning many passengers. All in all, however, they have conceivably much more in common than their authors and actors are inclined to admit.

Western science, whatever it wants to believe about its provenance, largely grew out of Christianity and took shape in academic institutions that for many centuries were primarily religious. In 1979, over 100 years after Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859)

launched the theory of evolution's triumphal march with its increasingly daring claims to dispense with the idea of a Creator, the first bible of posthuman biology, Horace Freeland Judson's classic *The Eighth Day of Creation,* contained—in its very title—a self-evident rhetorical reference to Genesis. Its content covers the history of the biological sciences from the discovery of DNA helixes to the first interventions into the human genome; that is, the moment when humanity's agency first appeared to approximate that once ascribed to God. Since then, we have learned to grow human tissues in laboratories, clone complex organisms, and create simple proto-consciousness without biological rooting. And yet, we still hardly can see ourselves in a framework other than "the eighth day" of the divine History initiated many eons before our appearance on earth; we reproduce rather than reduce the core and the structure of the Genetic story, the only modification—a transgenic operation performed on the cultural text of the Bible, to use Zhai's language—being the removal of the protagonist, which triggered a headless race for the empty throne of the overturned God. Entirely new humanmade epistemologies are (or are not) yet to be invented.

Trying to balance the intellectual and the spiritual, in the very first lines of her poetic narrative Zhai exposes this inconsistent logic, laying bare human hypocrisy and limitedness. After all, we still can only imitate or modify the extant reality and extant myths; *creatio ex nihilo* is, and perhaps will always be, beyond our reach, be it in nature or in culture. She also reminds us how much we lose when instead of contemplating things and landscapes in their perfect wholeness and aesthetic beauty, we decompose them into prime factors to break the algorithms of life. Today, one not only does not see the proverbial forest for the trees but does not even see the trees for the tree genes.

On the other hand, Zhai certainly could not be counted among the opponents of civilizational progress, and she does see great potential in those new technological and "textological" developments as things that may prove instrumental in her literary enterprise undertaken for the common good. In her oeuvre, one could easily detect what she calls "transgenic texts" or at least ones in which she very deeply interferes with epigenetics; that is, with which, when, and how (cultural) genes are expressed. Her main concern is to activate the feminine part of the Chinese cultural genome which has been suppressed for millennia in

the dominant patriarchal social-political structures.

Elsewhere, I discuss the role of technology in the evolution of Zhai's take on womanhood: from outspoken expressions of "female consciousness" in her poetry and essays written in the 1980s, through a roughly "gender-neutral" stage in the 1990s when she observed the futility of her emancipatory efforts, to her recent systematic, patient work at the roots of problematic mechanisms that have led to the long-time silencing of women.[2] Her signature move consists of stimulating the suppressed female element in traditional ancient Chinese culture and its ossified canons. She does so, for example, by unearthing the biographies and works of almost forgotten women poets or restoring their good name, as in "Ode to Yu Xuanji" (鱼玄机赋, 2005) and the later essay "Female Consciousness, Wife's Perspective, Female(-Animal's) Voice" (女性意识，夫人之见，雌声, 2007) devoted to Yu and two other Chinese classical women poets: Li Qingzhao 李清照 and Xue Tao 薛涛. In poems such as "Three Beauties" (三个美人, 1996) and "The Song of Weaving and Acting" (编织和行为之歌, 1998), in turn, she develops the scanty portrayals of female heroines of famous ancient Chinese myths, giving a voice to women who had hitherto served as a mere background to the fascinating adventures of their male lovers. The most interesting example, however, is arguably her essay "Infinite Palindrome Is a Mystery of the Universe" (回文无尽是玄机) from 2007, dedicated to Su Ruolan 苏若兰, a Six Dynasties period poet and the author of the spectacular "Picture of the Turning Spheres" (璇玑图), alternatively translated as "Star Gauge." Su's work is a "hyperpoem," a great palindrome-calligram shuttle-woven on brocade. It consists of a 29 x 29 grid filled with Chinese characters, which—read in different directions and starting from different places in the big square—form over three thousand poems ranging in length from several to several dozens of characters. Su is believed to have created the "Picture" for her husband. Jealous of his relationship with his concubine, she refused to accompany him to another province where he was assigned a post. To give an outlet to her emotions, she undertook this unusual arachnological (to use Nancy Miller's term) project and sent the impressive "Picture" to her spouse. Having received this unique present, the man, reportedly, returned (131-32).

Su's work, notes Zhai, for all its complexity and innovation,

is usually read as nothing more than an example of the genre called boudoir complaint poetry (闺怨诗), one of few classical genres reserved exclusively for women, whose paradigm boils down to a set of stereotypes and biases (cf. Da 690-91). Demonstrating the multidimensionality of "Picture," Zhai treats it as a starting point for her own ethics, in which equality and justice are inscribed in the very structures of the language as a mechanism that regulates the transcription of cultural DNA. Juxtaposing the ancient palindrome-calligram with postmodern Western art, the poet argues that "'Picture of the Turning Sphere' . . . refers to the specific nature of the Chinese character in order to recode and reestablish the relation of legibility and order between the characters, examining and proving the infinite semantic potential of Chinese script." Fascinated with the Chinese script's unique "capacity of self-transformation and self-driven broadening of its own scope" (135-36), she looks for a way to fully play out this potential and harness it for her own purposes; that is, to restore a properly functioning cultural memory in China. The explicit historical memory is incomplete and asymmetric, dominated by the male point of view. Perspectives on patching and balancing this narrative without fictionalizing it are limited due to the lack of preserved written sources created by or related to women. However, this observable incompleteness and asymmetricity are but a mere manifestation of much more complex underlying "epigenetic" mechanisms of memory, which regulate not so much the transmission and activation of specific content, but the transmission and activation of the very genetic structures along whose lines content is distributed and interpreted. Su Ruolan's "Picture," in Zhai's opinion, approximates the original genetic matrix of the Chinese language, which in its pure form "coded" the world according to the equitable principles of natural order and almost limitless potential of expression, depending on the factors that trigger one gene or another. Zhai argues that modern technologies may help diversify those triggers and facilitate the deciphering and activation of the numerous alternative meanings of Su Ruolan's masterpiece and see it as something more than the mere complaint of an abandoned wife. She envisions an interactive application that allows easy navigation throughout Su's "Picture." The user could click on the characters of their choice, creating multiple poetic sequences inscribed in this

miraculous textual grid.

Yet another example showing the potential of (bio) technological intervention into cultural landscapes in Zhai's oeuvre is the long poem "Roaming Fuchun Mountains with Huang Gongwang" (随黄公望游富春山, 2015). The work in question is a performative reinterpretation of Huang's famous painting "Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains" (富春山居图, 1347-1350), carried out by purely textual means in which videomaking techniques are skillfully incorporated to activate the genetic potential of the *shanshui* (山水, lit. "mountains and water") or "landscape" genre. As if polemicizing with Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's famous definition of poetry as a fundamentally temporal art and painting as a fundamentally spatial art, Zhai reimagines the unfurling ancient scroll as a poetic film that develops in time. The use of an imaginary camera allows for a genetic cross-over of the two genres and again creates an opportunity to activate the suppressed female element in a formerly woman-unfriendly space. In one of the many copious authorial footnotes to the poem, Zhai explains that neither mountains nor mountain paintings welcomed female guests at the time. The fluid, unstable feminine "I" in the poem is an attempted "deconstruction of, and response to, the accusation that women's reaching for conventionally male discursive practices boils down to their 'disguising-as-a-man'" (9) to get access to certain privileges and be given the right to speak. In fact, she argues, the interplay between the male voice and the female voice in female-authored works is much more complex. To be heard and understood, women must invent much more advanced strategies, and most of them tackle this task in a very creative and intelligent way. Naively "falsifying" the painting by drawing a big and clear female silhouette in its center or calligraphing a female-authored poem in an empty corner is not a solution. Instead, Zhai tries to unlock new semantic layers of the landscape perpetuated on the canvas by interfering with the very genetic matrix of the landscape painting genre and use the poetic word to trigger the suppressed "gene" that is responsible for female vision to restore sight to the long-blinded female eye of culture. Once this is done, everything changes, and the painting acquires new colors and depth. It transforms into a multilayered work that lends itself to multimedial and multidimensional performance, which Zhai designed

on the page, and director Chen Si'an 陈思安 subsequently brought to the (post)theatrical stage.[3]

But, needless to say, the (epi)genetic modification of texts and paintings, however important, has a different ethical weight than the (epi)genetic modification of living organisms, and in general experiments with texts are fraught with much less risk and responsibility than experiments with biological structures. Part one of "The Eighth Day" continues:

Will they have four limbs?	他们有没有四肢？
Only scientists know these things.	这些事情只有科学家知道
Will they have hearts?	他们有没有心？
Consciousness?	意识？潜意识？
Subconsciousness?	
Even scientists don't know these things.	这些事情连科学家都不知道
We must learn to fraternize with them	我们必须学会与他们称兄道弟
Trans or not trans? Those genes	转还是不转？这些基因
became a problem again	再次成为一个问题？
Shakespeare would be glad	活在生命双性繁殖年代
to live in the era of bisexual reproduction	莎士比亚可以庆幸：
He contemplated only life and death	他只考虑生存还是死亡！
in the 21st century	生在二十一世纪
genes pose other questions:	转基因提出了别样问题：
If two butterflies wished to change into Liang and Zhu	当两只蝴蝶想变成梁祝
they could do it	他们是可能的
And another butterfly wondering whether it may in fact be Zhuangzi	当一只蝴蝶思考它是否庄周
would be justified as well	也成为可能 (99-100)

On the one hand, science, in many ways, helps the word (of old myths) become flesh without the intervention of the divine factor. Invoking the famous ancient Chinese parable, Zhai suggests tongue-in-cheek that Zhuangzi could be transformed today into a butterfly in reality, not just in a dream. Vice versa: a butterfly could easily become

Zhuangzi; also, the butterfly lovers Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, from another Chinese legend, could be returned their human bodies using science and technology alone, without the intervention of transcendental factors. On the other hand, scientific discoveries have also made us largely lose the sense of transcendence, magic, and the uncanny, which lies at the foundations of our culture, thus cutting off the metaphysical source of many values, such as love or dignity, forcing us to search for alternative justifications of our moral codes. We hoped science would answer our questions, but instead of answering them, it has often simply cancelled them, rendering them irrelevant one by one, and has done so in a very brutal way: by erasing alternatives.

As we are learning how to extend life beyond the temporal (by increasing life span) and spatial (by cloning tissues), the limits of individual subjectivity--which thus far have been wrapped up in a palpable, gradually deteriorating body with distinct spatiotemporal boundaries--are losing relevance, even the universal existential conflict expressed by Hamlet in his famous "to be or not to be." It is not because we have found an answer, but rather because we have lost the choice, or at least we are on our way to losing it. In the world in which we are cloned without our permission—if not (yet) in a material way then certainly in a digital way with bits of our lives circulating freely in virtual space—it is almost impossible to truly *un*-be. The lack of choice, Zhai seems to suggest, is perhaps even more dramatic than the necessity of making this choice, which allowed us to preserve a minimal sense of agency, freedom, and self-determination. Paradoxically, the more powerful humankind is as a whole, the weaker we seem to be as individuals.

Eastern Religion, Western Science, and the Problem of Consciousness

In the first part of the poem, Zhai builds on dualisms, which are believed to be particularly strong in the Western Judeo-Christian tradition with its deeply ingrained logocentrism manifest in even its earliest myths, including the myth of creation. Observing—not without a certain "pre-posthuman" nostalgia—that the language based on binary oppositions is no longer instrumental in describing the world and conveying our knowledge of its mechanisms, in the second part, Zhai looks for alternative ways of expression. She turns to Eastern cosmology and anthropology:

Dwelling on the question of DNA sequencing 在考虑基因排序问题时
I also dwell on the meaning of Buddha 我也在考虑佛陀的含义
Buddha and the biological era 佛陀和生物时代
I always have to choose between the two 我总该选择其一
just like a biologist who 就像一个生物学家
became a monk (this is a fact) 变成一个僧侣（这是事实）
to complete genetic transformation of the soul 完成了心灵的基因转移（100）

It is difficult to say which particular scholar-turned-monk the poet has in mind. My guess would be Matthieu Ricard, a French molecular biologist who chose a religious life, and for many years has been known as "the world's happiest man" based on a twelve-year-long neuroscientific study in which he participated that demonstrated unusual electric activity in his brain during meditation. His brain scans showed, among other things, "excessive activity in his brain's left prefrontal cortex compared to its right counterpart, allowing him an abnormally large capacity for happiness and a reduced propensity towards negativity" (Bates). A similar case would be that of the physicist and philosopher of science Bruce Alan Wallace, a scholar in consciousness studies and the author of many publications on the nature of the human mind based on the investigations performed on people engaged in Buddhist meditation. In the 1970s, he was ordained a monk by the Dalai Lama himself (*B. Alan Wallace*). In any event, authors, artists, scholars, and philosophers who, like Zhai, have tried to reconcile the intellectual with the spiritual through Buddhism or other strands of Eastern tradition, in the 20th and 21st century could be counted in the thousands, if not millions.

For scientifically oriented minds, the book *The Tao of Physics* (1975) by Fritjof Capra has been widely regarded as a new bible. Capra demonstrates surprising resonances between contemporary, post-Einsteinian physics, particularly relativity theory and quantum mechanics, with ancient Eastern religious-philosophical systems. The fathers of quantum physics themselves had also noted these overlaps earlier: Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, and others. Less scientific minds, yearning for a new language to express the condition famously

referred to as "liquid modernity" by Zygmunt Baumann in his 2000 book, have nourished themselves with Buddhism-inspired works by Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Hermann Hesse, or Gary Snyder that attempt to blur the boundaries of the individual ego and reconnect it with the universe, some going as far as to adopt the concept of panpsychism. These more or less successful attempts reverberate in the remaining lines of part two, where Zhai reflects on the idea of consciousness as a flowing river and on the possibility of reconciling the desires of the intellectual mind with those of the spiritual soul.

Buddha says:	佛说：意识是一条河
consciousness is a river	
flows and flows	流下去流下去
after life ends it still keeps flowing	生命结束后它依然流下去
Mahayana, Hinayana, Vajrayana	大乘、小乘、金刚乘
they all reincarnate restlessly	它们全都轮回转世生生不已
Biology says: life is a chain	生物学说：生命是一条链
it manifests itself through code	依编码呈现
can be synthesized, can be perfected	可以合成、可以改良
can be mixed with other things	可以与其他物种混杂
On the eighth day,	第八天他
what these two say,	们说的是不是一回事？
isn't in fact the same thing?	
In my left hand holding	当我左手拿着佛陀教义
Buddha's teachings	
in my right hand	右手
holding a bio revolution bulletin	拿着生物革命告示
I'm more confused than Shakespeare:	我比莎士比亚更疑惑：
a thousand years or an instant?	一千年还是一刹那？
I always have to choose one	我总该选择其一
Are these two intersecting	这是两种交叉思维
paths of thought	
or have they always been	或者：它们本就是同一
one and the same?	(100-101)

Part two leaves us with an open question. Tempting as they are, the perceived convergences between the modern science of matter and consciousness originating in the Western academic and cultural environment and ancient Eastern thought do not entirely convince Zhai. And her skepticism is not unjustified when we take into

account, for example, to what extent "ancient" Eastern thought has been constructed historically as a response to the evolving Western worldview, first as a self-defense against intellectual and spiritual colonization and later in a more active offense-as-the-best-defense manner. As the historian of Buddhism Donald S. Lopez claims:

> [T]o understand the conjunction of the terms Buddhism and Science, it is necessary to understand something of the history of the conjunction. It might be dated back to the sixteenth century, when Saint Francis Xavier, the Jesuit missionary to Japan, noted that the Buddhists do not understand that the world is round. It might be traced back to the Reverend Dr. Eitel's lectures from his Hong Kong pulpit. Or it might be traced to the year 1873, when the Wesleyan minister David da Silva in Sri Lanka held up a globe during a debate with a Buddhist monk and asked him to locate Mount Meru, the cosmic peak that rose from the waters to form the center of the Buddhist world. That these events occurred in the course of Christian missions to Buddhist Asia suggests that Buddhist claims about Science originated in polemic, with Buddhists arguing that their religion is not superstition but science. Yet such claims have persisted after the opponent in that polemic has disappeared, or has at least become less visible. And the claims of compatibility have not always originated among Asian Buddhists. The discourse of Buddhism and Science has been transmitted through networks that crisscross the nebulous boundaries of East and West. Asian Buddhists have argued for the compatibility in order to validate their Buddhism. European and American enthusiasts and devotees have argued for the compatibility in order to exoticize Science, to find it validated in the insights of an ancient Asian sage (Lopez xi).

One should add that Buddha never wrote a single word, nor did his disciples and followers in the first centuries after his death. He also did not offer any specific cosmological model, and the majority of the words sometimes ascribed directly to him concern moral attitude and compassion toward every creature. Moreover, his only utterance that might be interpreted as his scientific view on the universe contains a passage about the legendary Mount Meru standing proudly in the

center of the flat earth, clearly nonsense in light of contemporary cosmology, which his followers justified, claiming—in Lopez's words—that Buddha simply

> made use of the prevailing cosmography of his time, one that had been created by the brahman priests of ancient India, using it as a convenient setting, no more than a backdrop, for his exposition of the path to liberation from suffering. . . . Hence, whether this cosmography is right or wrong is irrelevant because the Buddha had no investment whatsoever in its truth (Lopez 47).

Interestingly, Lopez adds, the rhetoric of the discourse of the purported compatibility between Buddhism and science has remained essentially the same until today (98), when contentions around whether the Earth is flat or spherical have long given way to those between string theory and, say, loop quantum gravity.

One can obviously contest the above observations, but they still have to be addressed before triumphantly proclaiming Buddhism—or any other Eastern or Western religion—to be a (or *the*) theory of everything. Zhai steers clear of all universalist claims, leaving them in the sphere of mere hypothesis and hanging a huge question mark on them. The only idea she appears to adopt straight away from Buddhism is its most Buddhist core, Buddha's teachings about compassion and kindness, so different from the violence inscribed in the foundational myths of many ancient cultures, especially the already signaled motif of competition between older and younger siblings as the prototype of all other violent behaviors. After the poem's ruminative part two, in part three, the moral imperative of "fraternizing" with our younger, posthuman and postbiological brothers and sisters returns four times. Yet, as I foreshadowed in the introduction, even this seemingly universal moral claim each time sounds weaker and weaker, to finally change into what resembles a complaint rather than a commandment.

Cyborgs and Companion Species

In part three, Zhai invites the reader to time-travel into the world of the indefinite but arguably not very distant future.

> On the eighth day, we were　　第八天, 我们被带到未来社会：
> we were taken to the future society:
> Everybody has their cat or rat brother　　每人都有一个猫兄鼠弟
> or a flowery-bird sister　　或者花鸟姐妹
> We must learn to fraternize with them　　我们必须学会与他们称兄道弟
> (101)

The first stanza does not portend anything disturbing. One may continue reading it in the Buddhist or Franciscan spirit, or, to reach for a more modern framework, in the context of Donna Haraway's "Companion Species Manifesto," which asks questions about the politics and ethics of "significant otherness" in emerging "naturecultures" reflecting on dog-human relationships. Drawing, among other things, on Alfred North Whitehead's "concrescence of prehensions," Judith Butler's gender theory, and the anthropological observations of Helen Verran and Marylin Strathen, Haraway proposes that:

> [f]or feminist theorists, who and what are in the world is precisely what is at stake. This is very promising philosophical bait for training us all to understand companion species in both storied deep time, which is chemically etched in the DNA of every cell, and in recent doings, which leave more odoriferous traces. In old-fashioned terms, *The Companion Species Manifesto* is a kinship claim, one made possible by the concrescence of prehensions of many actual occasions. Companion species rest on contingent foundations. . . . My garden is full of snakes, full of trellises, full of indirection. Instructed by evolutionary population biologists and bioanthropologists, I know that multidirectional gene flow—multidirectional flows of bodies and values—is and has always been the name of the game of life on earth (Haraway 100-101).

Although Zhai certainly shares Haraway's feminist goals as well as her concern for every living creature, she does not seem to be convinced by such utopian visions of interspecies kinship and our capability of peacefully "staying with the trouble." In what follows, she sketches a grotesque vision of a new Eden in which kinship degenerates and gives way to a new hierarchical structure of power.

> Cows and goats wandering aimlessly 再也见不到牛羊无事
> in peace are no longer to be seen
> dressed in suits always pressed by time它们都穿着西装匆匆行色
> We must learn to fraternize with them 我们必须学会与他们称兄道弟
> (102)

In these lines, Zhai alludes to Bai Hua's 白桦 poem "In the Ming Dynasty" (在明朝), which paints a pastoral landscape where cattle safely enjoy the pastures while people focus on their tasks and pleasures.

The future landscape, in her eyes, by no means resembles that of the remote Ming era or that of the Biblical paradise prophesied to arrive again at the end of time:

> The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. . . . They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:6-9).

Instead, in Zhai's vision, animals wear suits reminiscent of George Orwell's dystopian novel *Animal Farm*. In the context of the entire poem, this can be understood in two ways. First, it may be taken as a metonym for the animals' taking rule over humans; in this case, the urge to "fraternize with them" sounds like commonsense advice in the face of the real threat of being persecuted by other species if we do not maintain good relationships with them. Alternatively, it may also be a metonym for the forced humanization of animals by pushing them into enslaving socio-economical structures as corpo-rats or corpo-cats; in this case, the imperative of "fraternizing" still smacks of the commandment of love toward one's "lesser brothers," as St. Francis would put it.

This latter interpretation is, however, difficult to uphold in light of the next lines. Zhai questions the sense of playing chess by humans in the world in which machines outdo us in analyzing the situation on the board and beat the best players, as Deep Blue proved in the chess match against the world champion Gary Kasparov in 1997 and AlphaGo in 2016 in the Go match against the world champion Lee Sedol.

People no longer play chess	百姓不再下棋
IBM intelligence defeated them	IBM智能人战胜了他们
We must learn to fraternize with them	我们必须学会与他们称兄道弟
In the biological era people are unintelligent and sluggish	生物时代人类智商低下 行为迟缓
reportedly digital humans	据称电脑人
have 405 built-in applications	有405项内置程序
humans have only 42 chromosomes	人类只有42条染色体
it serves them right to endure some bullying	活该倒霉受气(102)

Here, one could perhaps cite another manifesto by Haraway, her earlier "Manifesto for Cyborgs," with its exhortation to recognize the equality of all beings, regardless of their provenance, be it biological or postbiological, and its optimism about the gradual cyborgization of humans. But in Zhai's voice there seems to be fear, perhaps even a sort of revulsion toward those unknown creatures, which are more powerful but also more repulsive than humans. Again, there are two ways of understanding the imperative of "fraternizing": as a strategic step that is supposed to guarantee us good relationships with the future rulers of the earth, or as an ethical imperative, which, however, here turns into a moral burden, rather than a beautiful ideal, since those whom one is supposed to love are so thoroughly unlovable, and—most important—they may never reciprocate our love, as the final stanza suggests:

> 2nd century of the Gregorian calendar 西元二世纪西元八世纪
> and 8th century of the Gregorian calendar
> Nagarjuna Candrakirti 龙树菩萨月称菩萨
> they told us one truth: 告诉我们一个真理：
> life is an atom life is an equation 生命是原子是方程式
> Amitabha they didn't know 阿弥陀佛他们不知道
> that the future biological era 未来生物时代是没心没肺的时
> is an era without heart/mind (*xin*)
> they also didn't tell me: 他们也没告诉我：
> where to place the heart/mind 心放在什么位置？
> only thus will we be able 才能让我们认出彼此 (102)
> to recognize one another immediately

The conviction that machines will never acquire a human level of "humanness" is embedded, among other things, in Zhai's attitude toward computer-generated poetry. In 2016, after one of the poetry evenings during which she read excerpts from "Roaming Fuchun Mountains," Zhai was asked whether she was afraid that robots may one day replace human authors. Her answer was simple and, in fact, very common among the authors of her generation—that is, so-called Third Generation (第三代)—in China:

> However developed the computer technology and however perfect the language skills of robots become, they will never replace poets: their emotions, passion, and warmth between the lines (Phoenix Information *Fenghuang zixun* 凤凰资讯).

In 2017, after the spectacular book debut of the robot poet Xiao Bing 小冰, whose work was marketed as the first poetry collection created 100% by artificial intelligence, such claims—as a helpless self-defensive mantra—were repeated by authors representing various, even mutually hostile factions of the poetry scene, unified temporarily by what they identified as their common enemy: poetry algorithms (cf. Krenz 2020, esp. 560-63).

Zhai never joined any collective AI hysteria among poets, knowing that AI itself is not a problem—indeed, it is just a very specific abstraction and augmentation of the human mind—and algorithms as such have been present in poetry, especially classical poetry, for centuries. The effort we are making to teach computers poetry writing in many ways makes us better understand the poetic tradition, and dissecting texts into prime factors allows us to see mysterious regularities and patterns which we have not been aware of so far, and appreciate their perfection even more, as in her imagined technological experiment with Su Ruolan's hyperpoem. At the same time, she never shared the excessive AI enthusiasm of certain avant-garde authors, and her optimism has always been rather moderate, conditioned upon our ability to create a sustainable ethical-intellectual ecosystem for new beings that perceive, process, and interfere with the world differently.

The last stanza of "The Eighth Day" indirectly conveys this twofold ethical and intellectual requirement in the idiomatic expression *mei xin mei fei* (没心没肺, lit. 'without heart/mind and lungs'), which, again, has two meanings. It may describe someone who is heartless: calculated, cruel, devoid of empathy and feelings, or robotic, in the worst sense of the world. But it may also refer to someone who is "mind-less"; that is, simple-minded, even innocent, with a limited perspective on things and unable to carry out more complex analytic processes. Either way, the collective *mei xin mei fei* condition does not bode well for the future of the world. Likewise, the penultimate line can be rendered in two mutually complementary ways: "[they also didn't tell me] where to put the heart/mind" and "[they also didn't tell me] where the heart/mind is located." Unless we learn where to place the *xin*, which in Chinese may mean both heart and mind, for newly created organisms to function properly on moral and cognitive levels, we will never be successful in continuing the divine process

of creation. To this end, however, we have to know where the *xin* or "heart/mind" is located in natural organisms, including our own human bodies. Without this knowledge, we will lose all interpersonal abilities, as the final two lines mysteriously suggest. *Xin* is presented there as a kind of transceiver that enables those in whose bodies it is installed mutual location and recognition as a prerequisite for all other forms of interaction. It is a transcendental, innate "chip," the last thing that will allow us to distinguish humans from humanoid robots in the era when the Levinasian "face of the Other"—the gate that opens to a fascinating and unique space of otherness and provokes a natural ethical impulse—will become utterly illegible, preprogrammed, designed according to unified standards, and replicated at will. When the face will become a mask. The central message that "humanoidity" has for humanity is the old Delphic maxim: first and foremost, "know thyself," which, tellingly, is reproduced, for instance, on the door of the Oracle in the cult movie *The Matrix*, a powerful story of humans' enslavement by machines in a posthuman landscape constructed to incite nostalgia for what I dubbed earlier as the pre-posthuman. As Laura Bartlett and Thomas B. Byers argue:

> While it is in many ways a cinematic example of the cyberpunk genre, it is as much an affront as a homage to that movement, as it repudiates the genre's antihumanist stance and seeks to reinscribe the nature/artifice binary that cyberpunk generally deconstructs. *The Matrix* places posthuman subjects at the center of its action and flirts with a theoretical postmodernism only to reject the posthumanist configuration of subjectivity in favor of resurrecting a neo-Romantic version of the liberal-humanist subject. While it raises the question of the "reality" of disembodied consciousness, it does so largely in order to express our anxieties concerning this possibility, and indeed it initially converts "disembodied" to "false"–in the sense of ideology as "false consciousness." . . . Even at the end, when the virtual world as transformed by the individual hero becomes an acceptable field of experience and action, it becomes so precisely because it now ostensibly answers to the needs and desires of the humanist subject/agent (30).

"The Eighth Day," written ten years after the release of *The*

Matrix, likewise is a testing ground for various ideas, an explosive blend of sentiments, fears, hopes, longings, fascinations, and nightmares, in which the apocalyptic is counterbalanced by the romantic, the progressive by the nostalgic, the robotic by the religious, and so forth. Its landscape is a Matrix, and also a matrix for the broader poetic explorations that Zhai has been undertaking since the late 1990s. Some I have briefly invoked here, offering specific technical and ethical solutions to specific challenges, just like the Wachowskis' heroes do in the following installments of the production in question, trying to negotiate conditions with the Architect and liberate those people who want to be liberated from the great simulation. Whether there will be individuals who will wish to be released, and whether there will still be another world into which they could be released, is of course another question.

Be that as it may, whether in the 2nd, 8th, or 21st century, poets have always perceived volunteering for red pills in "the great laboratory" of the world and testing the depth and content of various rabbit holes as one of their most important missions in society. In this regard, one certainly cannot deny Zhai's courage and devotion to her artistic work. From the very outset of her literary adventure, she has been among the pioneers and leaders, and daring explorers of new topics, always ready to peep into the unknown, whether a wonderland or a wasteland. Her impact on and role in contemporary Chinese verse could hardly be overestimated. Whatever new challenges will emerge in the future, we can be sure that Zhai's voice will be one of the most courageous, insightful, and respected on the cultural scene.

Notes

[1] By myth, I mean a narrative that offers a non-scientific culture-specific explanation of a certain phenomenon of great significance for humankind. It does not have to be false by assumption. It may, but does not have to, stand in contradiction to the scientific truth; collective intuitions allegorically conveyed by myths may, in some cases, find confirmation in scientific discoveries. Meta-myth is a general and abstract conceptual structure that underlies different culture-specific narratives, for example, myths of creation or myths of sibling rivalry developed in many different traditions across the world.

[2] This paragraph and the following one build extensively on Krenz 2018, Krenz 2021, and Krenz 2022.

[3] Feminist-ecocritical interpretation of the poem and its theatrical adaptation is offered by Justyna Jaguścik (see Jaguścik 2019 and Jaguścik 2021).

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