



Smog and the Psyche: Chen Qiufan's Reading of the Urban Anthropocene

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ABSTRACT

The growing concern for environmental issues has fuelled the rise of climate fiction [cli-fi], a subgenre of science fiction dealing with climate change that has become increasingly popular in the last few decades. In China, significant examples can be found, among others, in Chen Qiufan's works, which address these problems from different points of view. In his short story "Mai" 霾 [The Smog Society], the author explores the relationship between human beings and nature from an unconventional perspective, overturning the traditional conception of the relationship between the environment and the human mind. This article aims to analyse Chen Qiufan's short story as an attempt to subvert the causal relationship between pollution and happiness, outlining his interpretation of the urban Anthropocene. The analysis will set out from what Glenn Albrecht has defined as "psychoterratic emotional concepts", namely earth-related mental health conditions, to explore the author's view of man-made climate change. In particular, it will explore the depiction of the climatic emergency in the Chinese urban context and its consequences on the protagonist's psychology and emotions, as well as on urban social life.

KEYWORDS: Chen Qiufan, The Smog Society, Cli-fi, climate fiction, science fiction, environmental philosophy

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1. Dealing with Cli-fi

Over the last decade, we have witnessed an increasing attention towards environmental themes that has influenced not only today's economy, but also the sphere of cultural production.¹ Although writers have taken some time to approach the issue of global warming, lately the literary output dealing with this subject has grown together with novelists' intention to warn us by translating science into emotions.² In the late 2000s, Dan Bloom, an American journalist based in Taiwan, referred to science fiction works dealing with climate change using the term "climate fiction" – nowadays often shortened to "cli-fi".³ Indeed, while the narration of environmental catastrophes finds its roots in ancient myths, like the story of Noah's ark, and in speculative fiction from the 1980s, what makes cli-fi interesting is the fact that it constitutes a cultural response to scientific and policy discourses.⁴ The expression "cli-fi" was not coined for the purpose of offering a theoretical framework; however, it was soon recognised as an official literary term and sparked a debate on a literary category whose boundaries remain blurry. Some scholars point out the intersections between climate change fiction and other genres,⁵ while others suggest that we should view climate change as a topic spanning several different genres.⁶ Indeed, some writers have completely refused to apply the term 'genre' to the theme of climate change in fiction, feeling that to do

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and their insightful comments and suggestions.

² Tuhus-Dubrow, Rebecca, "Cli-Fi: Birth of a Genre", *Dissent*, 60.3. [2013], 59.

³ Bloom, Dan, "Thanks to TeleRead and NPR, 'Cli-fi' Is Now an Official Literary Term", *TeleRead*, 28 May 2013, <http://teleread.com/cli-fi-is-a-new-literary-term-that-npr-blessed-and-approved/index.html>. [Accessed 27 November 2021].

⁴ Whiteley, Andrea, Angie Chiang, Edna Einsiedel, "Climate Change Imaginaries? Examining Expectation Narratives in Cli-Fi Novels", *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 36.1. [2016], 28.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶ Johns-Putra Adeline, "Climate Change in Literature and Literary Studies: From Cli-fi, Climate Change Theater and Ecopoetry to Ecocriticism and Climate Change Criticism", *WIREs Climate Change*, 7.2. [2016], 267.

so would be to downgrade it.⁷ In this article, I will follow Bloom's view of cli-fi and explore science fiction in order to retrace the literary representation of climate change.

During the last decade, climate fiction has been blossoming on the world literature scene, following the pattern of Anglophone supremacy which constitutes the 'core' of the science fiction genre. Although Milner and Burgmann hypothesised the possibility of China becoming a new force in science fiction,⁸ cli-fi has yet to develop a strong Chinese branch, in either the field of fiction or that of cinema.⁹ Nevertheless, if we look at the most popular works of Chinese science fiction that have conquered the global literary scene in the last few years, we can find examples of this subgenre, such as Hao Jingfang's "Beijing zhedie" 北京折叠 [Folding Beijing], Liu Cixin's "Liulang diqiu" 流浪地球 [The Wandering Earth], and Chen Qiufan's *Huang chao* 荒潮 [The Waste Tide]. Indeed, science fiction and climate fiction share a common interest in technology,¹⁰ but among the latter's most intriguing aspects is the focus on the human sphere. How is the impact of the environmental crisis on human society described in cli-fi works? I will start from this question and try to shed new light on the representation of the interconnection between climate change and the human mind in Chinese science fiction. In particular, I will focus on Chen Qiufan's short story "Mai" 霾 [The Smog Society] and analyse it as a work of cli-fi through the prism of the psyche, in order to highlight the characters' emotional response to the environmental situation.

⁷ Millet, Lydia, "'Climate Fiction' Is Not a Genre", *Los Angeles Times*, 7 July 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2021-07-07/climate-crisis-is-here-so-is-climate-fiction-dont-you-dare-call-it-a-genre>. [Accessed 27 November 2021].

⁸ Milner, Andrew, J. R. Burgmann, "Climate Fiction: A World-Systems Approach", *Cultural Sociology*, 12.1. [2018], p. 24.

⁹ Tang, Damin, "Is China Getting the 'Cli-Fi' It Needs?", *China Dialogue*, 15 June 2018, <https://chinadialogue.net/en/climate/10680-is-china-getting-the-cli-fi-it-needs>. [Accessed 30 November 2021].

¹⁰ Milner, Andrew, J. R. Burgmann, *Science Fiction and Climate Change: A Sociological Approach* [Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020], 26.

2. A Polluted World in Chen Qiufan's Fiction

Chen Qiufan 陈楸帆, also known as Stanley Chan, is one of the most popular contemporary Chinese science fiction writers. Born in 1984 in Shantou, Guangdong province, he has been publishing sci-fi short stories since 2004. Attention towards the environment has emerged in Chen Qiufan's fiction especially through his description of different forms of pollution in today's world. His first novel *Huang chao* 荒潮 [The Waste Tide],¹¹ is an eco-thriller focusing on the problem of e-waste processing in China, which Sun Mengtian has defined as "one of the most environmentally conscious and outspoken science fiction novels in contemporary China".¹² Another text through which the author offers a reflection on the theme of pollution is the short story "Mai" 霾 [The Smog Society], first published in 2010,¹³ and translated into English by Ken Liu and Carmen Yiling Yan in 2015.¹⁴ The plot is set in an urban context blanketed with smog and revolves around Lao Sun, a man who has been feeling alone and purposeless after retirement and without his late wife, and thus decides to devote his time to the environmental organisation named "The Smog Society". The status of the group is rather unclear, and it operates by collecting data that are used to carry out studies on the correlation between environmental pollution and psychological harm. The story unfolds through an entanglement of feelings expressing how smog affects human life at the level of emotions and perceptions. It seeks to subvert the causal relationship between the increase in environmental pollution and the decrease in citizens' happiness.

¹¹ Chen, Qiufan 陈楸帆, *Huang chao* 荒潮 [The Waste Tide] [Wuhan: Changjiang Literature and Art, 2013].

¹² Sun, Mengtian, "Ecological Imaginations in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction", in Cooke, Stuart, Peter Denney, eds, *Transcultural Ecocriticism: Global, Romantic, an Decolonial Perspectives* [London: Bloomsbury, 2021], 83.

¹³ Chen, Qiufan 陈楸帆, "Mai" 霾 [The Smog Society], *Xin shijie*, 10.1. [2010], 38-43.

¹⁴ Chen, Qiufan 陈楸帆, "The Smog Society", trans. by Ken Liu and Carmen Yiling Yan, *Lightspeed*, 63 [2015], e-book edition.

Chinese climate change fiction is a rather young field of investigation. While recent studies by Chinese critics mostly focus on Western cli-fi,¹⁵ they show an increasing attention towards the genre. Other works have discussed the problem of climate change in Chinese literature and culture by analysing the relationship between the environment and Chinese cultural production.¹⁶ The intersection between ecocriticism, literature, and affect studies has been explored in recent years,¹⁷ and also applied to Chinese cli-fi¹⁸. Chen Qiufan's novel *The Waste Tide* has been investigated from an ecocritical perspective in several studies¹⁹, whereas an article by John R. Eperjesi addresses "The Smog Society" as an example of "pretrauma climate dystopia".²⁰ However, these studies do not focus enough on the defining feature

¹⁵ Yuan, Yuan 袁源, "Guanyu shijie wenxue zhong qihou bianhua shuxie rechao de leng sikao: ping 'Qihou bianhua yu dangdai xiaoshuo' 关于世界文学中气候变化书写热潮的冷思考: 评《气候变化与当代小说》 [Reflection on the Surging of Climate Change Literature in the World: A Review on Climate Change and the Contemporary Novel], *Zhongguo bijiao wenxue*, 3 [2021], 211-215; Li Jialuan 李家奎 and Wei Qingqi 韦清琦, "Qihou xiaoshuo de xingqi ji qi lilun weidu" 气候小说的兴起及其理论维度 [The Rise of Cli-Fi and Its Theoretical Dimensions], *Beijing linye daxue xuebao [shehui kexue ban]*, 18.2. [2019], 98-104.

¹⁶ Chang, Chia-Ju [ed.], *Chinese Environmental Humanities. Practices of Environing at the Margins* [Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019]; Lo, Kwai-Cheung, Jessica Yeung, eds, *Chinese Shock of the Anthropocene. Image, Music, and Text in the Age of Climate Change* [Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019].

¹⁷ Hogan, Patrick Colm, *Affective Narratology. The Emotional Structure of Stories* [Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2011]; Bladow, Kyle, Jennifer Ladino, eds, *Affective Ecocriticism. Emotion, Embodiment, Environment* [Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2018]; Liang Fujiang 梁福江, "Lun wenxue qinggan xushi yanjiu de lilun ziyuan" 论文学情感叙事研究的理论资源 [On the Theoretical Resources of Literary Affect Studies], *Guangdong waiyu waimao daxue xuebao*, 2 [2021], 70-79.

¹⁸ Codeluppi, Martina, "Feeling the Catastrophe: Affective Ecocriticism in Liu Cixin's 'The Wandering Earth'", in Moratto, Riccardo, Nicoletta Pesaro, and Chao Di-kai, eds, *Ecocriticism and Chinese Literature: Imagined Landscapes and Real Lived Spaces* [London: Routledge, 2022], 156-166.

¹⁹ Huang, Peter I-min, "Chinese Science Fiction and Representations of Ecofeminists. Mad Women or Women Warriors", in Vakoch, Douglas A., ed, *Ecofeminist Science Fiction. International Perspectives of Gender, Ecology, and Literature* [New York and London: Routledge, 2021]; Jiang, Yuqin, "Ecotech, Alienation, and Science Realism in the Chinese Cyborg Novel 'Waste Tide'", *Comparative Literature Studies*, 57.4. [2020], 655-669; Wang Rong 王蓉, "Liang'an haiyang kehuan wenxue zhong de shengtai guanhuai: yi Chen Qiufan 'Huang chao' yu Wu Mingyi 'Fuyan ren' weilii" 两岸海洋科幻文学中的生态关怀——以陈楸帆《荒潮》与吴明益《复眼人》为例 [The Ecological Concern in Marine Science Fiction Across the Taiwan Straits: The Case Study of Chen Qiufan's *The Waste Tide* and Wu Mingyi's *The Man with the Compound Eyes*], *Hainan shifan daxue xuebao [shehui kexue ban]*, 4.31. [2018], 33-51; Healey, Cara, "Estranging Realism in Chinese Science Fiction: Hybridity and Environmentalism in Chen Qiufan's 'The Waste Tide'", *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 29.2. [2017], 1-33.

²⁰ Eperjesi, John R., "Air Pollution in the Anthropocene: Fine Dust as Hyperobject", *Literature and Environment*, 18.2. [2019], 244.

of cli-fi, namely its effort to represent the impact of climate change on the human mind and on social life. This aspect is particularly relevant in the short story “The Smog Society”; therefore, I will analyse Chen Qiufan’s text as an example of Chinese cli-fi by focusing on the effects of pollution on citizens’ happiness and vice-versa, as it is described by the author. In order to highlight the connection between climate change and the city dweller’s mind, I will employ Albrecht’s “psychoterratic [psyche-earth] emotional concepts”²¹ to show the author’s view of the Chinese urban Anthropocene and of its consequences on social life. These concepts describe negative and positive emotional responses to ecological and environmental change, providing an effective lens through which to understand the link between the human psyche and the Earth’s transformations.

3. Smog and Solastalgia

Like many works of cli-fi, “The Smog Society” is a text soaked in melancholy. The protagonist Lao Sun lives on the seventeenth floor of a building and he spends his days roaming the streets to perform his duty as a member of *Maixie* 霾协 [the Smog Society], which is collecting data on the smog levels by taking measurements from assigned spots. His lonely existence, after his wife’s disappearance many years before, gives him plenty of opportunities to observe the urban landscape and a lot of time to think about the transformations affecting the environment, as well as his own life. When observing the scenery under the gloomy sky, made murky by the high concentration of particulate matter, Lao Sun remembers how it had looked in autumn years before:

²¹ Albrecht, Glenn A., *Earth Emotions. New Words for a New World* [Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 2019], x.

他记起了秋日的景象，漫山遍野的紅葉，层层尽染，衬着清爽的蓝天，白塔，落叶，倒影在碧色的湖面，宁静而空灵，还飘过声声鸽哨。²²

He remembered how it looked in the fall, the red leaves dyeing the hillsides layer by layer, trimming the clear blue sky. The white towers and the falling leaves all reflected in the lake's emerald surface: a tranquil airiness through which the cooing of pigeons drifted.²³

The emotion that emerges from this description might seem like a simple feeling of nostalgia. Yet, it is not so easily defined. Here the act of remembering bygone times, when nature was still blooming, is a symptom of another, more complex and less *natural*, feeling: "solastalgia". This neologism was coined by Glenn Albrecht, who first brought the concept to the popular attention in 2005. A portmanteau of "solace", "desolation", and "nostalgia", in Albrecht's words, solastalgia is:

[T]he pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault [...]. [It] is a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at 'home'.²⁴

While "nostalgia" is a form of pain caused by the desire to return home when away from it, "solastalgia" is a sickness caused by the fact that one's home is being attacked by environmental change.²⁵ The assault on the protagonist's sense of place is represented by smog, which not only smudges the urban landscape,

²² Chen, Qiufan 陈楸帆, "Mai" 霾 [The Smog Society], 39.

²³ Chen, Qiufan 陈楸帆, "The Smog Society".

²⁴ Albrecht, Glenn A., "Solastalgia: A New Concept in Human Health and Identity", *PAN [Philosophy, Activism, Nature]*, 3 [2005], 45.

²⁵ Albrecht, Glenn A., *Earth Emotions*, 38.

but is also perceived by the protagonist as something capable of making the beauty of nature fade forever. Therefore, Lao Sun's gaze often lingers on the features of a world he knows is quickly vanishing before his eyes, contrasting the blurry present with his clear memories.

The feeling of homesickness experienced while still at home stems from a sense of impending environmental doom. But for Lao Sun it is also strictly related to the memory of his wife, who has disappeared from his life – just like the happiness he once enjoyed without realising it. A less polluted landscape is the background against which he remembers old conversations with his partner, when they let the shadow of smog and the urge to pursue economic stability take away their chance of building a family together. Moreover, Chen Qiufan's narrated dialogues take the reader a step further, becoming meta-memories of an almost uncontaminated nature associated with a long-gone enthusiasm for life:

“那时候天总是蓝的，云是白的，没这么多楼，路的两边全是大泡桐，风吹过来树叶就沙沙的响。你骑着车带我去玩，那时也没这么多车，大马路宽敞得一眼可以从东望到西。太阳也不毒，有鸟儿，还有知了。咱们骑车到郊外，随便往草地里一躺。那个舒服呀。老孙，你还记得吧。”²⁶

“The sky was always blue back then, and the clouds were white. There weren't so many buildings. There were big paulownia trees on either side of the road, and when the wind blew their leaves would rustle, sha sha. You'd take me nice places on your bike. There weren't so many cars back then, either. The roads were so wide and open you could see all the way from one side to the other. The sun wasn't nasty. There were birds and cicadas.

²⁶ Chen, Qiufan 陈楸帆, “Mai” 霾 [The Smog Society], 42.

We'd ride to the city outskirts and lay down on the grass wherever we liked. It felt so good.

Lao Sun, you remember, right?"²⁷

Lao Sun's relationship with his wife becomes a metaphor for the environment: a relationship that deteriorated because of short-term goals that ultimately led to a lack of engagement. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that he also experienced a sort of solastalgia with respect to his marriage. Once again, Albrecht's definition of such a concept as an "ongoing loss of solace and the sense of desolation connected to the present state of one's home"²⁸ particularly fits the emotions which Lao Sun remembers having felt towards his wife, whereas in the present all he is left with is regret.

4. Isolation and Emotional Death

Chen Qiufan's short story is an account of the mental and social impact of smog as the most tangible effect of the urban Anthropocene. The most striking feature that the majority of citizens seem to have in common is a tendency towards detachment. Having been published in 2010, "Mai" could not foresee various governments' reluctance to actually implement the 2015 Paris Agreement, reflecting the lack of any genuine concern for the future of our planet.²⁹ However, what the short story does portray is the general apathy bred by the constant presence of smog, which in turn hampers people's will to act against it. The first consequence of this pollution which encourages detachment is the need to wear masks. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone has become accustomed to the need to filter their social interactions through the ubiquitous use of face masks, but in China the habit of wearing some kind of protection

²⁷ Chen, Qiufan 陈楸帆, "The Smog Society". Italics in the original.

²⁸ Albrecht, Glenn A., *Earth Emotions*, 38.

²⁹ Schinko, Thomas, "Overcoming Political Climate-Change Apathy in the Era of #FridaysForFuture", *One Earth*, 2.1. [2020], 20.

against particulate matter has a longer history. This way of living in a polluted city has a heavy impact on interpersonal relations, and the picture emerging from Chen's narrative suggests not only apathy, but also a sense of not belonging to the world:

对于老孙来说，除去那些气管炎、急性肺气肿、哮喘、鼻咽炎、中风等切身相关的病痛，霾所带来的最直观的感受，便是与这个世界隔了一层。无论对人或者对事，那像是隔了层毛玻璃，再怎么使劲，也触摸不着。

而为了抵挡霾戴上的防护面具，则在这一层上又加了一层，真是讽刺。于是，所有的冷漠、麻木、隔阂和漫不经心都有了物质层面的凭借，变得理所当然。

套子里的城市，套子里的人。³⁰

For Lao Sun, aside from bronchitis, acute emphysema, asthma, pharyngitis, strokes, and the other physical ailments, the most immediate consequence of smog was the sense of removal from the world. Whether you were dealing with people or things, you felt as though you were separated by a layer of frosted glass. No matter how hard you tried, you couldn't really see or touch.

That the masks meant to protect from smog added a second layer was especially ironic. The detachment, the numbness, the estrangement, and the apathy now all had an obvious physical excuse for existing.

The city was cocooned. The people were cocooned.³¹

³⁰ Chen, Qiufan 陈楸帆, "Mai" 霾 [The Smog Society], 41.

³¹ Chen, Qiufan 陈楸帆, "The Smog Society".

The author's narrative stresses the twofold effect of the mask as both a hindrance to spontaneous socialisation and a pretext to avoid imposed interpersonal relations. Sometimes, the layer added by masks also serves as a mark of social status, bringing forward the problem of inequality generated by climate change. When roaming the city streets, Lao Sun comes upon rich people exiting fancy buildings wearing filter masks that "sav[e] them the trouble of greeting him."³² He knows that many wealthy women "would apply a thirty-nanometer-thick layer of imported facial spray before putting on their masks", but only those who "had a face precious enough." Yet, he even bumps into people with "bare faces", namely "manual laborers unable to afford masks."³³ Smog permeates life in the city, but it does not penetrate everyone's lungs with the same degree of severity.

Finally, the sense of isolation fostered by the need to protect oneself from the environment ends up worsening the problem. In a lifeless and dirty city, people would rather use cars to safeguard their living space, so they "hid in their four- or five-square-meter metal cans and kept a safe distance from the world and other people".³⁴ The kind of apathy and detachment Chen Qiufan describes evokes Albrecht's concept of *emotional death*. Lao Sun and his fellow citizens suffer from the effect of smog on their happiness, and their lack of vitality, in turn, affects their will to fight pollution. As Albrecht puts it, emotional death "occurs when some humans no longer even have a reaction to the end, death, or loss of nature";³⁵ technology – he argues – is a crucial factor in the process of losing one's connection with nature. Similarly, in "The Smog Society", it seems that the impelling need to cope with the toxicity of the

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Albrecht, Glenn A., *Earth Emotions*, 67.

environment distracts the urban population, and technology is portrayed as a means to collect data *about* smog, rather than as a tool to take action *against* it. This conception of technology fosters the establishment of a subject-object relationship between people and the environment, encouraging detachment and, ultimately, impotence.

This dynamic could explain the main focus of the short story, namely the fact that the causal relationship between the worsening of pollution and the decrease in citizens' happiness works in both ways. In Chen Qiufan's narrative, the "reversed outcome" is ascribed to the effect of bioelectrical fields on the distribution of aerosolised particles. Employing Albrecht's concept, we could argue that, in our society, people do not merely suffer psychological damage because of smog, but that their depression is likely to lead them to a state of emotional death and, by letting the climate crisis slide, to eventually damage our environment even more.

5. From Ecoparalysis to the Hope for a Symbiocene

"The Smog Society" shows how the effects of smog on human psychology are not only related to people's emotional states, but also affect their life choices. The inability to take action against climate change is indeed a result of the sense of apathy described in the previous section, but it is also exacerbated by the overwhelming feeling caused by the menace of a global environmental catastrophe. The human mind struggles to process the scale of the problem, so it develops what Timothy Clark has termed "the Anthropocene disorder," namely the imbalance between the day-to-day perception to which we are used and the lurking danger of long-term destruction. This disorder is a cognitive overload, deriving from the attempt to process the magnitude of climate change in terms of everyday life choices. At the heart of this psychological condition there lies the difference between the human sense of time and the slow

rhythm characterising the onward march of the catastrophe.³⁶ Just as humanity is letting its chances to fight climate change slip away because of its incapability to realize the scale of the problem and act promptly, so Lao Sun seems unable to manage the timing of his own life, letting his goals slip away because of the smog he breathes every day. When thinking of his wife, he remembers how badly she wanted to have a family, a desire that often triggered fights between them:

“好了好了，咱不斗气了，我答应你，再过五年。”

“五年！那时我还能生吗？”

“现在三十多岁生小孩不是很普遍吗，咱们现在经济条件一般，周围的环境有这么脏乱差，孩子生出来不活受罪嘛。再奋斗几年，咱们去好地方生，让孩子在好地方长大……”³⁷

“Fine, fine, let’s not argue. I promise you, five more years.”

“Five years! Can I still bear a child in five years?”

“There’re plenty of thirty-year-olds having kids nowadays. Our finances are only so-so, and with our surroundings a dirty mess like this, it would be unfair to the kid. We’ll work hard for another few years, and then we’ll go somewhere better to have a child, let them grow up somewhere nice.”³⁸

³⁶ Clark, Timothy, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: the Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* [London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015], 140.

³⁷ Chen, Qiufan 陈楸帆, “Mai” 霾 [The Smog Society], 41.

³⁸ Chen, Qiufan 陈楸帆, “The Smog Society”. Italics in the original.

The couple's decision to postpone having a child because of the condition of the environment in which they live is a symptom of their incapability to realize the scale of the problem. It ends up shattering their dream, as Lao Sun's wife eventually disappears and their desire remains unfulfilled. The inability to acknowledge the time-scale of the environmental crisis and to act appropriately results in no action, exemplifying the manifestation of *ecoparalysis*, defined by Albrecht as a "psychoterratic condition that maintains people in a state of limbo."³⁹ The choice to wait for cleaner air before procreating – just as many people will wait for an elusive better deal before purchasing sustainable technology –⁴⁰ does not help the cause of the environment, as the result is just a never-ending state of paralysis, in which the idea of a better future dies along with the unrealistic hope of a perfect combination of factors.

Despite the general apathy described by Chen Qiufan, the author does not let his protagonist succumb to the negative emotion induced by climate change. After completing his measurements, Lao Sun becomes aware of the real research project behind them, namely the attempt to demonstrate that citizens' depression increases pollution. The research report triggers the government's reaction, leading the Smog Society to be disbanded. Nevertheless, Lao Sun is not left with a purposeless life. One of the sites where he used to take his measurements is an exclusive daycare built like a sort of greenhouse, in which children are able to study and play without wearing masks thanks to the protection of a layer of glass. The data showed that areas characterised by a high density of children corresponded to higher psychological health scores and lower pollution levels. Lao Sun is particularly struck by that carefree

³⁹ Albrecht, Glenn A., *Earth Emotions*, 84.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

atmosphere, so he decides to continue visiting the daycare even after the end of the Smog Society. He stands before the glass and entertains the children with tricks and songs:

欢快的有点滑稽的旋律透过玻璃，小孩子们手舞足蹈，跟着小丑做起体操来，他们肆无忌惮地笑着，唱着，跳着，叫着，那一张张裸露的脸庞上闪耀着金色的光芒。

老孙抬头看了看天空，那霾似乎也变得稀薄了。⁴¹

The melody, which was so cheerful that it verged on the absurd, pierced the glass. The children began to move to the music, following the clown in his gymnastics. They laughed unabashedly, singing, dancing, crowing, every bare face shining golden.

Lao Sun looked up at the sky. The smog seemed to be thinning too.⁴²

The bright note on which Chen Qiufan ends his short story lets the reader see a glimmer of hope. Lao Sun realizes that there is an effective way to take action against pollution, and that is to make children happy. Despite his apathy and paralysis, he is ultimately able to find a means to have an impact and actively contribute to lessening the problem while easing his melancholy for the family he never had. What the reader is left with, then, is a positive feeling that points to the possibility of a positive future. Albrecht conceived the idea of a solution to the problem of climate change and named it the *Symbiocene*. As the etymology of the words suggests, the Symbiocene is “that period in the earth’s history where humans symbiotically reintegrate themselves, psychologically and technologically, into nature and

⁴¹ Chen, Qiufan 陈楸帆, “Mai” 霾 [The Smog Society], 43.

⁴² Chen, Qiufan 陈楸帆, “The Smog Society”.

natural systems".⁴³ It is a concept that rejects the idea of a toxic empty criticism of pollution and highlights the therapeutic effect of envisaging a possible way out of environmental catastrophe. Although Chen Qiufan does not envisage a time in which the problem of pollution has finally been solved, by stressing Lao Sun's short-term success he takes a step towards a positive idea of the future, in which the creation of solutions – regardless of their scale – triumphs over the destructive tendency characterising the Anthropocene.

6. Conclusion

In the short story "The Smog Society", Chen Qiufan provides a picture of the urban Anthropocene by stressing the impact of smog on human minds. As a work of cli-fi, this work portrays some of the most common psychological effects of climate change, exemplifying their consequences on everyday life. I have employed some of Glenn Albrecht's psychoterratic emotional concepts to underline the author's views on the psychological burden of the urban Anthropocene, showing how the story traces a possible evolution of the human mind's reaction to the climate crisis. Solastalgia and melancholy pervade the whole narrative, as a result of the protagonist's sense of loss concerning his present life and of the regret he feels for his past choices. The emotional death caused by the incapacity to cope with the problem of pollution affects Lao Sun's personal and social life to the point that he is unable to make some important choices for the future of his family, embodying the concept of ecoparalysis. Nonetheless, the author advocates the possibility of a Symbiocene. Indeed, in the end Lao Sun is finally able to take action and find a new purpose in life by making children laugh, thereby contributing to the dissipation of smog.

⁴³ Albrecht, Glenn A., "Ecopsychology in the Symbiocene", *Ecopsychology*, 6.1. [2014], 58.

Cara Healey has stated that *The Waste Tide* combines realist and speculative elements to communicate the enormity of global environmental destruction.⁴⁴ Similarly, in “The Smog Society”, the author portrays a near future in which he realistically contextualises the problem of pollution as both the cause and the consequence of psychological health. A recent study has analysed the effect of climate fiction on the level of environmental concern among readers, showing that literature does have an impact on the perception of risks and on people’s attitude to climate change. However, in order to be effective in the long run, readers must be repeatedly exposed to stimuli of this kind.⁴⁵ In “The Smog Society”, Chen Qiufan not only addresses the topic of climate change, but does so through the prism of human psychology. It is therefore possible to argue that he is more likely to strike the right chords and act at a cognitive level, finding his way into the readers’ environmental conscience. It is worth pointing out the positive ending of the short story anticipated the author’s shift towards an optimistic view of the forthcoming decades. In his latest work, *AI 2041*,⁴⁶ the author combines his speculative writing with Lee Kai-fu’s forecasts on the scientific development of artificial intelligence and pictures a bright future for humanity. Paola Iovene has pointed out that this theme is quite distant from the worrisome environmental issues which Chen Qiufan addressed in earlier works, but it somehow confirms his intention to play an active role in shaping contemporary Chinese society.⁴⁷ His mission, we might argue, is to penetrate the readers’ mind and pursue the idea of a possible Symbiocene, in which humans, the

⁴⁴ Healey, Cara, “Estranging Realism in Chinese Science Fiction: Hybridity and Environmentalism in Chen Qiufan’s ‘The Waste Tide’”, *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 29.2. [2017], 8.

⁴⁵ Schneider-Mayerson, Matthew et al., “Environmental Literature as Persuasion: An Experimental Test of the Effects of Reading Climate Fiction”, *Environmental Communication*, [2020], 13.

⁴⁶ Chen, Qiufan 陈楸帆, and Lee Kai-fu 李开复, *AI 2041 : yujian 10 ge weilai xin shijie* AI 2041: 预见 10 个未来新世界 [AI 2041: Ten Visions for Our Future] [Taipei: Tianxia wenhua, 2021].

⁴⁷ Iovene, Paola, “Come si racconta l’Antropocene? Tecnologia, adattamento, e sopravvivenza nella narrativa recente di Chen Qiufan” [How Does One Narrate the Anthropocene? Technology, Adaptation, and Survival in Chen Qiufan’s Recent Fiction], Unpublished talk, 16 December 2021, Ca’ Foscari University of Venice.

environment, and technology will find a way to coexist in harmony. In a world still struggling with the Covid-19 pandemic, it is hard to predict if this optimistic trend will characterise Chinese cli-fi in general, since the sensitivity of the themes, combined with the government's increasing control, seems to have hindered the development of this kind of literature.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Chen Qiufan's case might represent a successful strategy to draw international attention towards Chinese climate fiction. By combining different tones and writing styles, he brings the most urgent social and environmental matters to the fore, exploring different aspects and leaving a mark in areas few other writers dare approach.

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⁴⁸ For example, despite its overall positive picture, the Chinese edition of *AI 2041* was still published in Taiwan rather than in Mainland China.

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