

## **Exploration of the Eco-City**

**—An Eco-critical Reading of An Era without Soil**

## **Abstract**

Having a history of over 6,000 years, cities are now faced with unprecedented predicaments, and there is a growing concern for the future urban development. Urban problems have been discussed by Chinese writers in their works in many aspects, but eco-cities are seldom treated as the theme. Contemporary Chinese writer Zhao Benfu (1947—) explores eco-cities in his novel *An Era Without Soil* (2008), insisting that an ideal city should be one that combines the elements of the countryside and wild nature, an urban-rural-wild trinity mode. This paper will delve into the trinity mode from the perspective of ecological philosophy and Urban Ecology.

Key Words: an era without soil; eco-city; urban-rural-wild trinity mode

## **Introduction**

Zhao Benfu is a contemporary Chinese writer whose literary career was inspired by the rural life he experienced until age twenty four in a small village in Jiangsu province. That experience informs his most important work to date, a series of three novels that he calls a land trilogy: *Black Ants and Blue Eyes* (1997), *The Moon and the Sun* (1997), and *The Era Without Soil* (2008). His work is not only widely read in

China, where three of his pieces have been adapted to film and television, but it has won the respect of literary scholars. Academic papers on his work began to appear in 1981, and in 2002 the influential journal *Contemporary Writers* included three papers on Zhao Benfu in its second issue. Now a member of the National Committee of the Chinese Writers Association, his standing in the literary community is further indicated by his present work as editor-in-chief of the literary journal, *Zhong Shan*, and as vice-Chairman of the Jiangsu Writers Association.

When it was published, both serially in newspapers such as the *Yangtze Evening News*, and as the whole novel (by a prestigious publishing house), *The Era without Soil* drew many comments and reviews. Zhao Benfu claimed that the novel, which took him ten years to finish, was the most important work in his career. It is worthy of study, not only because of Zhao Benfu's fascinating skills, but also because the novel explores human existence at a time when our highly developed industrial civilization has produced an ecological crisis. Zhao Benfu's goal in the novel is to imagine a higher civilization with an ecological ethic that might enable modern human beings to live harmoniously with nature, in modern communities such as the one referred to here as an eco-city.

China's historic dependence on agriculture has nurtured the worship of soil. The long-standing land-worship in Chinese culture is verified in an ancient Chinese myth which relates how a goddess named Nv Wa created humankind from clay. Chinese people regard soil as the source of life, and this reverence for soil is reflected in Zhao Benfu's land trilogy, *Land Mother*. The trilogy's main theme involves the legendary Da Wawu family's relationship with the land. The first part of the trilogy, *Black Ants and Blue Eyes* centers Chai Gu, an ancient girl with blue eyes and superpower over ants. Shouldering the task of her ancestors, the wild girl with amazing beauty and power leaves the primitive forest in search of a far-away wild land in order to raise her offspring. In the process of cultivating the wild land that supports her and her descendants, she becomes crazy about soil and dedicates all her life to the wild land on which she finally builds a village. She says: "Soil is the only thing that I worship!.....Soil produces mountains, forests, trees and grass, crops,.....Soil is really a magic thing with which nothing is comparable."<sup>1</sup> The second part of the trilogy, entitled *The Sun and the Moon*, mainly narrates the story of Chai Gu's grandchild Chai Zhiqiu and his wife. Chai Zhiqiu "loves wilderness and crops.....He is a born farmer."<sup>2</sup> Likewise, his wife is "in love with land, cattle, and wilderness"<sup>3</sup> The couple strive to increase cropland in their

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<sup>1</sup> Zhao Benfu 1997a, p. 325.

<sup>2</sup> Zhao Benfu 1997b, p.319.

<sup>3</sup> Zhao Benfu 1997b, p. 208.

lifetime. And they never imagine that rural areas will one day give way to urban expansion to such a degree that an era without soil comes into being. *An Era Without Soil* is the last part of the trilogy. This part revolves around Shi Tuo, the fourth generation of Da Wawu family, who works in Mu City. He inherits his great-grandmother's instinctive love for land. Though living in the city, Shi Tuo aims to destroy the city and turn it back into wilderness areas. In this last part of his land trilogy, the author criticizes harshly the city whose rapid expansion results in an era without soil, and at the same time he presents his ideal city—an eco-city in the form of an urban-rural-wild trinity.

### **Mu City in an Era Without Soil**

*An Era without Soil* is set in a time when the nation's rapid development and expansion have produced communities such as Mu City, whose soil has all but disappeared. More and more good earth has been invaded and covered with concrete, which causes many environmental problems such as light pollution, noise pollution, air pollution, and so on, leading to a spiritual crisis for city dwellers. The author expresses his deep concern for the mental state of the residents in Mu City in the first chapter: with the artificial lights, the residents have forgotten the moon and the stars; freed from farming jobs, they have become numb to the change of seasons ; surrounded

by ubiquitous concrete and steel, they “have lost their memories of soil”.<sup>4</sup> In their eyes, the moon and the stars are of no use; soil means nothing to them since they are not farmers; the change of seasons only brings them troubles, such as more traffic accidents produced by spring rain. The residents in Mu City depend less and less on wild nature and thus appear to be estranged from nature in their daily lives. Although it is convenient to live in the city, they are beset by various diseases such as anorexia, anxiety, insomnia, and so on. The author attributes the symptoms to the fact that the soil, now covered by concrete, had died and can no longer absorb and clean the city’s filth. And the harmful substance accumulates to such an extent that it damages the residents mentally and physically. The author’s revulsion against the city is not only conveyed in the first chapter, but is interwoven throughout the novel. For example, Chapter 8 focuses on the criticism of urban expansion. Here the author reflects on the disadvantages of urban development through the story of Ma Wanli, the former mayor of Mu City. When he was in office, the only thing he pursued was rapid economic growth. During his 10 years as Mu City mayor, the city had witnessed explosive development: tall buildings increased; the population increased; companies increased. And the most outstanding change was that “the area of the city had been expanded by two fifths”.<sup>5</sup> Ma Wanli was proud of his achievements

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<sup>4</sup> Zhao Benfu 2008, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Zhao Benfu 2008, p. 205.

until his retirement. Now, as an ordinary resident, the former mayor begins to look at his achievements with new eyes. He often takes a walk on the street at night, and he is surprised to find that the tall buildings and the illuminated signs shut the stars and the moon from view. Such nights without the moon and the stars remind him of the past of the city. In the past, Mu City had a rural and wild feel. Large patches of vegetable plots were scattered throughout the spacious city area, at the edge of which stood earth walls where wild shrubs grew, and “birds nesting in the shrubs flew over the walls.”<sup>6</sup> He and his girl friend used to sit on the wall enjoying the scenery which was bathed in the bright light of the moon and the stars. But now the simple and poetic way of living is gone with the expansion of the city. Since the soil has been covered with a solid concrete, it can produce no crops, vegetables, trees or grass. No natural mountains or rivers remain-- only “concrete forests” of buildings made of concrete and steel. Now the former mayor becomes upset about the effects of the larger environmental problem, such as the housing problem and the traffic problem, which inevitably accompany the rapid expansion of Mu City. He feels guilty for his short-sightedness and recognizes the truth in the sentence, “the success of the construction of the city does not lie in what increases but also in what retains.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Zhao Benfu 2008, p. 206.

<sup>7</sup> Zhao Benfu 2008, p. 217-218.

Mu City is the epitome of many actual cities in China that have come to occupy vast areas that were once rural and wild, thus leading to an era without soil. Cities now are developing at the cost of welfare of future generations. Although cities have become the symbol of civilization and the cultural center of human life and activities, human beings can not afford to lose even more of their croplands and wildlands. It is obvious that city dwellers need the life-supporting crops, and, equally, they need the life-producing power that can come only from wild lands, which are “the incubating matrix which served as the production site of the human race.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it would be suicidal to turn the life-supporting land into dead concrete, only for large-scale urban expansion. Although, in reality, the level of Chinese urbanization is much lower than that of many developed countries, the problem is that China seems to head toward promoting even more urban development. “According to the average rate at which cities are invading land for expansion, the land used for urban construction will amount to 92,300 square kilometers by 2020, which means increasing 1,900 square kilometers every year.”<sup>9</sup> Zhao Benfu is a keen observer of this tendency and explores possible solutions to it in *An Era without Soil*. As I explain in the following sections, his hope is to find ways to prevent Chinese urban development from overheating.

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<sup>8</sup> Rolston 1983, p. 185.

<sup>9</sup> Yang Rongjin&Shu Jianmin 2007, p. 19.

## Deconstruction and Subversion

Wild nature has vanished with the disappearance of soil. But a person named Shi Tuo in Mu City decides to take subversive action to restore the city into wilderness. Shi Tuo lost his memory of his life in the past during the period of Cultural Revolution when his first lover died in an accident, but his memory of his love for soil has never withered, “with his great-grandmother’s blood flowing in his vessels, he will never forget soil even though he has lost his memory of himself.”<sup>10</sup>

Living in the city without soil, Shi Tuo, the editor in chief in Mu City Publishing House, distinguishes himself by his insistent proposal to Mu municipal government that the skyscrapers should be torn down and the concrete roads should be unpaved to let the land be what it should be. His purpose is to restore the city to wilderness, even though that is against the tendency of urbanization which is regarded as a necessary means for China to become modern and strong. He is taken as an alien who is totally ignorant of the current situation and his proposal of course is rejected. In despair, Shi Tuo takes action secretly. He always carries a hammer with him, and hits the concrete pavements at night when nobody notices, so that the soil beneath can breathe the air and embrace the sunshine. He hopes grass will come

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<sup>10</sup> Zhao Benfu 2008, p.305.

out in the cracks and the force of the growing grass will break more and more concrete pavements, and then the whole city will collapse.

To help the reader recall the wild experience, the author designs an interesting plot in which Shi Tuo sends a newly graduated young girl named Ye Zi to look for a writer named Chai Men, the theme of whose writings is “countryside and wilderness”<sup>11</sup> To find the mysterious writer, Ye Zi journeys into the wilderness, where Chai Men is reputed to live, thus exposing the reader to the desert, virgin forests, glaciers, and so on. The adventure arouses Ye Zi’s respect and awe for wilderness which is so different from the grey Mu City. Ye Zi could not help claiming “wilderness is a world full of life ,.....a real wonder.”<sup>12</sup> Urban residents have lost their memories of experience in the wilderness because there is no soil left in the city for wild nature. But they need the wilderness in order to be fully alive. As American philosophy Professor Holmes Rolston, who is recognized as the father of environmental ethics, puts it, “a purely urban person is a one-dimensional person; only those who add the rural and the wild are three-dimensional persons.”<sup>13</sup>

Besides wild nature, rural areas as well have vanished with the

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<sup>11</sup> Zhao Benfu 2008, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> Zhao Benfu 2008, p. 90-91.

<sup>13</sup> Rolston 1979, p. 25.

disappearance of soil in Mu City. But a migrant laborer named Tian Zhu, Shi Tuo's cousin, manages to turn Mu City into a rural city. With the development of cities, rural laborers are tempted into cities to seek their fortunes. Unlike other migrant laborers, Tian Zhu retains his love for land, which is why he chooses to work as a landscaping worker. Planting trees and flowers for the city is tiring and the pay is relatively low, but he feels happy because the job involves soil and planting. Dealing with soil is a comfort for him in the "concrete forests".

Tian Zhu later opens up a landscaping company, and decides to plant all kinds of crops and vegetables in the bare land in the city. Taking advantage of his position as a general manager in charge of landscaping the city, he successfully plants wheat instead of turf in the 361 patches of land in the city, and he also plants all kinds of crops and vegetables in the areas which are not covered with concrete. The purpose of Tian Zhu is to "foster their [Mu City residents'] love for crops, and then restore their lost memories of soil."<sup>14</sup>

Tian Zhu is confident that he can succeed in recalling their memories because he has observed that Mu City residents enjoy growing flowers and vegetables and so on in their flowerpots, which reveals that the

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<sup>14</sup> Zhao Benfu 2008, p. 357.

city dwellers retain the memory of soil and planting although they are not aware of it. In Tian Zhu's words: "This kind of memory is fused with blood and awakens unconsciously, which is in fact an instinct".<sup>15</sup> Put another way, this instinct is the spiritual and cultural heritage from the ancestors, rather like what C. G. Jung referred to as the "collective unconscious."

The citizens do retrieve their lost memories of soil and planting as Tian Zhu expected, and they find simple but genuine pleasure in cultivating crops and vegetables in the city. They welcome the change brought by Tian Zhu because it is really a good thing for those who grow up deprived of opportunities to undergo rural experience. The change is especially supported by students who now have opportunities to become familiar with the crops and vegetables and learn to distinguish wheat from grass. It is the support of the residents that makes the leader of Mu Municipal Landscaping Administration Bureau forgive Tian Zhu for his amazing action.

To sum up, what Shi Tuo and Tian Zhu have done reflects the author's concept of eco-cities: the integration of urban areas, rural areas and wild areas. Such a mode is what people need and will become a tendency in the future. As environmental philosopher Holmes Rolston

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<sup>15</sup> Zhao Benfu 2008, p. 125.

remarks, “Three environments---the urban, the rural, and the wild --- provide three human pursuits---culture, agriculture, and nature. All three are vocations which ought to be followed and environments which are needed for our well-being”.<sup>16</sup>

### **Reconstruction and Rebirth**

Although the subversive actions of Shi Tuo and Tian Zhu send forth a flavor of romanticism, the alert reader will discover the scientific elements with more careful reading. Such elements are cleverly combined in the novel’s subplots.

One such plot is a meeting held by Mu Municipal Bureau of Landscape and Forestry to solicit public opinions about how to landscape a main avenue. In the hearing, an expert introduces the most recent environmental concept which is acclaimed by the audience. He criticizes the singleness of the vegetation in Mu City. He warns that lack of diversity will arouse ecological imbalance. Then he suggests mixed woods, where “both arbor and shrubbery should coexist”,<sup>17</sup> and he argues that weeds should be allowed to remain in the woods. Moreover, he is opposed to the practice of clearing away the decayed

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<sup>16</sup> Rolston 1979, p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Zhao Benfu 2008, p. 144.

leaves and dead trees from the woods because “they will become the humus which will breed microorganisms, and with the microorganisms, insects will prosper. In turn, the insects provide food for the birds, and as the birds flourish, the natural balance of life exists in the woods.”<sup>18</sup>

To make his argument powerful, he cites a forest near the American White House as an example. He also quotes an ancient Chinese saying “No fish will exist in the pure water” to further explain that overly clear woods will lose birds just as pure water will lose fish since in both environments food chains are broken due to the lack of biological diversity. Again the expert points out that the turf in Mu City is actually “green pollution,” because it lacks diversity. Here, too, Zhao Benfu’s thinking is in accord with that of environmentalists such as Yang Rongjin and Shu Jianmin, who write that “Many cities invest huge manpower, materials and money in restoring urban vegetation only to produce little effect. And the reason in part is the singleness of the vegetation and excessive emphasis on the recreational value.”<sup>19</sup> In the novel, the expert’s advice is accepted by the municipal government, and with the adjustment of ecological structure, more and more mixed woods appear in Mu City. The resulting eco-diversity attracts various

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<sup>18</sup> Zhao Benfu 2008, p. 144.

<sup>19</sup> Yang Rongjin & Shu Jianmin 2007, p. 35.

birds, bees and butterflies.

In addition to adjusting the ecological structure, the municipal government takes a series of measures to reduce air pollution, soil pollution, noise pollution and light pollution. For example, “heavy polluting enterprises are to be closed down if the polluters do not stop their polluting actions before the deadline; the practice of lighting up the city with electric light is discouraged, and the existing decorative lights and neon signs are to be removed.....”<sup>20</sup> The toughest policy is “phasing out all the vehicles except buses, ambulances, fire engines, mail cars, and police cars.”<sup>21</sup> And residents in Mu City are encouraged to take cycling and walking as alternative means of transport. The policy of adjusting the structure of transportation system by the Mu municipal government is necessary in building an eco-city. According to Urban Ecology, an important principle is to diminish our reliance on vehicles, and to get about by energy-saving and environmentally friendly forms of transport such as buses and bikes.

All these policies and measures are carried out with rigorous enforcement by the municipal government. Gradually, Mu City takes on a new look, allowing an urban-rural- wild trinity mode to take shape. And the ending of the novel presents an appealing picture of

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<sup>20</sup> Zhao Benfu 2008, p. 359.

<sup>21</sup> Zhao Benfu 2008, p. 359.

the eco-city that Zhao Benfu envisions: “With the moonset, stars begin to twinkle.....Land immersed in the light of the stars appears dim and mysterious..... Wind blows from the wild areas, rustling the leaves of numerous trees and corns..... broomcorns sway a little in the wind on every corner of the city.....The reverence for nature awakens in Mu City residents. Under the starry sky Mu City retrieves long lost quietness, and its citizens could enter peaceful and sweet dreams again after their busy days.”<sup>22</sup>

## **Epilogue**

As Zhao Benfu suggests, the eco-city is the ideal mode of future cities, and many countries in the world have successfully built their eco-cities such as Curitiba in Brazil, Copenhagen in Denmark, and Halifax in Canada.<sup>23</sup> As for China, she meets great challenges in the process of urbanization, and a big problem is that more and more good soil gives way to urban expansion. Realizing, in the 1980s, that the need for urbanization is in conflict with the need to retain soil, China has begun to study how eco-cities might be constructed, but this research is still in its infant phase. Against such a background, Zhao Benfu’s novel *An Era Without Soil* presents his own concept of an urban-rural-wild trinity that may offer a model for Chinese cities. Zhao Benfu

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<sup>22</sup> Zhao Benfu 2008, p. 362-363.

<sup>23</sup> The information is according to the book *Eco-City Construction and Plan* by Yang Rongjin & Shu Jianmin. Beijing: Economy Daily Press, 2007, p326-338.

conveys his hope that people will continue in their instinctive love for soil. And we have reasons to hope that Zhao Benfu's dream will come true if all the local governments in China act like Mu municipal government. His model of an eco-city based on the urban-rural-wild trinity is not merely fictional or Utopian. In fact, such eco-cities have already appeared, though just a few, in some countries such as Berkeley in the USA and the city of Singapore, the capital of Singapore.<sup>24</sup> The author himself reveals his prudent optimism in the last sentence of the novel, where he notes that, "According to the news on the web, crops such as corn, broomcorn, soybean and so on appear in other medium-sized cities and big cities in China".<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The information is according to the book *Eco-City Construction and Plan* by Yang Rongjin & Shu Jianmin. Beijing: Economy Daily Press, 2007, p342 and p354.

<sup>25</sup> Zhao Benfu 2008, p. 363.

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## **Notes**