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# Narrating Extinctions for Survivance

## An Indigenous Rice-Human Perspective from Mao Chenyu's Films

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**Abstract** This article navigates the obligatory relationship between extinction narratives and future imaginaries through the lens of an artist's films. Taking Chinese artist Mao Chenyu's works as case studies, the first part examines the notion of extinction that his video essay *Becoming Father* (2021) complicates through the perspective of rice (*Oryza sativa*) and humans in Dongting Lake. It reveals adaptive evolution, hetero-reproduction, and geontopower as three political regimes where extinctive pressures accumulate through the erosion of biocultural inheritability. The second part engages with this tripartite politics by questing for alternative models of inheritance from Mao's ethnographic films. It centers on how the artist invests in shamanist, geomantic, and animist practices to envision alternative modes of inheritance. Based on this, the article argues that the conception of extinction beyond mass death demands counterextinction measures to aim for more than survival. This volition can be summarized by the term *survivance*, an ethical way of living in end-times. It concludes by contextualizing Mao's work in post-Green Revolution China, where a logic of survival has driven mass extinction. On this basis, it proposes that extinction studies could benefit from cultivating a historical consciousness, especially regarding how extinctions are connected to the ideological underpinning of specific Anthropocene processes.

**Keywords** extinction studies, Indigenous studies, Green Revolution, inheritance, survivance

Synecdochic of Anthropocene catastrophes, extinction straddles between biophysical fact and representation, theorization, and fabulation.<sup>1</sup> Narrating extinction accordingly involves a range of choices: which localities to attend to, from whose perspective, and, fundamentally, which conceptual and spatiotemporal scope of extinction to depart from and interrogate. As the Extinction Studies Working Group has noted, these choices may ethically and politically respond to the ongoing mass species death and biocultural diversity loss.<sup>2</sup> Apart from illuminating unseen problems, another key aspect of

1. Wolfe, foreword.

2. Rose, van Dooren, and Chrulew, "Introduction."

“narrative ethics”<sup>3</sup> is how stories call upon us to form our identity around shared loss and garner wisdom to cope with present and looming crises.<sup>4</sup> In response to this call, environmental humanities is obliged to ask how extinction narratives thicken our understanding of current crises, what future propositions they open us to, and what media-specific and ethically grounded conceptual categories they generate for analytical engagement.

This article explores these questions by studying films and video essays as narrative devices, attending to the responsibility extinction narratives hold to future imaginaries. Taking Chinese artist and farmer Mao Chenyu’s (b. 1976) works as case studies, it illustrates how the notion of extinction is complicated from an indigenous rice-human perspective and how such narratives shape the political future desirable and conceivable for those under extinction pressure.<sup>5</sup>

Born to a farmer’s family in Ximaojia Clan, a Han Chinese natural village<sup>6</sup> in Yueyang County, Hunan Province, Mao Chenyu began to engage in experimental theater and filmmaking during his study at Tongji University in Shanghai from 1996 to 2000. In 2003, he made his debut production, *Soul Mountain*, out of ethnographic research in the primitive forests of the Shennongjia Forestry District. The experience propelled him to return to Ximaojia, where he topologized the local cosmology in the ethnographic film *Between Humans and Gods* (2004). Following this, the artist further carried his research on indigenous spiritual practices to the Miao, Dong, and Tujia ethnic groups in Guizhou Province, which yielded a list of productions that made him known on the scene of Chinese independent filmmakers in the early 2010s.

In the paddy-growing regions around Dongting Lake, the artist has found great ethnocultural diversity nourished by a wetland rice ecology. Meanwhile, he has witnessed this ecoculture degrading as multiple modern projects drag indigenous rice and humans into synchronized end-times. Rooting his art in this changing lifeworld, he named his serial works Paddy Films—moving images of the rice’s soul.

In 2012, Mao established the Paddy Film Farm on a thirty-acre land next to Ximaojia for practicing organic, smallholder farming. The same period saw the Paddy Films’ expansion to video essays, a genre that allows the artist to combine ethnographic footage with anthropological analyses and speculative narratives. The development in

3. Iovino, “Ecocriticism, Ecology of Mind, and Narrative Ethics,” 760.

4. Tornel and Lunden, “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night.”

5. In several places in this article, I use lowercase “indigenous” to designate an ecological identity of “belonging to the Dongting Lake basin through generational adaptive evolution.” The applicability of term “Indigenous” in the People’s Republic of China remains contested. Foremost, the Chinese government does not acknowledge the term “Indigenous Peoples.” The concept and legal framing of “Indigenous” have not been introduced to the country. For these reasons, most of China’s ethnic minority groups, for example, currently do not self-claim as Indigenous Peoples.

6. A natural village (*ziran cun* in Chinese) is a rural village that has formed before the village-level administrative division of the People’s Republic of China.

creative strategies prepared Mao's work for contemporary art exhibitions, beginning with his video installation at the 11th Shanghai Biennale in 2016.<sup>7</sup> In the second decade of Paddy Films, the artist began to bridge his research on the spiritual and biomaterial ecology of the Dongting Lake basin with the Anthropocene discussions, first presented in his solo "Litchi Girl" (2018) at the Asia Art Center, Shanghai.<sup>8</sup>

Revolving around the politics of extinction narratives in Mao's films, this essay presents an intertextual reading of his four works: three video essays, *Becoming Father* (2021), *Automatic Paddy* (2018), and *Seed·Epigraph* (2018), and the ethnographic film *Between Humans and Gods*.<sup>9</sup> The first half of this article discusses how *Becoming Father* and *Automatic Paddy*, a visualization of future rice in abiotic forms, conceive extinction beyond its scientific definition—namely, the death of all members of a species<sup>10</sup> or the "permanent failure of reproduction or recruitment in a population"<sup>11</sup>—by portraying extinctive processes as the erosion of biocultural inheritance. Beyond passing down genetic and cultural traits, inheritance around Dongting Lake means sustaining adaptive evolution, keeping multigenerational ties of coevolution between rice and farmers, and transmitting biocultural legacies across life, death, and nonlife. Following these narratives in the video, my analysis complicates inheritance in three political regimes: adaptive evolution, hetero-reproduction, and "geontopower."<sup>12</sup> It further examines how industrial agrotechnology's abduction of indigenous patterns of inheritance in the three regimes forebodes extinction.

Inheritance, as Thom van Dooren has elucidated, is a twofold mechanism that involves the largely involuntary process of retention and active "change and adaptation."<sup>13</sup> The latter aspect is well summarized as "evolutionary freedom" by environmental conservationists.<sup>14</sup> Reading *Becoming Father* in tandem with this theorization of inheritance, I consider the work as the artist's call for countering extinction by cultivating divergent evolutionary processes rather than merely keeping beings alive. This raises a further question: How do extinction narratives help establish and approach this goal?

The second half of this article addresses this question by delving into the models of inheritance emerging from *Seed·Epigraph* and *Between Humans and Gods*. The former investigates how modern cultivars escape domestication by acquiring wild progenitors'

7. The project "Paddy Films 2003–2016" is documented on the 11th Shanghai Biennale's website, <https://www.powerstationofart.com/whats-on/programs/shanghai-biennale-2016/artist-and-artwork/mao-chenyu> (accessed March 3, 2024).

8. The exhibition is documented on Asia Art Center's website. See "Litchi Girl," Asia Art Center (website), <http://www.asiaartcenter.org/asia/portfolio/litchi-girl/?lang=en> (accessed July 7, 2023).

9. For more information and viewing of the films, readers are welcome to contact the author and the artist.

10. *The Gale Encyclopedia of Science*, 6th ed., s.v. "Extinction"; Urbanik and Johnston, *Humans and Animals*, s.v. "Extinction."

11. Jarić, Gessner, and Solow, "Inferring Functional Extinction," 84.

12. Povinelli, *Geontologies*, 4–9.

13. van Dooren, "Spectral Crows in Hawai'i," 202–3.

14. Sarrazin and Lecomte, "Evolution in the Anthropocene," 922.

traits. Associating this phenomenon of rice feralization with shamanism, the video envisions spiritual practices as means of counterworlding against modernity. The latter traces how Ximaojia Clan reconstructed its cosmology and ritual practices after decades of secularization. Invoking spiritual mediumship as a vehicle of inheritance that connects the living with the once lived, the film demonstrates a resilient way of living on with death and spiritual degradation.

Devoted to sustaining inheritance in the lifeworld of rice, Mao's films conjure a counterextinction future that can accommodate divergent species, past lives, and non-life. This vision quests for more than the bare survival of a thin stratum of living species, demanding an ethics of living on under extinction pressure. To explain how filmmaking may render this way of living available for analytical engagement as a category of ethics and aesthetics, the article associates it with the concept of survivance.

Originating from Derrida's term *survivre*, survivance was initially conceived by the philosopher as an unconditional structure of existence that folds into everything the specter of what came before it.<sup>15</sup> Reworking the concept into a modality specific to Native American literature, Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor theorizes survivance as past narratives continuously pressing into the present as witnesses.<sup>16</sup> Drawing on both, without limiting survivance to a general economy of life or a category of literary criticism, Elizabeth Povinelli invokes the concept to describe how the living communicate with the ancestral presence as an obligatory practice on Aboriginal lands.<sup>17</sup> Exploiting the manifoldness of the concept revolving around the basic notion of beyond survival, the discussion session elaborates on how Mao's filmmaking hints at survivance as an ethical mode of living on in end-times that does not abide by the logic of survival.

The conclusion positions Paddy Films in the context of post-Green Revolution China, where the more lives agrotechnology selectively breeds, the greater sense of extinction it engenders. It thereby proposes the global Green Revolution as an underdiscussed driver of planetary extinction crises. On this basis, the article calls attention to how extinction presses populous ecological zones to our most familiarity, apart from in eco-communities of remote geographies more often highlighted by extinction studies. Meanwhile, it propounds that revisions of how the current material-technological factors of extinction are connected to historical Anthropocenic events may generate new analyses for extinction studies. Such analyses would also entail the field to critically reflect on what new political paradigms are called for to stay with ecological catastrophes.

#### **Landrace: The Loss of Ecological Interactions**

Amid a pristine mountainous view, *Becoming Father* unfolds with the story of *Lengshuihong*. This rice variety is indigenous to Shennongjia, a vast region of primary forests relatively intact by modern industries. When Mao encountered the rice in 2003, it was

15. Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally*, 26, 51–52.

16. Glancy, "Naked Spot," 271–83.

17. Povinelli, "Divergent Survivances."

meticulously preserved on a small patch of land by local hunter Wang Mingli. As the video states, Lengshuihong offers the mnemonic deposit for rice's evolution, harboring memories for future seeds in its genome. Meanwhile, it is enmeshed in "closure, internal loop, and decrement due to isolation and lack of exteriority."<sup>18</sup> To translate Mao's prophecy, I consult plant science, which places such crops on the stage of early domestication between wilderness and modern cultivars. Categorized as landraces, they typically develop through longitudinal adaptive evolution with climates and geographies within small-scale, nonindustrial systems of farming, horticulture, or agro-silviculture.<sup>19</sup>

Landraces have recently caught the attention of conservation biology. While their genetic diversity, nutritiousness, and cultural-aesthetic value are unmatched by modern cultivars,<sup>20</sup> their life is hurled into precarity by industrial agriculture. Foremost, the lopsided investment in genetically modified (hereafter GM) crops is depleting the human power and environmental resources necessary to sustain landraces. They are thus forced into small populations and isolated spots, usually attended to by marginalized individual conservers and indigenous farmers.<sup>21</sup> Landraces rely highly upon local climate and soil, yet their habitats are especially susceptible to environmental turbulence, diseases, and allochthonous pests that have become increasingly frequent with globalization.<sup>22</sup> This worldwide condition is reflected in the local case of Lengshuihong. As the video shows, the variety is so cloistered from the rapidly industrialized agricultural landscape that it necessarily fails to board the technological infrastructure of modern crops.

Meanwhile small populations, ecological isolation, and habitat fragmentation can further induce inbreeding depression. Evolutionary biology shows that inbreeding can reduce seed vigor and reproductive capacity. It also decreases intraspecies genetic flows while increasing genetic drifts, both contributing to the loss of genetic variance.<sup>23</sup> This feebleness of reproductive and evolutionary mechanisms is also driving landraces into extinction. *Becoming Father* illustrates how both the rice and the spiritual tradition of Shennongjia have suffered such genetic degradation.

The video juxtaposes Lengshuihong with a funeral scene in which a Shennongjia epic poem was chanted. Such poems about the Creation can guide the dead into after-lives during rituals. Like landraces, they contain the intergenerational memories passed down orally among folksong singers, modified and transferred through every performance.<sup>24</sup> The regenerability is, however, lost during Shennongjia's transformation into

18. The subtitle of *Becoming Father* quoted in this article was translated from Chinese by the author.

19. Casañas et al., "Toward an Evolved Concept of Landrace"; Wu, Lao, and Fan, "De-domestication."

20. Mueller and Flachs, "Domestication, Crop Breeding, and Genetic Modification," 461; Casañas et al., "Toward an Evolved Concept of Landrace."

21. Casañas et al., "Toward an Evolved Concept of Landrace"; Talabi et al., "Orphan Crops"; Mueller and Flachs, "Domestication, Crop Breeding, and Genetic Modification."

22. Casañas et al., "Toward an Evolved Concept of Landrace."

23. Allendorf, Luikart, and Aitken, *Conservation and the Genetics of Populations*, 97–114; Gao and Gao, "Depression within Peripheral Populations"; Reed, Briscoe, and Frankham, "Inbreeding and Extinction."

24. Mao, "Heian ji, quanqiu hua, difang xushi."

a National Nature Reserve. Since 1982, several conservation zones and a forest park have been established. The accompanying ecological migration displaced most indigenous hunters and effaced their traditional lifeways.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, ecotourism and infrastructural building schemes also drastically altered the topology of the region, uprooting the epic poems from their material-cosmological basis. As a result, the poems are now fossilized in written form as a national intangible cultural heritage.<sup>26</sup>

The looming extinction of Lengshuihong and Shennongjia epic poems corresponds with what biologists describe as the “extinction of ecological interactions.”<sup>27</sup> It occurs when a species is dislodged from multispecies symbionts due to low population density or habitat isolation. The phenomenon often forebodes or follows biophysical extinction. As *Becoming Father* reveals, central to this extinctive process is losing the capacity for adaptively evolving with the surrounding. While such capacity had long characterized landraces and indigenous practices, it is inevitably lost to violent modernization projects.

### **Transgenic Rice: The End of Fatherhood**

Mao Chenyu observed the recession of landraces following the triumph of the “Super Rice,” a modern cultivar promoted nationwide since the 1970s. Such high-yielding varieties have fed a rapidly growing population in China. Yet its monopolization sacrificed the genetic variability of rice and agrobiodiversity. During this course, farmers gradually lose the germplasm and knowledge necessary for developing landraces.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, they must purchase commercial seeds every season as the high-yielding trait of Super Rice lasts for only one generation.<sup>29</sup> Compared with hybrid rice, transgenic rice can further homogenize the genetic pool of the species. Its potential commercialization is thus expected to continuously detach farmers from the evolution trajectory of rice.<sup>30</sup>

The second chapter of *Becoming Father* entertains this widening rift between farmers and rice by comparing its socio-psychological implications to the extinction of fatherhood. The section begins by contrasting Super Rice and transgenic rice. Unlike the former, transgenic rice has faced strong opposition in China and elsewhere. While many studies have attributed the controversy of GM crops to its potential threats to agrobiodiversity, seed sovereignty, environmental justice, and Indigenous traditions,<sup>31</sup> the psychological element of the problem remains murky. As some scholars have emphasized,

25. Xie and Shen, *Outstanding Universal Value*, 179.

26. China Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center, “Heian zhuan.”

27. Valiente-Banuet et al., “Beyond Species Loss,” 299.

28. Mueller and Flachs, “Domestication, Crop Breeding, and Genetic Modification,” 464.

29. Kuyek et al., “Hybrid Rice in Asia.”

30. Mueller and Flachs, “Domestication, Crop Breeding, and Genetic Modification,” 464.

31. Robinson, “Ethics and Transgenic Crops”; Mueller and Flachs, “Domestication, Crop Breeding, and Genetic Modification”; Almeida and Massarani, “Farmers Prevailing Perception Profiles.”

the suspicion over GM crops may have much to do with a deeply held morality that “crossing species boundaries is wrong” and “unnatural.”<sup>32</sup>

*Becoming Father* relates the “unnaturalness” to the dismantling of androcentrism. In the video, Mao describes transgenic rice as breaching the division between plants and animals. Recent science projects have offered corresponding examples such as the introduction of the human protein FTO into rice and potatoes, the insertion of synthetic sRNA into transgenic rice, and the whole genome engineering of crops.<sup>33</sup> Transgressing species borders, genetic engineering does not rely on multigenerational breeding, which is indispensable for traditional and modern crop hybridization. It therefore decouples crop evolution from sexual reproduction,<sup>34</sup> thus rendering biparental roles obsolete. This means, as the video states, that “androcentrism is embroiled in danger.”

For Mao, androcentrism is ubiquitous to socio-material production and reproduction in the rural. *Becoming Father* illustrates this by pairing transgenic rice with the Kiln God, a local deity in Ximaojia Clan. In 2008, the artist and his father, a *majiao*—the local title for a spiritual medium—held a ritual for a new kiln built behind their house. A painting of a female nude was burned as a sacrifice to the Kiln God, the guardian of firing. Mao’s video invokes the documented ritual performance to foreground the artist’s gender critique. As it explains, to fertilize the kiln and give birth to its products, the male kiln god must abduct female fertility and transform itself into a hermaphrodite. This gendering of production constitutes a “theology of procreation”<sup>35</sup> that reinforces both androcentrism and heterosexism.

While the transgenic rice must establish such “theology” to be accepted into the “natural process of plant evolution,”<sup>36</sup> its bypassing of species boundaries and sexual reproduction essentially resists such apotheosis. Through this convoluted, metaphor-laden narration, the artist reveals his dialectical attitude toward transgenic rice. On the one hand, he invests in the counter-androcentric promise of agrotechnology to criticize the heterosexist sociology of natureculture. On the other hand, the farmers’ doubt about transgenic rice reflects a deepened feeling of losing fatherhood, a metaphor for their multigenerational, interspecific bond with rice. In this sense, the extinction of fatherhood also denotes the corporate sector’s abduction of the fatherly role from farmers.

### **Geo-rice: A Turn to Death and Nonlife**

Turning from Mao’s farm to its surrounding wetland, the last chapter of *Becoming Father* centers on the archetype “geo-rice” and its counterpart “geo-human.” Corresponding to the combining form *geo-*, two digital images, *Futurist Paddy* and *Geo-Body* (2018), appear

32. Robinson, “Ethics and Transgenic Crops,” 76; Shaw, “It Just Goes against the Grain,” 287–88.

33. Yu et al., “RNA Demethylation”; Zeng et al., “Cross-kingdom Small RNAs”; Goold, Wright, and Hailstones, “Emerging Opportunities for Synthetic Biology.”

34. Mueller and Flachs, “Domestication, Crop Breeding, and Genetic Modification”; Amin et al., “Factors Influencing Stakeholders’ Attitudes.”

35. Mao, *Becoming Father*, subtitles.

36. Mao, *Becoming Father*, subtitles.



as key visual narratives. The first image arranges a collection of items—an elaphure, an elephant, fish, bees, plants, fossils, minerals, and digital objects—into a troop of equations on an abstract, colorful stratum. They give birth to a monotone paddy covered in metallic gloss, floating at the center of the pictorial space. Against a similar background, a terracotta human body sinks to the bottom of the second picture. Above it is the permutation and recombination of squares and arrows of various colors. Through the images, the chapter offers a twofold imagination of the geological turn of life.

First is the transformation of life into nonlife. In *Automatic Paddy* (2018), a video elaboration of *Futurist Paddy*, Mao installs rice on a repertoire of infrastructures—genetic engineering laboratories, bee renting businesses, robot pollinators, mechanized agriculture, and large-scale land management systems. In the end, future seeds appear as a graphic of codes. The boundary between rice, machinery, technological objects, and bioinformatic computation thus dissolves. *Becoming Father* furthers this imagination into the geosphere, where organisms, geological bodies, and digital objects become the numeric, operators, and functions of the bioinformatic coding of rice. This projects a future whereby the biotic and the abiotic become inextricably entangled on the evolutionary path.

The emotive impact of the nonlife turn is reflected in the flatness of Mao's digital images, which resonates with the bulldozed landscape around Dongting Lake. As *Becoming Father* captures, the stratum of the region was exposed by mining while forests were uprooted for farming and land resales. Here, the geological turn manifests the agency of geological substances that folds life into death. Since the early 2000s, Hunan has been stigmatized by cadmium and indium pollution from a local plant that processed mining slags. Through toxic water and soil, the lethal chemicals accumulated in rice and human bodies. Irrevocable consequences continue to shadow the province, causing chronic diseases and slow deaths. Moreover, similar cadmium leak has occurred in other regions of China where mining industries boom, resulting in the extensive flow of contaminated rice into the national supply network.<sup>37</sup> Cadmium rice, as Chinese farmers refer to their contaminated product, is but one of the many names of geo-rice.

By portraying geo-bodies in the age of bioinformatics, extractivism, and chemical contamination, *Becoming Father* speculates extinction as the extermination of life at large. Like with the transgenic rice, Mao's attitude toward the geo-turn is dialectical. At the end of the video, he warns that when all "original codes" of life are exhausted, bioinformatic engineering can no longer hold a future. Meanwhile, he does not shun away the theoretical challenges elicited by the geological turn, which entails nonlife and death being included within the network of inheritance.

### The Politics of Inheritance

Conceiving extinction as losing ecological interactions, the end of fatherhood, and the turn to nonlife and death, *Becoming Father* extends extinction narratives into the register

37. Gong, "China's Tainted Rice Trail"; Liu, "Polluted Legacy."

of imagination and emotion. Rather than singular events lining up on a linear timeline, the extinction it portrays is continuously felt as premonitions and slow violence. Yet, to what extent is this narration more constructive than an inflated apocalyptic aesthetics? Departing from this question, this section associates extinction with the loss of inheritance. By unveiling inheritance as a biocultural mechanism toward which extinction pressure gravitates, it prepares for reading Mao's other films as the search for inheritance.

During a studio visit, I asked the artist what he thought this work was about. He answered, after a pause, with "zhongye."<sup>38</sup> Literally translated as the seed industry, *zhongye* denotes the cross-generational vocation of caring for seeds. For Mao, this includes preserving the seed of rice and rural lifeways. Seed as a trope appears in the opening and ending scenes of *Becoming Father*, where the artist produces baijiu from rice with his father. This *techne*, like Mao's other experiments, was once lost during the drastic socioeconomic transformation of rural China. After the establishment of the farm, it was resumed and passed down by his father. As the father-and-son scenes imply, in Ximaojia and some ethnic minority societies Mao visited, such heritage builds only along the male line. The invocation of the Kiln God accordingly posts his criticism against this model of inheritance, one that persists by reproducing fatherhood. While transgenic rice suspends this hetero-reproductive model, it also unravels the coevolution between farmers and rice. By ruminating over the twin effects of transgenic rice, *Becoming Father* reveals gendered reproduction as a seemingly indispensable part of and yet a limitation to the sustainment of interspecies inheritance.

As mentioned in the introduction, van Dooren suggested that to inherit means not only retention but also biocultural recombination that takes place through natural selection and multispecies entanglement, which makes inheritance a work of "generations of co-becoming."<sup>39</sup> Echoing this observation, the first chapter of *Becoming Father* foregrounds adaptive evolution as a political arena of inheritance while further specifying that the geo-climatic conditions for ecological interaction are prerequisite to such biocultural evolution. The geo-rice as an epitome of the abiotic and death turn of life propels us to venture beyond the biopolitical framework of inheritance. This generates a series of questions regarding how inheritance may tie in life with nonlife and post-life, what nonbiocentric models of inheritance are viable, and what it implies when we introduce inheritance into the regime of geontopower. Invoking the Foucauldian concept of biopower to reflect on humans' dominance over the earth, political ecologists have coined the term *geopower* to denote the governmentality whereby modern states and technocrats subjugate the planet.<sup>40</sup> While biopower regulates ways of human life, *geopower* extends this logic to nonhuman beings, geological bodies, and climate to make

38. Chenyu Mao, interview by the author, Shanghai, September 25, 2021.

39. van Dooren, "Spectral Crows in Hawai'i," 193.

40. Luke, "On Environmentality"; Luisetti, "Geopower"; Diran and Traisnel, "Politics of Geopower."

them the political subjects of the Anthropocene.<sup>41</sup> Among the proliferating theorization of geopower, Elizabeth Povinelli's geontopower aptly illuminates the problem of inheritance at stake here. According to Povinelli, geontopower works through an ontological division between life and nonlife. By attributing personhood exclusively to organisms, it casts those who see geological bodies and abiotic matters as animate into the premodern, thereby justifying multiple neocolonial projects on Aboriginal territories.<sup>42</sup> However, this ideological division between life and nonlife no longer stands in the face of the Anthropogenic climatological and meteorological disturbance. This calls for a nonbiocentric framework to articulate the stake of geological bodies in today's political landscape.<sup>43</sup> While Povinelli's proposition speaks of the more-than-human worlds of Aboriginal communities, the same ontological move is demanded by inheritance at the nonlife and death turn envisioned by Mao.

Overall, *Becoming Father* foregrounds the politics of inheritance in three intersecting loci: adaptive evolution, gendered reproduction, and geontopower. By usurping these regimes, agrotechnology and industries monopolize the mechanisms of reproduction and the direction of speciation, making it increasingly difficult for species and multispecies communities to inherit on their own terms and timescales of life. This loss of inheritability challenges counterextinction measures to cultivate diverging modes of inheritance. Correspondingly, the rest of the article examines the models of inheritance Mao foregrounds through his ethnographic works and their ethico-political implications on what to inherit and how to inherit. Led by three protagonists, it brings Mao's other films and writings into dialogue with *Becoming Father*.

### The Sorcerer-Ghost

The first protagonist is the "sorcerer-ghost" (*wugui*) from the video *Seed·Epigraph* (2018). The work displays shuffling photographs of paddy fields, each centering a rice plant that stands alone from surrounding paddies. Either outstandingly shorter or taller, these plants have darker pericarp and produce seeds anachronistically. Plant scientists name these plants weedy rice or feral rice. Weedy rice resembles wild rice in certain traits, including pigmented pericarp, greater seed dispersal, longer seed dormancy, and smaller production volume.<sup>44</sup> As such, it can return its seeds to the soil before harvest and germinate at the optimal timing, hence propagating without human attendance.

Despite its resemblance to wild rice, weedy rice is not a product of "domestication in reverse"<sup>45</sup>—that is, retrogression of the genes responsible for wild rice's evolution into modern cultivars. Rather, it is found to have evolved from cultivars through

41. Crutzen and Stoermer, "Anthropocene."

42. Povinelli, *Geontologies*, 4–9.

43. Povinelli, *Geontologies*, 14.

44. Scossa and Fernie, "When a Crop Goes Back to the Wild," 544; Wu, Lao, and Fan, "De-domestication"; Qiu et al., "Diverse Genetic Mechanisms."

45. Kanapeckas et al., "Escape to Fertility," sec. "Adaptive Evolution of Weeds through De-domestication."

mutation and natural selection, or gene flow from wild relatives. This phenomenon, termed feralization or de-domestication,<sup>46</sup> indicates that modern cultivars still strive to evolve beyond human interests, though they are known for low genetic variance and intensity of natural selection due to domestication payoffs.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, it is by moving in the opposite direction from artificial selection that weedy rice reclaims autonomy over selection and speciation. In this sense, it constitutes a counterexample to Lengshuihong, the landrace deprived of evolutionary malleability.

Weedy rice's success would not be replicable for landraces, as they live in radically different population sizes and environmental pressures. Yet, in rice feralization, Mao finds a volition that might be shared by all species under narrowed evolutionary conditions. He expresses his thoughts through an incantatory text in *Seed-Epigraph*: "Head back to the sorcerer-ghost inside" and "separate the self from totality." If artificial selection represents the totalizing imperative of modernization, rice feralization would be a metaphor for fleeing modernity by seeking nonmodern alternatives. The artist accordingly invokes the figure of the sorcerer-ghost to symbolize the nonmodern self, an interiority that he considers latent in species and cultures under siege. Meanwhile, the figure also refers specifically to the shamanist tradition, which he deems an important cultural heritage of the Dongting Lake region and a strategy for escaping extinction.

In Amazonian metaphysics, shamanism is defined as the practice of "communicating and administering opposed perspectives" between humans and nonhuman beings.<sup>48</sup> After years of researching spiritual mediumship in Hunan and Guizhou, Mao gradually developed a nonessentialist interpretation of this ontology by associating it with biocultural evolution. He describes shamanism as a universal capacity of reschematizing one's world by bridging it with others', a process of creating new conditions for living on amid extinction.<sup>49</sup> Feralization exemplifies how rice exercises this art. By preserving the herbicide-resistance genes of cultivars while acquiring the competitiveness and evolutionary flexibility of wild relatives, weedy rice destabilizes the human agricultural environment as it proliferates.<sup>50</sup> In this sense, it not only rewilds itself but also, in Donna Haraway's term, reworlds its milieu.<sup>51</sup>

By summoning the sorcerer-ghost through feral rice, Mao envisions inheritance as a traversal work that aligns individual volition with collaborative world-making. The inheritance of a specific biocultural lineage thus may reopen a world of greater biocultural possibility. This vision allows the artist to incorporate neoshamanism into his broader practice of undoing the homogenizing process of modernity. His films therefore invoke a range of rural and indigenous spiritual resources for reenchanting diverse worlds. The following two protagonists are summarized against this context.

46. Qiu et al., "Diverse Genetic Mechanisms"; Scossa and Fernie, "When a Crop Goes Back to the Wild."

47. Wu, Lao, and Fan, "De-domestication," 571–72.

48. Viveiros de Castro, "Perspectivism and Multinaturalism," 38.

49. Mao, "On Shamanism."

50. Qiu et al., "Diverse Genetic Mechanisms"; Scossa and Fernie, "When a Crop Goes Back to the Wild."

51. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 47–57.

### The Geomancer

Importantly, the Extinction Studies Working Group has pointed out that the generativity of generations—the continuous passing down of heritage along biocultural lineages—is irrevocably lost in extinction.<sup>52</sup> This implies that, apart from biocultural materials, intergenerational connections and the model of inheritance they sustain are also subjects of letting go of and holding on to in inheritance. In contemplating the end of fatherhood brought by genetic engineering, *Becoming Father* highlights the embodiment of generativity in the rural: the interspecific coevolution of rice and farmers through multigenerational ties. Meanwhile, it problematizes the model of inheritance in the rural as androcentric and essentializing heterosexist procreation. To inherit such relationships involves negotiating with these complications. Without assuming an easy solution, Mao persists in navigating the ethics of rural inheritance following the figure of the geomancer.

The protagonist appears in *Becoming Father* where a woman is climbing a ladder of swords, a scene Mao documented in the Tujia People's *nuo* ritual.<sup>53</sup> While traditionally women are prohibited from the ritual, Mao noticed that this gender barrier is dissolving in recent years as *nuo* becomes a tourist attraction. Accompanying the scene, the voice-over in the video claims: "The theology that genetic engineering lacks can only be generated by cutting the dragon's pulse [*longmai*]."

The term *dragon's pulse*—which stems from *fengshui*, the Chinese metaphysics that explains the myriad geo-meteorological processes in the world—denotes all serpentine geologies that rise above or cut down into the ground.<sup>54</sup> It is believed that through the dragon's pulse runs *qi*, a continuum of vital energy-matter that perpetuates the cosmological transformation of things and processes.<sup>55</sup> Abounding in *qi*, the dragon's pulse is an auspicious site for human and species prosperity.<sup>56</sup> For Chinese geomancers, the diviners of earthly forms for sitting houses and tombs according to *fengshui* theorems, "catching the dragon's pulse" is a basic practice.

Historically, the practice was caught in the tension between farmers and the state. Imperial rulers, by applying geomantic principles to the planning of capitals and royal tombs, carved the empire into a dragon's pulse.<sup>57</sup> The state thereby despoils geopolitical resources by maneuvering the environment.<sup>58</sup> Meanwhile, as the artist writes of the

52. Rose, Dooren, and Chrulew, "Introduction," 9.

53. *Nuo*: a pantheistic system that combines performances, divination, and diverse local drama genres. Its functions include deity worships, curing diseases, warding off evil spirits, ceremonies, and funerals. It is still practiced by Han and ethnic minority groups in southern China.

54. Feuchtwang, *Anthropological Analysis of Chinese Geomancy*, 141.

55. Ames and Hall, *Dao De Jing*, 3.

56. Feuchtwang, *Anthropological Analysis of Chinese Geomancy*, 113; Yu, "'Longmai' chuanshuo de quanli kongzhi yu wenhua chonggou"; Paton, *Five Classics of Fengshui*, xii–xiii.

57. Brunn, *Fengshui in China*, viii; Feuchtwang, *Anthropological Analysis of Chinese Geomancy*, 7–8, 175–77.

58. Yu, "'Longmai' chuanshuo de quanli kongzhi yu wenhua chonggou," 162–67.

custom in the Dongting Lake basin, every aspect of farmers' life—living, dying, and agricultural production—is an engagement with and cultivation of the dragon's pulses on their land. The folk's dragon pulses therefore compose a "totem of the multitude" that refuses to be assimilated into the imperial landscape.<sup>59</sup>

The paddy field where the interspecific tie between rice and farmers is taken over by state-sponsored agrotechnology industries corresponds with the dragon's pulse where the state abducts local resources. "Cutting the dragon's pulse" calls for the resistance that has long been a means of sustaining the generativity of the rural lifeworld. At the same time, incarnating into the woman *nuo* performer, the geomancer refuses to stay within the androcentric model of inheritance. This provokes the modulation of inheritance in the face of new sociopolitical concerns.

### The More-than-Human Relatives

Amid the dull, incessant spring rain of 1995, farmers in Ximaojia decided, quite suddenly, to call back deities (*shen*) long gone from their clan through rituals recollected from the elders' memory. The village landscape has since become imbued with spirits. A decade later Mao Chenyu topologized this animist cosmos in *Between Humans and Gods* with three tools: the camera, oral history, and *fuji*, a divination practice. The film traces deities, ghosts, ancestors, and animal spirits across the village, each bound to a site. The Lord of the Soil and the Ground lives on a camphor tree beside the paddy fields. Nearby, Old General Mao dwells on a cypress tree and two ghosts are sheltered by a chinkapin and a thorny bush. The human ancestors rest at the Snail Mouth-shaped Entrance, a mound resembling a huge snail husk, while ghosts of children haunt the House Hills Cemetery. The Kiln God in the old kiln is malicious, like the white snake, the black dog, the butterfly spirit, and a few felines that wander around.

Portrayed as the center of this cosmos, the paddy field is a quadrangle installation that attracts the spirits from the Dongting Lake basin.<sup>60</sup> Every morning, they fly above the flooded lowland, crossing paths with rice, aquatic animals, and farmers. At night, they diffuse in forests, hills, and marshes, forming an invisible network of actors. The boundary between the secular and the ethereal is but a porose membrane hanging between twigs. Through the elders' narration, the film reveals how these encounters had brought about awes, illness, and sudden death that inscribed the clan's history into its geography. This geospatial network manifests a deeper affinity among beings and entities.

As the artist reckons, each clansperson holds a position in the genealogy of gods, ghosts, and animal spirits; each spirit is coconstitutive with a site of specific geomantic features.<sup>61</sup> Life, post-life, and nonlife in the village thus cluster into what Sahlins

59. Mao, "Shui taitou?"

60. Mao, interview.

61. Mao, interview.

phrases as the “mutuality of being,” namely kinship unbound to biogenetic filiation.<sup>62</sup> For *kinship* remains largely reserved for human lineages in the study of animist societies of Asia,<sup>63</sup> I here borrow Nurit Bird-David’s formulation *relatives* for further analysis. Informed by Sahlins’s thesis, Bird-David defines relatives as multispecies beings who share living in “minuscule societies”<sup>64</sup> where the life forms are infinite while the horizons are always within personal reach. This applies to Ximaojia, where fewer than thirty people from only eleven households live closely with numerous beings in an intimate landscape.

Different from the multispecies communities Bird-David worked with, the more-than-human relatives of Ximaojia include also incorporeal presence. More specifically, the connection with incarnate beings through potent places is the cosmological principle of this community. Place potency, as Anne Yvonne Guillou summarizes of Southeast Asia, accumulates from the intentionality of places to affect humans, the materiality of geological formations, and the flows of animist energy through landscapes. Contributors of these factors, including humans, species, spirits, geological bodies, events of living and dying, and rituals are essentially consubstantial of place potency and of one another.<sup>65</sup> As Mao’s film captures, a similar model manifests in Ximaojia through spontaneously articulated *fengshui* discourses, place-related taboos, and enigmatic stories of encounters. As such, the more-than-human relatives of radical consubstantiality form an earthbound community, which I propose as a unit of inheritance that does not divide the biological and the geological, or the living and the once lived.

To explore how inheritance works for this unit, we may further look into the reenchantment of the Ximaojia clan. Among the deities who have returned, the major patrons of the village include General Yangsi, the Soil-Ground Boddhisatva, and Old General Mao, who all lived mortal lives before posthumous ascension. Their return is both descent from the spiritual realm and homecoming from death. As they came back, they revived spiritual mediumship as a cosmological vehicle of communication. After Old General Mao, grandfather of the artist and the former majiao, passed away in 1975, the practice was suspended for twenty years. It was only in 1995, when the villagers called upon deities, that Mao’s father was appointed by providence as the current majiao. He has since then led fuji rituals to mediate between the villagers and spirits. As Mao’s film has documented, during these occasions, deities would move a writing stylus or voice through the possessed medium. Their words became the major source of knowledge about the spiritual world and its relation to the clan’s geohistories. A world of incessant connections thereby reformed.

For Ximaojia’s inheritance, reweaving relationships attenuated by deaths and agricultural industrialization is crucial. As the artist recalls, the twenty years of secularity

62. Sahlins, *What Kinship Is*, ix, 29.

63. Århem, “Southeast Asian Animism in Context.”

64. Bird-David, “Persons or Relatives?,” 33.

65. Guillou, “Potent Places and Animism in Southeast Asia,” 389–99.

have crystallized into two imageries, the mutation of rice—a euphemism for indigenous varieties being wiped out by commercial hybrids—and the proliferation of ghosts.<sup>66</sup> Echoing the three extinctions in *Becoming Father*, this collective experience propels the clan to reenchant itself to reconnect with an animist world across the border between life and death. Rather than resuming certain cosmological traditions, this process was driven by the need to cope and live on with the contemporary experience of death and loneliness.

### **Against Survival: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Survivance**

Moving away from the technologically manipulated, androcentric, and biocentric patterns of inheritance problematized by *Becoming Father*, the above films present three alternative models: feralization, local resistance, and reenchantment. They involve a range of actors in the Ximaojia cosmos including the feral rice, farmers, human ancestors, deities, animal spirits, and geological bodies. These partakers, however, are becoming either extinct or disempowered in today's Dongting Lake basin. Giving visibility to these actors, Paddy Films quest for not only alternative models of inheritance but also the sustainment of these models at the loss of their partakers.

Like Ximaojia Clan's invocation of spiritual mediumship, Mao uses filmmaking to bring the specters of extinction into existence in a lineal and collateral network of inheritance. In both projects, the once lived and the never alive become the stakeholders in a counterextinction future with the living. Arguably, this future imaginary is grounded in an inclusive politics of participation that strives for more than the survival of a narrow range of life forms. I consider this politics as an ethical practice of living on for those under extinction pressure. To make this mode of being accessible to further analyses, I associate it with the concept of survivance.

Survivance, as aforementioned, was originally conceived by Derrida as the universal structure of existence, a living on inevitably inscribed with traces of past lives.<sup>67</sup> Drawing on Derrida but relinquishing his universalization, Vizenor renders survivance as the active and continuous presence of Native stories, a literary modality that carries the authenticity of Native American narrative and rhetoric practices.<sup>68</sup> Conflating the two without limiting survivance to a general hauntology or literary paradigm, Povinelli interprets survivance as an action of "how we respond to ancestral communications about altered conditions" that holds "an obligation to adjust forms of reciprocity."<sup>69</sup> Echoing Vizenor's and Povinelli's writing, survivance in Mao's works manifests in both responsive storytelling and ethical living.

Rather than a universal status of existence readily given, survivance in Paddy Films relies on the active participation of feral rice, human ancestors, and various incarnate

66. Mao, "Yuhangyuan zhengzhi."

67. Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally*, 52–53.

68. Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance."

69. Povinelli, "Divergent Survivances."



beings in halting extinction. Their presence is made through feralization, local resistance, and reenchantment—namely, actions of inheritance in response to extinctive crises. As they reweave the networks of inheritance unraveled by ecological isolation, biotechnology, and death, they also engender material changes in the biogenetic, geological, and spiritual ecology of Dongting Lake. As such, survivance is a real-life practice rather than literary metaphor.

Meanwhile, thinking of survivance as simultaneously inhibiting the domains of life and art may help expose the reciprocity between narrative constructs and the living world. Coconstitutive with the Ximaojia cosmos, Mao's mediascape is woven by the materiality of a rice ecology inscribed with cross-generational lives in multiple space-times; in turn, it mediates survivance convincing and experienceable among a wider audience, bringing the stakeholders of a counterextinction future alive on each occasion of storytelling.

While the Derridean survivance makes the precondition of inheritance, I propose to think of survivance as a practice that the processual work of inheritance thrusts beings into. It entails an ethical way of living on with extinction that may be bearable and pursuable for those who have no power to subvert the political and technological status quo yet refuse to submit to the loneliness and solitude of mere survival. The concluding part of the article further considers why such resistance against the survival logic is especially relevant for coping with extinction in the era of modern agriculture.

### Conclusion

Mao's films suggest that extinction, apart from scientific predictions, also pertains to a pervasive feeling of loneliness that results from losing the interspecific and cross-generational ties between rice and farmers through which biocultural inheritance operates. The contrast between this felt calamity and the actual demographic growth of crops and humans echoes Rose's attribution of loneliness to the immediate oblivion of death in the current era of superfluous life.<sup>70</sup> It points to an extinction trajectory that occurs beyond the Dongting Lake basin. Such extinction, I argue, is symptomatic of the post-Green Revolution earth, where living on finds no hope in the propagation of life alone.

Arising globally in the 1950s to feed growing human populations, the Green Revolution encompasses a series of ongoing agrotechnological advancements including crop hybridization, genetic modification, inorganic pesticide, and chemical fertilizers, supported by irrigation, land management, finance, and marketing systems.<sup>71</sup> Eliminating hunger first from industrialized countries and now in developing ones,<sup>72</sup> it writes a success story by the logic of survival. Meanwhile, as it feeds more humans and crops, it

70. Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming*, 74.

71. Hazell, *Asian Green Revolution*, 1–5.

72. International Food Policy Research Institute, *Green Revolution*, 1.

arguably contributes to “the post-1950 acceleration of the human imprint on the Earth System,” known as the Great Acceleration of the Anthropocene.<sup>73</sup> Some scientists consider post-Green Revolution agriculture as the primary contributor to Anthropocenic environmental degradation, including biodiversity loss.<sup>74</sup>

Despite the critical appraisals made in agricultural research and bioscience, they are mostly concerned with how local knowledge and more ethical use of agrotechnology may improve food security for humans and preserve biodiversity. While these discussions are crucial, they seldom touch upon the political ideology at stake in the Green Revolution, one that evades the question of mass death by cultivating an obsession with life.

Casting light on this blind spot, Paddy Films call for a critique of the logic of survival by thinking in the more ethical term of survivance, which may help us disinherit the legacies of the Green Revolution and move on to a political horizon where we responsively face death and nonlife. This shift of political paradigms, I argue, is what may exceed the scope of science and could be a task for extinction studies. In particular, it demands a historical consciousness that can gear our attention to what values are at work behind which Anthropocenic processes and how these processes draw specific trajectories of extinction.

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73. Steffen et al., “Trajectory of the Anthropocene,” 83.

74. Santos, “Rethinking the Green Revolution,” 491; Gott, Morgenstern, and Turnšek, “Aquaponics for the Anthropocene,” 396.

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