Ethical Dilemma in "Documenting" Manufactured Landscapes in China

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Abstract Amidst the impressive growth of China's industrial workings, we have detected a dubious trend of "manufactured landscapes." Taking cue from Burtynsky's term, I have focused intensely on such alteration of the nonhuman material world by revealing how the trend has wrought illusion, displacement and transfiguration of man's relationship with water, land and other forms of materiality which has hitherto remained fused and bonded with man's sustained livelihood. Acting on a similar impulse, the film documenters in China and overseas have explored China's recent massive industrial and commercial constructions that have radically altered the basic nature of her vast landscape, and have drastically affected the bond between human habitat and the natural environment. I explore the layered complexity in documenting the disruptive impact of these man-made landscapes by means of "affective intervention" — by looking closely at scenes taken from Burtynsky's *Manufactured Landscapes* (2007) and Hu Jie's *The Silent Nu River* (2006). In the former, I stress how Burtynsky and Baichwal use the camera's panning shots to tease out and mediate the little contested framing of still photography, while in the latter, I underscore how Hu Jie adroitly deploys the camera to involve the people being interviewed and viewers to record moments of conflict and negotiation. Both documentary films shed light on the embedded agency of both human and non-human forces in its indigenous cultural and social environs.
Key Words manufactured landscape; affect; Edward Burtynsky; Jennifer Baiwal; Hu Jie

When Edward Burtynsky first released his documentary film of China's mega-sized industrial constructions (with Jennifer Baichwal as director), it was not clear whether he used the term "Manufactured Landscapes" in the film title to renew an old concept of his in order to caution against a new hazard in the spirit of environmental activism.[1] In the ensuing years, "Manufactured landscapes" came to stand for

mammoth industrial and engineering constructions that are disturbingly grand and sublime, and have over time infused themselves in the human subconscious as part of the natural landscape. The term soon gained critical traction and has since morphed into the modus operandi for much of the critical commentary on ecology in China insofar as its industrial and urban engineering impact the wellbeing of the human habitat. Reassessing such impact shall shed light on the dubious nature of China's development frenzy; it has indeed revealed its excessive and unregulated craving for real estate investment and capital construction, and its outcome has left China's already crowded landscape studded with eye-sore buildings and landmarks in a manner reminiscent of the Great Leap Forward campaign in late 1950s.[2]

I approach manufactured landscapes in the Chinese context from a relational perspective, namely, to explore aspects of the ecological impact via a cluster of issues underlying the interdependence between the humans and landscapes. I realize full well how this relational interdependence draws from a deep fount of ancient Chinese cosmology; it is spelled out in a popular mantra: Tian ren he yi (天人合一，Heaven and humans are a harmonious whole). Yet I also acknowledge that one vital force that has sustained human survival amidst biotic and terrestrial flows and ebbs is the Chinese notion Ren di qin he (人地亲和，Humans and land exist in affinity), which emphasizes a cohesive melding of humans and terrestrial settings.[3] According to Yi-fu Tuan, what brings about this cohesion is an enmeshing of social relationships, cosmological wisdom and traditional ceremonials and rites in diverse locales. Prompted by Tuan, I intend to explore a realm of subjects intersecting aesthetics, ethics and ecology; at the heart of my inquiry is the question: how shall we perceive landscape and build livable habitats in an age beset with willful depletion of resources and runaway property development? I find it compelling that, since the onset of China's Open-Door Reform (circa 1980s), there have been aggravating efforts to bring landscapes under human control solely at the behest of market-driven demands and costs. This has resulted in an ever-whetted appetite for property construction for the market and a grave neglect of a balanced and wholesome planning and building of human habitats. Lapses of moral sensitivity and ethical judgment have clouded our vision to discern an excessive use of resources driven by a misguided instrumental reason.[4] Regarding landscape or wilderness as parts of a mechanistic system at our disposal, we have allowed ourselves to reclaim, reorder and reconstruct lands solely by human desire, and have caved in to "the cash-in imperative" by overusing land and other resources and consuming them at a breakneck pace. In the end, we realize it is this nullifying dissonance that lies at the root of our moral laxity.

My take on what causes this dissonance has directed me to the study of the intricate nature of man-made landscapes that have made vast incursion not only into

our physical topography, but our cognitive sphere.[5] It is thus necessary to explore the layered ambiguity in documenting man-made landscapes by "a disinterested observer" and reveal the seemingly grand, but profoundly disruptive impact of these spectacles of industrial working. A central issue poses itself right out-front: is photo realism objective and dispassionate by default? A great many documentary filmmakers have answered to the contrary, offering us powerful footages of ecological calamites as a result of China's feverish growth of industrialization and urbanization. Rather than taking these spectacles as documented evidence of a cool, disinterested mind at work, they regard them as a means to reveal the directors' ability to discern man-made sublimity in ways that appear self-effacing but are deeply provocative and insightful. I thus argue that such documentation signals a different kind of emotive attachment, rather an affective intervention, if you will, and that their approach re-asserts the need for ethical judgment to restore our sensibility to design and sustain livable habitats.

Edward Burtynsky's Still Images of China

It is Burtynsky's photographs of China's man-made landscape that bring into focus the excessive largess of human encroachment on the planet and the hidden pitfalls in the human endeavor to disfigure and displace natural landscape in excess. Burtynsky is no stranger to photography's lasting ambiguity — the tension between aesthetics and conscience, but he has aptly introduced "padding" of ambiguity and complexity into his photographs that enrich and incite the viewers to reach a breaking point of tension where they make a moral decision themselves. By means of embedded references to painting and sculpture of landscape, for instance, he has captured wide-range vistas of industrial scenes and projects through an "elevated perspective" and then expands it by a mid-aspect of the industrial workings, such as railcuts, open-pit mines and tailings, followed by an extended eye line suggesting infinity.[6] According to Burtynsky, when such an unfolding perspective is infused in the still image, it would "bring the viewers to grapple with their own consciousness about being that space."(Pauli 41) In the same vein, he stresses the unique role of still photograph; he believes that "[s]till images are used as the iconographic representations of issues we need to grapple with in our times," and that "[Still photographs] lock on. … allow[ing] that kind of fragment to become embedded into our memory." (Burtynsky 52)[7] He further explains how still photograph fulfills the role of inciting moral awareness:

> … we don't avert our eyes, but we get drawn into that place. Once a person is drawn into that place of the content of these images, it forces that person into this kind of forbidden pleasure: "I'm enjoying being in there, but there's something wrong here. Why am I enjoying this? I shouldn't be. This isn't good. This is a

> waste land. (Burtynsky 53)

As the viewer engages in self-interrogation while viewing the photographic image, he/she reaches the point where the person has to grapple with his/her conscience about the validity of seeking any hedonistic pleasure out of these still images as if they were fruits of pure artistic creation rather than ruined environs resulting from unchecked human desire. It seems, however, there is real potential for certain internal conflict to arise in Burtynsky's account since it figures both an unfolding perspective from within the photo and a frozen representational frame from without. Seemingly at odds with each other, such a dubious feature has not escaped the scrutiny of his critics who have lately explored this ambiguity, using it to caution the viewers against the risk of neutralizing "the implicit moral and social force of photographic images."[8] Kenneth Baker, after dissecting the internal functions of a still photo by Burtynsky, states point-blankly that "Burtynsky's submerged references to non-photographic modern art slow, perhaps even block, merely hedonistic consumption of his pictures"(Pauli 41). In the meantime, Baker is quick to point out that

> … beneath our pleasure beats a note of anxiety that arises from our wondering how the beauty of the image came about? The acts of shooting and printing it are like the pieces that complete a fantastic abstract puzzle. The picture's writhing details almost invite reading as ideographs: What ravage of earth and air do these compacted masses of colored metal signify? (Pauli 42)

It is thus apparent that the dualistic nature of still photograph lays the intent of the artist open to reactions at once affirmative and critical, and Burtynsky is no exception. Yet it requires a genuine moral alertness on the part of the photographer to document not just awestruck feelings at the sight of ugly vastness and sublimity, but a nagging despair at the humans' inability to bring their own consumptive excess to a halt. It was as if Burtynsky had been awaiting his trips to China between 2002 and 2005 to rise to that challenge.

Incidentally, *Manufactured Landscapes* (2007) presents us an intriguing instance in which the famed photographer finds himself facing a similar conundrum.[9] This film is now globally acclaimed thanks precisely to its title "Manufactured Landscapes" and the gallery of Burtynsky's still photographs it exhibits alongside the film's documentary narrative. With a discerning eye, he has captured stunning images of these mega-size industrial projects that have studded China's landscape in recent decades. Noisily and menacingly, these projects are taking over China's topography as a result of her hasty embrace of the global, market-driven economy. In a similar

manner, Burtynsky's earlier images overwhelm the viewer with a sense of being awestruck. He used his favored panoramic angle to underscore the chaotic scene of war-like ruins left behind by the hurried and unruly demolition of residential towns; these images are "locked on" in the viewer's mind as a stirring testimony to the ambitious scope and rapid pace with which the Chinese were building their industrial workings, urban centers and business facilities, but also to the costly underside of it: the brutal and indiscriminate excesses committed by the humans in their drive for power and control over nature. The apocalyptic effect of such images is enhanced through his innovative use of the lenses and angles coupled with a calculated shooting distance. In addition, some of these images are unique and rare because, when Burtynsky photographed these colossal industrial sites, they were taken at exactly the same spots, but during two or three separate visits with a year or so apart. In other words, he has visually documented phases of the landscape being altered with the lapse of time (Pauli 44). Thus, the images enable him to display an evolving process of then vs. now. This progressive mode is especially striking with his photos on Wushan 巫山 , a city located on the Yangtze River not too far from the Three-Gorge Dam. Burtynsky visited Wushan twice in 2002 and once in 2005 respectively; nearly three years passed between then — the demolition of the old town of Wushan — and now — its nearly complete man-made flooding.[10] The film captures this poignant moment: perched atop the mountains, with his camera placed at the same spots he had placed before, the photographer saw exactly what he wanted: a chance to witness the last moments of old Wushan before being flooded in its entirety and chronicle a total erasure of an age-old human habitat completed with its watery burial deep in the man-made lake (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The City of Wushan in 2002 (left) and 2005 (right), Curtesy of Manufactured Landscape (DVD)

However, there is more: the film captures the moment in motion. Much like his earlier Wushan images, Burtynsky's photographs tend to induce an arresting stillness as if the artist's vision has delimited to an invisible frame, and it cannot help being

withheld from taking a crucial step ahead and moving beyond into the realm of social conscience. But the withdrawal of his vision also entails a catch: viewed within the photographic frame, the camera is apt to rehearse the gaze of a detached observer whose perspective is aligned with an atomistic "I" in command over the natural sublime, or in this case, the apocalyptic shock. Withdrawn from the sights observed, Burtynsky thus risks making his photos liable to a dissonant gaze; by freezing and miniaturizing landscape he would etherize the painful trauma inflicted upon those local residents who were forced to abandon their ancestral homes at the behest of modern progress.

What his still photography falls short of is more than compensated by what the film captures in motion at the hands of Elizabeth Baichwal, his filming partner. Assisted by Baichwal, Burtynsky is able to overcome the inertia of disinterest and neutrality of his earlier photographs, avert the trap of dissonance by allowing his camera gaze to track moving figures in the scene rather than stay fixed on its objects or sceneries. Together, they have opened up the photographic frame and infused it with the tracking ability of the film camera, thereby inserting a panning sequence with the still-life images. Thus the viewer is no longer confined to a static vision, but is shown the effects of an unfolding narrative. Upon close scrutiny, we notice that the earlier images come very close to presenting a haunting nightmare of Wushan when the city was disfigured like a patient being operated on with its abdomen cut open to reveal the contorted "intestines" — half-torn houses and mangled streets (Baichwal, DVD). In contrast, we now discover that the camera's deliberate panning has brought our focus to the border zone where the sprawling new city meets the submerged old. As it zooms in on human figures caught in a flurry of activities, we find ourselves in direct and personal contact with not only live individuals, on-going communal events, but memories of the recent past and distant histories of the local sites. As the voiceover of the film now comes on to tell us, in an unassuming yet engaging tone, that these men were carrying used bricks and abandoned wooden frames they had gathered from the old city, and that they need to reuse these to improve their new homes because the "new" houses in which the city authorities had relocated them lack windows — a shocking detail in the local and living reality which would have probably slipped the attention of still photography (Baichwal, DVD).

While the camera tracks further and deeper in the border zone, more and more real-life details are brought to light, filling in the social backdrops for Burtynsky's still images of awe-inspiring debris. One such detail reveals, for instance, that the new houses were short-changed in design and construction because a portion of the official funds for the relocation housing projects were paid off as "kickbacks" for the local officials and contractors. As the tracking draws to a close, it is evident that

Baichwal has put a human face onto the pathos of the debris zone — she has posited more sociological and psychological relevance by means of the film camera's tracking motion. In a convincing manner, the tracking shots correlate the documentary's narrative progression, which in turn reflects on the artist's vibrant awareness of the ties between aesthetics and social complexity and individual integrity. It is therefore crucial to conclude that she has nimbly merged the mobility of the cinematic narrative with the distilling stillness of photography, and she has ably assisted Burtynsky in valorizing an ethical orientation in his still photography by extending their visual portent beyond the parameters of aesthetic framing. And to that end, Burtynsky acknowledges the indebtedness and has credited her, while being interviewed by the media, by praising her effort to establish "a dialogue" between different generic forms of "framing" landscapes, yet stays course with his own critical strategy of avoiding a didactic "right" or "wrong" moral judgment but "leaving it open for the viewers" (Baichwal, DVD). Incidentally, in doing so, Burtynsky also concedes that there is no insurmountable barrier between aesthetics and social conscience in terms of photographic documentation.

In the light of this "open-ended" dialogue, I would argue that the deeper issues are yet to reveal themselves if we further explore the partnership between photographic and filmic documentation. One issue is directly related to the cross-medium dialogue which Burtynsky refers to: it is the transference of value judgment from the aesthetic to the ethical. As seen from the above, whereas the ethical does rely on human affective reaction to affirm its stand, the aesthetic does not automatically correlate to the ethical when impacted by pragmatic reasoning. In a way, this aesthetic lopsidedness is exactly what holds the viewer back from feeling the urgency and gravity of a moral choice. At the sight of the awe-striking and ruinous largess, the viewer is likely to detect a sense of humans "taming" nature, wreaking havoc with its apparently chaotic and devastating aftermath. Concurrently, however, the manufactured sublime appeals more to his/her sense of supremacy than to a sense of alarm triggered by disproportion and extremity. Derived chiefly from a technological rationale, the fear-stirring enormity of human endeavor, whether in feat or in waste, attests to the fact that a scientific rationale is sufficient to outsmart the inchoate nature. By now we realize that Burtynsky's vision of man-made landscape embodies a set of discordant musings: they are interwoven visually but remain divisive ethically; thus it is poised to bring about either a firmer resolve for humans to anatomize and master natural landscape, or a rude awakening about the irreversible doom if they choose not to respect and co-exist with it. Thus, it reveals the likely risk of complicity with humans' conquest of nature enmeshed in Burtynsky's still photography that exerts the human will excessively, but constricts the human affective as grounds for ethical

judgment, thereby alienating the human from the non-human life forms on the planet.

This is precisely how the human viewer, whether an artist or a scientist, gets his/her ethical impulse lulled into inaction and becomes vulnerable to the dominance of the technicist world view in which an excessive drive for technological prowess blights human affective reactions to natural landscape, calling them sentimental, and therefore, inferior in judgment.[11] Burtynsky's earlier enthrallment with industrial workings and his photographic celebration of it is guilty of such ethical laxity. I therefore believe that in his earlier photos the sensory led to the sensuous, which in turn led to unwary tolerance of "manufactured decay and ruin." His fault lies in letting the sensory impact be channeled solely toward a human-centered use of natural resources for the sake of human gains — a typical technicist mindset. It is thus vital for Burtynsky's aesthetics to incite awe and dread from the viewer so as to use that affective impact to raise his/her environmental awareness. To meet that end, he has of late exhibited "an environmentalist turn" with his photographic documentation of landscape, including this collaborative effort in recording China's construction "boom" with photography and film.[12] When aligned with Baichwal's cinematic eye, he succeeded in freeing the photographic gaze on industrial grandeur, and enmeshing the animated sequence of tracking the motion of the local "scavengers." A new perspective thus opens up to display local residents struggling to cope with life under immanent dangers of premeditated flooding and imposed relocation. Their jointly presented footage is presently triggered by an ethical anxiety in the interest of ecological conservation. Their collaborated work gives off a genuine sense of ethical concern and care by means of a break-away from what was typical of the photographic gaze — the removed and disinterested viewpoint, the photographer now begins to turn a critical eye against the abusive prowess of technology and shifts his photographic gaze towards acts of ethical infringement owing to technological excess. Arguably this collaborative experience has resulted in an "ethical awakening" for both artists. In the face of industrial grandeur, an aesthetic appreciation can only go so far as its lopsided values allow — as a therapeutic antidote to the injurious excess of endless quest for wealth and power. But when the affective is evoked primarily to restore the viewer to living reality, as Baichwal has done with her panning shots, a free flow of interconnected feelings between the sensory and the sensual is augmented to help insert the viewer in the ethos of demolition and flooding at the Wushan site.

The film has indeed ignited a type of "affective intervention" that counters the pure "sensory" pleasure dictated by humans' instrumental appropriation of reason.[13] The upshot of it, as Baichwal shows, is the "lived" attachment of local communities to the landscape, such as the Wushan residents did, in the most harmonious way they could with the river and their daily routines of fishing and farming amidst the

surrounding. Related to this attachment is how a static and fetishistic image of the man-made sublime comes to pass at the peril of the local history, both human and non-human. Taking cue from their "lived" experience, the two documenters are intensely observant and attentive to what the film camera picks up during their tracking sequences, and spares no effort in following up with on-spot, in-person conversations with the local residents. A case in point is their filming of two large-size red pennants on which are inscribed Chinese characters and hanging over an old residential area about to be demolished. They learned later by chatting with the residents that the pennants form two slogans that seemingly support the local leadership's relocation policy, but in fact admonish them to be as good as they profess in public — not to abuse their power for self-serving gains. Details like this, filmed on the spot while they chatted, are thus embedded in the evolving narrative, and affectively assemble a context that extends, congeals and enlivens what meets the eye with the still photography.

Hu Jie and *The Silent Nu River*

I now want to explore how Chinese filmmakers navigate the challenging task of documenting the disruptive effects of man-made landscapes in contrast to the "disinterested" gaze of still photography. Contrary to the shared decorum of be disinterested, I contend, these documenters aim at the semblance of reality in a variety of ways that appear self-effacing but deeply provocative or stimulating. I believe that right up front, the aim of their documenting industrial landscapes is to re-evoke the bond between humans and landscape being or already lost in the midst of frantic urban and industrial growth; they engage the human affect as a way to serve as checks and balances whenever the landscapes and human habitats come under threat posed by zealous pursuits of property construction and resource depletion. Individually or as a group, their investigative works reclaim fresh grounds in fostering an ecological outlook by way of an ethical impulse in spite of our toxic bodies and blighted sensibilities. I will highlight below how Chinese directors' ethical concerns based on a land-human affinity help them bond with their local environs and the myriad ahuman life forms via their corporeal attachments. My analysis seeks not just to applaud such affective reactions in photographic memory, but to underscore the importance of the "genealogical" bond linking the human to the ahuman material world by means of their land-rooted bodies, communal values and traditional ceremonials and rites, and affirm how human/land affinity can effectively anchor the rudderless chases of human greed.[14]

It is not as if the Chinese filmmakers have never traveled down this path before. After all, China's crossing over the modern thresholds around mid-1800s was largely

motivated by ethical as well as instrumental values and knowhow inspired by the West.Since its advent, Chinese modernity had embedded a keen ethical drive for its inquiry and application in adapting the Western notion of "evolution" very much in the spirit of "change-as-improvement" to guide the overall course of social progress.[15] But this alternative way of conceptualizing social progress turned out to be outpaced and overpowered by the urgent drive led by the Chinese state to grow into a world-class power and avenge her feeble and humiliated losses at the hands of foreign imperial powers. This official mandate compelled many leading intellectuals to embrace a linear path to national supremacy based on wealth and power, which posed itself as the overarching and irreversible end of social betterment.[16] Before long it nurtured a full bloom of certain teleological thinking that mimicked the rise to technological dominance of first the Soviet Russian model of heavy industry and centralized economy in the 1950s and then the market-driven venture capitalism of Euro-America since 1990s. Despite the irreparable gap between the two cold-war ideological camps, the Chinese State has adduced and put into practice brands of socialism, ineptly yet effectively mixing ingredients of market-driven entrepreneurship with mechanisms of its ideological control. Nevertheless, neither model of governance has genuinely valorized a balanced approach to the pressing needs of an oversized human population sustained with limited natural resources. The PRC's nation-building project since 1949 has been fraught with cases in which many in the science community caved in to instrumental misuse of resources under ideological disguise adorned by the State; the outcome is blandly predictable: they veered off the path of moral obligation and social conscience, and, by suspending their critical sensibility, they became accomplices to wanton acts of mangling the natural landscape and depleting its resources.

We need not look too far to find the mortifying instances in the state-led massive projects of hydraulic dams.[17] Since the Reform Era, the foremost mishap caused by the abuse of technological advance is to be subsumed into a single-track, linear thinking that caters to the State's feverish development scheme. In the local context, they have endorsed a hasty agenda of melding of "urban renewal" and "gentrification," which has commandeered massive arable lands first from China's east coast to the interior, then from the interior to the frontier/border regions out in West China. In tune with such ambitious schemes, leading technocrats would envision gigantic construction projects, such as the damming of the Yangtze, Lanchang and Nu Rivers in southwestern China, with scarce concern for the needs of the local inhabitants and ecological habitats. Where the natural resources, e.g. water, abound, there happen to be age-old towns and villages of land-bound Han farmers and ethnic minorities whose life style blended seamlessly in with their ecological environs through generations. Damming these rivers excessively would pose an instant threat of drowning their

farmlands and pastures, result in uprooting them from their ancestral habitats and disrupting their time-honored livelihood. Telling instances of such an imminent desolation are found in *The Silent Nu* (Hu, 2003).[18]

True to investigative journalism, *The Silent Nu* features a series of interviews of local ethnic residents on camera and seeks to air a cross-section of views and opinions on the upcoming project of damming the Nu River in the attempt to eventually build thirteen tiered hydraulic stations along the middle and upper reaches of the Nu.[19] The filming crew trekked through a number of small towns, villages and scenic sites along the upper and middle reaches of the river to complete their investigative agenda: to document how the local residents living on the river banks would react to the government's over-ambitious energy scheme. Rather than extracting useful data and diagrams from the local offices and archives, the director chose to visit the local families from door to door and chat with one host after another while sitting around the family fire-hearth. There is a deliberate effort in the narrative to relinquish the field-trip style routines of collecting data and crunching numbers for statistic surveys and polls in favor of his face-to-face casual chats with the residents without disrupting whatever they happen to do on a normal day. Unlike the on-camera Q-and-A interrogations typical of news coverage, the camera captures the people being interviewed in their casual and unguarded moments as they react to questions posed to them as if they were at home chatting with friends. As a result, the director's inquisitive tone betrays no trace of condescending disinterest and it serves to dissolve any alienating distance owing to lack of intimacy. This turns out to be the chief reason why Hu succeeds in making his affective intervention by din of the viewer.

Let me explain with the following two instances. In the first instance, Hu's focus homes in on an affective displacement — how the commercial prospects of damming the Nu River caused the local ethnic leader to willingly forego his corporeal ties with the elements of his home place, disregard the river-based habitat as his nurturing lifeline, thereby surrendering his home-grown sensibility to the cash-in mindset of a building contractor. Presently Hu's camera is trained on A-pu, a Lisu ethnic minority leader, praising the pristine qualities of the river water bestowed on them by the snow-melt of the Himalayas. Then with a gradual close-up followed by a deliberate long-take, the director's presence recedes to let the viewer step in as the conversation partner with A-pu while the Lisu leader loquaciously "informs" the viewer how he and his Lisu community have come around to aspire to the lucrative "returns" by turning their river into a money-maker, and that their best option is to dam this section of the river and build a hydraulic power station. To be fair, as he speaks, A-pu remains in awe of the towering snow-capped mountains and the timeless roaring of the river currents behind his back. As he glowingly flaunts his new "vision," however,

the viewer cannot but notice that he becomes tentative and abstract, which is clearly evidenced in his awkward gestures. By pointing to the river behind him, he declares: "beneath all that is where the money is hidden, and we are ready to scoop it all out!" (Hu, DVD) A-pu's words inadvertently betray his thinking of damming as uncovering some treasure that has been illicitly hidden from them and should now be rightfully restored to them. In the meantime, by now the viewer lets his/her attention be hooked, he/she is imperceptibly drawn into the Q-&-A session, and his/her role as a viewer morphs into that of a participant, in fact a co-investigator, of this encounter by means of the director's camera. This is as significant a move as Burtynsky's having Baichwal to co-direct the film Manufactured Landscapes.

Director Hu captures A-pu's image at this poignant juncture shortly after the Lisu leader has been "enlightened" by a technicist vision of livelihood based largely on a crude form of Western instrumental reason. The vision and its "logical" assertions rudely disregard the fact that so many diverse and surviving ethic communities have sustained their living in close affinity with the land and resources reclaimed by their forefathers since ancient times. It sheds light on the extent to which some local ethnic leaders like him have been coerced into thinking "rationally" and have perilously plugged into the global market of venture capitalism. This leap of faith on his part is the result of embracing a profit-driven calculus that brackets out the entire process of demolition, alteration and rebuilding of the terrains, climate and modes of livelihood. Long before the damming can bring any income to his people, he must be reminded that they would have to relocate to designated areas and move in to prefabricated new houses where, owing to the one-size-fits-all urban design, they would no longer have lands to farm, or pasture for their cattle to graze. Their mode of life will be profoundly altered, starting with the loss of their most intimate daily routines, such as airing hand-washed clothing in the open air or taking a casual dip in the body-cleansing hot-springs nearby. With a slate of hand, A-pu would be led to abruptly suspend his corporeal being, by way of a crassly conceived law of marketability, from a "lived" environ that bears witness to time-honored wisdom and endurance of his ancestors.

If put in so many words from the Investigator's lips, all this would have been didactic prep talk and fallen on the deaf ear of many like preaching. But having the viewer involved, "face-to-face" with the local residents, as co-investigator, posits vital difference: among the audience, one can surely find those who have been through similar phases of demolition and relocation in their life thanks to some damming projects thrust on them. Like those who endured in the aftermath of the Three George Dam, they would be instantly compelled to testify with their experience of traumatic survival and urge A-pu and his cohorts to think twice before being sold unconditionally to the damming project. And their cautionary tale would go somewhat

like this: The profits of damming the Nu River might trickle down eventually, but it would take a long time, for whatever is used to justify the damming of the Nu has so much to do with primary priorities, such as the consumers' demands in coastal urban centers half way across China and with the values of the energy dictated by marketing factors in total disregard of the conditions of the local habitats. On the other hand, as a more plausible scenario for the immediate impact facing the local residents, it would amount to disowning their sovereign rights to their lands and severing their ancestral ties to the rich and unique wisdom necessary for sustaining river-based farming and cattle-ranching. In brief, their lived mode of existence would be forcibly displaced and altered without any of their own consent. What A-pu has embraced is indeed a form of self-effacement of their distinct mode of existence with unique cultural heritage.

Likewise, it would provoke others in the audience, but in a different way; by that I mean those in leadership — especially the technocrats — who oftentimes deem it a necessary price to pay for the sake of "progress," progress in the more developed parts of China. For a sobering comparison, Hu presently shows an interview with a hydraulic engineer who was dispatched from Beijing to take charge of the dam construction at this location. Apparently highly educated and professionally trained, the chief engineer is surprisingly candid and informative with the adverse effects of damming the Nu to produce hydraulic power. When Hu asks (in a voice-over) what concerns the chief engineer has had for the local community while designing the dam, surprisingly, the man from Beijing offers a candid and honest reply: "local people will be shocked by what they see once the dam is completed — they'd better be prepared that the roaring waves splashing the rocky banks for which the Nu is famous will be there no more! Instead they will see a huge, standstill man-made lake" (Hu, DVD). His remark sounds honest but tentative, and a tad guilty (Figure 2). Since as a person with a clear conscience, his affective reactions to the damming project are genuinely keen and scrupulous, and he cannot let these feelings be suppressed as irrelevant. As if to savor what this remark implies, Director Hu instantly shifts the camera to direct the viewers' gaze towards the roaring river currents while keeping the chief engineer's remark as a voice over. Next, Hu cuts right back to the face-to-face interview with the chief engineer, his next question is blunt: "since you are leading the damming project, can you tell us how you feel about these perilous effects?" No sooner does the question end than the hydraulic expert smile wryly and declare: "I can't tell you that; my position here doesn't allow me to. I'm not interested in politics!" He then quietly exits out of sight (Hu, DVD Figure 2).

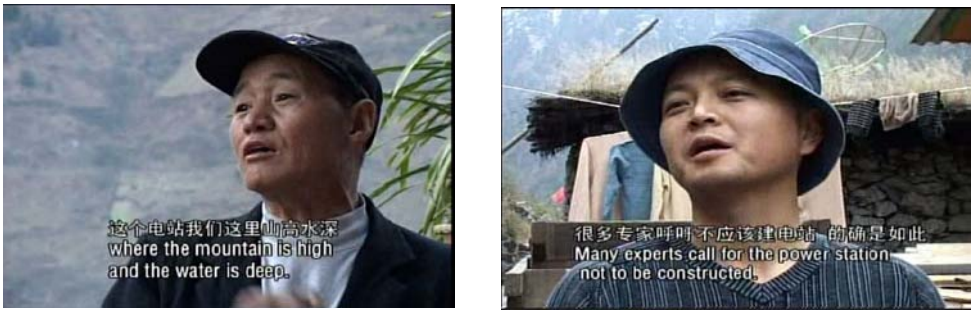

Figure 2: the Lisu Village Head (left) and the Chief Hydraulic Engenineer (right) Curtesy of Hu Jie/Wang Yongchen.

The chief engineer's ill-timed departure matters on many levels. Firstly, it is regrettable that in his capacity as the leading specialist, he is in a position to openly disclose the truth derived from his professional judgment, yet he stops short of stating the truth which can only deprive him his chance to do his part for a just and fair treatment for the local people — whose lands and livelihood his damming project is about to flood and ruin. Secondly, his self-styled silence just before the point of a truth revelation is regrettable to the viewer and probably to himself as well; one cannot but wonder: what sort of social or cultural forces are outstripping his moral conscience over such vital stakes? It is not hard to imagine that the submissive role science has customarily played under rigid ideological constraints in China has prompted him to exercise self-censorship: to blot out his affective judgment and yield to a utilitarian view, so as not to contest the State's overarching scheme of damming rivers to keep up with the excessive demand of consumption. Thirdly, failing to reveal the truth on moral grounds is ultimately equal to failing the mission of modern science in the Chinese context. Any scientist with a decent level of conscience should advocate that this is an issue of fairness and equality on the societal level. It should urge him/her to confront their inner guilt and help overcome the final obstacle to technological modernization, i.e., China's social progress — the economic boom has hitherto done pitifully little to ensure their "trickle-down" policies and repay those who have contributed the most to and benefited the least from the benefits of China's economic takeoff.

The failure of the hydraulic specialist in articulating his true feelings about damming the Nu River is a symptomatic analogy of the wide-ranging inability of science to crucially further the cause of social wellbeing. Director Hu's on-the-spot decision to film his interview with the chief engineer was risky yet deeply rewarding; the kind of feedback from his interaction with the interviewees and the audience as shown above is not guaranteed to occur all the time. Yet when it does happen, the

impact is phenomenal: it not only helps encompass the portentous meaning beyond the photographic framing, but include live instances to illustrate where the symptom lies and how it can be remedied. So, the symptomatic silence of the Nu, which is clearly implicated in the film title, should be alarming enough to challenge and destabilize not just the elusive benefits that A-pu and other local leaders were led to expect. In these two instances, what gets expressed and what gets silenced about are the two sides of one and the same technicist mindset that induces technology's willing complicity and conformity to social and political manipulation. In the case of the hydraulic expert, when he blots out his affective impulses, his judgment is hence blinded to its ethical restraint, turning his expertise into a likely tool for the State's misguided palate for energy consumption and her runaway urbanization. In his turn, A-pu, the Lisu cadre, forgoes his corporeal and land-bound wisdom, and buys into the frenzy for fast revenues and material affluence sans his ethical intuition of the humans' relationship with land. Led by the implied télos of a one-size-fits-all development, both have bowed to the flawed scheme of modern development in accordance with one model and one model only, thus being misguided by the delusion that humans are entitled to capitalize on whatever natural resources they can lay their hands on in the ahuman world as their expendable assets.

What inspires me is how an ecological awareness enables these artists to observe the massive industrial projects discretely, and how they attempt to restore a merger between the ethical and the technological by way of the human affect. To seek a solution by way of humans' affective capacity is for them to timely capture those emotive instances in which their intuitive attachments to the land, water and other vital elements of the habitats rise up to the occasion to resist or offset errors of reckless ambition and greed manifest in their technicist ambitious schemes. Evoking science's original ethical mission, they aptly implicate the experts of science and users of technology in the attempt to revive their sentient gift of affective bonding with non-human materiality, and treat the multitudes of life forms, not as "dumb" brutes, but as "conveyors and converters" of the general ecological network.[20] By exercising their expertise in "check and balance," they are called upon to act ethically, opt for development policies that treat industrial and commercial construction as integral part of sustainable life on earth, and sustain the indigenous customs and modes of existence that respect the various eco-systems. In sum, the latest "material turn" in ecological studies has spawned a great deal of attention not only to the areas intersecting ethical studies and environmental justice, but potential links between ontology, epistemology and ethics. One area that apparently warrants critiquing is an intersecting realm between the ontological formation of ethnic identity and the conception of ecological values. I believe that this is precisely where epistemological

shifts often occur from the one to the other, which will facilitate a mutual transference of value from the scientific to the ethical.

Notes

1. Edward Burtynsky:*Manufactured Landscapes*. Directed by Jennifer Baichwal. Performance by Edward Burtynsky. Zeitgeist Films, 2007. The words "manufactured landscape" had been used by Burtynsky for one of his photo catalogues released in 2003. There seems to be no earlier citation of these words anywhere in history.

2. The Great Leap Forward was designed and led in 1958-1960 by Mao's strategy of using Soviet Russia as the pace-setter to embark on a spell of grand-scale construction and production which soon turned overheated and overblown, resulting in a three-year famine in the early 1960s.

3. One key factor that welds human survival to ecological transformation is dwelled on as the human-land affinity by the cultural geographer Yi-fu Tuan. I stress Tuan's important contribution to this topophilic shift that has emerged as the most original and energizing variation of the Tian,ren he yi notion. In terms of historical value, it is highly relevant to note that Tuan's articulation of Ren di qin he appeared at a time that coincided with the rise of humanist geographers who in the 1970s intervened against a "quantitative revolution" of the social sciences on the strength of affect, memory and literary imagination.

4. There are many explanations for this surrender. Dave Foreman writes: "Humanism makes Man the measure of all things, the vessel of all values. Humanism is engineering — of machines, society, individuals, and Nature. Resourcism is Humanism applied to Nature (or 'natural resources')." Dave Foreman, "Around Campfire with Dave Foreman" in the Online Bulletin, accessed on March 1, 2007 by The Rewilding Institute: Albuquerque, NM. The historian Mark Elvin has made similar observations based on his voluminous study of the Chinese agrarian civilization. See Mark Elvin: *The Retreat of the Elephants: An Environmental History of China* (New Haven: Yale University, 2004) 167-215.

5. My research has led me to focus primarily on the following documentaries: Hu Jie, *The Silent Nu River* (Beijing: Green Earth Distributor, 2006), and Jennifer Baichwal: Edward Burtynsky, *Manufactured Landscapes* (New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2007).

6. I have referenced what Lori Pauli states in her article "Seeing the Big Picture," in Lori Pauli: *China: the Photographs of Edward Burtynsky* (Göttinggen: Steidl Publishers, 2005).

7. "The Still Photography: Embedding Images in Our Mind," *Nieman Reports*, Spring 2010/Online Exclusive (Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard) 52.

8. Kenneth Baker, for one, has raised such a concern in his article "Form and Portent: Edward Burtynsky's Endangered Landscapes" in Pauli, *The Photographs of Edward Burtynsky*, 41.

9. Jennifer Baichwal: *Edward Burtynsky, Manufactured Landscape* (New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2007).

10. In 2002, Burtynsky traveled to Wushan twice to photograph the town, and two of his photos show the incredible pace at which the town buildings were demolished.

11. I have adopted the term "technicist" from Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1996)39-40.

12. I borrowed the term "the environmentalist turn" from, among other things, the title of an ecological convention held in Milwaukee WI, in (circa) April 2012. I think the term fits Burtynsky's significant change of tone in his public statements.

13. In perceiving the potential role of "the affective intervention," I have drawn on ideas espoused by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost in their Introduction to the book they co-edited, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010)1-46.

14. I hereby reference a variety of critical approaches on the notion of "new materialism" which, instead of focusing on the human subject as the center, probes the workings of trans-corporeal bond between humans and all other material forms, and explores the "agentic" functions of assemblages and interconnections that together motor environmental changes. These works point me to the direction in which I will focus intently as to how human-land affinity can relate to the espousal of new materialisms while writing on the theme of manufactured landscapes as one significant dimension.

15. Interested readers are referred to Wang Hui, *The Rise of Modern Chinese Thought* (Beijing: Sanlian Publishing House, 2004) and Liu Qingfeng, ed. *Hu Shih and the Emergence of Modern Chinese Culture* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1990).

16. H. Lyman Miller makes a penetrating yet cogent argument along this line of thinking in his *Science and Dissent in Post-Mao China: The Politics of Knowledge* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996) to which I am indebted in the ensuing comments.

17. There have been studies of these massive failures recorded in journalistic reportage and scholarly works in the area of cultural anthropology. Jun Jing, *Temples of Memory: History, Power, and Morality in a Chinese Village* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Elizabeth Economy, *The River Runs Black: the Environmental Challenge to China's Future* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Dai Qing, ed. *Changjiang zhi si* (The Death of the Yangtze), (Xindian: Xinfeng Publishing House, 1991).

18. Hu Jie, *The Silent Nu River* (Beijing: Green Earth Distributor, DVD, 2006).

19. The ambitious project was first approved and implemented by the State Council and the Ministry of Hydraulic and Fuel Energy of China in 2003. Since then, there have been heated controversies amongst experts and the general public over its adverse effects on the environmental and biotic environs. They once caused the then Premier Wen Jiabao to suspend its construction by means of an executive order. But just recently the suspension has transpired and damming on the Nu River is again underway. In the film, the camera now and then captures shots of crews of engineers and laborers on the banks and in the river preparing for their dam construction.

20. I am drawing on the key idea in Bruno Latour's book *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the*

Sciences into Democracy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004) 9-52.

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