Alan Huang
Stanford University

Ecological, Mental, and Social Alienation in Gu Tao's Evenki Trilogy

Abstract The Evenki are a nomadic reindeer-herding people in northeastern China whose lives have been significantly transformed by China's rapid development in the form of relocations, hunting restrictions, and poaching. This forms the background of Gu Tao's Evenki documentary trilogy: *Aoluguya*, *Aoluguya*; *Yuguo and His Mother*, and *The Last Moose of Aoluguya*, centering around an alcoholic hunter named Weijia who witnesses the ebbing of his nomadic livelihood by Chinese industrialization. By employing a close reading of the films, I raise the following questions: Is there any inner connection between the prevailing alcoholism and the disappearance of the Evenki cultural identity? Is mental and ecological degradation the result of ignoring the intrinsic interdependence of the human and nonhuman? Will the Evenki's animism, which imbues the nonhuman world with personification and dignity, become the main source of salvation for the Evenki people who are entrapped by modernity's ravages? The conditions faced by the Evenki signify how the rapid development of China has exerted a dire impact on indigenous communities, cultures, and their psychic conditions. By focusing on the destruction of fulfilling human and nonhuman relationships, Gu Tao casts doubt on the direction of Chinese modernity.

Keywords Evenki, animism, anthropocentrism, ethnic minorities, modernity

The Evenki are a nomadic reindeer-herding people in the greater Khingan Mountain Range of northeastern China. Their lives have been significantly transformed by China's rapid development. They have faced changes such as multiple relocations, hunting restrictions, poaching and cultural erosion. Under the aegis of the Chinese government's anthropocentrism, a belief that sees humans as superior to nonhumans, the Evenki's identity is fracturing. In this paper, I will explore Gu Tao's Evenki documentary trilogy—*Aoluguya, Aoluguya*, *Yuguo and His Mother*, and *The Last Moose of Aoluguya*—which center around a depressed and alcoholic hunter named Weijia and his sister, Liuxia. By

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employing a close reading of the films, I aim to explore the tensions between a fading nomadic lifestyle and a modern sedentary one. The questions I raise are the following: Is there any inner connection between the prevalence of alcoholism and the disappearance of the Evenki cultural identity? Is mental and ecological degradation the result of ignoring the intrinsic interdependence of the human and nonhuman? Will the Evenki's animism, which imbues the nonhuman world with personification and dignity, become the main source of salvation for the Evenki people who are entrapped in the process of modernization? The conditions faced by the Evenki in this trilogy signify how the rapid development of China has exerted a dire impact on indigenous communities, cultures, and their psychic conditions. Disrupting such intricate ties in favor of endless extraction is shown to be folly in Gu Tao's trilogy.

Weijia's plight is one of many common themes in the documentaries of Gu Tao, a Chinese indie documentary filmmaker who focuses on the gradual loss of cultural identity among the ethnic minorities of northeastern China. Besides the Evenki trilogy, he has made documentaries about the nomadic Oroqen people called *The Opaqued God* and *Lost Mountain*, who also face declining traditions amid the advance of modernity. Compared to the Chinese novelist Chi Zijian, who has also depicted the Evenki, Gu Tao's documentary format lends a more realistic and grounded perspective that delineates the inner pain of the Evenki's cultural erosion. Since Chi Zijian's *The Last Quarter of the Moon* is more aesthetic and lyrical about Evenki traditions, she does not touch as deeply upon the detrimental effects of modernity as Gu Tao. Although the novel features an Evenki painter, Irina, who leaves her nomadic habits to learn painting in a modern city and commits suicide due to returning, Chi's aesthetic writing style greatly downplays this tragedy. Using the documentary format, Gu Tao has a more frank depiction of the Evenki's lived realities with little chance of an aesthetic embellishment of the Evenki's precariousness.

Facing a brutal reality

Gu Tao's trilogy takes a personal perspective by using Weijia and Liuxia to follow the sentiments of disorientation and loneliness in a disappearing culture. *Aoluguya, Aoluguya* is a broader survey of the Evenki way of life between the Aoluguya township and hunting camps in the mountains. The documentary shows Weijia and Liuxia travelling to the Aoluguya Township to interact with other hunters in a camp within the Khingan Mountains. *Yuguo and His Mother* focuses on the titular character and his mother, Liuxia, as the boy reconnects with his Evenki heritage. Yuguo is a boy brought up in a distant boarding school who occasionally visits his mother and uncle in the Aoluguya Township. When he visits, he slowly learns more about Evenki mythology and nomadism,

re-evaluating his identity. *The Last Moose of Aoluguya* centers on Weijia, who laments the disappearance of the Evenki hunting customs and cultural identity. The hunting ban imposed by the Chinese government has pushed many Evenki into despair, which is underscored by the difficulty of finding wild reindeer. Compounding his despair, Weijia is unable to overcome his crippling alcoholism, which strains his relationships. The trilogy's focus on Weijia and his relatives evokes how detrimental modernity has been for the Evenki.

The degradation confronting the Evenki consists of three stages: disenchantment, enclosure, and despair. Disenchantment is the reduction of spiritual beliefs and magical aura in favor of rational processes that render the natural world inert. Max Weber argued that disenchantment occurred when Western nations saw a decrease of both spiritual beliefs and human freedoms in conjunction with the advent of rationalized practices such as bookkeeping, intricate bureaucracies and timekeeping since the late 18th century (Weber 312–313). This disenchantment aligns with the dualistic ideas of René Descartes which view nature "as non-agentic, as passive, non-creative and inert, with action being imposed from without by an external force" (Plumwood 110). In this paradigm, spiritually endowed nonhumans are reduced to nonspiritual, lifeless, and even non-thinking entities, inferior to humans and ripe for exploitation. In the Evenki context, the impact of disenchantment is felt in the loss of the shaman as a vital figure in Evenki life. The shaman was typically revered as a medium between the divine and human worlds. Their knowledge allowed them to treat illnesses and intimately comprehend their natural surroundings (Heyne 378).

Disenchantment allows the implementation of enclosure, in which the state and other property owners impose exclusionary and extractive policies upon the humans and nonhumans in an area. According to Jason Hickel, enclosure is a process instrumental to the rise of capitalism in which elites eliminated "self-sufficient economies," and created both "a mass of workers but also a mass of consumers—people wholly dependent on capital for food, clothes and other essential goods" (Hickel chap. 1). For the Evenki, enclosure is manifest in the forms of hunting bans and poaching intrusions which eliminate their traditional livelihoods, forcing them into a sedentary life dependent on the Chinese state. Despair results from enclosure in which the recipients lose meaning in their lives, spiralling into alcoholism, violence, and suicide. The anthropocentric belief that humans can exist apart from nature is shown to be folly when profound personal meaning and communal bonds are shattered in the name of development. The process of degradation severs the Evenki from nature, assimilating them deeper into the wider Han-dominated culture of the People's Republic of China.

A counterpoint to the degradation I mention is catharsis, which is characterized by rekindling Evenki nomadic traditions and restoring environmental connections. While Gu Tao's trilogy mourns a precarious and vanishing culture, it urges a reconsideration of human-nature kinships. Graham Harvey defines animism as the view "that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others" (Harvey 137). This worldview emphasizes reciprocity between humans and nonhumans instead of an extractive dualism. Animism complements the grouping of social ecology, mental ecology, and environmental ecology from *Three Ecologies* by Félix Guattari (Guattari 41). He describes social ecosophy as "reconstructing the modalities of 'group-being'," reconsidering interpersonal relations, family, and communal bonds (Guattari 34). Mental ecosophy requires rethinking "the relation of the subject to the body, to phantasm, to the passage of time, to the 'mysteries' of life and death" developing alternatives from capitalist mass media (Guattari 35). The degradation of these ecologies under the extractive and expanding nature of capitalism has instilled a "certain incomprehension and fatalistic passivity" in both individuals and the government (Guattari 41).

When situated in the context of the trilogy, Weijia and many Evenki people are left adrift because the encroachment of the state and its industries has ruptured their three ecologies. Despite their wayward pathway, the Evenki depicted find meaning when they engage with the natural world, demonstrating a powerful bond. It is in that light that animism deserves attention for contextualizing how humans are inevitably connected to the nonhuman world. It implies that a separation from nature is at the root of much social disorientation in China.

Evenki History and Disenchantment

Disenchantment is key to the denigration of animistic spirituality and the imposition of anthropocentric beliefs. It rests upon a mechanistic view of the universe that regards humans as innately rational and full of feeling compared to nonhumans. When placed into the context of the trilogy, animism is regarded as a retrograde obstacle to progress by the Han-dominated Chinese state. According to Judith Shapiro, Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party held a militantly anthropocentric view of the world, failing to see humans "as part of nature, seeing nature rather as something to be harnessed or overcome" (Shapiro 3). They espoused the spirit of the "Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains" to radically reshape the natural world (Shapiro 3). It was in line with the notion of "continuous revolution" in Mao's socialism which militarized society in constant social upheavals (Shapiro 6). This worldview identifies nature as a force to be subjugated, reducing ecosystems and animals to raw material. Even after Mao's death, such echoes can be seen in the rapid

pace of Chinese industrialization. When applied against the Evenki, they are categorized as atavistic individuals who must be integrated into the national development project. But in the eyes of Weijia, the state's approach renders the Evenki's lands unrecognizable because it severs the nomads' relationship to their land.

The Evenki people of China are a Tungusic people who have traditionally lived between Lake Baikal and the Amur River on Chinese–Russian borderlands. Arriving in the 17th century, they are a reindeer-herding people in China and often traded many goods, accessing abundant materials in Siberia such as tigers, bears, sable and deer (Dumont 518). Due to this livelihood, hunting is central to Evenki identity for sustenance, trade, and culture. They are divided into clans with relatively egalitarian social structures and follow customs referred to as *aojiao'er*, "customs or rules passed down by ancestors" (Xie 64). Community and ecology are interlinked among the Evenki with their reindeer serving functions such as transportation and clothing. Evenki customs revolve around the reindeer life cycle, moving locations to prevent the animals from overgrazing on lichen (Xie 63). Furthermore, the animals are important to religious ceremonies because they are believed to transport the souls of the dead into another world (Siqinfu 27). The intimate attention paid to the relationship of organisms is shown when an Evenki chief, Maria Suo, recollects observing the movement of squirrels in order to effectively find food (Gu 192). It resembles Xie Yuanyuan's observation that older Evenki could "serve as a 'living map' of the Khingan Range," and could guide manifold people such as geological research teams, surveyors, forest research groups, land and irrigation survey organizations (Xie 61). The Evenki's nomadic lifestyle displays a deep familiarity with ecological patterns, reflecting the importance of harmonious ecosophy.

However, such ecological kinships were shattered by tremendous changes in the 20th century. When the Japanese took over their homelands in the 1930s, the Evenki suffered a severe population decrease (Xie 71). After the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, the Evenki faced disruption in the form of geopolitical pressures and development projects. They were frequently relocated to places such as the Aoluguya Ethnic Township in response to events such as the 1964 Jimide Surrender-to-Revisionism-Treason Incident (Xie 75). Furthermore, large-scale development of Daxing-anling caused many Evenki, Oroqen and Daur to leave the forest to work as farmers or live in the city (Siqinfu 21). Due to difficulties in hunting, the Evenki started to shift from hunting to reindeer herding in 1961, becoming more reliant on reindeer for antler production (Ge 47–48). However, they had to contend with the increasing arrivals of outside migrant workers since 1979 whose presence "incurred disruption and damage to natural ecosystems and the concomitant

decrease in the number of wild animals" (Xie 80). The early 1980s saw a new wave of development under the Reform and Opening Up policy, causing railways, highways, and logging roads to encroach into the forests (Siqinfu 23). One particularly disruptive event in the eyes of Weijia was the 2003 relocation which transformed the Evenki from hunters into producers of reindeer antlers. Another crucial step in the relocation was the confiscation of all Evenki hunting guns by the public security bureau of Genhe county and the local police of the Aoluguya ethnic township (Ge 49). Nevertheless, the Evenki still frequented the forests and continued practices such as foraging, herding reindeer, living in tents, and clan structures (Ge 51). This alternating environment explains why Weijia divides his time between the hunting camp and the Aoluguya township, preferring the former.

The policies of the People's Republic of China towards the nomadic Evenki are assimilationist, pressing them to adapt to a settled life since the 1960s (Ge 49–50). This resulted in the fading traditions and corrosive alcoholism that comprise the backdrop of *Aoluguya, Aoluguya* and *The Last Moose of Aoluguya*. In *Aoluguya, Aoluguya*, Weijia mentions that "it was a good decision not to move down to the settlement," as he feels a greater sense of freedom in the camp than the Township which he finds restricting and bewildering. Furthermore, the camp enables Weijia to feel a closer connection to his ancestors which is reflected in a song he chants. In Geiger's analysis of *Nanook of the North*, he argues that a documentary filmmaker makes art by "passing from the realm of the purely descriptive use of 'natural material' into the realm of 'arrangements, rearrangements, and creative shapings of it" (Geiger 126). Gu Tao does not merely represent reality but enhances it with his choice of certain scenes and soundtracks. Here, he emphasized scenes where Weijia utters words such as "to lead the children of the forest home," "father's forest" and "mother's river." It reflects Xie's observation that many Evenki hunters are deeply familiar with natural details such as peaks, hills, and creeks to the point that every "location had a name brimming with vivid meaning that fully described the site and its characteristics" (Xie 64). But under the increasing enclosure of the Evenki lands, such practices appear doomed to fade into history, provoking frequent nostalgia in Weijia.

The Enclosure of land and tradition

Enclosure is the process of implementing restrictions on a territory for extraction. In the Evenki context, it takes the forms of a hunting ban, increased development and the marginalization of the Evenki language in favor of Mandarin. There was a hunting restriction passed in 1996 to ostensibly protect wildlife in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, confiscating private

guns (Ge 58). However, this ban has proved devastating to the Evenki by severing traditions while contributing to poaching intrusions into the Khingan Mountains. In addition, the Chinese education system threatens the Evenki language due to the emphasis on Mandarin, obstructing an intergenerational transfer of knowledge. This process of land encroachment, hunting bans and linguistic decline reduces the autonomy of the Evenki by endangering their cultural knowledge.

Enclosure is symbolized by Weijia's description in the start of *The Last Moose of Aoluguya* when he likens the police to Big Brother due to their ability to exercise arbitrary power over him. He feels helpless against the police because he was fined 1500 yuan and jailed for fifteen days for firing a gun at the sky. To that end, the hunter reminisces about older times when Evenki walked down the street proudly displaying their guns without any fear of police harassment. In effect, the hunting ban brutally damages Weijia's self-esteem and self-respect, stripping him of dignity and identity. Later, when he sits with other hunters around a campfire, Weijia recalls an incident where hunters were arrested and found guilty in a trial. He feels that hunters are deeply disrespected in Chinese society. The denigration of hunters is connected to the degradation of Evenki cultural identity as shown in an interview with Maria Suo where she describes the ubiquity of hunting practices in her youth (Gu 189). This differs from the contempt experienced by Evenki hunters after the 2003 relocation in which they are seen as rowdy, dependent, and insatiable by local residents in Genhe County (Xie 141). In addition, Evenki hunters believed that reporters who interviewed them never addressed their actual concerns and instead treated them as "savages" and "weirdos" (Xie 142–143). Hunting restrictions diminish the Evenki's autonomy, making it difficult to practice core aspects of tradition.

Another form of enclosure is the decline of the reindeer population. One instance was a massive plunge of the reindeer population during the 2003 relocation with over three hundred reindeer transported to the Aoluguya township only for ninety to go missing or die (Xie 138). The government's failure to provide lichen and sufficient willow leaves for the reindeer to eat also contributed to the mortality rate (Ge 58). This food supply proved unsuitable for the reindeer, causing many deaths and forcing a beggarly dependence of the Evenki on the Chinese state. A 2004 letter to the Hulun Buir City party committee secretary exclaimed that "We are almost left to live on chaff!' Now at Genhe we live on subsidy and assistance" (Xie 144). These deaths are referenced by Weijia in *The Last Moose of Aoluguya* when he recounts the manifold deaths of reindeer brought down to the settlement, forcing the animals to be moved back to Hunters Camp. It is due to the presence of the reindeer and their inextricability from the Khingan Mountains that the Evenki can continue

their nomadic livelihood rather than completely surrendering to a sedentary modernity. Nevertheless, one hunter in Aoluguya remarks that "I feel like we are just hanging here and no one will take care of reindeer." The statement captures a loss of purpose from the hunting ban since the hunters find little reason to stay on the mountain. What worsens the issue is that the Evenki's livelihood of selling antlers yields meager profits. In this light, the Evenki resemble ethnic groups in Siberia such as the Siberian Evenks and Chukchi who have dealt with cultural threats from both climate change and state constrictions such as residential schools (Jagani). Due to the paramount importance of reindeer in Evenki culture, a decline in the population adversely affects their identity and customs.

In *The Last Moose of Aoluguya*, a key threat to the Evenki is the decreasing numbers of wild reindeer. The population has either been killed by illegal poachers or migrated elsewhere due to deforestation. Maria Suo mentions that deforestation and the increased presence of poachers made nomadism more difficult, hard even to find firewood (Gu 194). Due to restrictions on hunting, the Evenki have to succumb to market forces whereby reindeer become a source of income rather than just a hunting tool (Xie 152). Likewise, Maria Suo mentions eating reindeer only as a recent phenomenon among the Evenki (Gu 190–191). Such trends date from the 1990s, which saw an increase in illegal poaching and logging that decreased wildlife. It is necessary to contrast the Evenki's traditional hunting with poaching because the former respects ecological rhythms whereas the latter is based on market logic. The former practice acknowledges reciprocity, enabling a wildlife population to regenerate from killings. In contrast, poaching catalyses a drastic decline of wildlife because animals are commodified as raw material to generate profits. This distinction is exemplified in a conversation at the camp in which an Evenki from the city spoke about the purpose of hunting as thinning the herd of the weak and never targeting females to ensure reproduction. That logic is also depicted in a later scene with Weijia when he recollects approaching six bears with the intent to kill until he was dissuaded by his companion, Maoxie, on the basis that they were mating. This story is juxtaposed by Weijia with his knowledge of Han Chinese poachers who shoot everything, signifying the consequences of ignoring reciprocity.

There is a reverence for animals in a story recounted by Weijia because Evenki hunters observe strict limits motivated by sustenance, taking no more than they need. The activities of Han poachers have caused a population decline because they are driven by greed and profits and do not practice reciprocity. The consequences are demonstrated by a long scene in *The Last Moose of Aoluguya* where Weijia and another hunter, Maoxie, set off to find more reindeer in

response to a dearth in the population. It is at this point that before the duo set out, there is a sense of both futility and uncertainty that the duo will not succeed at their task. When the two embark, a somber didgeridoo music plays, implying that their search will be a failure. As he walks through the forest, Weijia finds a desolate loneliness and a grim atmosphere. Instead of finding live reindeer, the hunter only comes across rusting traps and the bones of a female reindeer. Leading their reindeer, Weijia and Maoxie first walk through brownish pathways and trees before crossing several streams. Walking up the mountain, they find a gateway frequented by reindeer which is left in disarray. To the hunters and the audience, it displays signs of tampering, indicating that poachers were there. As the duo walk, the camera pans around the landscape, revealing a generally gray and dull color palette. Most of the grass appears desiccated, the trees lack leaves and those that have leaves seem gray and colorless. Furthermore, the area appears devoid of animal life, conveying an aura of abandonment and decay. Walking further, Weijia shouts in disbelief at the sight of some traps, exclaiming "These idiots leave their traps to rust?" When the camera zooms to his perspective, it shows a poacher's trap on the ground, now a set of broken metallic parts. Then the camera cuts to show a circular chain dangling from a tree. These two objects serve as a source of danger and destruction for the Evenki. In light of this setback, Weijia reflects that "It's been years since any moose have come here" then turns around only to find a lack of tracks. Not giving up hope, the hunters climb up the hill to come across scattered reindeer bones. Among the hunters, Maoxie notices the lack of skulls and antlers while Weijia suspects that the bones belonged to a female reindeer. Disappointed, the hunters leave the area and as they leave, the camera points down to focus on the bones. The search has been a failure because the hunters have only discovered rusting traps and the bones of a female reindeer rather than teeming herds of wild reindeer.

During the foraging, somber music plays to signify the hopeless tone of the scene. The presence of the bones is associated with death, hinting at a potential extinction of the species and the extirpation of the Evenki culture. Furthermore, the living reindeer accompanying Weijia and Maoxie sniff at and examine the bones for themselves. This juxtaposition of the living reindeer with the scattered bones highlights the possibility that the virile animals standing before their dead brethren could suffer a similar fate one day. As the two hunters leave the area with a sense of defeat, the film displays text reading, "Weijia and Maoxie were in the forest for five days and four nights. All they discovered were some poachers' traps and some moose bones." The text tells the audience how long the hunters searched, and the length of time emphasizes their crestfallen attitudes. The scene is presented as one of dashed hopes, as if to confirm that decline and extinction

are inevitable. The documentary format is used to present the concrete realities confronting the Evenki while the use of music conveys an aesthetic sense of mourning to complement the subject matter.

Returning from his unsuccessful search to the hunters' campfire, Weijia mentions only seeing three traces of moose, first at Nalaqi, second at Xogeliqi, and the third at Jianchang. He can only reflect on the drastic changes, noting that previously, near Nalaqi there were moose everywhere. Weijia discusses that the present day is "a different era" in which poachers will ravenously claim an abundance of wild reindeer. Compounding the problem is the fact that many reindeer have also died in snares set by Forest Bureau employees (Siqinfu 25). As mental, social, and environmental ecologies are interconnected, a threat to the Evenki's environment posed by the poachers disrupts their livelihood like the hunting ban.

An important way the Evenki relate to their natural environment is in their use of language and unique terminology, distinguishing them from other ethnic groups. It is underscored by an elderly Evenki in *Last Moose of Aoluguya* who states that it is vital to learn the Evenki language, otherwise they will become Chinese. This sentiment is echoed by Richard Fraser's argument that once "you lose a language you don't just lose vocabulary, you literally lose an entire way of seeing and expressing the world" (Gibson). These dangers are exemplified by how Weijia and other Evenki mostly speak in Mandarin rather than the Evenki language. This linguistic usage represents an ecological rupture due to the disappearance of a unique vocabulary tied to the Khingan area. The reason more Mandarin is spoken instead of Evenki is that the Chinese education system prioritizes the learning of Mandarin while estranging younger Evenki from traditions (Xie 159). Furthermore, the Chinese education system considers hunting and herding lifestyles to be primitive and tries to educate such beliefs out of students (Xie 159). What exacerbates the situation is how the Evenki language is not written down, as compared to Mandarin, and therefore more vulnerable to disappearing (Xie 64). This phenomenon is part of a larger global trend of decreasing linguistic diversity where more than 40% of an estimated 7,100+ languages are in danger of extinction by the end of the 21st century (Glasberg). This pattern is interconnected with environmental degradation, development, and the destruction of Indigenous communities (Glasberg). The loss is devastating because of the potential insights gleaned from the Evenki's perception of their natural environment, posing greater obstacles to repairing ecological destruction.

Enclosure is best represented by how the Chinese state's all-encompassing notion of development homogenizes ethnic minority cultures like the Evenki while ignoring ecological reciprocity. Policies imposed by the Chinese government such as the hunting ban and increased development have ruptured

traditional hunting practices and imperilled Evenki cultural identity. The hunting ban has coincided with increasing poaching and deforestation, effectively replacing sustainable practices with destructive ones. The increasing homogenization is demonstrated by the Sinicization of the Evenki where the majority live a more sedentary life in townships with less access to traditional hunting grounds. This is underscored by a decrease of the native Evenki language in favor of Mandarin, raising the risk that the Evenki will be indistinguishable from the Han ethnic majority. Since enclosure enforces a loss of meaning for the Evenki, nostalgia is a common sentiment in the trilogy with Weijia and his sister constantly reminiscing halcyon times. Due to this damage to cultural identity, many Evenki have fallen into despair, coping with alcoholism, which exacerbates the process of cultural disappearance.

Despair and alcoholism

When cultural beliefs are ravaged by disenchantment and hunting ways constricted by enclosure, the Evenki fall into despair because they cannot express connections to the natural world. In such absence, alcohol is left as the only alternative to numb the grief and anguish felt by the Evenki. It is represented by how Weijia and Liuxia struggle with alcoholism throughout the trilogy, awkwardly lumbering in completing certain tasks. The hunter's alcoholism is so entrenched that he shows tremendous difficulty overcoming the problem even in faraway places such as Hainan. While used to cope with the loss of their cultural identity, alcohol engenders a variety of other problems such as interpersonal violence, hindering a continuation of traditions. The Evenki's despair is compounded by the alienating quality of modern society where townships do not fully accommodate their needs and technologies such as television do not provide a sense of fulfilment. Such a damaged mental and social ecosophy questions whether humans can truly live apart from reciprocity with the nonhuman.

The loss of cultural meaning and consequent despair are central to a celebration of an Evenki festival where the dancers wear traditional dress in front of a fire in *The Last Moose of Aoluguya*. The dance and use of alcohol are attempts to restore the animistic imagination and traditions, trying to capture the mystique their ancestors and shamans once led. However, the audience feels the dance is more like a performance, serving only to entertain than to express bonds with nature. The practice feels disconnected from the daily life of the Evenki township in which most of the inhabitants have increasingly more in common with the Han ethnic group. This event resembles an event on August 10, 2003 where a county art troupe was invited by the government to perform at the Aoluguya Evenki Township relocation. As the Evenki hunters were driven out of area, the troupe was tasked to pose as them, offending the hunters who

saw the performance as a mockery (Xie 135). These reactions signify a hollowing out of identity in which Evenki culture is rendered more akin to a museum relic rather than a living culture. They encapsulate Weijia's observation in an interview with Gu Tao, where "to lose your culture is to lose everything" (Gu 199).

Weijia mentioned that initially during the relocation, many Evenki did not turn to alcoholism until the hunting ban, because the forest can be a desolate place "where all you can hear is the sound of deer bells and the wind blowing through the leaves" (Fornieles). When the Evenki still retained their hunting guns, they were unbothered by loneliness because they could continue meaningful practices. But with the hunting ban, they were left with a "deafening silence exacerbating their loneliness and emptiness" (Fornieles).

Alcoholism is a destructive way of confronting anguish because it leads to both lethargy and violence, trapping many Evenki in addictive cycles and pushing many to their deaths. This is demonstrated with Weijia, reliant on alcohol to the point that he remarks that he can't speak his mind if he does not drink. When a woman tells him his inability to speak arises from the drinking, the hunter retorts that he can write when he is not drinking. For the Evenki drinkers, alcoholism is an attempt to re-enchant the world by altering their state of consciousness. According to Lesley, many pre-contact Native Americans associated "mind-altered states" with a "quest for enlightenment" and ways of contacting the spiritual world (Lesley 92–93). As such, when hunting is banned, alcohol becomes appealing to the Evenki because it appears to replicate shamanic experiences despite its degrading qualities. As part of his coping mechanisms, Weijia has a habit of creating extensive paintings depicting landscapes and Evenki life, which he then burns. In *Aoluguya, Aoluguya*, when asked about this absurd behavior, he proudly proclaims it to be his cool style. During his forays across the mountains in *The Last Moose of Aoluguya*, Weijia complains about the inaccessibility of alcohol, showing little concern about alcohol poisoning. The potency of alcohol is shown in one scene in which Weijia expends effort to climb a tree just to reach the liquor attached. Weijia's struggles signify the pervasiveness of alcohol addiction among the Evenki in which about eighty three Evenki died of alcohol abuse, alcohol-related accidents and suicide between 1957 and 1998 (Siqinfu 35). Siqinfu observes that 85 percent of men of marriageable age are unable to marry due to alcoholism, mental health and physiological issues, hindering the transfer of cultural traditions and parent-child relations (Siqinfu 35). This is heavily apparent with Weijia who often talks about committing suicide if his rifles were seized. According to Gu Tao, Weijia made many attempts at suicide before, describing an instance where he ran into the woods with his rifle and tried to jump into a ditch (Fornieles). Besides Weijia, the behavior of his sister Liuxia highlights why alcoholism is particularly destructive to Evenki society.

Like her brother, Liuxia has been reduced to a deplorable state by alcohol. Liuxia lost her husband in an accident where he fell down a ravine and her grief plunged her deep into alcoholism (Fornieles). In an interview, she mentions that she has only two teeth left—many of her teeth have rotted and fallen out from alcohol abuse (Gu 205). Due to her instability, her son Yuguo was sent to a boarding school between the ages of six and seven in Wuxi, under the Communist Youth League's Project Hope initiative (Fornieles). Alcohol often pushes Liuxia into violent situations with her brother and other Evenki. Once, when she stole another person's alcohol, she got beaten to the point of requiring two steel plates (Fornieles). In addition, Liuxia and her brother often hit each other casually as shown in *Aoluguya* when Weijia and Liuxia have a dispute, causing her to bash her brother over the head with a chair. Furthermore, in Yuguo's first reunion with his mother in *Yuguo and His Mother*, she quickly stumbles from wooziness, worrying him. It is due to alcoholism and its associated violence that when Yuguo first visits the Aoluguya Township, he expresses a reluctance to get closer to his mother and uncle. The rift created by the siblings' alcoholism could potentially push Yuguo further into Han society and away from his heritage. Due to this malignance of alcoholism, the mother of Liuxia and Weijia tried drastic interventions to halt their bad habits.

The failure of Weijia to change despite intervention demonstrates the pervasiveness of alcoholism in the Evenki. Once, his mother tried to confiscate alcohol from both him and his sister, but to no avail. In *The Last Moose*, she sends Weijia to Hainan out of desperation, both to undergo treatment for his alcoholism and to find a wife. Weijia befriends a woman named Xia in Hainan, and he shows signs of improvement. During his stay, Weijia discusses a variety of topics with Xia, continues his artistic painting habits, and even visits amusement parks with her. Nevertheless, Weijia proves unable to give up his bad habits; his relationship with Xia does not endure. This is shown when Xia asks Weijia about keeping his promise not to drink, only for the two to argue about what alcohol to buy: beer or liquor. During this exchange, Xia worries that the Evenki man will embarrass guests as he displays habits that discomfort her, such as wearing a tropical shirt in an unsuitable setting. Moreover, Xia is a teacher of English and attempts to convince Weijia to learn the language, even allowing him to sit in the back of her class. But when Xia's students are learning the alphabet, Weijia takes a nap, frustrating the teacher. Eventually, Xia gives up on Weijia, causing him to return to Aoluguya township. Weijia's interactions with Xia demonstrate not only how difficult he is to work with, and the intractable nature of alcoholism.

When analyzing the nature of the Evenki's alcoholism, it is important to note that this kind of alcoholism is a problem confronting many other indigenous minority groups. Another nomadic group from China, the Oroqen, face a

similar predicament as the Evenki, forced to give up hunting for an agricultural livelihood. This process of transformation was very destructive, causing widespread alcoholism and suicide and significantly eroding traditional culture (Gibson). After the transformation, the majority of Oroqen were urbanized and Sinicized, with few speaking their native tongue (Gibson). Another parallel can be found with Raphael Lemkin's description of Native Americans and Tasmanians in which exposure to alcohol caused the intoxicated drinkers to murder friends, kin, wife, and offspring in a frenzy (Lesley 88). Lemkin's analysis indicated that alcohol is directly connected with social destruction, proving uniquely dangerous to indigenous societies compared to industrialized ones. These situations echo Weijia's sentiments in a poem where he describes industrialization as "turning the world into a miserable place" (Fornieles). In such a hopeless milieu, he exclaims that he would shout "Go ahead, shoot" if he crossed paths with the police (Fornieles). When examining all these situations, a loss of meaning is a central consequence of rupturing mental and social ecosophy.

In addition to alcoholism, television and other media heighten the feelings of alienation and despair felt by the Evenki. Throughout the trilogy, there are scenes of people watching television with a hollow reaction. Towards the end of *Yuguo and His Mother*, Yuguo is brought to listen to karaoke, yet he feels bored. This ennui continues when Yuguo watches television news about US–China relations and the War on Terror, causing the boy to cover his face with a pillow. This disinterest contrasts the enthusiasm the boy felt earlier when he listened to the explanations of Evenki myths. Yuguo's listlessness matches Guattari's critiques of "mass-media serialism (the same ideal standards of living, the same fashions and types of rock music, etc.)" (Guattari 30). He mentions that "our television screens are populated, saturated, by 'degenerate' images and statements" (Guattari 43). It is easy for enormous amounts of disturbing imagery and information to spread through information technologies, inducing a numbing effect. As such, the narratives and entertainment provided by media prove unable to satisfy the hollowness of meaning that faces the Evenki in their encounter with Chinese modernity. Weijia and Liuxia's alcoholism, in conjunction with Yuguo's listlessness towards television media, signify a need to re-evaluate Evenki traditions.

The disruption of traditional ties between the Evenki and their environmental, mental, and social, ecologies induce a tremendous despair. To resolve that despair, many Evenki turn towards alcoholism, but it worsens their problems by intensifying violence and social disintegration. Within the trilogy, Weijia and Liuxia are shown to be lethargic or violent, dragging them into dangerous situations and straining their relationship with relatives. Alcoholism combined

with new media underscore a meaninglessness caused by modernity because their ecosophy is shrivelled. But despite this aimlessness, there are signs that their ecosophy can be repaired by paying attention to a reciprocity with nature. As such, there is a question of how to strengthen the Evenki's bonds to nature despite disenchantment and enclosure.

The Catharsis of Animism

In spite of disenchantment, enclosure and despair, animism still holds tremendous importance in Evenki culture for enchanting the world. Weijia, Liuxia, and even Yuguo are shown to find meaning in their interactions with their natural surroundings. This is evident in the myths they impart, which personify nature, and in Liuxia's adoration of the sun, moon, and stars. This kinship with nature is linked with sustainability because it recognizes the reciprocity of humans with nonhumans and emphasizes relating to the other over prioritizing the individual self. These connections are most embodied in *Yuguo and His Mother* where the boy reconnects to his culture, both learning about Evenki mythology and discovering how to relate with the nonhuman world. Through Yuguo's familiarization of Evenki culture, Gu Tao implies a rejuvenating force from animism even for people with little prior exposure to it.

In the *Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, Nurit Bird-Davis extends A. Irving Hallowell's insights that "indigenous life is organized around the existence of persons, human and otherwise, rather than around materiality, functionality and abstraction" (Harvey 39). Bird-Davis describes indigenous thinking as "I relate, therefore I am" contrasting the Cartesian maxim of "I think, therefore I am," which is a cognition and self that is "bounded at the skin and isolated from others" (Harvey 39). Within the animist paradigm, projective activities such as "dream encounters, greetings, praise songs, give-aways" are valuable because they cement relationality (Harvey 40). In contrast, Cartesianism refuses to acknowledge aspects of life that cannot be quantified and subject to a "mathematical, empirical and replicable test" (Harvey 51). Where a Cartesian paradigm emphasizes an individual and a cause, animistic thinking emphasizes "who is dividually, and therefore collectively, acting, rather than what causes" (Harvey 49). As these ideas prioritize relationality over the self, animism emphasizes collective power and agency.

The power of animism's relationality is demonstrated in the transformation of Yuguo after arriving in Evenki lands because he gradually adopts nomadic habits. The boy is initially unfamiliar with the Evenki nomadic traditions and finds the practices bizarre. Due to Yuguo's upbringing in a boarding school, Weijia is pessimistic about the boy's prospects of survival in the mountains. The hunter believes that the boy will be unable to adapt, only to find that the boy

gradually acclimates to the native way of life. This is expressed in actions where Yuguo comes to prefer sleeping on the floor rather than a sleeper and even considers eating raw meat (Fornieles). These attitudes are complemented by his proximity to his mother, who shows him around the reindeer while constantly comparing him with the sun and stars. When Yuguo was at boarding school, Liuxia longed for her lost son and in his absence, directed her affection towards the sun. After her drinking, she has been found lying down in her tent to let the summer sun shine on her face, personifying the sun as her son (Fornieles). In doing so, Liuxia not only symbolically reunites with her son, she expresses an animist relationality in which she professes gratitude to the sun for gifting warmth. Sometimes, Liuxia turns her affection to the stars as a substitute for her son, describing the stars as her children. The power of relationality is further demonstrated in her positive comparison of her son to baby reindeer. She is often shown singing to reindeer and caressing them, treating them like her own children. In turn, the reindeer express affection as shown when they voraciously surround Liuxia and her son during a feeding session and lick them. When bonding with the animals, Yuguo is able to access a deeper spiritual reservoir, reminiscent of creation myths.

Creation myths are important for explaining the natural world to a people and strengthening communal bonds. The Evenki have a moon creation myth in which the Khingan Mountains were once a great ocean and there was no moon, only sun and stars. But when the sea began to drift, the Khingan mountains arose and the birds debated which trees to plant. The cuckoo arrived in the midst of this, viewed as the first shaman who determined the area's plants. As birds emerged from the lake, the cuckoo decided that the moon would appear every 15 days. As the myth is narrated in the documentary, the narration is paired with a montage of the Khingan Mountains at night and sunrise. The myth and its juxtaposition with a time-lapse of forests elucidates the importance of relationality, particularly birds who are venerated as crucial shapers of the environment. "The Storyteller" by Walter Benjamin defines oral storytellers as vital to a community by imparting narratives face-to-face, preserving collective identity (Benjamin 171). As the narrators of these myths impart the stories to younger people like Yuguo, they ensure the myths will shape future generations. Quoting Walter Benjamin, Guattari mentions storytelling as being analogous to a potter making a clay vessel, adding distinct touches to the object instead of expressing "the pure essence of a thing, like information or a report" (Guattari 67). In spite of his alcoholism, Weijia demonstrates a powerful artistic spirit, singing verses such as "listening to the silence of the spring, the bright skies carry a familiar sound." This encouragement of a keenness for nature reflects Guattari's observation that "Individuals must become both more united and increasingly different" in response to global capitalism (Guattari 69). Due to

Yuguo's different background from Weijia, coming of age in the city, the boy will appreciate the creation myth differently.

Animism's importance in Evenki life is demonstrated by the awareness of reciprocity. This is shown in *The Last Moose of Aoluguya* when the hunters venerate fire as a deity for gifting beloved light and heat to humanity; in turn, they must show gratitude. Describing such beliefs, Richard Fraser mentions that when a fire is lit, "a person will first offer a portion of liquor into it as a gift" (Fraser 135). Fire is given personhood and is even seen to communicate via crackles and hisses (Fraser 135). The reverence of the fire deity reflects Georg Heyne's observation that "All events in nature, any success or failure in human activities, illness, death" are caused by spirits (Heyne 378). A prominent embodiment of human and nonhuman kinships in Evenki culture is the role of the shaman, who is believed to be personally chosen by spirits (Heyne 393). This role is elaborated in *Last Moose of Aoluguya* when Weijia mentions his grandmother was a shaman who once slapped him for upturning an ant nest because he was ruining their home. Despite the fact that Weijia harmed ants, his grandmother scolds him as if he hurt other human beings. In this memory, the shaman makes little distinction between the human and the nonhuman, refusing to recognize a hierarchy. Within these beliefs, the Evenki do not see human beings as entitled to exploit nature when they are deeply indebted to its gifts.

Despite their alcoholism and despair, Weijia and Liuxia derive profound insight from their people's animistic practices. It is because animism emphasizes relationality, giving a picture of a world where the Evenki have renewed environmental, social, and mental ecologies. The effects of animism are evident in how Weijia continues his ways of hunting, Liuxia expresses adulation of the natural world, and Yuguo becomes acquainted with his heritage. What is crucial in animistic beliefs is the importance of nonhumans in shaping the world, calling for humans to respect nonhuman beings as varied as fire and birds. This attention to reciprocity exposes pitfalls of an anthropocentric worldview which emphasizes the individual self over the relationality of beings. With this perspective, Gu Tao expresses questions toward the viability of Chinese modernization.

Conclusion

Throughout the trilogy, Weijia, Liuxia and the larger Evenki people are shown to be in a state of disarray caused by an anthropocentric trifecta of disenchantment, enclosure, and despair under a rapidly industrializing People's Republic of China. Disenchantment is the creation of anthropocentric ideas that bifurcate the human and the nonhuman, justifying the former to exploit the latter. To enable this exploitation, the lands of the Evenki are subject to

enclosure, hindering their hunting traditions and subsequently pushing them into a meaningless despair. Despair is manifested when the Evenki descend into alcoholism, violence, and fraying communal bonds. In such a state, they are likely to be heavily Sinicized. Despite anthropocentrism threatening the viability of propagating hunting customs and tending reindeer herds, the Evenki's animistic beliefs offer catharsis. Catharsis is the regeneration of environmental, mental and social ecologies in which humans find different ways of relating to the nonhuman world. This perspective casts doubt on how Chinese modernity is an imposed homogeneity and whether it is truly fulfilling. While showcasing modernity's pitfalls, Gu Tao illuminates how rethinking human and nonhuman bonds can answer this question.

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