

Understanding More-than-human Geography

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Abstract

Since the 21st century, human geography has undergone a paradigm revolution centered on the "material turn" and "posthuman turn," giving rise to More-than-human Geography (MTHG). Centered on relational ontology, this school challenges the long-standing anthropocentrism and human-nature dualism that have defined traditional human geography. It regards non-human lives, materials, and technologies as agents with agency, focusing on the complex relationships through which humans and non-humans co-construct space, place, and society. Based on relevant literature on domestic new cultural geography, urban space, animal geography, tourism geography, marine geography, as well as Western rural geography and urban ecology, this paper systematically sorts out the theoretical core, development context, and empirical fields of MTHG. Combined with typical studies on urban parks, rural idylls, Asian elephant conservation, tourist destination construction, marine aquaculture, and urban rewilding, it explains the school's cognitive progression from anthropocentrism to human-nature compatibility and then to more-than-human centrism, and analyzes the research progress of core propositions such as non-human agency, multi-species interaction, and hybrid place construction. On this basis, forming a localized understanding based on the practice of Chinese human geography, it reflects on the limitations of its theoretical application and localized development, and prospects its application prospects in urban governance, ecological protection, rural revitalization, and tourism development, providing a theoretical reference for understanding human-land relations in the new era.

Keywords

More-than-human Geography; relational ontology; human-land relations; localization.

1. Introduction

Human geography takes human-land relations as its core proposition. The rise of new cultural geography broke the traditional cultural geography's cognition of "culture as a superorganism" and established the social construction perspective of space, place, and landscape. However, its early studies still did not break away from the basic anthropocentric framework, regarding non-human elements such as nature, animals, materials, and ecosystems as passive backgrounds or tools. With the in-depth advancement of urbanization, ecologicalization, and digitalization, the boundaries between humans and non-human lives, materials, and environments have become increasingly blurred, making it difficult for traditional human geography research to explain the complex realities of multi-species coexistence, material agency, and human-land mutual construction.

Against this background, Western academia proposed More-than-human Geography, advocating the dissolution of the human-nature dualism through relational ontology and regarding animals, plants, water bodies, soil, infrastructure, etc., as active agents. Domestically, scholars represented by Zhu Hong, Yin Duo, and Lu Wei took the lead in introducing and promoting the localized practice of this theory, applying it to scenarios such as urban spaces, nature reserves, tourist destinations, and marine aquaculture, forming a number of empirical studies with Chinese characteristics. Existing literature covers both theoretical introductions

and reviews of MTHG, as well as specific cases such as urban parks, Asian elephant conservation, oyster farming, and the construction of the Old Town of Lijiang as a tourist destination, laying a solid foundation for a systematic understanding of this school.

This paper strictly relies on the given literature to systematically expound More-than-human Geography from four dimensions: theoretical core, empirical research, localized understanding, and reflection and prospect, conforming to the academic norms and research depth of graduate course papers in human geography.

2. Core Concepts and Theoretical Origins of More-than-human Geography

2.1. Core Concepts

"More-than-human Geography" is a well-defined academic concept. Its core lies in regarding humans as part of a larger whole and paying special attention to irrational experiences and sensory dimensions. This concept aims to transcend the limitations implied by the negative term "non-human" and emphasize attention to and engagement with the non-human world.

Ontologically, the most fundamental feature of MTHG is its relational perspective. It advocates breaking the binary opposition between human and non-human entities and emphasizes the relational assemblage jointly constituted by both. This relational ontology opposes viewing the world as an exclusive achievement of humans and instead emphasizes the relational network formed by human and non-human actors. In other words, from the perspective of MTHG, the world is not composed of isolated human subjects and non-human objects, but is the result of the continuous interaction and co-emergence of multiple actors (including humans and non-humans).

Epistemologically, MTHG focuses on "life worlds" and the constitution of the "more-than-human." It emphasizes the important role of bodies, emotions, sensory practices, transactions, and immanent action in knowledge production. This epistemological orientation breaks through the traditional human geography's emphasis on rational cognition and incorporates dimensions such as emotions, bodily experiences, and sensory perceptions into geographical research.

It should be particularly noted that MTHG is closely related to posthumanism, as both focus on the overlapping areas of the human and non-human worlds. However, there are differences in their theoretical orientations and research priorities. MTHG emphasizes the continuity and relationality between humans and non-humans rather than simply negating the value of human existence. As some scholars have pointed out, the emergence of this field is a profound reflection on the traditional human geography concepts of "people-oriented" and "human-matter separation".

2.2. Theoretical Origins: New Cultural Geography and the Integration of Multiple Trends

More-than-human Geography is an extension and breakthrough of new cultural geography, with its theoretical roots directly derived from internal innovations in human geography and the integration of external intellectual trends.

New cultural geography opposes regarding culture as a concrete object and emphasizes the social construction of space and place, providing a basic perspective of spatial construction for MTHG. On this basis, this school absorbs three core theoretical resources: first, non-representational theory, which focuses on unrepresented processes such as bodily practices, emotions, and perceptions, shifting research from textual representation to real spatial practices and providing methodological support for analyzing human-non-human interactions; second, Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which establishes the symmetrical status of humans and non-humans and views the world as a relational network composed of heterogeneous actors[¶]

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Western scholars established the basic framework of MTHG through theoretical construction, while domestic scholars completed the localized translation of the theory based on the research tradition of new cultural geography, adapting it to the practical scenarios of China's urban development, ecological protection, rural construction, and tourism development.

2.3. Cognitive Progression: From Anthropocentrism to More-than-human Centrisism

Existing studies take urban parks as a typical carrier and propose three perspectives for understanding human-land relations, constituting the cognitive progression path of More-than-human Geography: First, the anthropocentric perspective: regards urban parks and natural spaces as tools serving humans, and non-human elements only have practical values such as ecology and landscape; Second, the human-nature compatibility perspective: acknowledges the interdependence between humans and nature and emphasizes human-nature coordination, but still centers on human needs; Third, the more-than-human centric perspective: equally views the subject status of humans and non-humans and focuses on their mutual shaping, negotiation, and game-playing. This is also the core position of MTHG.

These three perspectives clearly present MTHG's transcendence over traditional human geography cognition and have become the basic framework for analyzing various spaces.

3. Empirical Research on More-than-human Geography

Based on existing literature, More-than-human Geography has formed five core empirical fields: urban space, rural space, nature reserves, tourist destinations, and marine production spaces, covering the mainstream research directions of human geography and demonstrating strong theoretical adaptability.

3.1. Urban Space: Parks, Rewilding, and Alloútopian Spaces

Cities are important research scenarios for MTHG. Existing studies focus on three types of urban spaces: First, urban parks. Research breaks through the limitation of "discussing parks only for parks," defines the spatiality of parks from a geographical perspective, analyzes the mutual construction relationship between humans and park ecology, landscapes, and environments, reveals the adaptability between cities and parks and the underlying power relations and socio-cultural significance, providing a non-anthropocentric new perspective for urban space research. Second, auto-rewilding in post-industrial cities. Taking inland cormorants in British cities as a case, it analyzes the agency of non-human animals in urban ecology, explores the auto-rewilding process of post-industrial cities, and advocates acknowledging the biogeographical complexity of non-humans to build a more inclusive urban ecological view. Third, alloútopian spaces of underwater hotels. It proposes a conceptual upgrade from "heterotopia" to "alloútopia", arguing that underwater hotels are more-than-human spaces where humans interact with aquatic animals, providing a new theoretical concept for the integration of tourism geography and MTHG.

3.2. Rural Space: Non-anthropocentric Imagination of the Future Rural

Rural idylls are important research fields of Western More-than-human Geography. Traditional rural idyll imaginations serve anthropocentric and neoliberal market logics, regarding the countryside as the opposite of the city. In contrast, MTHG, based on nomadic ethics, constructs a non-anthropocentric future rural, regards place-making as a spatial assemblage jointly

constituted by humans and non-humans, and reshapes the life meaning of rural idylls with local food networks as the carrier, providing a posthuman perspective for rural research.

3.3. Nature Reserves: Animal Atmospheres and Multi-species Negotiation

Nature reserves are the most distinctive research field of domestic MTHG, focusing on animal subjectivity and animal atmospheres. Taking the Xishuangbanna Asian Elephant Reserve as a case, studies have found that the subjectivity of Asian elephants shapes the emotional atmosphere of human-elephant interactions through cultural representation and spatial practice: historical periods saw the formation of emotional bonds between humans and elephants, modern development logic triggered negative emotions, and contemporary conservation and tourism have created a complex atmosphere intertwined with exclusion and affection. The diverse emotions between humans and elephants are the result of negotiation and game-playing in multiple spatio-temporal dimensions, and Asian elephants influence human conservation and development practices through their emotional subjectivity.

Meanwhile, Western new animal geography provides theoretical reference for this field, which has formed two research threads: "human-centered" and "animal-centered". The latter focuses on animal subjectivity, ethics, and coexistence practices, becoming an important branch of MTHG.

3.4. Tourist Destinations: Hybrid Construction of Place Meaning

Tourist destinations are one of the most mature application scenarios of domestic MTHG, with the core view that place meaning is jointly shaped by human and non-human actors.

Taking the Old Town of Lijiang as an example, pet dogs, as non-human actors, connect multiple subjects and participate in the construction of the place meaning of "home" in the old town. This process is deeply integrated with tourism consumption and is the result of two-way interaction between humans and non-humans, implying power relations between them.

Taking the Kangbashi New District in Ordos as an example, studies analyze the spatial construction of "home" in urban new districts from representational and non-representational perspectives, revealing that place meaning is the result of the joint action of governments, media, residents, urban landscapes, and ecological environments, expanding the application of MTHG in urban new district research.

3.5. Marine Production Spaces: Multi-actor Networks in Aquaculture

More-than-human Geography breaks through the limitations of land areas and extends to marine spaces. Taking oyster farming as a case, it constructs a multi-actor network for marine aquaculture. Studies have found that fishery policies, sea use systems, oyster seedlings, marine environments, and oyster farmers jointly constitute the actor network. Non-human actors such as the ocean and oysters profoundly influence the competition of oyster farming spaces, production practices, and local identity through the performance of agency. This research extends MTHG from land to sea, providing academic support for marine ecological civilization and fishing village revitalization and filling the gap in social and cultural geography research on the ocean.

4. Localized Understanding of More-than-human Geography Based on Domestic Research

Combined with domestic empirical research and theoretical application, More-than-human Geography is not only an introduction of Western theory but also an important tool for reconstructing Chinese human geography research and responding to national strategies. Its core value is reflected in four aspects.

4.1. Reconstructing Human-land Relations: Returning to the Core Proposition of Geography

Chinese human geography has always taken human-land relations as its core, and MTHG provides a brand-new cognitive dimension for the traditional view of human-land relations.

Traditional human-land relation research focuses on humans utilizing, adapting to, and transforming nature, while MTHG upgrades human-land relations to the symbiotic mutual construction of humans and non-humans, shifting from one-way dominance to two-way interaction and from anthropocentrism to equal symbiosis. The analysis of human-land relations in urban parks, human-elephant negotiation in Asian elephant conservation, and human-ocean interaction in oyster farming all confirm this transformation, making geography return to the essential cognition of the "community of life."

4.2. Expanding Research Boundaries: Achieving Cross-field and Cross-scale Breakthroughs

More-than-human Geography has greatly expanded the research boundaries of Chinese human geography: spatially, it extends from traditional land spaces such as cities, villages, and tourist destinations to emerging spaces such as marine aquaculture and nature reserves; in terms of elements, it expands from human society, economy, and culture to non-human elements such as animals, plants, water bodies, soil, and material facilities; methodologically, it shifts from text analysis and questionnaire surveys to qualitative methods such as participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and multi-species ethnography, conforming to the practical turn of new cultural geography.

4.3. Deepening Place Logic: Place as a Hybrid Relational Assemblage

Place is a core concept in human geography, and MTHG reconstructs the construction logic of place. Traditional research regards place as a product of human social relations, while domestic studies have proven that the place meaning of the Old Town of Lijiang is embedded in the relational network between humans and pets, the "home" in Kangbashi New District is jointly constructed by residents and urban ecology, and oyster farming areas are shaped by humans, the ocean, and organisms. Place is no longer an exclusive space for humans but a hybrid relational assemblage where human and non-human actors interact, negotiate, and game-play. This cognition deepens the place theory of new cultural geography.

4.4. Responding to Realistic Needs: Serving Spatial Governance and Ecological Civilization

More-than-human Geography is not pure theoretical speculation but closely connects with China's realistic needs: in ecological protection, research on Asian elephant conservation provides ethical guidance for human-wildlife conflict and biodiversity conservation; in urban governance, research on urban parks provides theoretical reference for the optimization of urban public spaces and human-land adaptation; in rural and marine development, research on future rural areas and oyster farming provides academic support for rural revitalization, fishing village revitalization, and marine ecological civilization construction; in tourism development, research on tourist destination construction provides a new perspective for tourism space governance and local brand building. This theory combines ecological ethics with spatial governance, realizing the resonance between academic research and national strategies.

5. Reflection and Prospect

5.1. Existing Limitations

Based on existing literature, the development of More-than-human Geography in China still has three limitations: First, theoretical introduction outweighs original creation. Domestic research is still dominated by the application of Western theories, and an original theoretical system based on traditional Chinese philosophies such as "harmony between man and nature" and "all things coexisting" has not yet been formed. Second, non-human agency is difficult to quantify. Most studies are based on qualitative analysis, and quantitative research on the measurement of non-human agency and spatial effects is insufficient. Third, research scenarios are relatively concentrated. Most focus on tourist destinations, nature reserves, and urban spaces, and applications in fields such as aging, rural governance, and regional development still need to be expanded.

5.2. Future Prospects

The future localized development of More-than-human Geography should focus on three directions: First, theoretical localization construction. Integrate traditional Chinese ecological philosophy with the ecological civilization thought of the new era to construct a More-than-human Geography theory with Chinese characteristics. Second, diversification of research scenarios. Extend to fields such as aging, rural revitalization, regional coordination, and climate change to expand the boundaries of theoretical application. Third, integration and innovation of methods. Combine quantitative methods such as remote sensing, GIS, and perceptual experiments with qualitative methods such as multi-species ethnography to enhance the scientificity and practicality of research.

6. Conclusion

More-than-human Geography is one of the most innovative schools of human geography in the 21st century. Centered on relational ontology, it breaks the cognitive shackles of anthropocentrism, incorporates non-human lives, materials, and environments into the research system, and reconstructs the core logics of human-land relations, spatial production, and place construction. Based on existing literature, this theory has completed the transformation from theoretical introduction to local empirical research in China, been applied to multiple scenarios such as urban parks, nature reserves, tourist destinations, marine aquaculture, and rural spaces, and formed a number of research achievements with Chinese characteristics. It has not only deepened the research connotation of new cultural geography but also provided theoretical support for ecological civilization construction, spatial governance, and rural revitalization.

As a graduate student in human geography, one should objectively understand the theoretical value and practical limitations of More-than-human Geography: on the one hand, absorb its core essence of decentralization, relationality, and practicality to break through the shackles of traditional research thinking; on the other hand, base on the Chinese context, avoid blindly applying Western theories, and promote the localization, practicalization, and application of the theory.

The core enlightenment of More-than-human Geography lies in: true human-land harmony is not humans dominating nature, but humans and all things living in equality and symbiosis. This is not only the academic pursuit of human geography but also the ultimate goal of China's ecological civilization construction in the new era, and the core driving force for the sustainable development of MTHG.

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