Vector
Chinese SF

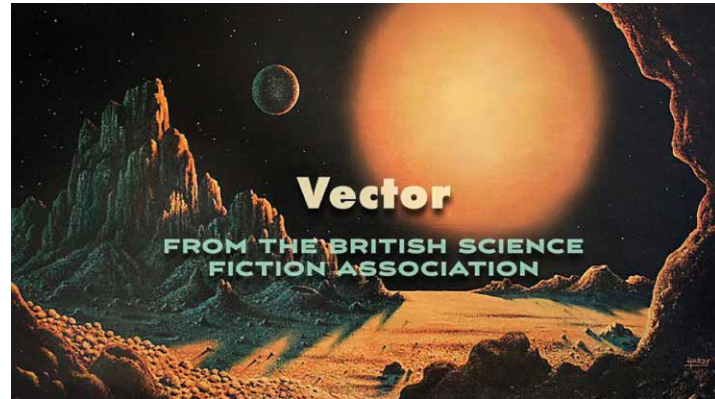# BRITISH SCIENCE FICTION ASSOCIATION

VECTOR
293

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Torque Control

Polina Levontin

Cao Fei, *Nova*, 2019, Video, 109'. Courtesy the artist, Vitamin Creative Space and Sprüth Magers.

It has been a joy to work with our amazing guest editors Yen Ooi and Regina Kanyu Wang to bring you this edition of *Vector*! We are also immensely grateful to the Serpentine Gallery for allowing us to use the images of the artist Cao Fei (born 1978, Guangzhou) for the cover: 'Born in the same year that China's economic reform and opening up policies began, Cao Fei is a leading voice in a generation that has come of age concurrent to the country's rise to prominence and accelerated urban and consumerist development' [Serpentine Galleries].

Cao Fei works across media, including installation (e.g. *Blueprints,* featured on the cover), AR, film and others, using the speculative and virtual as ways to approach, understand and intervene in contemporary reality. The still above is from a film *Nova*, 'Cao Fei's feature-length sci-fi epic about a computer scientist who's attempting to turn humans into digital mediums, and submits his own son into a virtual limbo between the past and future' [*Dazed*]. The back cover is a still from another of Cao Fei's science fictional art films, *Asia One,* which explores the inherent instability of forced solidarity between machines and humans: 'Humans and machines, hand in hand,' proclaims a poster at a nearly fully-automated plant where the action is set, evoking the slogans of Cultural Revolution. Our next issue, *Vector 294* — guest edited by Nick Hubble — will further explore themes of automation and class consciousness in science fiction.

Building our previous issue, *Vector 292* on Speculative Art, you will find here two in-depth interviews with artists Gordon Cheung and Beatrice Glow, accompanied by the images of their inspiring and challenging artwork (courtesy of the artists). We will let our guest editor Yen Ooi introduce you to the issue properly, following a brief update on the ongoing diversity and anti-racism agenda at the BSFA.

Diversity and Anti-Racism Update

The BSFA Commitee

This is an update on the BSFA's anti-racism and diversity actions. At the August AGM, the membership moved to make a financial contribution to anti-racist causes, and at the same time to take measures to support the participation of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic creators and fans in the UK SFF community, including: support-in-kind (membership fee waivers); financial support for convention-goers; and the creation of a new post, Diversity Officer. These motions were deliberately worded quite flexibly, and we're now happy to report on the next steps.

- The Diversity Officer position has yet to be filled. If you're interested in finding out more, please get in touch! Our Chair Allen (chair@bsfa.co.uk) is the best person to talk to.

- We will be partnering with organisations, in addition to the African Speculative Fiction Society and the London Chinese Science Fiction Group, to provide community memberships, either free within the UK or at a reduced rate (£29) for those living in the EU, Commonwealth, and UN Least Developed Countries. In the future, these memberships will be funded out of the BSFA's general budget. We hope they will be a step toward ensuring that the BSFA is a more inclusive organisation, and that the BSFA Awards are voted on by a more representative body. We have already allocated most of the initial 30 places.

- We will also be setting up a Participation Fund (see below). Initially we'll simply be open to donations to the fund on a rolling basis, and of course there's potential for fundraising activities in the future.

- It's also been suggested that we have some open discussion at the next AGM about diversity more generally, including but not limited to, gender, sexuality, class, disability, age, and geography. This seems like a great idea.

Participation Fund

At time of writing, we have £400 from BSFA officers, a big chunk of which is Dave Lally's initial contribution at the AGM. Once the new website is launched, there will be a section for donations there. If you're eager to donate now, please get in touch with our Treasurer Farah (treasurer@bsfa.co.uk).

- 75% of the funds will comprise the Diversity Officer's operating budget, used to offer financial support for convention or conference attendance for fans, scholars, authors, and creators of colour; potential paid creative and critical opportunities; and/or the creation of additional BSFA memberships with appropriate partner organisations beyond the 30 mentioned above.

- 25% of funds raised will be donated directly to anti-racist organisations and causes (including Black Lives Matter UK), and/or UK-based SFF-related organisations to support specific anti-racist initiatives which would not otherwise be possible. If you would like to nominate one, please get in touch. We have also made one small initial contribution already (to the Free Black University).

We'll monitor this arrangement, and may make adjustments after it's been place for one year, within the parameters set at the AGM. Further updates will be appear in the BSFA newsletter (via email), on Twitter (@BSFA), and Facebook (www.facebook.com/groups/BritishScienceFictionAssociation).

龙马精神* Dragon Horse Vitality Spirit

Guest editorial by Yen Ooi

* This is a common Lunar New Year greeting

Chinese science fiction's (CSF) growth in popularity has followed the rapid development trend of China itself. In his interview with fellow writer Maggie Shen King, Chen Qiufan (a.k.a. Stanley Chan) highlights that China has over the last four decades achieved the technological and economic advancements that countries in the West achieved in the last century. The speed of modernisation and urbanisation is a remarkable thing to behold, with 100 million people lifted out of poverty just since 2013. China's rise has been subject to international scrutiny and criticism, which is to be expected. The most unfounded of which plumbed new depths in the past year — 2020 — through the pandemic. While the previous president of the United States of America (among many) used the term "Chinese virus" in his description of Covid-19, East Asian diaspora communities living in Western countries experienced increased instances of racism. What is the connection?

Genres are in general difficult to define, but CSF is especially complicated. Both the terms *Chinese* and *science fiction* defy any clear definition, yet are used so commonly that every user has their own pre-assumed definition. One popular assumption in the West is that CSF should always be read in terms of political dissent or complicity with state power. As much as that might be true for some, it is an unhelpful generalisation. After all, we do not assume that British SF is only about Brexit, or American SF only about Trump. In one sense, all storytelling is inherently political, and within Anglophone SF especially, the racist and queerphobic attack on representational diversity is often disguised as a demand to "remove the politics" from our stories. However, the necessarily political nature of storytelling is complicated in the case of the Anglophone reception of CSF. The insistence of many Western readers on interpreting CSF exclusively in relation to government censorship can itself have a paradoxically censoring effect. Some CSF authors have even resisted writing stories set in China, or allowing the translation of their work into English, for fear that readers will ignore its actual aesthetic and intellectual qualities, while using it as material for simplistic

speculation: *Whose side are you really on?* To quote Ken Liu — for what is a publication on CSF without mentioning the writer who, it feels like, has single-handedly brought CSF to Anglo-American readers? —

> Like writers everywhere, today's Chinese writers are concerned with humanism; with globalization; with technological advancement; with development and environmental preservation; with history, rights, freedom, and justice; with family and love; with the beauty of expressing sentiment through words; with language play; with the grandeur of science; with the thrill of discovery; with the ultimate meaning of life.
>
> — Ken Liu, *Invisible Planets*, 2016.

Chinese means many things: culture, ethnicity, nationality, language, people, food, celebrations, traditions, dance, art, tea, etc. It is impossible to talk about all things related to CSF, but we hope that we've managed to introduce some key ideas and concepts in this issue, and that you'll find areas that particularly excite you — as a writer, researcher, or reader — to want to learn more.

As a scholar of the field I've always drawn a very wide definition of CSF, to include literature written by writers from Chinese-speaking states as well as writers from Chinese diaspora communities worldwide (not necessarily writing in a Sinitic language or English). In researching CSF this way, what has been interesting is in the comparability of the CSF journey for literature written by writers in China and outside of China. The similarities come from applying our personal and individual experiences of being Chinese (whatever that may mean) to the genre of science fiction. Most of our journeys, in China or internationally, have only found stability and creative flow in the recent decades, and progress through information technology has hit us at similar speeds. In China, CSF as a cultural development began again in earnest from the late 1980s. For those outside of China, whether we're the first or umpteenth generation, recognition and

development of ethnically-charged creative production only happened recently. This shared experience — not unlike the "Chinese virus" example — has the potential to bring us together as a community.

It seems East Asian studies in the West still has difficulty shedding an orientalising "exoticisation" of its subject, and CSF in our current climate is not immune to it. As China grows in economic and technological power, Orientalism becomes techno-Orientalism through science fiction from the West in representing East Asia as a mindless, savage machine.

> Techno-Orientalism is the phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hypertechnological terms in cultural productions and political discourse.
>
> — Roh, Huang, and Niu. *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*. 2015.

There is an inevitability in this representation when we consider that China is now the highest technology exporter in the world, and since 2019, the leader in science research and development expenditure, overtaking the US. In this sense, China must now be understood in hypertechnological terms. However, despite being the second largest economy in the world, China is still categorised as a developing country, which stands in apparent contradiction with the hypertechnological reality, in hypotechnological terms. It is also important to note that China's drive for progress is from the pressures of globalism, to contribute and compete in a world of information capitalism that is led by the West. This techno-Orientalist representation could seem to be a self-fulfilling prophecy determined by the West, using terms that insidiously centre the West for comparison — Chinese technology is always 'too advanced' or 'not advanced enough' — while ignoring meaningful details of progress. If we're to give CSF a space of its own that is distanced from the stereotyping tropes encouraged by Western anxieties, we need to look at how the genre copes with, responds to, and compensates for these Western notions. This is CSF's techno-Occidentalist movement and the question that we should be asking now is, "How is Chinese science fiction responding to the pressures of progress and modernisation that is motivated by the West?"

In his paper on "What Do We Mean When We Say 'Global Science Fiction'?" Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr talks about the *big* issue in global science fiction.

Much of what I have to say about literary global SF revolves around Anglophony. The stubborn imperial fact is that English is the lingua franca of globalization. […] Cultural capital has tended to flow one way.

— *Reflections on a New Nexus.* 2012

Whether a writer is based in an Anglophone country or not, if we want to be a part of the wider science fiction community, we have to learn and understand how the Anglophonic market works. Take Wuxia as an example: it is a known genre of its own in China and among East Asian communities internationally, but when it is presented to the mainstream Anglophone market, it is forced under the umbrella of fantasy or science fiction, something that writers are having to navigate. China's own publishing and entertainment industries have their own categories and genres, which do not directly map onto the Anglophone market. Some of what we read as CSF in English isn't published as science fiction in China. For instance *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City* by Kai-cheung Dung (2012) won the 2013 Science Fiction & Fantasy Translation Awards, but is not regarded as science fiction or fantasy at all in China.

Recently, an exciting development that has gripped the attention of readers and researchers in Chinese literature, Chinese studies, and Chinese science fiction is the development of internet novels in China. Much like on Wattpad, stories are serialised and published. However, because it is accessible using mobile phones and 99.3% of China's total internet user base are on a mobile device (KAWO 2020), production and consumption speeds are high, with translators and researchers trying hard to keep up with the developments on that platform. In a recent discussion, Regina Kanyu Wang (who is guest co-editor with me on this issue) mentioned that academics in China are trying to figure out if internet novels can be studied as part of 'literature,' or if they constitute their own separate field of study. In another conversation, Sarah Dodd, of the Leeds Centre for New Chinese Writing, mentioned that internet novels are high on their radar, and something that comes up in many conversations among researchers. Perhaps the development of internet novels is starting to break down some of these concepts of genre, but while Chinese writers and East Asian diaspora writers are still writing for the mainstream English markets, the Anglophone concepts and expectations of genre remain in play.

Another interesting dimension of Chinese science fiction is how it embraces modern science and technology, and how it manages more traditional Chinese

practices of science like Daoist alchemy, studies of Qi, and Traditional Chinese Medicine. Though they're used in practice around the world, they're considered "alternative medicine" or "pseudo-science." If we consider that China needs to compete economically and technologically on the global market (and in a short period of time), we can understand that China also needs to do so within modern knowledge of science and technology that is West-driven. In order to achieve the success they have to date, China has had to pool their strategy towards Western ideas of progress, including teaching English as a second language to children from as young as Primary Three.

However, if we try to extrapolate China's recent progress — because they've achieved in 40 years what the West had in 100 years — their trajectory will surpass Western expectations soon. We are already seeing this in CSF, where China officially recognises CSF as an industry, acknowledging it as a large contributor to its cultural trade, and in ecosystems thinking, where China is pioneering new policies designed to enhance ecosystem services, to "better balance [economic] development with ecological protection" (*Green Growth That Works*, 2019). And when the West is unable to provide China with further inspiration for modernisation and economic growth, China might finally be in a position to pave its own way, something that it had previously enjoyed through most of the Imperial China era, until the early 19th century. If we are allowed to speculate a future (we do work in science fiction, after all), the trajectory of China and of CSF becomes even more of an area for creativity and the imagination, moving away from just the economic drivers into genuine scientific exploration. If China does indeed become a technological research superpower, might that even transform the way we conceive of technological innovation itself? Perhaps Chinese cultural production and CSF will be able to pave new directions that draw inspiration from more traditional, cultural, and historical experiences instead. It is also interesting to note that internationally, East Asian and South East Asian communities are starting to see more engagement and support in their creative and cultural production, suggesting another parallel development in cultural movement between Chinese states and Chinese diaspora communities internationally.

At home in the UK, for the recent Lunar New Year celebrations, there were a lot more collaborations to be noted among British East and South Seat Asian (BESEA) creatives. A fun project to highlight is a collaboration between the artist Gordon Cheung (featured in an interview in this issue) and chef Andrew Wong. Gordon designed and produced a virtual mural for Andrew's restaurant to celebrate the festivities of the year of the Ox, using an app that can be downloaded with this QR code.

We've also seen more development, growth and success among BESEA organisations and communities, to name a few:

- BEATS (a not-for-profit advocacy organisation founded by British East and South East Asians working in the Theatre and Screen industry)
- besea.n (a grassroots movement born from six ESEA women, created to shine a light on Britain's East and South East Asians)
- SEEAC (Southeast and East Asian Centre is a welcoming home to the migrants, refugees and anyone of Southeast and East Asian heritage in the UK).

There are also creative communities like the writing groups BESEA Writing Group and Bubble Tea Writers, of which I'm a member, together with SFF writers Cynthia So, Eliza Chan and Zen Cho. I'm not sure if it's because of Lunar New Year, but the energy and excitement from the various BESEA communities are palpable.

With this same energy, Regina and I would like to first thank the BSFA, and Polina and Jo in giving us a chance to explore Chinese science fiction through this special issue in such a creative and expansive way. We would also like to thank all our contributors for sharing their work and thoughts so openly with us, and especially Storycom for coordinating the work with our colleagues in China. We hope that the articles in this print issue and online through *Vector's* website will encourage you to explore the many facets of CSF. And if you are interested, keep an eye on Vector-BSFA.com and CoFutures.org (where Regina is a Research Fellow), as we will be collaboratively developing an open database of CSF resources in the near future.

And finally, in thinking about Chinese science fiction, its future seems to be uncharted. May it be renewed with the vitality and spirit of dragons and horses.

YEN OOI IS A WRITER-RESEARCHER WHOSE WORKS EXPLORE CULTURAL STORYTELLING AND ITS EFFECTS ON IDENTITY IN SCIENCE FICTION. YEN HAS WRITTEN ROAD TO GUANGDONG (GAME), SUN: QUEENS OF EARTH (NOVEL), A SUSPICIOUS COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES AND POETRY (COLLECTION) AND VARIOUS ARTICLES AND PAPERS. YEN IS ALSO A LECTURER, MENTOR, AND CONSULTANT.

The Evolution of Nüwa: A Brief "Herstory" of Chinese SF

Regina Kanyu Wang

If you listen to a lecture on Chinese science fiction (SF), or check a list of representative authors of Chinese SF, eight or nine times out of ten, you will hear the names of male authors first. There is Liu Cixin, Wang Jinkang, Han Song and He Xi, the "Four Heavenly Kings." Or Chen Qiufan, Baoshu, Zhang Ran and Feidao, the leading post-80s writers. If the list goes on, you may finally hear of Xia Jia, Hao Jingfang, Zhao Haihong and Ling Chen, the female authors who are equally extraordinary but less mentioned. During a panel at Worldcon 75 in Helsinki in 2017, the moderator Xia Jia, who is also a prominent scholar, gave a short introduction to Chinese SF. For the first time in such major occasions, she decided to present the female writers before the male ones. Her efforts emphasized that Chinese female SF writers are not inferior to their male counterparts, and questioned the routine of male writers always being the first and the dominant.

Despite the growing popularity of Chinese SF both inside and outside of academia, far less attention is paid to female authors' works compared with male authors' works. Research on Chinese SF from a gender perspective is even more rare. This article intends to re-narrate the "herstory" of mainland Chinese SF in the larger historical background of China and hopes to invite more discussion on this topic in the future.

It is widely acknowledged that SF in its modern sense was first brought to China via translation in the late Qing dynasty (1840-1912, from the First Opium War to the issuance of the Imperial Edict of the Abdication of the Qing Emperor). Female writer and translator Xue Shaohui (薛绍徽) and her husband Chen Shoupeng (陈寿彭) co-translated Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* into Chinese in 1900, which was among the first SF publications in China (Ren). At that time, there were a group of women intellectuals like Xue who were fighting on the same front as men to save the country from the Western imperial invasion as well as the corruption of the Qing dynasty, while also dedicated to improving women's rights. This was when women started to have more exposure to public education on both Chinese and Western thinking (Xia X.). Female writers started to publish fiction in newspapers (Ma). However, it was hard to spot any female authors in the late Qing era who created original SF stories. The images of female characters in late Qing SF tend to be either dispensable/nonexistent or unrealistic/hegemonic (Zhang Y.). In Haitianduxiaozi (海天独啸子)'s 1904 novel *The Stone of Nüwa* (女娲石), the author imagines a female utopian society, where women possess various forms of expertise like martial arts, science and medicine. These women are enthusiastic about saving their country and even establish a women-only patriotic organization, but their approaches are bound to feudal gender stereotypes: training cute girls to marry and assassinate government officials, going to brothels to study how to seduce males. Women characters in this book are extreme and exaggerated, but still, it is probably the earliest feminist SF in China.

Unfortunately, it is very rare, if not impossible to find female authors or representative feminist stories in Chinese SF through the Republic of China era (1912-1949, from the end of Qing dynasty to the establishment of the new China) and the first decades of the People's Republic of China (founded 1949). Through successive unease, wars and regime changes, a three-year period of natural disaster of the Great Famine (1959-1961) and the ten-year turmoil of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), we can find no traces of female authors joining their male counterparts in publishing SF in its first short Golden Era in-between the upheavals.

When the new country was born, China experienced a gender revolution together with a class revolution. After 1949, Chinese women learned that "Men and women are the same" (男女都一样) and "Women hold up half the sky" (妇女顶起半边天). "Iron Maidens" (铁姑娘) – women depicted equally as strong as men – contributed vital labour forces to construct the young nation, and the differences between men and women were erased from the mainstream narrative. In the first black-and-white Chinese SF film, *Ballad of the Ming Tombs Reservoir* (十三陵水库畅想曲, 1958, Beijing Film Studio), we can see that although female labourers were taking on the same work burden as male labourers and that a woman can be president of the people's commune,

she still additionally has to carry out traditional women's responsibilities like cooking and dancing. It is a default setting for women to be responsible for the housework, caring and service work even while carrying out the same social and economic work as men (Wang Y.), not only in the film but also in the real Chinese society at that time.

Two dozen years later, male SF writer Wei Yahua (魏雅华, born in 1949) contributed a pair of provoking stories in early 1980s: "Dream of a Soft Country" (温柔之乡的梦, 1981) .and its sequel "I Decided to Divorce my Robot Wife" (我决定和机器人妻子离婚, 1981), in which he describes a female robot's transformation from an obedient, beautiful and "ideal" wife to a self-aware and independent woman requiring her own rights. The story, which was published not long after the 1980 Marriage Law was passed, which enlarged the rights of women and children and banned arranged marriage (Conn), can be seen as an early discussion of feminism in Chinese SF. Two of the earliest-known female Chinese SF writers are Ji Wei (嵇伟) and Zhang Jing (张静). Ji, who writes under the pen name Miaoshi (缪士), was born in 1954 and published her first science fiction stories around 1978. She has won multiple awards both in SF and mainstream literature. Her father, Ji Hong (嵇鸿, born in 1920) is also a famous SF and children's literature writer. Zhang, who was born in 1938 and began publishing science fiction stories in 1985, writes under the pen name Jing Jing (晶静). Her representative work "The Love of Nüwa"(女娲恋, 1991) won the 3rd Galaxy Award that year. The story is about an alien girl, Y, who while on a field trip to Earth is mistaken for the Goddess Nüwa by the local ancient earthlings. Y cannot bear to see the local people die from rainstorm and flood, so she disobeys her alien fiancé's order and chooses to help them at the cost of staying on Earth forever. In the end, she marries an Earth man, Fuxi, and takes on the responsibility of sustaining the reproduction of human beings as a woman. In Chinese mythology, Nüwa is the Goddess who mends the broken sky and creates human beings. She is half-woman and half-snake. Y in the story resembles Nüwa by wearing a snake-tail spacesuit, dispelling rain clouds with her spacecraft and fulfilling the job of creating humans. After the "Reform and Opening-up" period in the end of the 1970s, Chinese intellectuals devoured Western thinking and began heated social and political discussions. The concept of the "Iron Maiden" was thus questioned. In the mid-1980s, "female literature" was brought up in China in order to separate out writing by female writers to strengthen the uniqueness of female writers' expression. This can be regarded as the first upsurge of gender discussions in contemporary China.

It is hard to say how much of this has influenced SF writing in China at that time because SF itself was undergoing the criticism of "spiritual-pollution" because of the elements of capitalism and commercialism — topics more than science in SF were regarded as being harmful politically — since 1983 in another campaign of social and political discussions.

The "Newer Generation" (更新代) writers who are currently still the pillar of Chinese SF began to publish in early 1990s, and more female writers started to emerge around 1995, among whom are Ling Chen (凌晨, born in 1971), pen name of Yu Lei (余蕾) , and Zhao Haihong (赵海虹, born in 1977), who have not only won numerous awards since the beginning of their career but also continue writing today. Both of them insist on their own writing being androgynous — in the sense of Virginia Woolf's famous quote on "a great mind must be androgynous" — and are unwilling to have their works marked as "feminist." Ling Chen's writing style is rather rational and never lacks technological details, which is the dominant masculine aesthetics in Chinese SF. Because of the gender-neutral pen name and her writing style, she has been mistaken as male by some readers, which she was happy about. Zhao Haihong, though usually writing from a female perspective, claims that she never emphasizes her female identity too much while writing. Interestingly, they have spoken through their female protagonists in their stories: "I am firstly an astronaut and then Shu Hong's fiancée. My career and credits are not earned because of Shu Hong"; "I am a revolutionist, not a woman … I wish I could be a woman, but if I have to choose, I choose the revolution." Both authors have written about marriage, reproduction, women's dilemmas in choosing a career, and other topics that show feminist interests, but their denial of female writing is clear. The Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing in 1995 and unveiled the second wave of gender discussions in China. It was then that the concepts of "feminist literature" (女性主义文学) and "female writing" (女性写作) were brought up. However, due to commercialization, female writers' expressions of love, desire and sexual experiences were marketed as "beauty writing" (美女写作) and later, "body writing" (身体写作), which suppressed other possibilities of "female writing." This caused many female writers' unwillingness to have their writing categorised as female or feminist writing, not only in SF, but also in mainstream literature as well (Zhang L.).

Entering the 21st century, the increase in the number of Chinese female SF writers continues. Qian Lifang (钱莉芳, 1978) is worth mentioning because of her 2004

historical SF novel Providence (天意), which was the best-selling SF before Liu Cixin's The Three Body Trilogy came out, and won the special award of Galaxy Award. The novel is set at the turn of the Qin and Han Dynasties in ancient China, combining historical and mythological elements with alien technologies. The two parts of the book are centered on Han Xin, the talented male hero, and Ji Jiang, the girl who is equally intelligent, both of whom are vital to save the Earth. Such structure makes it possible for readers to see both male and female perspectives in the story and also emphasizes the importance of women's role in history, drawing attention to the fact that women are mostly missing in ancient Chinese (and other culture's) history books. The novel was adapted into a TV net series in 2018 (Hero's Dream), which became the first screened Chinese SF net series adaptation. In fact, the adaptation (which is actually not so good) is mainly targeted at a female audience, adding a time travel setting and enlarging the romance part — typical tropes in female-oriented net series in China — compared to the original, which is probably because women occupy a larger percentage of net series audience than men in China.

Among the female authors who began to publish after 2000, three were born in 1984. Xia Jia (夏笳), a.k.a. Wang Yao (王瑶), began to publish SF in 2004 with her debut short story, "The Demon Enslaved Flask" (关妖精的瓶子), a science fairytale. She calls her writing style "porridge SF" (稀饭科幻), which is softer than soft SF, a mixture of SF, fantasy and even fairytales. SF to her is a genre that crosses borders and discovers what is unknown or impossible before. In the afterword of "Eternal Summer Dream" (永夏之梦, 2008), she questions: "1. Why cannot SF stories be set in the East? 2. Why cannot the protagonist be female?" Her questions pointed out the long-existent problem in Chinese SF – the default Western and masculine setting. In her recent short story series, Sinopedia (中国百科全书), Xia Jia continues to challenge the tradition. All the stories have the same female protagonist who is a scholar of humanity, in contrast to the traditional male scientist narration in SF. The series' stories are all about common people's lives in a near-future China, where small technological gadgets are embedded everywhere to deal with day-to-day issues at an individual's scale, such as the ageing society, psychological disease or language malfunction plague, in contrast to the "grand" narration that is preferred in much Chinese SF. Hao Jingfang (郝景芳), the first Chinese female author to win a Hugo Award, claims her writing to be "no-type" (无类型), which blurs the boundary between mainstream literature

and speculative fiction. She cares about realistic space but expresses it in virtual settings. Her Hugo-winning short story "Folding Beijing" (北京折叠) is one such work, showing concerns for the real problem of social stratification in a virtual foldable Beijing that separates three different social classes via a literal stratification. What should also be noted is that Hao, as an economist and a mother, extends her practice of care into the real world where she has established a start-up to provide creativity education to children, including those in less-developed areas, where kids — especially girls — from poor families don't get access to such education. Chi Hui (迟卉) is a prolific writer who publishes under different pen names when writing SF, fantasy and game stories, but keeps her real name Chi Hui as the most used one. Majoring in biology, she has created stories with unique creatures and alien planets, almost always featuring a lonely and rebellious female protagonist. In her story "Insect Nest" (虫巢), Chi creates an alien planet with an interesting gender structure, where each girl has to take care of their boy tree while growing up. They have to be responsible for the boy trees' life until they grow into full-size men; and together, they will pass through the forest when matured then step into the "third season" of life by transforming into a giant insect. Apart from being a writer, Chi also works as an editor at Science Fiction World, the largest SF magazine in China, and leads many new writers to start their journey in writing.

In the second decade of the 21st century, we continue to see a boom of Chinese female SF writers, and more and more of them starting to openly discuss the feminist themes in their writing. Gu Shi (顾适, born in 1985), an urban planner as well as storyteller, says in an interview in 2016 that there is no boundary between male and female in SF writing, and no distinctions, advantages or disadvantages that specifically belong to male or female SF authors when they are writing (Gu, "SF"). In many of her earlier stories, she prefers to choose a first-person narrative from a male protagonist. But in another interview in 2020, she confessed her moment of realizing that this was a problem, after which she began to create more diverse and rounded female characters (Gu, "I want to"). In her story "Introduction to the Second Edition of 'Prelude 2181'" (《2181序曲》再版导言, 2020), Gu narrates the imaginative future history of hibernation in the format of a book introduction, featuring all-women characters: scientists, scholars, journalists, lawyers and entrepreneurs. It is a wonderful piece and the best showcase of the intelligent, capable and beautiful women she wants to write about. In my own writing (Kanyu Wang 王侃瑜, born in 1990), I have also expe-

rienced a self-discovery of feminist awareness. At the book launch of *2019 China Female Literature Collection*, which included my own story "The Language Sheath" (语膜, 2019, English version published in *Clarkesworld*, May 2020), I mentioned that questions such as "What's the Chineseness of Chinese SF?" and "Why do female authors choose to write SF?" show the dominance of Western authors and male authors, because these questions imply that Western and male are the default settings for SF writers. Though I did not want to over-emphasize my identity, and neither do many other female Chinese SF writers, I did want to express the richness and multi-layered quality of writing that grows from cultural and gender identity. "The Language Sheath" is such a story talking about the complications of cultural identity and being a mother.

The tendency of authors to openly admit to female/feminist writing may be linked with the third wave of heated gender discussions in China, which was started by the #MeToo movement and extended to more industries in the recent five years or so. Both established and emerging writers were moved to join the league. Cheng Jingbo (程婧波, born in 1983), who began to publish in 1999, and Peng Simeng (彭思萌, born in 1990), who published her first short story in 2011 but stopped writing until 2016, have both actively remarked on the importance of feminist writing. Cheng's novella "Host" (宿主, 2019, Lenghu Award winner) is about a woman in search of her husband, as well as the solution to her emotional dilemma on a road trip. Peng's novella "Beast Boxing" (野兽拳击, 2016, Douban Reading Competition winner) tells the story of a female product manager achieving confidence and high targets in a virtual reality fighting game that eliminates the difference between male and female strength. Xiu Xinyu (修新羽, born in 1993), who was once focused on mainstream literature and now SF as well, contributed one of the rare, from Chinese female SF authors, pieces that takes gender as its only major theme. "Eve and Eve" (夏娃与夏娃, 2019) – also titled, in its alternative Chinese setting version, "Big Nüwa Era" (大女娲时代, unpublished) – speculates what will happen if all-female aliens come to Earth and claim that all women belong to them and men are just accidents and defective products of reproduction. The story shows men's reaction in an ironic way when the aliens intend to take all the women from Earth.

There are definitely more names to be mentioned, like Tang Fei (糖匪, born in 1983) who has recently been interviewed by *Words Without Borders* on "Sexism and Science Fiction" (Bruce and Harman); Zhou Wen (昼温, born in 1995) who has been the first female winner

of George R.R. Martin's Terran Prize; Congyun "Mu Ming" Gu (慕明, born in 1988) who is a programmer at Google and has won all major awards in Chinese SF in the past few years, shortly after she began to write SF; and Shuang Chimu (双翅目, born in 1987), who is a PhD in philosophy at Renmin University of China and highly praised by many SF fans in China. The list can go on for a while. Also there are female entrepreneurs in Chinese SF industry, working on the frontier of bringing SF to a wider audience. The CEOs of three of the major SF start-ups in China are all women: Yang Feng (杨枫) of Eight Light Minutes, Zhang Yiwen (张译文) of Storycom and Ji Shaoting (姬少亭) of Future Affair Administration (check out the "Chinese SF Industry" piece in this issue for more about these companies). Their leadership is piloting these companies, as well as the Chinese SF industry, into new territories.

From *The Stone of Nüwa* to "The Love of Nüwa" and then "The Big Nüwa Era," women in Chinese SF emerge not only inside but also outside of the texts. There has been increasing self-examination on the issues of gender identity, and enthusiasm for exploring gender discussions through speculative fiction among female Chinese SF authors, especially in the recent five years. At least three all-women and non-binary Chinese speculative fiction anthologies are being prepared for the first time in history. The US publisher Tor is working with Storycom on *The Way Spring Arrives and Other Stories* (春天来临的方式), an English anthology edited by, written by, and translated by women and non-binary people, with essays by women and non-binary scholars, to showcase both established and rising writers/translators of Chinese speculative fiction. Two more sets of all-female anthologies are being published by Bofeng Culture (*Her Science Fiction*, 她科幻) and Lichao Culture (*Classics of Chinese Female Science Fiction Writers (1990-2020)*, 中国女性科幻作家经典作品集 (1990~2020)), both with plans to widely include female writers' stories in Chinese. With the discussion and attention created by these anthologies, as well as more research interests in feminist/female writing in Chinese SF, there is definitely more to expect in the coming years.

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REGINA KANYU WANG IS A PHD FELLOW OF THE COFUTURES PROJECT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OSLO AND OVERSEAS MARKET DIRECTOR OF STORYCOM. HER RESEARCH INTEREST LIES IN CHINESE SCIENCE FICTION, ESPECIALLY FROM THE GENDER AND ENVIRONMENTAL PERSPECTIVE. SHE IS ALSO AN AWARD-WINNING WRITER WHO WRITES BOTH SCIENCE FICTION AND NON-FICTION.

History-informed futures

Angela Chan interviews Beatrice Glow

Clay Pipe, Smoke Trails Series, 2021, Beatrice Glow, VR Sculpture. The reference image is from an obsolete 2 dollar bank note from the Timber Cutter's Bank, Savannah, Georgia, United States, and features a smiling Black woman carrying a child and carrying tobacco leaves in her apron.

Artist-researcher Beatrice Glow's extensive commitment to public history shapes her work across social-botanical history, dispossession, enslavement, migrations and extractive economies. Building long term projects directly with communities, Beatrice maps complexly interconnected colonial histories through grounded investigations and emerging technologies. Currently on a residency, Beatrice chats from Singapore with Angela Chan in the UK about her work and science fiction's capacity to tell truthful histories and envision just futures together.

AC: Hello Beatrice, thank you for calling with me. Given the array of your practice, how would you like to describe yourself as a practitioner and what are the key themes that guide your outlook and activities?

BG: It's constantly going through evolutions, and at the moment, I think of myself as a multidisciplinary artist-researcher in service of public history. I activate many different mediums across art, from sculptural installations to video, to emerging technologies, and all of that with the intent to meet my audience where they are. Public engagement is an important factor in my practice, and for the art, to shift a dominant narrative.

AC: I first experienced your work through your solo exhibition *Forts and Flowers* (2019) at Taipei Contemporary Art Center, which is part of the larger community-centred project *Rhunhattan: A Tale of Two Islands* (2016 - ongoing). That was my entry point into the many extended investigations you sensitively spend time with. They often focus on everyday elements of migration, extraction and globalisation, such as etymology, perfumes, tableware, nutmeg, architecture. How did you begin mapping

these complex and multiple histories of colonisations, and as aligned with indigenous land sovereignty and climate justice?

BG: I'm glad you got something out of that exhibition, because it was a small attempt at trying to bring that story to my ancestral homeland in terms of the larger history that ties together the different migration flows, the circulation of people, goods, cultures between Asia, the Americas, Europe and the Great Ocean in between.

Place is very important to me in how we shape ourselves and reflect on who we are through lived experiences. Growing up in North America, with family in South America, and parents from Taiwan, I've always had in mind how my family's experiences are different by place. After university I had an amazing opportunity in receiving a Fulbright grant, and I moved to Peru, where there is the largest Asian Latin American population. The year before that, I had been to Argentina for a few months to meet my family, and that really piqued my interest in the different ways in which we experience belonging and feeling safe as racialised people in this world. My uncle, whom I met there, seemed very much not to have been in a safe place for most of his experience; he slept with a pistol under his pillow. They went through the saqueo in the early 2000s in Argentina so they had a very different idea of what it means to be a racialised minority. It made me interested in this side of history, and I was also surprised about the way I was treated as a romanticised ethnic Other. Experiencing humorous yet strange questions/encounters or microaggressions, I guess, led into my early development as an artist: just trying to poke fun but ask questions around identity and perception, and how we show up as racialised bodies.

So in Peru, I wanted to look at the longer history of Asian presence in South America, and that brought me to so many homes of people with diasporic histories. I visited many cemeteries, for records of Japanese and Chinese labourers, which uncovered difficult histories. I also traced the railroads from Lima city all the way up to the Andes. I finally took a boat ride in Iquitos, which is a city in a jungle in the Amazonian river basin, looking for the village called Chino, which on a basic level means Chinese. But really the word Chino is an imaginary word to me: it has many definitions in Spanish, the colloquial language and its slang. Meaning orange in Puerto Rico, it can also mean an indigenous person in Central America, 50 cents in Peru, or cannabis, in reference to squinty eyes one has after smoking. So I was looking for Chino in its plethora of meanings. When I finally arrived, they

said I was the first chinita to arrive, but I don't identify as Chinese. I was placed under that umbrella, and I was placed to think about how we are read.

That experience also allowed me as a young person to visit the Guano Islands where Chinese 'coolies' were forced to do labour, and where the first railroads in Latin America were built to transport the guano on these islands. These horrific places that inflicted violence on these people, and trying to understand that history, also allowed me to see the complexities of where my privileges were, and where my disadvantages were. I met teachers who were of indigenous and mixed race ancestry, white Peruvians, and Afro-Peruvians who also have Chinese ancestry that's not so much documented, which informed what it means for me to be a visibly racialised settler in South America.

That set the scene for me, regarding how we tell important stories, and what the artist's role is in recovering stories that are not told. A lot of people had entrusted me with the responsibility, telling me I'm the first person to ask them these questions and allowed me to do their interviews and they shared their family photos. It was a gift that I could stay for two years doing this work with people. When I travelled back to the US, I thought about the stories that slip through the gaps in the archives, and one of the main ones was the pre-Columbian connection between Asia and the Americas, which signaled to me the Great Ocean, known also as the Pacific. There's one founding myth in the northern coastal region of Peru, of Señor del Naylamp who arrived on a boat, and he had almond-shaped eyes, and many concubines and 'brought civilisation.' There are many archaeological references to this character, and people were wanting to tell me that our ancestral heritages are related, like in these stories. Such folklore and artwork allow for more speculative understandings of history than the archives of history books. It made me think about the Great Ocean, and growing up in California, my mother's brother would say if you look out to the west, you'll see Taiwan. This sparked my imagination that despite geographical differences, you're always connected to a place.

I'm presently on a residency, and I'm in the Malay archipelago that's a homeland of many Austronesian peoples, and their history is under-discussed in the world. The general consensus in linguistic research, which some contest, is that Austronesian peoples set sail from Taiwan around five to six thousand years ago, and people speak Austronesian languages across Taiwan, Aotearoa, Madagascar, Hawaii, Indonesia, Philippines, Rapa Nui, just to name a few. So it's a very beautiful story about human connection that's also seen in certain foods

Rhunhattan: A Tale of Two Islands, 2017, equirectangular image, Beatrice Glow and Alexandre Girardeau.

of the Pacific that are found in the Andes. Those are the stories I'm interested in about Asia and the Americas, in which history doesn't begin with Columbus; it's an anti-colonial narrative I began following then, even if I didn't realise this at my younger age. So you see, I'm mapping a very big map!

Fast forward many years later, I had a fellowship as a visiting scholar in New York City, and residence in the Asian/Pacific/American (A/P/A) Institute at NYU. I was invited to think through various things and be supportive of the incoming Hōkūle'a, a Polynesian double-hulled canoe that was circumventing the waters as part of a cultural revitalisation around the world to spread the message of mālama honua, meaning to care for Mother Earth from an indigenous environmental stewardship perspective. In 2016, the Hōkūle'a was arriving in NYC and people didn't really know how to get New Yorkers ready for such an important delegation, and what the proper cultural protocols were. Furthermore, the Hōkūle'a stewards asked to be welcomed and greeted first by the original peoples of the island. That was a very painful moment for many people to realise how little many of us knew, or had made friends or kinship with the indigenous Lenape/Lunaape/Lunaapeew peoples of New York, and that many of us never asked such a question.

At the same time, I was researching the spice trade, with interests in the early modern period connections that made Asia, the Americas and Europe. In a book, I read a story about Manaháhtaan, Indigenous Manhattan.

In 1667, the Dutch traded Manaháhtaan for a spice island that was a kingdom in what's now known as Indonesia. The island, Rhun, sits in the archipelago of the Banda Islands, and was the first English colony. It produced nutmeg, leading the Dutch to battle them over it. I was interested in multiple histories and the connections between New York and this island that has Austronesian ties, that helped me feel anchored in its history of circulations.

The Bandanese, along with others in the Southeast Asian region, have a very sophisticated history of navigation that seemed to resonate with the Hōkūle'a. For its welcoming, I collaborated with the A/P/A Institute to create the *Wayfinding Project* (2016), which is part augmented reality (AR) lab with an installation and exhibition. Students can use the space as a classroom and use the AR apps installed on tablets to see the updated information, without taking up the physical space too much. I also drew a lot of maps, thinking about different perspectives on what map-making means; for example, one of them was Pacific-centric, and another was a colonial era map where New Amsterdam appears in Northeast America, and when you scan it, you would see a different vision of the island, of Manaháhtaan, and you'd be able to wayfind yourself there. Through these multi-processes you could really look at where you are, and honour the Pacific seafaring memories.

I started building relations with native culture bearers in the region, and those in the diaspora to group together the fragmented histories of forced migrations, diaspora,

genocidal histories of the Northeastern America, New York and New Jersey area in particular. At the same time A/P/A was generous and understanding in the way that I wanted to connect that shared history and cultural heritage with the Bandanese people. They supported my first research travel to the Banda, and I called the project *Rhunhattan: The Tale of Two Islands* (2016 - ongoing). It's a kind of worlding, in the sense of building the connections that haven't been discussed, and asking people, who were arbitrarily joined by a piece of treaty paper that exchanged their homeland islands, to be a part of this, if they would like. It's an ongoing process that I find very empowering, yet also difficult. This year is the 400th year since the genocide of the Bandanese people under the Dutch East India Company, who employed Japanese mercenaries to carry out the executions of the Banda Islands' leaders. They killed 15,000 people — that's 90% of the local population — in the pursuit of domination of the nutmeg trade in 1621. With many colleagues, we came together to build the historical connections across Indonesia, North America and the Netherlands. We organized a Banda Working Group to form a whole range of online events, from March to May 2021, holding space and commemorating, by bringing cultural bearers, public historians, artists and scholars together to have discussions, and importantly, to encourage public memory.

There are many things, from sovereignty to the histories of the Lenape/Lunaape/Lunaapeew people, that started to surface in more mainstream conversations around the same time I started to connect the experiences and histories of the Bandanese and the Lunaape/Lenape/Lunaapeew. That mapped together a very intensely and intimately researched network of stories, that I don't try to simplify, as it's so layered. I share selective parts of it depending on the invited platforms and their contexts, but occasionally I do also map out the full complexity of it like this now with you, because it deserves that space. Healing requires the long term commitment.

AC: Throughout your work, the speculative world-building is very much rooted in forefronting truths that colonial expansions sought to erase. In the work that you co-labour with communities, what are some of the artistic tools and technologies that shape its interactivity in this process of healing histories and building just futures?

BG: I think a big part of our inability to be free is the suppression of our imagination. I'm really lucky to be trusted with the opportunities to work with younger people these days, and I really see it's so important to

nurture that. A lot of them want to tell their stories, but they have not been encouraged to do so for most of their lives. Thinking about the title of my workshop, called 'Un-and Re- Worlding with VR sculpting,' they're doing collection-based research and looking at site-specific histories, and at the same time, they're learning how to do virtual reality sculpting. They form teams to collaborate among themselves and it's fun to see them play together, but also question things in ways they've never done before, with the conceptual tools and the readings that I bring. It's been quite fulfilling: right now I'm doing it in Singapore, and I really enjoy the conversations I have with my students.

When I was just starting this process at the A/P/A Institute at NYU, I was thinking together with my partner, Alexandre Girardeau, a creative technologist and a communications science theorist, about what we could do with the emerging technologies of that moment. It was 2015 and VR was still quite new. What if we could tell stories and use this as a tool to invite cultural bearers that we have the honour to work with, to tell their own stories in the space? This would create an oral histories archive, rather than an event or finished product, and we saw it as a platform that could continue to develop. We began to create workshops with some elders who were visiting as a delegation in town, and some agreed to participate, including the Turtle Clan Chief Vincent Mann of the Ramapough Lunaape Nation, George Stonefish, and later on Brent Stonefish and his son Xander Stonefish. Chief Mann told stories that grounded us to the place where we are, Manahatta, and described his visions of what it means to be a contemporary indigenous person, living in the tri-state area, and seeing his ancestors as always being present when he walks down Broadway. This famous street in New York City is also part of a complex network of pathways that the original peoples of the island used as highways that connected to the greater northeastern region. He shared powerful histories and stories like this, and is a huge inspiration and teacher to me, amongst many others. Some conversations can be heavy. We invite elders to critique our work and say what they want out of this experience. My partner and I see ourselves as the community facilitators of dialogues, interpreting them into visions.

We eventually made these volumetric scans with Chief Mann, 180 degree captures that allowed people to meet him in the space with the headset. It's quite a spiritual space, he's a pixelated presence and talking to you, invoking the land, water, constellations and ancestors. When asked who this VR piece is for, he said that first and foremost it's for the future generations of indigenous

Mannahatta VR (v. 2019) - Chief Vincent Mann of the Ramapough Lunaape Nation, Turtle Clan Chief, on Broadway, Interactive virtual reality experience.

youth, but also the general people in New York, or those who have a relationship to the island and would maybe like to know more for a deeper understanding. He hopes that future generations can meet their ancestors in this experience.

So it has this speculative futures fictioning, in the sense that it's from a vision of peoples who have always been told that they belong in the past, yet they proclaim that their people will continue to be here. They envision a world where their values continue to guide us forward, and no matter the environmental racism they experience, they will continue to speak about it, to power and to truth. They want that to be shaped by their vision of what a safe, clean, healthy future looks like. We created a possible pre-colonial reality, but it's also a speculative future where you can see the native plants reclaiming the city in a way that makes it healthy and beautiful. These narratives are guided by continuing dialogues with community members. I think a lot of it for the elders is strategic, with VR's potential to get the younger people in the community excited to talk about their history using "cutting edge" technology, despite its gimmicks. It's also complex because of the technology's origins in military development. Once again, how can this anti-colonial vision help to shift the gaze, to tell other kinds of narratives that do not replicate trauma and violence? I was

also hoping to engage with different ways we can tell stories through a process that involves envisioning futures together.

AC: That sounds incredible! Extending on your use of virtual spaces, and building what I'd like to call 'history-informed futures,' would you like to talk about your current project Smoke Trails and how science fiction shapes its narrative?

BG: Yes! *Smoke Trails* (2020-) is the working title for this. Starting with a project I did in Chile, called *Aromérica Parfumeur* (2016), I was looking at the social history of plants and the ways I can tell their stories through a fake perfume boutique. It invited significant community engagement into the process, with over 10,000 visitors, because it was in a shopping mall, where people aren't expecting to see an art exhibition. It was also a shopping mall named after Amerigo Vespucci, the namesake of America. I played this into the foundational narratives of what we understand the Americas to be, and how it has relationships to the search for the spices of Asia and their aromatic experiences. These have propelled so many people to not only travel, but also to commit many atrocious massacres around the world, especially in regions like from where I am speaking to you now, an entrepot along the Maritime Silk Road.

In this experience, I talk about many plants, and I shine a light on nutmeg with the story of the Banda Islands, pepper, cacao … I play a lot on the words: eau de colón, so it's cologne spelled as in Colón, meaning Columbus. Another was taboo, with tobacco. In these early stages, I was using smoke as a way to explore the foundational history of the US. Tobacco smoke is a very important native plant that led to the sustaining of the Jamestown settlement, and with its commercial success originating from the 'discovery' of the profitability of tobacco, the English Crown funded this as its first colony. I did some research on the imagery on old American money, and tobacco appears on the note where Sir Walter Raleigh shows the English court how to smoke. When you think about money and its ties to empires and tobacco, one can say that empires were built on smoke.

I was thinking about the etymology of the word "parfum" which means "through the smoke," which led to focusing on smoke as the next step in my investigations into the social history of plants during the early-modern period. I thought "smoke trails" would be an appropriate lynchpin for thinking through the postcolonial experience. The materiality of smoke, being something we can't quite put our finger on, is the omnipresent feeling of the colonial histories; the oppressive ambience; the non-dit that you can't say but is there hauntingly — and it's all hard to grasp. Then I started to see the smoke everywhere: from the combusting engines of industrialisation; the vapours of trains that transformed our transportation and

sense of space and time; the smoke stacks of factories and pollution, to bombings and military innovations, the gases within these smokes and burning forests. What we see in the media constantly are the imagery of war. I start with tobacco and move through these evolutions of different smokes, to finally think of the vape with its ashless smoke and its digital smoke signal. The vape is sanitized of the social history of the plant, it is artificial, and is very popular amongst young people. It makes me think of smoke trails as this long historical arc of our civilisation, while remembering that tobacco is a sacred native plant. Here in Southeast Asia, I'm looking at incense with its sacred relationship between smoke and the divine.

Making all these narratives easier to follow, I created a science fictional story of a pseudo collection owned by a family, whose wealth was made through the Empire of Smoke. The idea is that the family scrubbed their real name from the internet, and we only know their financial institution as the Empire of Smoke. From the spice trade in Europe, specifically Padua in Italy to the East Coast of America, the fictional family's branches are all embedded in these institutions of old money. I'm setting this in the near future, a rough 2040, when the climate catastrophe in the very possible future makes the Earth uninhabitable: we'll have ceaseless pandemics, and there is social unrest. In this time, the family of the Empire of Smoke decide to liquidate most of their physical assets to relocate into a bunker, because Manhattan, as well as other places, is drowning.
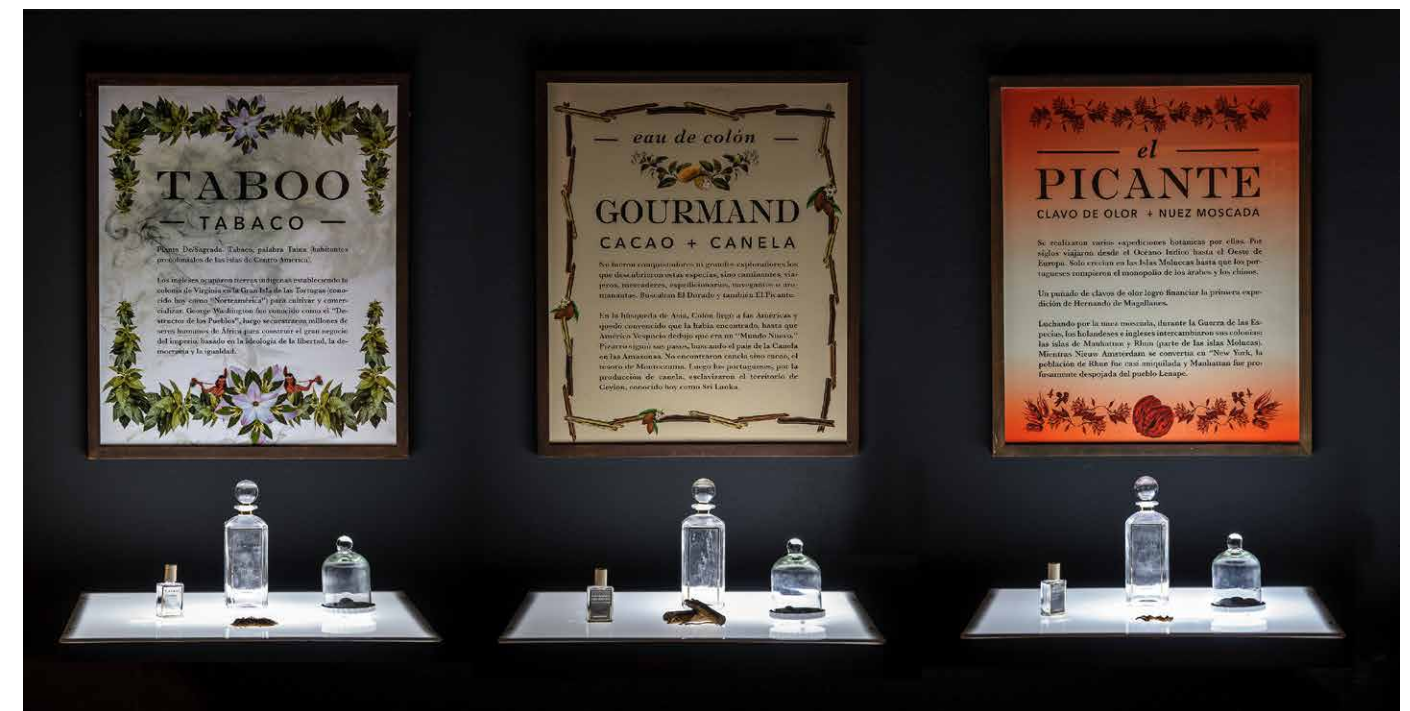
Aromérica Parfumeur

Whiteamoor Candelabra, 2020, 3D printed VR sculpture, hand-painted details.

In the process, I'm making objects for their fake collection, and also writing an accompanying catalogue with someone who has written catalogues for the auction house Christie's, so I'm having lots of fun! I'm doing virtual reality sculpting of bizarre and vulgar objects, and it feels very strange that fact and fiction are so intertwined here — the things I'm making are very possibly real. I'm writing a lot of didactics around them to tell the story of *Smoke Trails*. The objects range across the decorative arts, from perfume bottles shaped as grenades and made in delftware, and pipes and tobacco jars I've sculpted from the images on old American money. I also made a whiteamoor, a take on the blackamoor that often depicts racialised bodies in subservient positions on decorative arts pieces, like on a candelabra where the body would hold the candle. There's a gold mask I made with a crown that's medieval punk, I guess! These are the imagined types of strange objects that only the wealthy — this family are quadrillionaires by the way — would own.

One pseudo-artifact I am making is a golden silk smoke parachute. In researching each object that I create speculative versions of, there's such a rich history. With the parachute it connects to the history of military innovation. There's also a term called the golden parachute, with which CEOs can attain a severance package if they leave a company. It's the ultimate exit plan. In the "Smoke Trails" family, the young are always taught to have a golden parachute. But the parachute is also a children's game, so I'm making a smaller version just big enough for five children to play. It's golden with beautiful gold leaf silk thread from Kyoto with an embroidered print of tobacco, because tobacco in Chinese is called "golden silk smoke." It's the family's nod to their heritage and how they made their money, whilst also teaching the children about their own history, and how to draw up an exit plan. It's a fun object that such a wealthy family would definitely have! The balls I'm making for the parachute game are all depictions of shiny planets and moons, which the family are planning to colonise or create to continue their legacy. The more absurd you are, the more real it is and the more people think they want it. It's the strangeness of the market.

I'm having fun with speculation and spontaneity in artistic creation, and it is unlike my work with communities, which has a different type of emotional demand and method. *Smoke Trails* contrasts to *Manahatta VR*: it tests the water to be as obscene as possible, which seems very appropriate to me in this moment of decadence and degradation. Billionaires have increased at least 40% of their net worth in the past year. We will soon have quadrillionaires, and I was thinking about how out of touch they are. I have produced a whole series of paintings of smoke, which in the narrative are the works of the family's daughter, who's an heiress and sort of Williamsburg hipster. An influence on *Smoke Trails* has been my nine-month exhibition run for my prints on silk of plants that changed the world, *Spice Roots/Routes* (2017). This was in the James B. Duke House, the mansion of the American Tobacco Company founder, that houses the NYU Institute of Fine Arts. It was modelled after the French Château Labottière, with marbles and decorative pieces shipped across the ocean, and it's located on the Millionaire Row of Manhattan. That was a space in which I thought a lot about luxury, the decorative arts, and the darker underpinnings of smoke. I installed my prints of nutmeg and pepper in the smoking room, where the gentlemen would go to have their patriarchal smoke, make deals and socialise over a puff. There is also the lecture hall that used to be the ballroom, where my tobacco print was installed by the speaker's lectern, as well as my military camouflage *Afghan Poppy (the New Silk Road)* print that points to the heroin trade and the invasion of Afghanistan.

There's a specific polished aesthetic to *Smoke Trails*, which is why using digital tools is more suitable. A lot of my prints on silk begin as hand drawings, collages and research, which I digitise for print before embroidering on it as a layered process. With VR sculpting, they are sometimes printed and there are also a lot of analog hand painting that happens afterward. Actually, maybe I'm losing my fingerprints because I work with my hands and sanding. This is also one of my sci-fi elements to the work, because machines can't successfully read me. I'm thinking, "What happens to people with no fingerprints?" It's to do with labour and the future of biometrics. Being speculative with this project, I'm imagining that this family's new bunker has a state of the art odour-based biometric machine that determines who can enter, it reads you by your smell, and I extend on what these smoke stories would look like in the future.

AC: What are other activities you're currently spending time with?

BG: In much of my work as an artist, I channel my need for more agency and immediate action through organising work. I serve as the programme manager for the Public History Project, which arose from an intense debate in NYC about monuments, and the interlinking histories of dispossession and enslavement, in order to really understand climate justice. It's a project that also looks at the intricacies of that, and so it's a very big project that we'll be doing public programming on. These include commemorating massacres that have happened in the region, where Lunaape/Lunaapeew/Lenape people's land was built on. This is hard and heavy, but it helps us understand where we are, the enslaved peoples and migrants who were forced to work the land, and how our histories are connected. Additionally, with the Banda Working Group we are putting on Banda 1621-2021: International Roundtable Series to commemorate the impact of the genocide of 1621.

I am also excited about an upcoming solo exhibition to be announced soon, which will further highlight these narratives that I feel are important for wider discussion in public spaces.

AC: Beatrice Glow, thank you!

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Chinese SF Research in a Nutshell

Mia Chen Ma, Frederike Schneider-Vielsäcker, and Mengtian Sun

Apart from some early mentions of SF in reviews of China's Reform Era literature (Rudolf G Wagner's "lobby literature" in his 1985 book *After Mao: Chinese Literature and Society, 1978–1981*) and late Qing fiction (David Der-Wei Wang's "science fantasy" in his 1997 book *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1848-1911*), Chinese SF studies did not really make its first show on the global stage until *Science Fiction Studies'* special issue in March 2013. Since then, Chinese SF research has quickly strode forward from the Chinese language world to a wider audience. Nathaniel Isaacson has contributed the first full book-length study on Chinese science fiction in his *Celestial Empire: the Emergence of Chinese Science Fiction* (2017); Mingwei Song has conducted research on what he names "New Wave" of Chinese SF (works from 1989 which he believes share a similar subversive nature with "new wave" SF in the West) and its subversive nature; and a growing number of both established and emerging scholars have been joining the team studying Chinese SF. Time-wise, the various research looks at Chinese SF from the late Qing dynasty, to the period of the Republic of China, then the first seventeen years after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, followed by the 1980s to contemporary and current writing. Geography-wise, Chinese SF works have come from mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and internationally through Sinophone and Chinese diaspora communities. To give us a glimpse of the latest trends in Chinese SF research, in this article, we have three scholars working on contemporary mainland Chinese SF briefly introducing their research: Mia Chen Ma on ecological conundrums, Frederike Schneider-Vielsäcker on digital surveillance, and Mengtian Sun on looking at Chinese SF globally.

Mia Chen Ma is a PhD candidate at School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. Her research interest lies primarily in the increasing role for science fiction as a way of thinking about other fields, such as ecology, urbanism, and politics in contemporary

Chinese context. Her current research project is funded by Universities' China Committee in London (UCCL). It mainly looks into the ecological narratives from Chinese New Wave science fiction works. She also works as the Co-Director for the London Science Fiction Research Community. In addition, she is also keen to explore the literary world of overseas Chinese writers, particularly those who integrate the debates on post-colonization, transnationalism, and biopolitics into their narratives.

Chinese SF and China's Ecological Conundrums

China's escalating ecological crisis and its literary representation have become the basis of much scholarly discussion, but the study of ecological themes in recent Chinese science fiction (SF) works is scarce. This may be partly due to the fact that SF as a genre has maintained a marginalized status since its debut in the Chinese literary realm. While a large body of scholarship has traced the ecological elements from Chinese poetry, reportage, or other mainstream literary genres, the ecological implications of Chinese SF have been paid much less attention.

In contrast, the ecological narratives from Chinese SF published in the past decade — during which both China's political climate and the entire global system have changed almost as immensely as ecological climate — often directly point to a specific ecological issue, such as waste pollution, climate change, overpopulation, energy depletion, etc. With the detailed observation on China's changing political, social, and cultural discourses, they offer re-evaluations of unresolved conflicts within the ecosystem, while pondering on the possible future of China and the entire humanity. For example, Wang Jinkang's *Cross* (2009) discusses human interference with viral evolution in the context of globalization and terrorism. Hao Jingfang's *Folding Beijing* (2015) deals with overpopulation and its consequences in escalating social stratification. He Xi's *Six Realms of Existence* (2012) also treats the problem of an overcrowded world, in which the population has exploded. Chen Qiufan's *Waste*

Tide (2019) narrates the electronic waste pollution of a real Chinese town, Guiyu, and the struggles of migrant workers.

These eco-oriented Chinese SF works demonstrate, challenge, and reshape the existing discourse of China's ecological conundrums in a way that they significantly expand the scopes of what counts as "harmful" to the entire ecosystem — including both the human and more-than-human world of earthly nature, as coined by David Abram. They bring attention to the "situated knowledge" behind our seemingly common reactions toward the entanglement of the prevalent ecological and social issues. Even though people can identify the worsening of global ecological problems, they are often unaware how their interpretations of these issues are not actually premised on their own opinions or experiences, but are often reflections of their social positions and identities that are assigned by authorities. In this instance, our knowledge is always already socially situated.

For example, Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide* depicts how the waste workers, who manually dismantle electronic waste without any protective equipment, are labelled as a specific social group of the "waste people." Being despised and exploited by the rest of the society including the local officials and the global company involved, they are then expected to take the major responsibility in saving the entire society from its escalating ecological and social crisis even at the cost of their own lives. More importantly, these waste workers themselves are completely unaware of such contradictions. For them, the spirit of sacrifice is already deeply ingrained in their "situated knowledge" about their social role within society. In this instance, disguised as a collective endeavor to tackle the ecological conundrum, social oppression and injustice become even more insidious, which, eventually hinder the attempts to find the fundamental cause for the escalating ecological and social crisis. From this perspective, both Chen and the other contemporary Chinese SF writers have identified such "situated knowledge," and explored how the ecological issues, such as electronic waste pollution, being characterized as local and global, can also be addressed, twisted, and furthermore integrated into the restructuring of human society and the more-than-human world.

Meanwhile, they also bring awareness of the existence of what Karen Thornber defines as "ecoambiguity" — a combination of unpredictable, inconsistent, and contradictory behaviours that lead us to acquiesce in harming the entire ecosystem while claiming to be nature lovers (2012, 214). The prevalence of such ecoambiguity, as delineated by Chinese SF writers, reflects and

reinforces the penetrating capacity of the "situated knowledge." It illustrates how all these ecological problems and social issues become entangled with each other, while fundamentally, none get resolved . It also explains the reason why people are obsessed with the advancement of modernization on the one hand, but need to be assured and reassured now and again about the ecological and socio-political risks arising from such continuous development.

From many aspects, in depicting the complexity of solving ecological conundrums, all the above mentioned Chinese SF writers have shed light on our often contradictory perceptions on modern risks. Their ecological narratives, directly or indirectly, pose questions on a developing "risk society," which, according to Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, refers to "a society increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety), which generates the notion of risk" (1998, 209). Their imaginations of the human future often point to a society that is risk-oriented, technologically-saturated, yet also deeply destabilized, ecologically-damaged. They delineate how human incompetence of restoring their intimacy with nature brings about repeated failure from all aspects, including the termination of both humanity and modernity.

In particular, their stories strive to reveal two contradictions inherent in the risk discourse: people who claim to manage the complex ecological and social risks are also the same group of people who are simultaneously producing and elevating these very same risks; people are grappling with the symptoms rather than probing into the fundamental causes. As a result, the public are often ignorant of those invisible risks such as the problematic foundation of scientific theory and practice, particularly its incapability of making effective interventions due to its own involvement in producing risks. With the revelations on the problematic risk discourse, Chinese SF writers underline how our ecological concerns can be easily utilized, redefined, or simply neglected in the implementation of risk management.

The literary critic Li Tuo once criticized Chinese intellectuals from the 1980s for refusing to explore "the complicated relationship between instrumental reason and modernization" (Chi and Wang, 2000, 143-144). Namely, on the political propaganda of China Dream that is established on a national pride for China's rapid modernization. Being afraid of representing voices that challenges mainstream ideology, many mainland Chinese writers have maintained a detached attitude toward the complexity of modernization in their narratives. However, the above-mentioned Chinese SF writers

all associate their ecological narratives closely with the complexity of modern risk itself, attempting to uncover the interplay between nature, culture, politics, ethnic relations, and international relationships shaped by China's changing national discourse in the past two decades. The question that is posed by these eco-oriented Chinese SF works that leaves us hanging without an answer, is if their narratives, either demonstrating obvious environmental awareness, or delivering rather implicit ecological messages, can function as an intervention to public discourse on the reconciliation between human and more-than-human world.

Frederike Schneider-Vielsäcker is an Assistant Professor at the Institute of Chinese Studies at Heidelberg University. She will receive her PhD in Chinese Studies from the Free University of Berlin in 2021. Her thesis focuses on the reflection of socio-political issues in contemporary Chinese science fiction literature. She has given talks on Chinese science fiction at the MLA conference, Stockholm University, University of Geneva, and Lund University, and has been interviewed by German radio stations. Together with Kapsel magazine, she recently co-organized a discussion with Chinese author Chi Hui and scholar Prof. Dr. Mingwei Song at the Confucius Institute Frankfurt and co-curated an event series with major science fiction writers from China at Kunsthaus ACUD in Berlin.

Negotiating Freedom: The Motif of Resistance in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction Literature

In times of digital surveillance, Chinese science fiction (SF) plays an important role in the critical examination of oppressive state mechanisms. Contemporary Chinese authors' subversive visions deconstruct the state's metanarrative such as the "Great Revival of the Chinese Nation" (*Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing* 中华民族伟大复兴) that emphasises China's recovery of national strength and focuses on social stability as a means to return to the centre of global power politics. Ma Boyong (马伯庸, b. 1980) and Zhang Ran (张冉, b. 1981) are two of the representatives among the new generation of Chinese SF writers who have the courage to question the government's status quo. Their short stories' engagement with state control constitutes one of the four aspects that I am particularly interested in. The remaining three aspects are narrative explorations of economic growth, social disparities, and gender issues in the writings of their contemporaries. When reading these stories, the narra-

tives reveal a strong connection to the complex reality of mainland China. As motifs of oppression and resistance are commonplace in the genre all over the world, their occurrence is not unique to SF from China. Furthermore, the addressed themes in Chinese SF are not exclusively relevant to Chinese, but to Western societies as well.

"City of Silence" (*Jijing zhi cheng* 寂静之城, 2005) by Ma Boyong can be read as a homage to Orwell's SF classic *1984*. Not only does the story share the common theme of social control through the control of speech and thought, the main characters in the story also engage with Orwell's novel in secret "talking meetings" of their resistance group. Ma's future vision imagines a totalitarian world in which there is not even room for love. People live in some kind of offline version of China's real-life online censorship, since every spoken word is monitored by the latest technology. When speaking, they need to adhere to a list of "healthy words" which comprises less words day by day — until there is nothing left to say. Hence, the main difference between *1984* and "City of Silence" lies in the methods of social control. While the government in *1984* invents a new language (Newspeak) to get into people's heads, in "City of Silence" it exercises social control through the removal of language.

Similarly, "Ether" (*Yitai* 以太, 2012) by Zhang Ran portrays a grim future in which censorship has become omnipresent. Through nanoparticles floating in the air, the filter technology scans all forms of conversation — written and oral — and replaces "menacing" language with "harmless" language without the transmitting person's notice. In this environment, an underground group gathers regularly for "finger talking," a way of exchanging thoughts freely by writing Chinese characters into other members' palms as a form of silent resistance. In comparison to *1984* and "City of Silence," the nature of control takes an interesting shift from the censorship of speech to mass deception through the production of misinformation in "Ether".

How do these Chinese SF writers assess sensitive topics that are targeted by the state's monitoring systems and at the same time avoid their works from being censored? One of the common methods is through setting the stories in a dystopian future version of the US to distract from the intended critical reflection of censorship in present-day China. As the history of Chinese SF shows, changing the setting from China to another country or planet has been a conventional literary practice to voice criticism. In the 1932 novel *Cat Country* (*Maochengji* 猫城记) by Lao She (老舍, 1899–1966), for example, a society of feline people on Mars satirises the Chinese nation's decay at the turn of the twentieth century. It

goes without saying that in the case of "City of Silence" and "Ether," the stories also implicitly comment on the US. Another approach is to encode their messages in metaphors, numeric codes, wordplay, and homophone characters. For instance, the protagonist's act of drinking distilled water in "City of Silence" can be decoded as an accusation of censorship for inducing mental atrophy, and the image of a castle built on quicksand in "Ether" points to the dangers inherent in the state's grand narrative of a flourishing China. Thus, Chinese SF writers find innovative ways of using language as a tool for non-violent protest. The metaphorical language does not only convey political implications and link their stories to the traditions of Chinese literature, it also adds to the diversity of SF as a global genre.

"City of Silence" and "Ether" introduce the common motif of resistance in various forms: muteness, speech, and free love. In this way, both stories illustrate the power relationship between speech and silence from the perspective of those social groups who do not possess the right to freedom of speech. By negotiating a desire for freedom concealed between the lines, Ma's and Zhang's dark visions challenge China's authoritarian government and call for readers to break the silence in order to prevent these bleak futures from happening. Their stories also provide food for thought to the international readership as they remind us to rethink the mechanisms of surveillance in our countries. In the end, everyone of us could face a future like the ones imagined in "City of Silence" or "Ether," but let's hope for the best — and resist.

Mengtian Sun completed her PhD degree from the University of Melbourne. Her research interests include comparative and world literature, modern and contemporary literature, genre fiction (science fiction in particular), gender studies, among others. She has published in journals such as Science Fiction Studies and Frontiers of Literary Studies in China. She also works as a literary translator, and has translated works by SF writers such as C. L. Moore and Alex Shvartsman.

Alien Encounter in the Chinese Context - A Comparative Perspective on Chinese Science Fiction

In my research, I have been interested in looking at Chinese SF (science fiction) from a comparative perspective. Chinese SF does not exist independently in a vacuum. From the very beginning — around the turn of the twentieth century when Chinese SF emerged — it is

a borrowed genre. Throughout its history, the development and transformation of Chinese SF goes hand in hand with the introduction and translation of SF texts from outside of China, from countries such as Japan, France, the UK, Russia, and the US, among others. This continuous interaction and exchange with global SF makes Chinese SF what it is today, both in terms of form and content. By looking at Chinese SF from a comparative perspective, we can see more clearly how SF — its generic features and thematic concerns — metamorphosed locally into a Chinese context. For example, by looking at Liu Cixin's novels side by side with those of Arthur C. Clarke, we can see how Liu recycled and transformed the classical tropes of golden-age SF to tell a Chinese version of the alien encounter story.

Liu has constantly been dubbed as China's Arthur C. Clarke ever since he won the 2015 Hugo Award for best novel. Liu himself has paid tribute to Clarke on many occasions and humbly stated that "[e]verything that I write is a clumsy imitation of Arthur C Clarke" (Qin). Many scholars have touched upon the similarities between their works; what needs to be looked closer is their differences. Although Liu considers his works as a "clumsy imitation" of Clarke, upon close comparison, Liu actually recycles and transforms the classical alien encounter trope for a Chinese context. A preliminary comparison between their alien encounter stories reveals one significant difference between them — aliens depicted in Clarke's stories are mostly benevolent, whereas aliens appearing in Liu's works are mostly malevolent. Most of Clarke's alien-encounter SF depicts aliens who are kind and selfless — "guardian angels" who want nothing but to rescue, protect or guide humans, as is exemplified by "Rescue Party," "Retreat from Earth," "No Morning After," *Childhood's End, 2001: A Space Odyssey* and *A Time Odyssey*, to name just a few. Conversely, the majority of Liu's alien encounter SF, such as "Devourer," "The Poetry Cloud," "The Sea of Dreams," "The Village Schoolteacher," "The Wage of Humanity," and *The Remembrance of Earth's Past Trilogy*, feature aliens who are malevolent to different degrees; some are invaders with obviously malicious intentions, some, even though without conscious malevolent intentions, still bring about disasters to humans because humans are too insignificant to cause them any concern.

I will take Liu's *Remembrance of Earth's Past Trilogy* and Clarke's *Childhood's End* as examples to demonstrate the specific differences when it comes to their alien encounter stories and the significance of these differences. I argue that *Childhood's End* is an unapologetic justification of (British) colonialism (dressed up as the

benevolent Overlords) and propaganda for colonial ideologies, whereas Liu's trilogy is a representation of the colonial encounter story written from the point of view of the (semi -)colonized, for whom this experience is characterized by dehumanization.

Although both *Remembrance of Earth's Past Trilogy* and *Childhood's End* depict what happens to humans on earth when they are invaded by an alien species — an apt metaphor of the colonial encounter — they turn out to be very different stories because *Remembrance of Earth's Past Trilogy* is written almost entirely from humans' point of view, that of the colonized, whereas *Childhood's End* is written mostly from the aliens' point of view, that of the colonist. In *Childhood's End,* human characters and alien characters take up almost equal proportion of the story. Although there are several major human characters, none of them have such a persistent presence as Karellen, the representative of Overlords on earth. Even the main human characters often empathize with the aliens more than with other humans. Conversely, in *Remembrance of Earth's Past Trilogy*, all the major characters, numbering more than 20, are humans, except Zhizi — the aliens' AI machine. What is more, the aliens and their relationship with humans are portrayed differently. The Overlords are described in a very anthropomorphic way, speaking perfect English, displaying rich emotions, laughing, sighing, and feeling "sadness that no logic could dispel" (Clarke, 189). This makes readers easily identify, empathize with, and take the side of the aliens/colonists in *Childhood's End*. On the contrary, *Remembrance of Earth's Past Trilogy* emphasizes the alien-ness of the Trisolarans, the aliens in the series. At the most fundamental level, the Trisolarans cannot even understand some basic concepts in human language, such as "think" and "say," because their physiology and the way they communicate among themselves is very different from that of humans. In the trilogy, the aliens themselves never appeared, except Zhizi, who, although takes the form of a Japanese woman, does not express even as remotely as rich emotions as that of the Overlords. Thus, in *Remembrance of Earth's Past* trilogy, readers are distanced from the aliens and discouraged from identifying with them. By telling the alien encounter story from the humans' perspective, Liu manages to tell the story of the alien/colonial encounter from the point of view of the colonized, instead of the colonist, in order to critically engage with the history of colonialism and colonial discourses.

Another key difference between *Remembrance of Earth's Past Trilogy* and *Childhood's End* is the purpose and consequence of the alien encounter. The Overlords are depicted as "guardians" of humans, who come, in Karellen's (a major alien character in the novel) words, to "improve your planet, to raise your standards of living, to bring justice and peace" (159), and in Stormgren's (a major human character) words, "[t]idying up our world and *civilizing* the human race" (52). The alien and human characters' rationalization of the aliens' invasion of earth in the novel is almost a direct copy from the colonialist's "script" of "missionary fantasy," the fantasy that they are "civilizing" the "savage." The novel even draws a direct link between Overlords and colonial Britain: Karellen argues that there is no difference between them; "[t]he main difference between us and the British in India was that they had no real motives for going there" (140). At the end of the novel, humans are "upgraded" into a more advanced posthuman species because of the Overlords, which is used to justify the Overlords' invasion of earth. In *Remembrance of Earth's Past Trilogy*, however, the consequence of the alien encounter is depicted as the dehumanization of humans, which is often the same case when it comes to colonial encounters. In the trilogy, humans are despised as chongzi (worms) by the aliens; this dehumanization echoes the colonial subjects' experience of often being considered as merely "a grotesque parody of humankind" (Rieder 37). Liu's human characters, however, question and overthrow this colonial dehumanization by overthrowing the binary hierarchy between human and chongzi — chongzi are not necessarily inferior to humans.

These are only two differences among many others that set Liu's alien encounter stories apart from those of Clarke. Whereas both writers' alien encounter is a metaphor of the colonial encounter, they end up telling very different stories. Clarke's alien encounter stories are skillfully engineered for readers to empathize with the "civilizing" project of the aliens/colonists, who are depicted as "guardian angels" of humans. Liu uses the same trope, but tells the story from the humans' (the colonized) perspective; he questions and overthrows dominant colonial ideologies and discourses along the way. Consequently, through a comparative study, Liu's alien encounter stories can be considered as a modern, Chinese, postcolonial response to golden-age apologetic alien-encounter SF.

Interview

Maggie Shen King and Chen Qiufan (Stanley Chan) in conversation

In this cross-interview, we have two prominent writers interview each other about their respective debut novels. Maggie Shen King is the author of *An Excess Male*, one of *The Washington Post*'s 5 Best Science Fiction and Fantasy Novels of 2017, a James Tiptree Jr. and Lambda Literary Award Finalist. Chen Qiufan (a.k.a. Stanley Chan) is the author of *Waste Tide*, which has been praised by Liu Cixin, China's most prominent science fiction author, as "the pinnacle of near-future SF writing."

Maggie interviews Stanley

Maggie: For those of us who recycle diligently, it's easy to become complacent and forget about the magnitude and consequences of our consumption. I really appreciate that *Waste Tide* brings to the fore the sheer volume of the Western world's electronic usage and creates in the process a twenty-first century waste land in its electronic recycling center. I understand that you grew up near Guiyu, the town that inspired your novel. What do you hope to accomplish in elevating this issue to center stage? As China becomes a superpower and increasingly begins to turn away this sort of work, what are your thoughts and hopes for the emerging nations of the world?
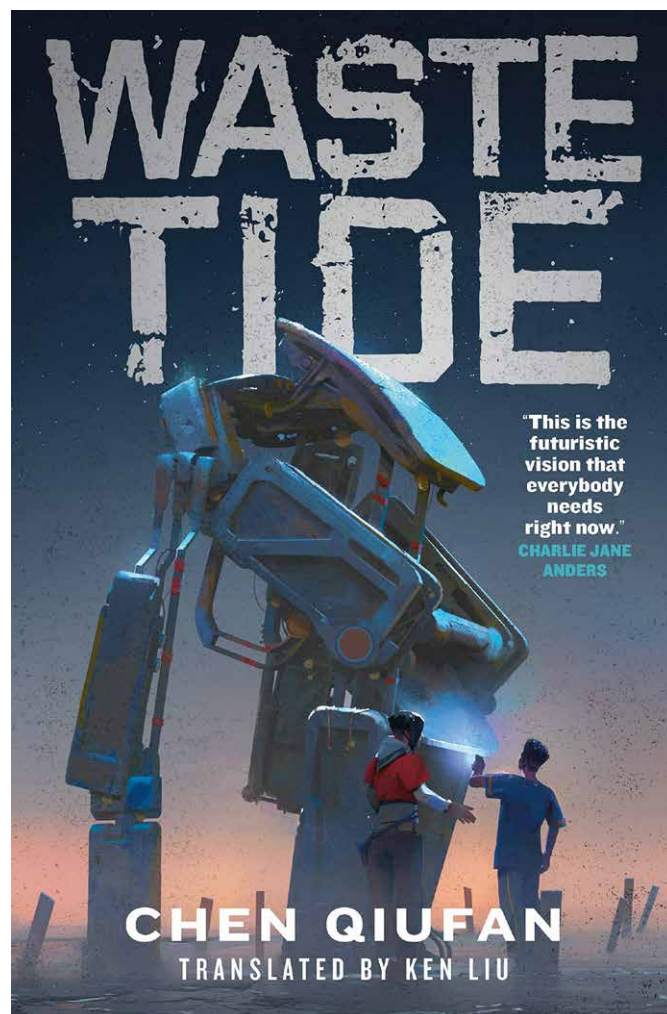
Stanley: I try to stir up the awareness of the truth that all of us are equally as responsible for the grave consequence of mass pollution happening across the globe. In China, the issue escalated during the last four decades along with the high speed of economic growth. We try to live life as Americans, but we have 1.4 billion people. China has already replaced the USA as the largest producer of e-waste simply because we are so after the consumerism ideology. All the trash that China fails to recycle will be transferred to a new trash yard, perhaps somewhere in Southeast Asia, Africa or South America. If we continue to fall into the trap of consumerism and blindly indulge in newer, faster, more expensive industrial products, one day we may face trash that is untransferrable, unavoidable, and unrecyclable. By then, we would all become waste people. Technology might be the cure but fundamentally it's all about the lifestyle, the philosophy and the values we believe in.

M: You've woven together a wonderfully comprehensive tableau. There is an American corporation trying to introduce a new order and technology to Silicon Isle, overseas eco-terrorists executing a stunning intervention, "waste people" processing the poisonous electronics and repurposing them, on the side, into body art and mind-altering hallucinogens, a government eager to keep its waste migrants under its thumb, and local controlling interests operating like the triads of old. Beneath it all, there lies a tale as old as time — one propelled by good old-fashioned greed. Why was it important to tell this story on an international scale? Over the last decade, more often than not, China has been in the shoes of the American corporation in your story, financing infrastructure projects in developing countries all over the world.

WASTE TIDE

"This is the futuristic vision that everybody needs right now."
CHARLIE JANE ANDERS

CHEN QIUFAN
TRANSLATED BY KEN LIU

How best should a wealthier overseas commercial entity or government come into a less affluent market such as the Silicon Isle?

S: Waste is profoundly shaping and changing our society and living. Our daily mundane world always treats the waste, garbage as the hidden structure together with its whole ecosystem beyond our sights. To maintain the glorious outfit of contemporary life. But unfortunately, someone takes advantage from it while others suffer from it (like NIMBY). Just like class distinctions, economic exploitation, international geopolitics in e-waste recycling procedures for example. There is no stand-alone social repertoire lying in the background to be reflected off, expressed through, or substantiated in, interactions. We have to see the reality. So it has to be on an international scale.

You are right and I don't have the clear answer either, it seems to me sustainability and respect for diversity naturally go against the bloodsucking national capitalism whatever you call it.

M: Kaizong and Mimi formed the moral center in *Waste Tide*. Why did you choose a Chinese American and a migrant/waste person — two outsiders — as the heroes of your story? Kaizong's and Mimi's self-sacrifice

and kindness toward their enemies offered hope for the fundamental goodness of people. And yet our waste person was able to make a difference only after the improbable acquisition of god-like powers that later left her with the mental capacity of a three-year-old. Tell us about your idea and the plight of the modern Chinese hero.

S: This is a sharp one. Actually looking back in Chinese history, perhaps there is only one way to achieve social progress and revolution. To be sacrificed with pain, violence (physical, mental as well as power structures), and coercion. There may be a very strong aftermath after the enlightenment. This aftermath may be a schizophrenic existence that switches between different personalities, for it retains the imprint of the old times, both ethically and emotionally.

Also, all heroes eventually become martyrs. Mimi would surely be sacrificed, whether intentionally or unintentionally, because she was the tipping point in the whole systematic change. It seems to me that she couldn't have been able to withstand the tearing tension, so she would have ended up as a victim anyway.

M: Punished by the government for something which was never officially explained, Silicon Isle was forced to operate on restricted bitrate. In an age where the speed of information was everything, the lockdown essentially deprived its inhabitants of a viable future. I love that when Mimi was ready to lead, she summoned Anarchy.Cloud — a freedom-, equality-, and love-embracing server that belonged to no nation, political party, or corporation. It is powerful commentary. What is your view of the job and responsibility of a writer?

S: As a writer, I can only write what I believe in. I want to emphasize the responsibility and the values that science fiction should have through my own writing. I was strongly influenced by the tradition of "literature is the way to carry the Tao," but this practice may be seen by others as "toxic" or too much "propagandizing." The Tao or message itself might be absurd or biased, but this self-awareness of influencing the reader and interfering with reality is critical and unshakable to me.

M: I was very much intrigued by the floating waste islands at the close of *Waste Tide* and the possibility of people living on them. Is this a story idea that you plan to tackle in the future? What is your next project?

S: The waste islands will be the trigger of the sequel, which still awaits in the pipeline.

There are two projects I am working on currently during the COVID-19 lockdown time. One is co-authoring a book entitled *AI:2041* with Dr. Kai-Fu Lee. It's a combination of science fiction and tech prediction about how AI

would change our world in all aspects according to solid research. Another project is my second novel, *A History of Illusion*, set in an alternative history in which the Apollo project failed and the human race turned to psychedelic entertainment, where a young man with designer-drug talent tries to explore the secret truth behind his family. Both might come out in 2021.
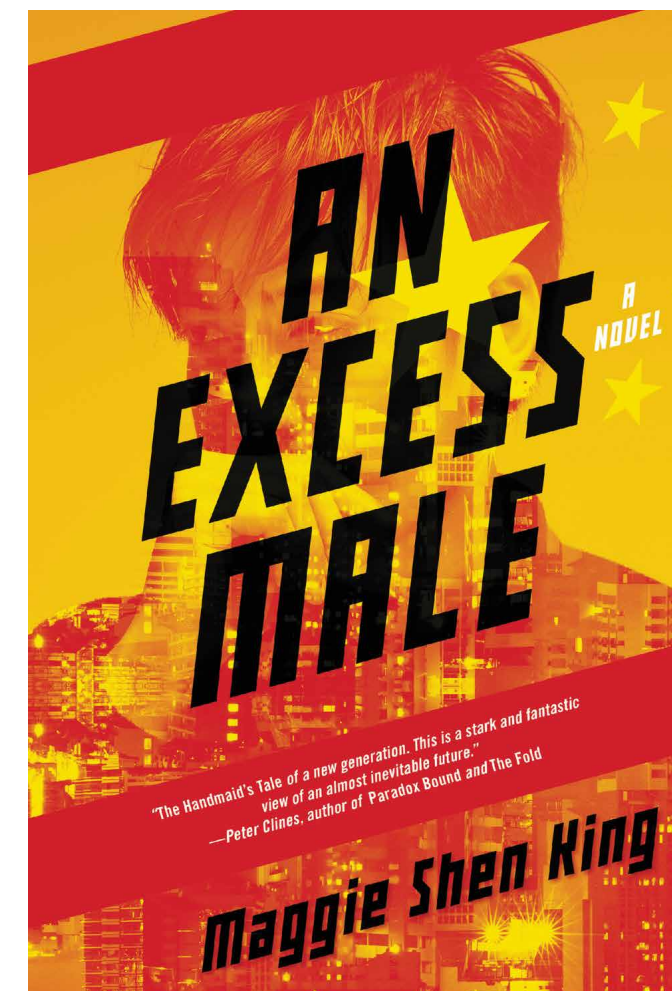
Stanley interviews Maggie

S: In your extraordinary debut novel *An Excess Male*, I felt so connected to my own private Chinese life experience: one-child policy generation, patriarchal social system, homophobic atmosphere, et cetera. Especially in reference to the current debate of the "Calm down period" for divorces and single women fighting for the rights to freeze their eggs. Why would you choose speculative fiction as a genre to address all these complex issues, and how did it help you to extend and amplify your message?

M: As a result of the one-child policy and the cultural preference for sons, China now has 30 million more men than women of marriageable age. This population policy which was initially intended to be a one-generation fix lasted nearly forty years. It became the world's longest lasting and most radical social engineering experiment. For the Western audience, it is difficult to fathom or accept this level of intrusion and violation of one's reproductive rights. Stories of the state's monitorization of individual women's menstrual cycles; forced, late-term abortions; and baby confiscation and kidnapping by the police possess a near dystopian, sci-fi quality. I attempted to recreate that feeling of incredulity and shock in my novel by taking the problem of balancing the gender ratio to one of its logical extremes.

S: Speaking of the characters setting, it seems to me Wei-guo is like an outsider coincidentally stepping into a polyandry family of May-ling, Hann and XX. Where he is the only straight male who can execute the role of reproducing as the government wants everyone to do. This gave him an ambiguous perspective on everything while keeping us guessing what his real stand is. Could you tell us more about how you built up all these relationships, like organic growth or running as a road map? Any moments out of control?

M: Historically, polygamist situations — emperors' courts and wealthy families with multiple wives living under one roof — were rife with power struggle, jealousy, and intrigue. Even the traditional multi-generational Chinese household often had a difficult time escaping

AN EXCESS MALE
A NOVEL

"The Handmaid's Tale of a new generation. This is a stark and fantastic view of an almost inevitable future."
—Peter Clines, author of Paradox Bound and The Fold

Maggie Shen King

that dynamic. In my novel, I wanted to subvert that expectation. On the surface, it appeared that by marrying into a household alliance of two brothers sharing a wife, my excess male protagonist would be at a disadvantage in addition to being the lowest man in the social strata. He would discover, however, that even with the deep abiding love in that family, neither brother cared to be truly in the marriage. My protagonist would come to provide the glue that held this problematic family together. The conflict within this strong family could be resolved with love and respect, whereas their difficulty with a State that necessitated their situation would prove much more difficult to reconcile.

This book started from a short story which later became most of the first chapter. I wrote this book without a road map, so yes, I felt more often than not out of control. The novel started out as a family drama. The governing question was whether my excess male would marry into this household. My writing group kept encouraging me to show the world outside. My excess male protagonist was already involved in simulated war games, but it wasn't until I added his scene with its

governing board at the Ministry of Defense in the first chapter that I felt the stakes heighten and change for the entire book.

S: It really interests me that you create the live-action military role playing games to keep 30 million excess males busy. Which reminds me of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, you can barely see a female Fight Club member there. Does that implicitly express the assumption that males, in any time and cultural context, are incapable of handling their extra energy or libido correctly or internally that might ultimately lead to violence and self-destruction?

M: I tried to present two opposing views on this issue in my novel. The State perceived the 30 million excess men as a highly problematic source of societal dissatisfaction and disorder. Any organized activity involving this crowd — especially their simulated war games — was a potential threat that needed to be carefully managed and controlled.

From the perspective of my excess male and his fellow participants, Strategic Games was more akin to wilderness survival training, a chance to exercise and learn about the great outdoors. Strategic Games was a self-governing group organized by the unmarried men to provide recreation, emotional support, a sense of belonging, and a framework to help them stay positive as they wait for a turn at marriage that may not come. When given a chance, these men opted for community, optimism, and order.

It was an uneasy détente. Trouble arose in my book when the State overstepped and tried to cull the Strategic Games ranks by demanding that teams meet a 5% mental health quota and cut those "unstable" members.

S: I believe you must've been asked many times about the comparison between your book and *The Handmaid's Tale*. I can't help but ask more about how you think the Confucian belief system plays a role in your story, while leading to a totalitarian, patriarchal future similar to Gilead? Any possibilities we can avoid that from happening?

M: Filial piety to one's parents, loyalty to one's country, and hierarchy as the way to establish social order certainly play a part in my book. The individual's urge to conform and a reticence to challenge authority are some of the fundamental building blocks of Chinese society. The rise of totalitarian patriarchy in my book, however, required much more than Confucian beliefs. It needed a State with a chokehold on its populace.

Totalitarianism regimes count on the tacit consent of the masses. It is vital that we do not submit quietly. Civil resistance and persistent non-violent group action are

essential. Decentralized leadership in local communities, free elections, a multi-party political system, and a government with built-in checks and balances are some preventative measures.

S: It feels to me like we are both issue-driven storytellers. Which means we need to balance the key messages, plots and characters in a very subtle way. Try very hard not to voice-over too much on preaching ideologies. Tell us the best and worst part when writing your first novel? What are you working on right now and next?

M: I agree. With issue-driven stories like ours, it works best to dramatize conflict, to let characters and situations present moral dilemmas, and allow readers to come to their own conclusions.

For me, the best part of writing is stumbling upon a strong idea and puzzling together the myriad and often far-flung story elements. When everything fits well, the story takes on a life of its own. I'm a slow writer, and the hardest part can be the day-to-day of it when the writing is not coming easily. I'm not one of those who can formulate big chunks of work in my head. The challenge for me is to show up regularly, fingers on keyboard, and persist when it is difficult.

I'm in the process right now of revising the draft of my next book. The story is based on another unintended consequence of the one-child policy — the thirteen million girls who were born illegally and could not be registered. Often second children or illegitimate, these girls do not have the right to schooling, medical care, or work. Set in modern-day China, my new novel tells the story of a multigenerational family that in asserting its reproductive rights chose to defy its government. It is also the story of a young woman's discovery of selfhood and political power under a State that refused to recognize her existence.

MAGGIE SHEN KING IS THE AUTHOR OF AN EXCESS MALE, ONE OF THE WASHINGTON POST'S 5 BEST SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY NOVELS OF 2017, AND A JAMES TIPTREE JR. AND LAMBDA LITERARY AWARD FINALIST. HER SHORT FICTION HAS APPEARED IN NEW YORK TIMES, ECOTONE, ZYZZYVA, ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION, AND ELSEWHERE.

CHEN QIUFAN (STANLEY CHAN) IS THE AUTHOR OF THE NOVEL WASTE TIDE. HIS AWARD-WINNING SHORT FICTION HAS BEEN TRANSLATED INTO MANY LANGUAGES, AND APPEARS IN ENGLISH IN F&SF, MIT TECHNOLOGY REVIEW, CLARKESWORLD, YEAR'S BEST SF, INTERZONE, LIGHTSPEED, AND ELSEWHERE.

SF Fandom in China

Feng Zhang

Chinese science fiction has gained tremendous attention in China and all over the world lately and with it, there is a fast growing body of science fiction fans across the country. This article sets to briefly introduce the recent developments of SF fandom in China, focusing on fans of SF literature, with little mention of the much larger fandom of popular media (Star Wars, Marvel universe, Doctor Who, etc.). It is worthwhile to note that the line between fannish and professional activities in the field is blurring, as there is more and more input from the private capital and government.

Organizations

The World Chinese Science Fiction Association (CSFA) was founded in 2010, as a central hub for SF-related professionals and fans. It can be seen as the counterpart of US's SFWA or Japan's SFWJ in China, only CSFA is more loosely organized. One of CSFA's major missions

Fan Art: A Three Body tribute using Minecraft

is to administer the Xingyun Awards for Global Chinese Science Fiction (sometimes referred to as the Chinese Nebula Awards, weibo.com/xingyunjiang), now the most prestigious award in the Chinese SF community. Every year, Xingyun Awards are presented in a ceremony, held during a weekend in the second half of the year.

There are some local SF organizations in different regions or cities too, e.g. Shanghai Pudong New District Science Fiction Association (shpdsfa.com), and Sichuan Science Fiction Association. Many of these organizations are registered and supported by local governments, serving as linkages between the private and public sectors.

Fan-centered organizations do still exist both in the physical and virtual spaces. A prominent example is SF Applecore (applecore.cc) in Shanghai, which gathers SF fans in and outside of colleges in this mega-city and frequently organizes off-line activities like readings, gatherings, festivals, and workshops. Regina Kanyu Wang was one of the founders of SF Applecore.

Speaking of fans in colleges, we must tell you that a large amount of small SF societies in colleges united to form a union called *SF in College* (weibo.com/SFCU01; wechat: gaoxiaokehuan), which is very active in promoting SF among college students and organizing a variety of activities for student fans (e.g. SF writing competitions, online writer workshops, etc.).

Another noteworthy trend is that new start-up ventures dedicated to SF culture were launched by die-hard fans, with help from investors. A notable example is the well-known Future Affairs Administration (FAA), which originated from a small group of fans who initiated the bid for a Beijing Worldcon back in 2014.

Conventions

A distinctive phenomenon regarding SF fandom in China is that SF conventions emerged as the core platform of both fan culture and industry development. Compared with ten years ago when there was no such convention at all, nowadays about four to five national SF conventions take place regularly each year, including China SF Convention, Xingyun Awards Weekend, Another Planet SF Convention, and Chengdu International SF Conference, to name a few.

Since 2010, a few hundred SF professionals and fans have gathered to attend the Xingyun award ceremony and other activities during Xingyun Awards Weekend each year. The event has been held in multiple cities across the country, i.e. Chengdu, Beijing, Taiyuan, and Chongqing. China SF Convention is organized by China Association for Science and Technology (CAST), which is the largest non-profit, non-governmental organization for Chinese scientists and engineers. The first China SF Convention was held in 2016, representing the interest in promoting science fiction from the central government perspective. Two international SF conferences were held in Chengdu in 2017 and 2019 respectively, with Chengdu municipal government as the major organizer. In the 2019 conference, Chengdu was named the "Science Fiction City" of China. Organized by FAA, Another Planet SF Convention (APSFCon, apsfcon.com) is a more fan-oriented event as less governmental input is involved.

The aforementioned conventions learn from the Worldcon model and consist of activities like forums, panels, workshops, markets, art exhibitions, film screenings, etc. In Dublin 2019, Chengdu officially announced its bid for the 2023 Worldcon (worldconinchina.com/). The experience in the past years of organizing SF events is likely a positive factor in the bidding.

Cultures

There used to be influential SF fanzines in the community such as *Nebula* (1988-2007)[1] and *New Realms of Fantasy* and Science Fiction (2009-2013)[2]. In the past decade, new fanzines appeared one after another, e.g. *New Dust SF*, and *SF Bi-monthly Magazine*. Many newly-launched fanzines chose to utilize Tencent's Wechat platform and became so-called We-media. Notable ones include *Nebula SF Review* (weibo.com/u/7478464036 wechat: NebulaSFReview), *SF Encyclopedia* (wechat: scifiwiki), and *SF Post Office*. Since more professional or semi-professional markets were established as outlets for fiction writers, these new SF fanzines tend to be focused on non-fiction content.

The wildly popular Three-Body Trilogy (Remembrance of Earth's Past trilogy in English publications) led to a big "San-ti" fan base and catalyzed the formation of so-called "San-ti culture." Fan-fictions, fan films, fan music and fan art were produced continuously by "San-ti fans," expanding the universe of the Three-Body Trilogy. The

fan-fiction by Bao Shu, titled *The Redemption of Time*, was officially published and became semi-canonical. A short film, *Waterdrop*, adapted from a small scene of *Dark Forest* by a student, was highly praised by Liu Cixin. The Minecraft-style animated series, *My Three-Body*, was started by a group of young fans in 2015. Later, the production team was sponsored by the company who owns the adaptation rights to make the highly-acclaimed Season 3. San-ti fans kept amazing people with their creativity and enthusiasm.

A recent notable example showcasing the community efforts of Chinese SF fans is the Chinese Science Fiction Database (CSFDB, csfdb.scifi-wiki.com/), which catalogs all kinds of works of science fiction in Chinese. The database is created and administered by a group of voluntary fans and provides a wealth of resources for researchers and fans who are interested in Chinese SF.

Closing Remarks

Chinese SF fandom has always been active in the history of Chinese science fiction. As a matter of fact, a considerable part of Chinese SF history was made by fans, since very few figures in the field could be called professionals even just ten years ago. With more input from the private and public sectors, SF fans are creating a rich and diverse SF culture that entertains and attracts a lot of audiences. Moreover, many of them turned into professionals in pursuing their interests. Hopefully, it paves the way for a brighter future for the genre in the country.

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1   Nebula SF Review (weibo): weibo.com/u/7478464036 wechat: NebulaSFReview
2   New Realms of Fantasy and Science Fiction: blog.sina. com.cn/s/blog_6043c94c0102evjx.html

Shanghai Fortress and the Sino-future

Dev Agarwal

To state that art does not exist in a vacuum is to loosely paraphrase the late filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky. That in turn leads to his further observation that "the artist exists because the world is not perfect."

China is home to the largest film production economy in the world, surpassing Hollywood as well as the juggernauts of India and Nigeria. In 2012, it was the second-largest market in the world by box office receipts. It has had the largest number of screens in the world since 2016, and in 2020, it became the largest market. CNN reports that Chinese cinemas brought in $3.1 billion at the box office in 2020, nearly $1 billion more than the United States did that year.

China has also become a major hub of business for Hollywood studios, encouraging their entry into its domestic market. Yet it is interesting to note that at the same time, in 2016, China passed a law banning film content deemed harmful to the "dignity, honour and interests" of the People's Republic, and encouraging the promotion of Chinese "socialist core values."

Discussing China's film business (and its science fiction output as a subset thereof) is not purely an economic matter, as to discuss any facet of China's art is also to discuss the confluence of one of the world's five remaining self-described communist states, the world's most populous country, and a nation that may become our newest superpower. As Tarkovsky said, there is no vacuum.

The multi-media artist Lawrence Lek observes that "Sinofuturism is an invisible movement. A spectre already embedded into a trillion industrial products, a billion individuals, and a million veiled narratives. It is a movement not based on individuals, but on multiple overlapping flows ... Because Sinofuturism has arisen without conscious intention or authorship, it is often mistaken for contemporary China. But it is not. It is a science fiction that already exists."

Sinofuturism is with us, through a wide array of products, individuals and narratives. As a movement it has reached the point where commercial cinema has paid it attention and invested in it, bringing to Netflix *The Wandering Earth* (2019, Frant Gwo). This was a big SF spectacular, with a suitably cosmic story of moving the

earth to safety past Jupiter on its way to the star Alpha Centauri, as our sun turned inhospitable to life. The film was successful both at the box office (posting $700 million in receipts worldwide) and with critics.

A core theme of *The Wandering Earth* is sacrifice. The global population has died *en masse*, and a big problem (the sun is turning into a red giant in three hundred years rather than in its projected five billion years) is solved with a big solution — moving the planet all the way to a new star. *The Wandering Earth*, therefore, works on a big scale both in terms of the disaster — it's planet-wide — and of the loss that's occurred in the backstory. The solution is not about calling on actors to work individually, rather, the characters are representatives of the Chinese state and function obediently within it.

As with many SF disaster films like *Deep Impact* (1998, Mimi Leder) and *Armageddon* (1998, Michael Bay) to name just two, personal sacrifice for humanity and family are also emphasised in *The Wandering Earth*. However, *The Wandering Earth* embraces that Trekkian theme of the needs of the many outweighing the needs of the few with a particular flavour. In those earlier Hollywood films, survival is dependent on idiosyncratic and highly individualised characters who buck conventional norms to strike out on their own (the roughneck oil drillers of *Armageddon* are seen with a list of demands to the US government, including never paying tax again — ever). In *The Wandering Earth*, the world has come together under a single leadership, the United Earth Government, and the protagonists are willing agents of it.

The success of *The Wandering Earth* invigorated China's cinematic reach and led them to make a similarly big SF film, *Shanghai Fortress* (2019, Teng Huatao). *Shanghai Fortress* was, according to the website Jayne Stars, "meant to be China's next mega sci-fi production."

This was designed as a big-budget production with "eyeball kicks" and pyrotechnic action. Unfortunately, it ended up with the feel of a film made by committee and with the objectives of spectacle first and storytelling second. In this case, the film was concerned with war, with the city of Shanghai imagined as the final line of defence for humanity against an invading alien race.

Earlier success of *The Wandering Earth* bred confidence (soon overconfidence) that found *Shanghai Fortress* a budget of 400 million yuan ($61 million). However, it only took back 74 million yuan ($11.5 million) at its opening. In terms of reviews, these were quickly negative.

So while a commercial and critical failure, is the film any good? And what does it say more widely about Sinofuturism or science fiction culture?

The film follows some familiar pathways of an emergent pop culture flexing itself on the world stage. Shanghai is the centre of the story, which puts the narrative of Earth versus the aliens firmly in Asia, for a change. While it's nominally a United Nations base, the dominant actors are ethnically Chinese.

Notwithstanding one or two key moments of heroism from Lu Yiyi (Sun Jialing) and Lin Lan (Shu Qi), it is also a story dominated by men. Foregrounding men in an action film is, of course, de rigueur, but what is more unusual for Western eyes is that the leading man Jiang Yang (Lu Han) defies contemporary Western sensibilities of a typical action hero (none of the steroid facilitated bulk and over-defined physicality of Chris Pratt or Chris Hemsworth). This is actually refreshing and indicates that there are other aesthetic ways to perceive a leading man.

The narrative appears to assume that Chinese audiences will respond more enthusiastically to a story of great sacrifice as a nation, and that Earth (as a surrogate for China) will rebound from that sacrifice anew. In this sense, there is none of the cynicism about big govern-ment that we saw in either *Deep Impact* (which begins with exposing the government for hiding the impending extinction-level event) or *Armageddon*, where the mission to the asteroid is run by men who are not obedient to the government and are specifically encouraging each other to resist the government's control. *Shanghai Fortress's* version of Sinofuturism is perhaps closer to a type of film of years gone by, of Soviet Cinema and films glorifying the Red Army and its sacrifices in World War 2.

In Hollywood, the action movie staple is that the government is too big and often part of the problem. Individuals, striking out alone, or in small groups, are what achieves results. It is more of a challenge narratively to present collective action dramatically rather than focus-ing attention on individuals. This may have been a factor in the success of *The Wandering Earth* compared to *Shanghai Fortress*, i.e. the degree to which the former film was able to craft a visual rhetoric that complimented this more complex narrative, compared to the more dissatisfying *Shanghai Fortress*.

In terms of aesthetics, while not necessarily Sinofu-turist, the film foregrounds the ongoing debate around conceptual spaces. All spaces in film are conceptual in that they are imagined, or reimagined. Even when a camera is filming an actual location, the act of captur-ing it within the space of the camera's framing leads to inevitable manipulation and altering of reality (the place itself is represented narrowly and partially through the cropping of the camera's image). Actual locations are three dimensional and engage all of our senses, while film is (usually) two dimensional and operates on an audio-visual sensory level. Then how we appreciate the filmed experience distances us further as we see the location outside of its normal setting, either in a cinema or before a television or laptop (and the actual becomes conceptual as it is manipulated by the director, the cinematographer, and through CGI).

An extra layer, particularly in big-budget films and in science fiction, is in the use of green screens to radi-cally alter perceived reality. Reality, therefore, becomes what the filmmaker chooses and what they can afford. In this way, we are only permitted to see the world of *Shanghai Fortress* as far as Teng Huatao permits it. His directorial decisions were to show us a heavily industri-alised world denuded of nature. This is nothing new in a post-apocalyptic action film but possibly mines several deeper cultural truths.

One is the Chinese state government's relation-ship to its own environment. China has not only gone through rapid industrialisation in the last fifty years but also a consequent growth in the size and number of its cities. While this has benefitted significant numbers of the population, it has also led to a substantial demand for consumer goods, private vehicles and energy use. This in turn has damaged China's natural environment and led to pollution, increased use of fossil fuels, and poisonous air quality. As this cycle is perceived by some as essential to the increase in the standard of living in China and the increase in its global prestige, it is accepted as a price worth paying. Here, science fiction may play a propaganda role, as both escapism and as a way of imagining the future, where nature has been appropriately conquered for the wider benefit of the state. (It should be noted that a counternarrative is also developing in China, as in other industrial nations, and China has pledged to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2060).

The curator of Norient Space, Philipp Rhensius, in reflecting on Lawrence Lek's work on Sinofuturism, comments that it shows us "what's left when humans are gone: a world inhabited by data cables, server farms, robots, games, and a few humans who are either pitiful characters or catatonic creatures wearing VR headsets."

While *Shanghai Fortress* does not go to this final extreme in its depiction of the future, it adheres to similar principles. Teng Huatao imagines a world of industrial spaces and little physical nature. This is because of the alien threat rather than the willing destruction of the environment by the state (just as in the more success-ful *The Wandering Earth* where the world was an icy wasteland due to the sun's red giant status rather than failings by humanity to preserve our habitat). A narrative mirror to *Shanghai Fortress's* denuded environment is that the characters have sterile and isolated relationships, devoid of explicit physicality. At one point the two main protagonists exchange a love token. Appropriately, this is a flower, but it's made of plastic. This is perhaps the ultimate example of the natural world supplanted by the artificial.

In terms of structure and plot, the film does not take risks and follows as linear and predictable a path as you might expect from any Hollywood alien invasion story. Sinofuturism intrudes, narratively speaking, only in terms of characterisation. The characters function within the story like the Terracotta Army in that Lu Han's character, Jiang Yang, is an obedient soldier, who does what he's told. This could not be more different from any given Hollywood character who identifies as a maverick, or highly individualistic, and "goes rogue." Instead, Jiang Yang and his colleagues work together, adhering to collective values to protect the last city, the Chinese nation, and thus all of humanity.

Bringing all of these thoughts together, *Shanghai Fortress* is ultimately an artistic failure. It is uninspiring and fails to hit the right notes. It does not vividly depict human-ity under stress in a drama. It also does not work at the level of glossy surfaces and the spectacle of pyrotechnic action, as it remains unengaging on that level as well. *Shanghai Fortress* appeared to confidently seek to fill the space opened up by *The Wandering Earth*, and show Hollywood how a Chinese studio could compete on their terms. However, not only did *Shanghai Fortress* fail to do that in Hollywood, it failed at home and left Chinese audiences dissatisfied (to the point that its creator had to make public apologies for it — a performative penance that we're unlikely to see directors put through in the West). However, while a failure at the box office and with critics, the film arguably has something to say about the forces at play in shaping escapist, state-sanctioned Chinese SF. But the film itself remains the very thing to avoid using, to make sweeping observations about Sino-futurism. *Shanghai Fortress* is ultimately the shallowest of shallow dives into science fiction.

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Uyghur Folklore

Sandra Unerman

Uyghur Folklore & Legend, compiled by Abela Publishing, 2009.

The Effendi and the Pregnant Pot, Uyghur Folktales from China, translated by Primerose Gigliesi and Robert C. Friend, New World Press, 1982.

These books both contain collections of Uyghur folktales. Both have their limitations but it is very difficult to find translations of any speculative fiction from the Uyghur community in China. Some basic information about Uyghur history can be found in a few references in *The Silk Roads* by Peter Frankopan (Bloomsbury, 2015). These outline Uyghur origins in Central Asia, their role during the Mongol Empire and their current position in Xinjiang province, but that is all. I know very little about the culture of the Uyghurs, so I hoped to learn something about them from these books.

A young man will only go near his bride in the dark and leaves the house before she can see him by daylight. But this is not the story of Cupid and Psyche and the resolution owes more to the man's cleverness than an ordeal undergone by the woman.

A sheep and her lamb travel from a valley in Tibet to a high plateau for 'the summer grass. On the way, they meet' a wolf, who wants to eat them both. The sheep persuades him to wait until they are on their way back down, when they will be much fatter. They return according to their promise but trick the wolf, with the help of a hare, who pretends to be on a mission from the Emperor of China to collect wolfskins.

These examples indicate the range of stories in the 2009 collection and their similarity to folktales from other cultures across the world. There are fifty-eight entries, although some are variants of the same basic tale. The book's title is somewhat misleading, in that no information is provided about folk customs or legends in the sense of tales about specific places or figures from history. The names of storytellers are given and dates, ranging from the 1870s to the 1920s, so presumably these were oral tales, written down by folktale collectors during that period. However, we are given no informa-

tion about who the collectors were, the circumstances of collecting or the basis of selection of these particular tales. No editor or translator is identified. The similarities between these tales and those from elsewhere may result from universal human responses, the influence of the collectors or from long-standing historical connections among the people who told the tales. No introduction could have disentangled those strands completely but background information could have helped the reader understand the context and the kind of community to which the stories belong.

The stories do read as versions authentically collected from oral sources, rather than polished up for literary purposes. This can be seen from the gaps and flaws in some of them. In the first, a fox brings grass for a lamb to eat and is betrayed by a wolf, on whom she takes revenge. It looks as though the fox has taken over the role which ought to belong to a sheep, at least in the opening action. Some of the references are difficult to understand, without further information, especially the figure of the 'pyhrqan,' who appears in several tales. This is translated in a footnote as 'monk' but the stories suggest a being with supernatural powers.

The narratives have the terse, direct strength of oral tales. The descriptions of settings are minimal but the background of sheep pastures and mountains evoke a landscape of open spaces and long journeys. A hare plays the trickster in several of the animal fables, reflecting the role of the hare as a significant mythological figure in many cultures, as discussed in Marianne Taylor's *The Way of the Hare* (Bloomsbury, 2017). Other stories, set in villages or towns, provide glimpses of the daily life of ordinary people and their concerns, about family relationships, making a living and oppression by the powerful. They are set in what might be described as a timeless past, with a social and religious framework that appears to draw on more than one tradition.

Oppression of the workers by the powerful is the theme of the stories in the 1982 collection, which all feature Nasreddin, the Effendi of the title. As the translators explain in their introduction, he is a legendary figure widely known in traditions from Turkey, North Africa and

Asia. They say that stories about him have spread from the Uyghur community to become popular throughout China. They are not themselves folklore collectors, so their versions of the tales are not directly taken from Uyghur oral tradition. Their translation is made from Chinese and was published in Beijing.
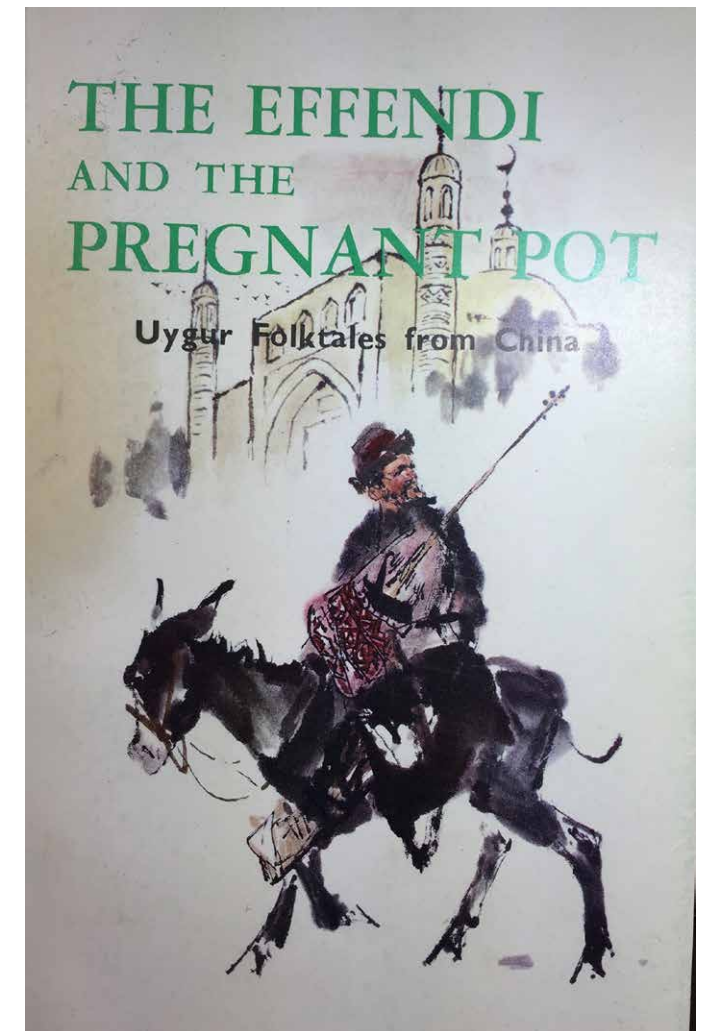
The translators claim explicitly that the Nasreddin stories can help to create a new, socialist culture, because they highlight the abuses of rulers, together with the humour and wisdom of the poor. The sixty-five brief stories in their collection reflect these ideas accordingly. Like those in the 2009 collection, they are set in a timeless past but with a social structure more specifically focused on Moslem traditions. In most, the effendi gets the better of an important official, who attempts to insult or bully him. In one typical example, the padishah (the ruler) blames Nasreddin, who has accurately predicted the death of his prime minister. He threatens Nasreddin with death, unless he can say how long the padishah himself will live. The reply is that the padishah will live two days longer than Nasreddin, who is released as a result.

These stories are more polished than those in the 2009 collection and put more emphasis on urban life, although sheep and wolves do appear in several tales. They reflect one strand of the wider tradition about Nasreddin. However, he is a more complex figure than is expressed here, someone who can be stupid as well as clever and whose exploits are not always directed against the ruling classes. (His relationship to the traditional figure of the fool or jester is outlined in Enid Welsford's *The Fool, a social and literary history* [Faber & Faber, 1935]). By reducing his ambiguity, this book flattens his character and reduces the implications of the stories to a single, basic message, although that is expressed with humour.

Taken together, these two collections give an impression of one historical aspect of Uyghur culture, as it shares folk traditions from elsewhere. Both are readable and lively but tell us very little about that community today.

THE EFFENDI AND THE PREGNANT POT
Uygur Folktales from China

Visit to a Prison

One day the padishah took the effendi with him on a visit to the prison. "What crime did you commit?" the padishah asked the prisoners.

"None!" yelled the men in unison.

The padisha began questioning each by turn and, it seemed, there was only one guilty person among them.

"Protector of the Universe," the effendi said to the padisha, "please order this man kicked out of here at once! How could he have gotten himself into this place? It is inadmissible that there are people like him in your prison!"

— *The Effendi and The Pregnant Pot, 1982.*

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Conversation with Gordon Cheung

Dan Byrne-Smith

Born in London to Chinese parents, Gordon Cheung is an artist who will, whenever possible, talk to people who want to know more about his work. I'm very grateful for all of the occasions when he has given his time to discuss his work with me, conversations which often turn to the topic of science fiction. This interview took place on 4th March 2020, as the impact of COVID-19 was beginning to be recognised in the UK, as the streets of central London started to look very quiet, and elbow bumps had replaced handshakes as the acceptable greeting among friends. Before the interview, we discussed COVID-19 and the strange sense of fear that was taking hold. We talked about whether perhaps there was a sense of xenophobia attached to it, relating specifically to China.

The context of the interview was his exhibition 'Tears of Paradise,' held at Edel Assanti Gallery in London from 17th January to 18th March 2020. The interview was a chance to explore Cheung's fascination with science fiction, the ways in which his practice becomes a lens through which to view some extreme conditions of modernity, and the nature of his work as a series of speculative forms. It was also a chance to talk about these interests in the context of an exhibition that very much looked towards China. The show was presented as a reflection on the continuing emergence of China as a global superpower, an act of witnessing which looks towards futurity as well as to historical narratives, such as the Opium Wars. The five paintings in the exhibition offered aerial views of landscapes, equal part actual and prophetic. These relate to sites of infrastructure projects on an enormous scale. Using a combination of methods, including paint and hardened sand, floating cities coexist with the proposed outlines of new urban realities. These paintings shared the gallery with *Home*, a sculptural installation made using bamboo and paper from the Financial Times. These sculptures, suspended from the gallery ceiling, were recreated forms of traditional Chinese windows, evoking homes demolished as part of the ongoing process of rapid urbanisation.

Since graduating from the Royal College of Art in 2001, Gordon Cheung has built a practice around painting, while sometimes making use of sculpture, video and elements of installation. He is best known for his paintings, often large in scale, created on a paper laminate surface made up from stock listings cut from the Financial Times. His 2009 exhibition 'The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse' brought together these elements to create a hallucinatory overview of the present, through evocations of both histories and futures. The exhibition demonstrated the extent to which Cheung's work had become a visual practice of cognitive estrangement. There is not just a demonstration of an interest in science fiction but rather the construction of a science fictional set of operations manifested in a body of extraordinarily rendered imagery, offering a contested arrangement of the future in a form that demands engagement.

Cheung's work beguiles and seduces, alluding to the terror of the sublime while exploiting the seductive potential of images and surfaces. He is captivated by the ongoing history of the twenty-first century. Earlier work was preoccupied with his own memories of the promise of a technological revolution, a future that was never to arrive. The hopeful things to come, both social and technological, that Cheung was once led to believe in have been superseded by wave after wave of catastrophe, played out as forces of global capitalism, perpetual conflict, and environmental destruction. Within Cheung's work, the apocalypse is happening right now.

The thematic and symbolic territory has moved on since Cheung's 'Four Horsemen' exhibition over a decade ago. For some time he developed something of an obsession with tulips, both as a trope of Western painting and as the embodiment of the first speculative economic bubble. As evidenced in the exhibition 'Tears of Paradise,' his practice in recent years has increasingly looked at imagery and narratives derived from his fascination with China as global superpower.
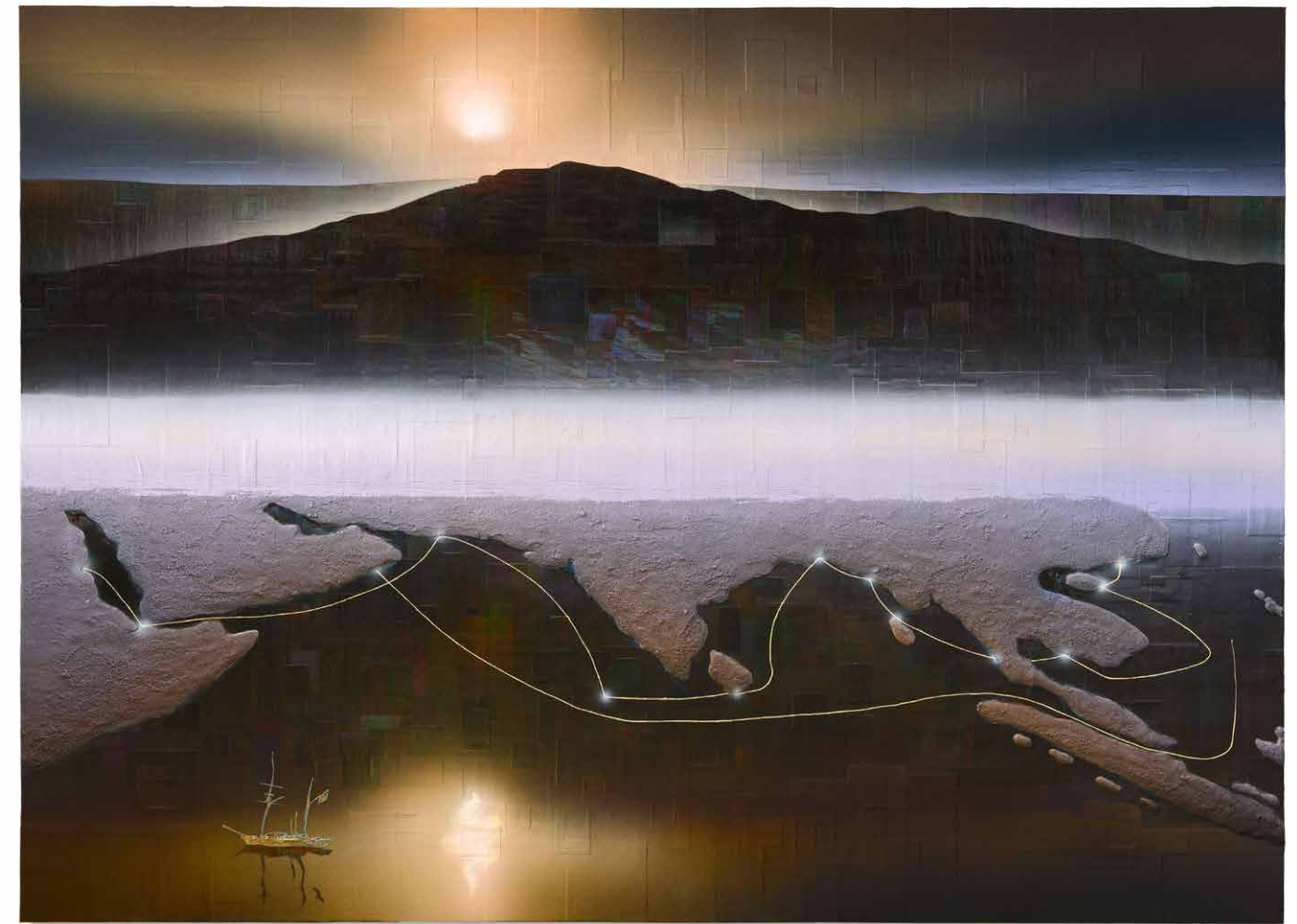
Gordon Cheung, *String of Pearls*, courtesy of Edel Assanti gallery, 2020

DS: Thank you for agreeing to do this interview Gordon. Something that has always struck me about what you do, in relation to my interest in science fiction, is that rather than make use of genre elements, to make science fiction a theme or a topic, your work actually operates as a kind of science fiction. Another way of looking at this is that you've developed an approach to practice where you use science fiction as a lens through which to see the world. I don't want to reduce your work to being one thing in particular but I've always thought that this was an important dimension to your work, or a way to think about what you do.

I wanted to begin exploring this by going back in time to something that you have said, where you've talked about your own expectations about technology and a modernity to come. This relates to how you were thinking at an earlier time in your life, particularly when you were an art student, looking ahead to the end of the century.

GC: When I was first at art school, it was during a time that was a digital and communications revolution. Both the internet and the mobile phone were becoming more available. There was an emerging language of terms, like globalisation, global villages, the information superhighway, digital frontiers, all these utopic terms, experienced as a kind of euphoria with talk of borders and boundaries coming down. There was going to be this new world, in which technology would enable us to connect like never before. As a result, we'd all hold hands, sing songs together, and be happy. Then there was the tech stock crash, the dot-com bubble bursting and the millennium bug. This was a very odd situation or phenomenon. We believed in the West that computers were going to explode in our faces and that airplanes were going to drop out of the sky. It was only in China, I believe, that this hysteria did not catch on. China seemed to keep everything going, looking at us and asking 'what are you guys doing?' We were all being told to download a security patch to fix everything, as the computers didn't understand the date change and were going to overheat and explode. This of course never happened.

DS: It seemed like a lot of companies and institutions had to hire specialists to essentially future proof their systems against this flaw. Without this intervention, everything would crash, the whole operation would cease.
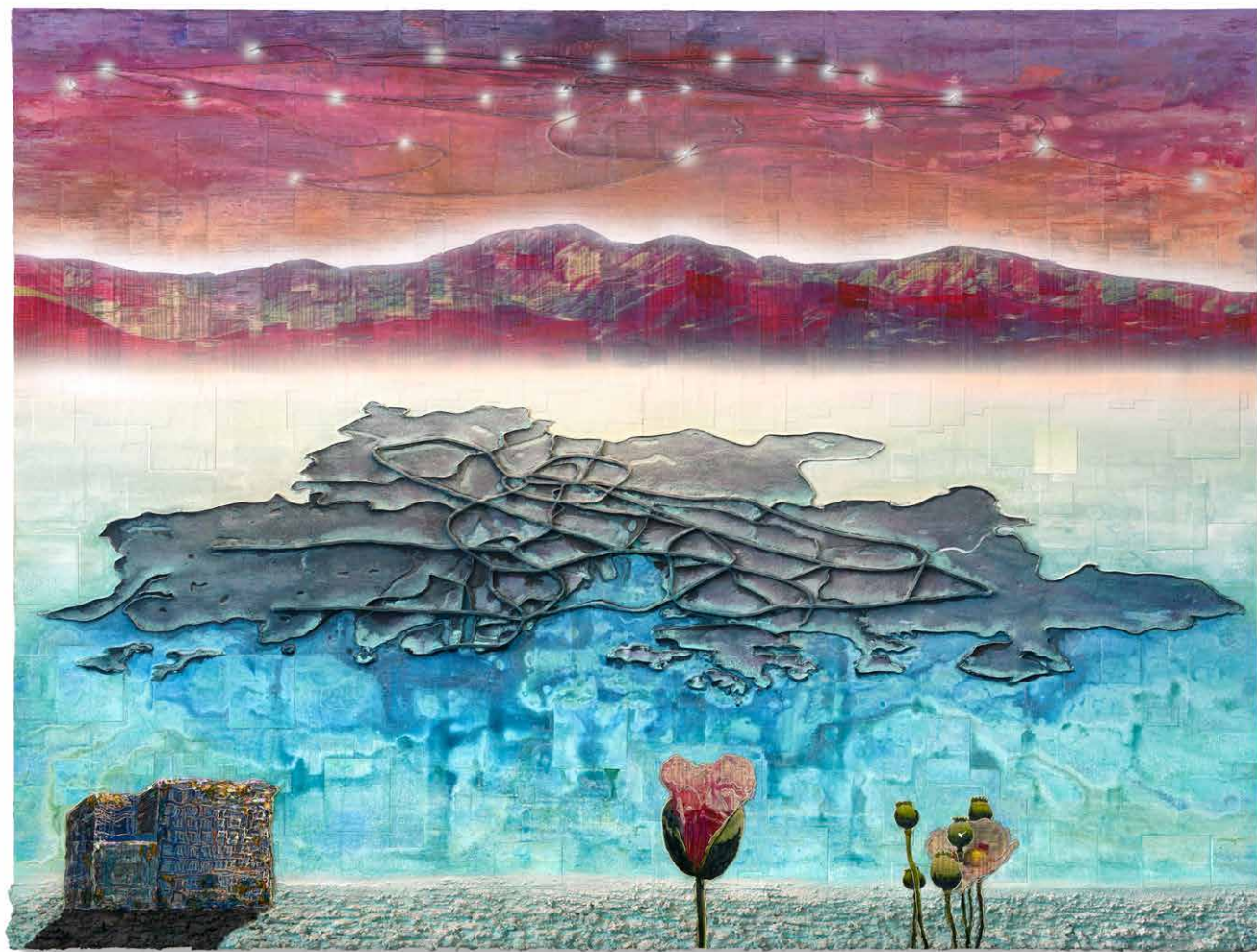
Gordon Cheung, Tears of Paradise, courtesy of Edel Assanti gallery, 2020

Gordon Cheung, Megapolis, courtesy of Edel Assanti gallery, 2020

GC: Almost like a techno-snake-oil scam. Somewhere, someone made multiple millions from this.

DS: So, how did you feel, before the millennium bug and the tech stock crash, about all these promises, the information superhighway and so on?

GC: I was very excited. It spoke to my love for the futuristic and for science fiction. I'd always loved those things. I'd long since been drawn to realms of imagination that were embodied by things like Star Wars. As a child I'd draw space battles and that kind of thing.

DS: It seems pertinent that you'd feel a sense of excitement in the 90s. If you look at the history of Western imaginaries and narratives, it looks like the idea of a future grinds to a halt in the late 1960s and early 1970s, around the time that humans land on the Moon. It is easy to look back at that time as feeling like the end of the future, that projections about progress, about human civilisation being fundamentally transformed in a positive way by technology, had all ended. You can look back and see

a slowing down of ideas around futurity, a reduction of these ideas to almost nothing, or at least nothing positive. This is a massive generalisation of course, but there is then this moment of technological promise in the 90s that is an important reappearance of a supposedly positive futurity in a Western context.

GC: I guess, maybe post-post space race, I hadn't thought of it in that way. There were so many facets to the science fiction that I've enjoyed and the kinds of ideas that were addressed. A lot of the science fiction that I digested was concerned with the Cold War and the Red Menace. Then there were things like *The Terminator* and *Blade Runner*, films that were dystopic, raising questions about what it was to be a human being, relationships between us and technology. Reacting at art school to the euphoria around technology while digesting these dark and dystopic fictions perhaps is an indicator of my personality or something, but I'm actually a lot more optimistic about what technology can enable us to do. So it was shocking to experience the Millenium Bug, that we went into the millennium, which was supposed to herald a future for all us, cowering under a security patch to

protect us from exploding computers. You couldn't make this up. If you'd taken this script to Hollywood, you would have been told that it would never ever happen. The year 2001 was overshadowed by the events of 9/11 but we also saw the first too big to fail companies, WorldCom and Enron, suffer and collapse at that time. These institutions were revealed as these kinds of Ponzi schemes, we were beginning to see the cracks in this multinational globalised economy, in these impossible to understand machines that we exist within. This was all before the 2008 financial crisis.

DS: There's a recurring motif I see emerging in your older work — the ghost, or rather the Scooby Doo ghost, which is you alluding to a manufactured or fake fear. It is a visual motif that sums up an example of people looking for fear in the wrong places. While something like the Millenium Bug is built up and grabs all the attention, these other forces are also at work, which are to shape the early years of the new century. The focus of fear and anxiety was directed in the wrong places. This seems to then unfold as a sequence of manufacturing fear that continues today.

GC: The 2001 9/11 attacks spawned hysterical absurdity. As well as all of the lives lost in the violence of the attacks, there was this rapid spiral into what we now call fake news. There was a manufactured consent to go to war with a country that had nothing to do with the attacks. People were quickly and easily bamboozled through the theatre of politics to become willing participants, allowing our leaders and governments to bomb people who had nothing to do with the attack.

DS: There were protests against this, huge demonstrations of people who were opposed to military action.

GC: I was on that march in London, millions of people here, with many more around the world. But then there was a child witness who had seen babies taken from incubators and thrown. The story got repeated over and over again in the US. This became part of the justification used to convince people that it was necessary to take down a dictator. When it was discovered that this witness was the daughter of a Kuwaiti diplomat, and that the story was fabricated, things had already been set in motion. These are incredible manipulations of fear. It is cruel and

cynical, particularly as we should be afraid of violence and injustice, and should act to stop those things. But the methods and reasons that our leaders choose can so often be little more than manipulations and lies. It's such a cynical understanding of human emotion and morality, used to enact something that should not be done.

DS: So, what years are you at the Royal College of Art, in London, doing your postgraduate study?

GC: 1999 to 2001.

DS: You are there at the cusp of the millenium, at the transition into the new century. You begin under the pall of the Bug, what you see in the world around when you graduate is this new disturbed era.

GC: Well before all of that was the Hong Kong handover in 1997. Before that there were all these other moments of shock, surprises, the Berlin Wall, the freeing of Mandela, these moments where you were like whoa, what was that? There is some serious stuff going on. But Hong Kong in 97 was particularly striking for me. I was watching the handover on TV. I didn't really understand what was happening, I just knew that it was important, really important. It was pulling at my sense of identity in different ways. Back then, in my early twenties, I didn't know what empire was. I didn't know what the British Empire had done and why Hong Kong was a British colony. I didn't understand any of this, I didn't even know what a colony was, not really. It's only in the years since then that I've begun to understand it better. So there was this kind of excitement or euphoria around all these historical events in the latter part of the last century. But then there were these dystopic or apocalyptic waves. Perhaps that's the case all the time? That there are always these multiple events that represent utopia and dystopia, breathing almost, inhaling, exhaling. It just happened that these things we're talking about existed over the threshold of the millenium, so became that much more significant in the collective psyche. But from 2001, and the consequence of one of my friends dying in the 7/7 attacks in London, and Tony Blair's shoulder to shoulder participation in the war, made me question more the given narratives provided by our leaders and the media. Over the years I've changed the way I digest news, cross referencing multiple sources to try to get closer to some kind of truth.

DS: When would you say you started to try and deal with this politicised landscape through images? Is it something that happened at the Royal College? When did you start to develop the complex and layered narratives

that you present visually? When did you come up with a method or an approach to constructing your non linear narratives?

GC: In my interview for art school I presented these self portraits, of an angry young man, typical cliched angsty stuff, but I got in. But then the first thing that I did at St. Martins was to question what painting was. There was this dominant discourse of the death of painting —

DS: It was the 90s!

GC: Yeah, it was the 90s. I found this idea of the death of painting really weird. It struck me as odd to be questioning the existence or validity of a medium. As a discourse, it seemed detached from any realities. So, when I had this digital and communications revolution starting to take place around me, and there is this euphoria around what this technology will enable, it made me think about how to capture this sense of history and bring it into my work. I had this idea of painting without paint. I removed paint from the process of painting. I exchanged pigment for information. I started to use the stock listings from the *Financial Times* as a way to capture the new information spaces that we are living in. It began as a form of abstraction in my art school years, and I was trying to grapple with finding a self-constructed language that was sidestepping the dominant narratives of the death of painting through abstraction. Touch, gesture, surface, writing, these were the dominant themes for me but I was substituting and augmenting many aspects of those things with collage, with layering and mechanical reproduction. I was able to explore and absorb something about the materials of our current histories. I wanted to try and capture a sense of what it means to live in a situation where all of these narratives are flying at you, both euphoric and apocalyptic. In 2001 there were more natural disasters recorded than in any other time. The twenty-first century was clearly going to be about the existential relationship that we have to our environment and to climate change. But then there are all of these science fiction narratives about robots taking over, sentient AI and so on, these were some of the things that became foundations and the building blocks for my current interests.

DS: You talked about depicting certain forms of information space. For me, that's an amazing cognitive leap, to start to think in those terms. It's interesting to look back to the promises of the future that were made in the 90s. Those promises demanded this kind of cognitive leap, to cross over wide spaces of how things could be understood. I struggled to get my head round this thing called

the internet that my friend was trying to describe to me. Similarly, when I read William Gibson's *Neuromancer,* I didn't really understand the information spaces being described. It demanded a shift or expansion in how I thought about things. How did you get to the point where you realised that you needed to represent information space?

GC: *Neuromancer* was exactly the thing that got me to that point, and the film *Tron* before that. But I also remember growing up in the era of the home computer. The TV, with its three channels, was this one way delivery system. To then have the ability to move the pixels on the screen in a computer game was magical, as if I could reach into the screen and influence the images and actions. You project this idea of agency or control inside this space, behind the screen. This felt very profound, particularly when extrapolated into these new worlds in science fiction stories. It all makes for an engrossing world of possibilities. The opening of *Neuromancer* describes the sky, which is the colour of a tv tuned to a dead channel. The imagining of the sky as buzzing with dense information is essentially what the internet became, and by extension, what the stock market is. This space that completely saturates us. The information flows through us at the speed of light.

DS: Do you remember when you made that connection to the stock market? This global network that is abstract, symbolic, real and concrete all at the same time. It has this tidal pull. When did you look at those listings and think that it was that world of information you describe?

GC: Well, the news constantly talks about the stock market.

DS: Yes, but I would just ignore it. It was on a par with football results, I'd just switch off.

GC: Unlike football results, these things have a huge impact on the world. The stock market represents capitalism and consumerism. It is economics and data. It promises wealth, it is a kind of casino. It was later on that I fully understood it as a parasite, as a way of making money that doesn't really contribute anything to the productive life of society.

DS: But it drives so much and our lives are tied into it so much that our sense of agency feels diminished.

GC: Yes, when the market crashes, there are real consequences. It has an impact on us but we are not involved in it. These are part of a world of complicated events that I wanted to try and understand. In a lot of science fiction, like in the film *Alien*, for example, corporations have essentially taken over everything. This is a projection of the logic of capitalism, that governments will be taken over by huge and powerful corporations.

DS: One of my excuses for having a lifelong fascination with science fiction is the way it can sensitise you to these kinds of structures and discourses around power that might not otherwise be so obvious, particularly in relation to other spaces of representation. This is precisely what you are describing in *Alien*. Science fiction can present speculative situations in which corporations have the power that you would traditionally associate with the state. With this comes an acknowledgement of the power that corporations already have. This is actually already built into many political systems. Science fiction, it seems, has traditionally been comfortable telling those stories. Paul Verhoeven's science fiction films were really interesting in that regard too.

GC: Yeah, there's fascism, police states, attacks on progressive values and so on.

DS: So, these are very accessible spaces of interpretation and critique, often in a kind of disguise.

GC: Science fiction holds up a mirror. It's a distorted mirror of course, almost a funfair mirror, but it allows us to see something in a different way. That ability to shake our fixed ideas of something enables the possibility of revising a perspective. We are able to see things from a different point of view, or from multiple points of view. It expands our cognitive abilities. It is to be able to look at things cubistically. Reality has multiple truths and narratives. Sometimes they are hidden from us. The one that is given to us is the mainstream version necessary for a particular leadership to get us to do stuff, to make us beholden to their beliefs. Revealing a hidden narrative might destabilise, and make you question the version of events given to you. Science fiction has that power to be able to open spaces of imagination that are beyond what you perceive to be real. That perception of reality has been provided for you, whether from a culture or leadership, it is important to question it.

DS: Walter Benjamin, in his essay 'A Small History of Photography,' refers to Bertold Brecht and borrows this saying, that a photograph of a factory tells us very little

about the factory. It tells us nothing about what life is like for the workers in the factory, it tells us nothing about the impact that the factory has on the world around it. That has become a very useful way of thinking about some of the things that science fiction can offer, as opposed to more conventional documentary or realist modes.

GC: That reminds me of a quote from *Watchmen* about the value of a photograph of an oxygen molecule to a drowning man.

DS: There's an early work of yours that you showed to me in your studio many years ago, it's an image taken from the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. I was wondering if you could say something about that work and the scene that it depicts?

GC: So, you're talking about the scene of pre-dawn man, in which this proto-human's tribe has been in contact with the monolith, this mysterious and ambiguous alien artefact. We're led to understand that some sort of knowledge has been passed. This pre-dawn ape comes to understand that if you use a bone as a weapon, you can conquer this pool of life which all of the ape tribes drink from. By violence and murder, this ape secures the survival of its tribe and then throws the bone into the air. As the bone rotates through the air, the image cuts to a space station in orbit. Kubrick seems to be suggesting that the evolution of humanity is intertwined with violence. This is an uncomfortable truth. Or perhaps a truism? But I found it an idea that was profoundly delivered in the film, which brings us forward in time to a sentient AI which seems more human than the astronauts on board the ship. They are trapped with HAL, who is so rationally determined to save the mission that it's been programmed to fulfil that it realises the need to eliminate the crew. Dave Bowman then becomes this Starchild at the end, which suggests another evolutionary state. In the film, this suggests a kind of hope for humanity, to become more than what it is. These were amazing ideas to me. What does it mean to be human? Where do we want humanity to go? There is also this acknowledgement of the darkness of our own species, and the impact we have on other species.

DS: All of this discussion comes from a very small image, a small work that becomes a kind of shorthand for a lot of ideas and thoughts, some of them troubling, some of them hopeful. This image becomes very useful for referencing a lot of things and it feels as if this is a technique that you have adopted and are still using. You'll

use fragments, elements, pieces within these elaborately constructed canvas works where these parts are a shorthand for a large-scale discussion.

GC: Absolutely, but all images are in a way shorthand. It depends on how much someone wants to find out about. You could look at this image and just think it is this primal scene.

DS: But then anyone who has seen the film can pick up on all of the things that you described.

GC: I think of films and other popular narratives as modern mythologies, or like the tales told by bards in other times. These are stories that have had an impact on millions of people, have been taken to heart, become part of their identities. This isn't necessarily a dominant part of their identity but it is part of it, part of the tapestry. We are linked to these tapestries of mythology in these entertainment systems that we are part of.

DS: We were talking earlier about how fans of some kinds of entertainment, some franchises of science fiction, become so invested in the topic of their fandom but fail to invest the same kind of emotional attention, of anger or enthusiasm or excitement about issues in real life. It has become common to invest so much in these modern mythologies that lived experience and the world around us gets somewhat ignored.

GC: It's a safe zone. You're free to empathise. You're free to cry over the plight of these characters in a way that you wouldn't when watching the news. If you empathise with the news, with some kind of reality, there is a risk of responsibility. In the cinema, with stories, with fiction, you are free to feel without consequence. You don't need to feel responsible. You don't need to act. There is the illusion of a tangle of morality which becomes entertaining. It becomes this expansion of your cognitive realities in a safe and controlled way. In fiction, there is no guilt or hypocrisy when you don't act. You can turn it off. You don't need to feel about witnessing something awful and doing nothing about it.

DS: So, when you came out of the Royal College, you became very interested in the apocalyptic. This was the apocalypse not as something projected into the future but as something unfolding in the present, something ongoing.

GC: I came to realise that the apocalypse is being enacted, is something being done to people around the world by the very civilisation that I belong to. When you hear stories of children being afraid of the sky, because of fear of drone attack, this is not a reality that I face. Hearing these stories makes you comprehend the difference of your reality. These are people facing real existential danger. These are people who are having their homes destroyed through no fault of their own. These kinds of fears and conditions are things that we might see as tropes in dystopian films. People trapped at borders, in refugee camps, in places where the rule of law is missing.

DS: About ten years ago, you had a large show in Walsall in the West Midlands, where you used an image of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. You used this image, this motif, as a theme to explore a lot of the ideas we've been talking about. Could you say something about what you did with the Four Horseman?

GC: The Four Horseman of the Apocalypse was a response to the 2008 financial crisis. There was all this talk of these masters of the universe, these bankers who took the economy down. It was also a reference to the Iraq war but I was interested in these classic, traditional ideas of the end of the world that were being used to somehow help us understand our modern end of the world. For a two week period, these companies were collapsing, in some cases they had been in existence for over 150 years. Their stock prices went down to nothing. These too big to fail companies were like dominoes, collapsing on this biblical scale. These gigantic monoliths of power and financial might were crumbling before our eyes. Some parts of the media were talking about it as the end of capitalism, questioning whether the system itself could survive. That was how afraid people were. Would the rule of law be stable, would society continue and so on. And it did, well, we kicked the can down the road, we'll see how things continue. But at that moment, it was this compelling and profound moment of fear and I wanted to find a way to capture that. I used the motif of the bull rider. So the stock market is called the bull and the bear markets, mythologically in terms of attack, the bear strikes down and the bull thrusts up. It is aggressive terminology, attack metaphors to describe this artificial space. In this mythological world, I exchanged the four horsemen for the four bullriders. I added another metaphor to that which was the Minotaur. This half-beast, half-man was for me the banker, this creature that is the epitome of predatory capitalism. The bullriders are macho, them-

selves a kind of mythology of retained masculinity from another era. It was a convergence of different mythological elements.

DS: For me, there were different ways in which that show was science fictional. There was the nature of the imagery, characterised by these toxic, petrodelic landscapes. Strangely recognisable, a bit like those moments in the stargate sequence in *2001* when actual aerial footage of landscapes is coloured to appear alien. Recognisable but distorted. Twisted into something with an apocalyptic sensibility. Relating to the sublime as well. Then there is this other sense of world building, of developing a mythology with rigour and thoroughness. So it is partly visual, partly down to a considered and detailed process of world building, constructing the logic of this reality, a logic of the fantastic. All of this has a referent in the world of reality.

GC: That may all stem from me taking LSD as a teenager. It blew my mind, literally. Before that point, reality was reality. When you interrupt the processes by which your brain constructs this, with a hallucinogen, suddenly everything appears as psychedelic colours, as patterns forming when you look at the grass, or the dappled light coming through leaves onto the ground turns into hexagonal shapes. When you've experienced this you come to realise that the brain is just an instrument through which you perceive reality. That experience opened up the horizon. You understand that you are inside a machine, in a way, and that you're looking through the instruments that have been given to you, through which your consciousness exists. So, this widening of your perception, of your horizons, is something that I aspire to achieve with my paintings. To look at reality through a multi-faceted view. Not a fixed point. We have multiple ways of looking, multiple genders, biases, cognitive dissonances and so on.

DS: The show was incredibly ambitious in that way. It was constantly interrupting itself. There were three spaces which each did different things, and there would be these counterpoints. A very large painting of the Four Horsemen (after the Russian artist Viktor Vasnetsov) was in the same space as a series of your own distorted versions of Durer's apocalypse woodcuts (from 1498). These were small images, burned into layers of the Financial Times with a laser. These were next to an image of a mourning family, of a man who died at Abu Ghraib. As a viewer you are being walked into these different realities, as well as different methods of making the work. You also had a video installation. There were these projected animations

of the bullriders that looked like your paintings had been brought to life. These projections were accompanied by a refrain from *The End* by The Doors. The sound of the song pollutes the whole thing, all the rooms. Somehow you feel like you are in this machine, this machine that is distorting reality. It is a distorted reality of global finance and unfolding apocalypse, but is also distorting the reality of experiencing the work. It was quite an immersive experience.

GC: The room that had the Four Horsemen and Durers, and the image of the family holding up a photograph of someone who was tortured and murdered in Abu Ghraib. I wanted these indelibly powerful consequences of certain mythological narratives, which take us to bombing another country, and then doing the very thing that we accused them of doing. It was this Nietzschean concept of staring into the abyss and the abyss staring back at you, of the danger of fighting monsters and then becoming one yourself. I wanted to have a modern version of the end of the world contrasted with a historical one. In another room, I also had Top Ten Billionaires, Top Ten Hackers and Top Ten Celebrities Earning After Death. The top ten is an absurd way of listing and measuring things. I wanted that absurdity. The complexity of comprehending the vast scope of our human existence and civilisation is so overwhelming that we need shorthand forms, stepping stones towards understanding. The billionaire is a new type of class. Some are arguing whether they should even exist, as they represent the accumulation of wealth on such a vast scale that they damage economies and societies. The last room was this immersive video installation made up of four looping projections of the four bulls, like infinite gods. The real gods, though, are really the billionaires, while the four horsemen as imagined in the past dominate a wall in the first room. These are all competing mythologies that set up oscillations between utopias and dystopias.

DS: I still have vivid memories of that show and it felt like I was experiencing a kind of science fictional encounter. It reminded me of lots of things that I love about science fiction but you brought those things together in ways that not only emphasised the uniqueness of contemporary art and what it can do, but that really was very much your own configuration of how these things come together and operate.

GC: I was trying to create new languages. This in a way comes back to the time when I was at Saint Martin's, trying to paint without paint. It was a way of trying to find alternative languages. Also, Because my identity is

in-between. I was born in the UK and I have a relationship with Hong Kong, which I also consider to be a home. The conflict that I have come to terms with, with how people like to designate an identity, is something I've found empowering. I can accept ambiguity. An ambiguity that a lot of people can't accept. They like fixed statements about something. That's why I'm always challenging overarching narratives: Good versus evil, democracy versus communism. Which is often used, or has been historically, to designate good versus evil. To try and look beyond these simplifications and reductions, to the complexities of living in civilisations in frameworks of geopolitical histories written by victors.

DS: Maybe you could say something about how your attention has shifted towards China.

GC: Even when I was student, I remember that it seemed like people were talking about a rise of China as a world power. This was something I didn't really understand, I wasn't aware of histories of empire. It is something that has continued to be talked about with fascination, a kind of admiration for these economic miracles, but also in terms of unsustainable growth. And then there are those who are dismissive of the scale or success of China's economic growth, despite it far exceeding Western nations. There is a lot of criticism of their economic policies, on the basis that they are being enacted by the communist state, or a dictatorship. Over the years, I've gravitated more towards China, I've tried to understand more about what is happening there. In 2008, when I was interested in the birth of modern capitalism, I started looking at the Dutch Golden Age, which led me to think about the first globalised company, which was the East India Trade Company. So I was thinking about how this company helped globalise trade routes, colonisation, slavery, things which are not often depicted. Then to looking at the contemporary form of capitalism and what is happening in China, looking at the extraordinary project. Looking at what they've done, such as building more railways and roads than in the entire world's history. They brought 800, 000, 000 people out of poverty in a matter of decades. These are extraordinary achievements and now their largest project, the Belt and Road project connecting over 170 nations for mutual trade through infrastructural investment, as fraught with problems as it is, is still an enormous undertaking. Looking at how a civilisation is conducting itself on the world stage, compared to the US empire and the West has been of interest to me, especially as I try to traverse an understanding of the British Empire versus Imperial China.

DS: It is interesting how you came to that through looking at the Dutch Golden Age, thinking about tulips as a kind of origin of contemporary capitalism. You are developing methods of research that employ a kind of distance, or looking at things through a lens.

GC: 2008 was this very confusing moment, I didn't understand how an economy could collapse on a global scale just because the bankers were corrupt. This led me to look into the idea of an economic bubble, the first of which to be recorded was tulip mania. I found it absurd that this happened over a flower but no more absurd than the 2008 crisis. At least then you actually got a tulip bulb. There was this insanity, this casino mentality of the global market that had such an impact on human civilisation. Tulip mania led me to looking at the East India Trade Company as well as the genre of flower painting. This genre always seemed benign, but the inclusion of tulips and the symbolic references assigned to the flowers was really interesting to me. The flower isn't just a flower. It is not just an image of beauty. Still life paintings aren't just about the transience of life, reminders of our fragile mortality.

DS: There's something about how you remade those still lifes that has to do with science fiction's ability to defamiliarise, to perform cognitive estrangement.

GC: In order to be able to reflect back on our modernity, looking into both the past and future blurs modern reality between different times.

DS: Around the time you started working with still life imagery you also started to introduce glitch technology into your production process.

GC: I found an open source algorithm that rearranges the pixels of an image without destroying, erasing or copying over them. So the images that are glitched can, theoretically, be put back together in the original form. What you get is something that questions the idea of a fixed image. It realigns pixels into gradients. This notion of reordering is a metaphor for the repetition of history. The same images and narratives are reorganised into a different form.

DS: Sometimes on your Instagram account you'll take a current news image and transform it.

GC: I hashtag those as a history glitch. It is usually moments where there is this dominant narrative tendency towards simplification, such as good versus evil. I'm inter-

ested in the images being reordered as if to say that there is more than one way to look at it, to encourage consideration of wider geo-political circumstances. To think more about why something might be happening. The algorithm was first used on open source images of still lives from the Rijksmuseum. These were reproductions of paintings that included tulips. These interested me because of tulip mania and the first economic bubble. It was a way for me to suggest that we are cycling through these things from the past, without learning any lessons from the past.

DS: It seems that in turning your attention to China, you are returning to an idea about new mythic narratives concerning futurity and the future. It is a shift away from futures as Western narratives of supremacy and manifest destiny. In one way, it could just be that you are drawing attention to things happening in China but in the creation of your images there is the use of elements that you've been developing for years. They become like motifs. They contain a lot of information.

GC: They are like maps within maps.

DS: There are visual devices that serve another sense of purpose, as elements of world building. Or as the elements of a story. It feels like an epic narrative, something like Frank Herbert's *Dune* or NK Jemisin's Broken Earth trilogy. It is like a huge story about ecology and power and the destiny of a whole population.

GC: That is me wanting to avoid simplified narratives of good versus evil, democracy versus communism, liberty versus dictatorship. I find these oppositions un-useful as a way of understanding the realities of civilisations that lie on geopolitical fault lines.

DS: Thank you. That is quite a place to end this interview. It really sums up how your work offers a space to build new kinds of narratives that reflect this sense of depth and complexity.

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Immediate Pasts and Soon-to-be Futures: Sinofuturism in Review

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This is an extended version of the essay that first appeared in volume 50 number 3 of the *SFRA Review*.

L ike a snowball picking up speed, the last year has seen a growing aggregate of academic and popular interest in sinofuturism, both in China and abroad. Writing in a special issue of *Screen Bodies* on queer sinofuturism, scholar and designer Yunying Huang notes that as of 2020, the only results in Chinese for the term were a conversation between artists aaajiao, scholar Gabriele de Seta, and curator Xuefei Cao, and "a workshop on 'Wudaokou Futurism' (Space 2019) which convened a discussion of Sinofuturism in the geo-physical location of the Beijing region" (Huang 59). This Wudaokou futurism workshop, in fact, was the impetus behind the *SFRA Review's* 2020 sinofuturism special issue, with many of the same speakers who participated in the workshop — including original workshop organizer Dino Ge Zhang — contributing articles that built on their prior presentations.

The Wudaokou alternative futurisms conference itself was held in December 2019, when China was already in the grips of the pandemic that would soon engulf the United States, the United Kingdom, and the rest of the world. I participated from a dark hotel room at 5 am, Skyping in (this was before Zoom became an omnipresent part of our connectivity — a lifetime ago!) to talk about alternative modes of temporalities to an audience that was, themselves, temporally and geographically disparate. Since then, the technology that sweeps us along towards an increasingly interconnected future has also come under the same orientalist scrutiny that informs so much sinofuturist anxiety in the first place: from then US president Donald Trump's abortive move to ban both TikTok and WeChat in the States, to the widespread conspiracy that Covid-19 is a Chinese bioweapon deliberately engineered to destabilize Western nations, to the fear of surveillance technologies deployed in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, the role technology plays in China's place in the future is as central to Western perceptions and fears of global power relations as it ever was.

As I wrote in the introduction to the *SFRA Review* special issue on sinofuturism that grew out of the Wudaokou workshop, the theory itself has largely emerged as a concept applied externally to China by Western observers. By compartmentalizing sociocultural development as a form uniquely tied to the nation-state while also seeking to maintain both distance and otherness, sinofuturism differs from theorizations such as Afrofuturism (to which it is often compared) through its application *to*, not development *from*, the subjects it takes as object. As a result, the very label of "sinofuturism" developed out of the same orientalizing impulses that previously relegated China to a space of backwardness and barbarism (Niu, Huang, Roh 2015) and which now attribute to it a projected futurity. Yet this Western label is one that Chinese authors and artists have appropriated and weaponized for their own creative ends, without necessarily sharing unified goals.

Authors of science fiction in China have uniquely grappled with this impulse, especially insofar as digital technologies — such as the growing e-publishing industry and networked media platforms — allow for the proliferation of new voices historically barred from traditional publishing venues (Xu 2015). What's more, contemporary science fiction in China functions as a transnational form that centers a technoscientific process or material object as a means of introducing social change, rendering the aim of science fiction inherently future-oriented even when relying on the past or focused on the present. Because potential future ontologies are expected to be relevant to present extrapolations, they fundamentally rely, to some degree, not only on realistic depictions of possible technologies and circumstantial realism, but also the familiar perceptions of the extant material and digital worlds — a central tenet of sinofuturism's omnivorous inclusion of technology, labor, art, and the visions it makes possible (Lek 2016).
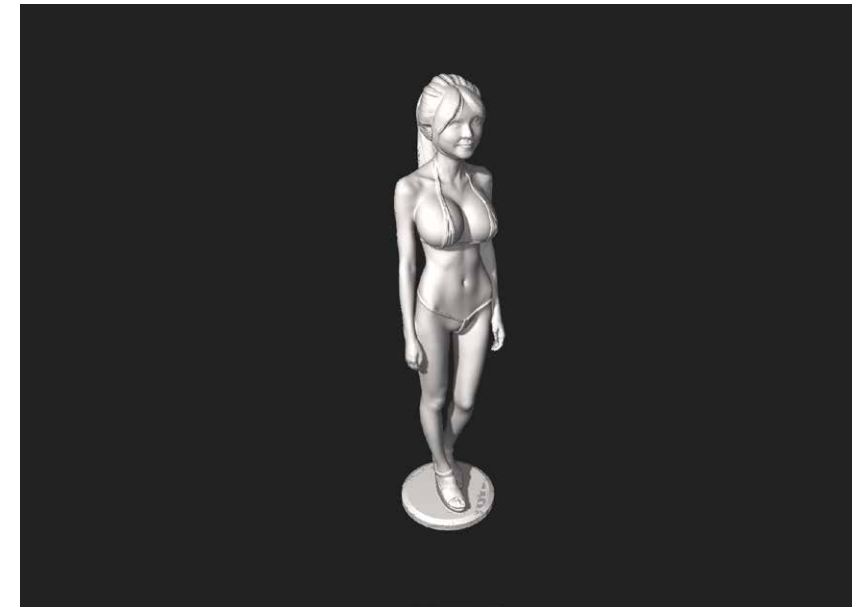
Naomi Wu 3D model, courtesy of the artist.

The globalizing effect of the internet and the subsequent rise in wide-scale digital exchange, in particular, has created a space for production in which Chinese authors are writing for an increasingly global audience and shifting their goals correspondingly. As early as the beginning of the 20th century, authors and public reformers in China (such as Liang Qichao, who, in his 1902 unfinished novel *The Future of New China*, described a utopian 1962 in which China was the dominant global power) were envisioning sinofutures in which China was preeminent on the world stage. The idea of China as a dominant force in the world yet-to-come continues through much Chinese science fiction today, from standout international sensations such as *The Three-Body Problem* to anonymously published digital short stories like "Olympic Dream." For science fiction authors describing the Chinese future (or the future as Chinese), an awareness of the fact that American and Western media largely paints China as a place of repression and censorship is an integral part of the worlds they depict.

To the extent that this is true, publishing regulations in China mean that the internet and other digital forms of publications, such as video games and online message boards, have become increasingly important outlets for science fiction. *The Three-Body Problem*, for example, was serialized first in the online-only *Science Fiction World* before being published as a book, and Western publication outlets like *Clarkesworld* have partnered with China-based Storycom to publish more Chinese science fiction in translation online. Because of the expectation of a global audience that online publication ensures, science fiction is changing as readership expands, yet the balance of global power remains uneven. Noted

science fiction authors such as Xia Jia still describe science fiction coming out of China as having the mission of educating Western readers (Xia 2016), while English translators are increasingly burdened with the necessity of explaining historiocultural specificities through lengthy footnotes (Liu 2014). That is, just as the West applies the term "sinofuturism" to an entire national development project, Chinese authors are put in the position of responding and catering to Western assumptions in order to be legible on a global scale.

Here is where the specificity of China as a technologicized imaginary, located outside of both space and time, results in an orientalizing impulse fundamentally different from the fetishization of a high-tech Japan seen prominently in cyberpunk and the gleamingly sexualized noir adoration of the 80s. Shaped by and reliant on Western projections of Asia as the techne through which to shape a future defined by and created for the West, sinofuturism not only projects China as a temporal locus for the project of modernity (Niu 2008), but also posits Chinese individuals themselves as resources, not originary producers of cultural or technological capital. Reduced by the West to faceless algorithmic data points, Chinese laborers and producers are commodified in an ideologically reproductive system informed by the racial panic of outsourcing, common in the early nineties with the rise of overseas data centers (Atanasoski and Vora 2015). Chinese science fiction writers are well aware of this and increasingly find themselves in a position to either push back against it or grapple with those fears in order to appear legible to an international readership.

Some authors do this by writing directly to the negative visions of a Chinese future most commonly held by the West: Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide*, for example, deals with the physical detritus left behind by the dreams of digital development and the environmental devastation created when those developments are made obsolete and discarded, while Ma Boyong's "City of Silence" shows both digital message boards and spoken language as subject to the same censorship as physical media, giving lie to the aspirations of online communications as a state of expressive exceptionalism. Other Chinese content producers actively embody the digitizing impulse that seeks to turn human beings into images for consumption: Naomi Wu (Shenzhen's "sexy cyborg"), for example, has created a 3D scan of her body

and uploaded it for the purpose of 3D printing models. These models are marketed alongside 3D models of Major Motoko Kusanagi from the Japanese anime *Ghost in the Shell* — an explicit juxtaposition of two stylized bodies (one real, one fictional) that, in their respective worlds, represent the future through a conscientious abandonment of the biological for the constructed.

So what, then, does it mean for Chinese science fiction to attempt to depict a sinofuturist vision in the increasingly globalized space made possible by digital technologies? And what does it mean to produce content within a framework that imagines a techno-utopic future founded on artistic labor while simultaneously reproducing racialized tropes of dehumanization? How is material production changed by an increasing reliance on the digital?

As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the idea for the 2020 *SFRA Review* sinofuturism special issue developed out of a workshop organized by Dino Ge Zhang as part of the Wudaokou Futurists collective, a collective aimed at decentring sinofuturism from its Western articulations. The workshop, "Alternative Sinofuturisms," already presupposed sinofuturism as a venue for alterity and retained a space for various approaches and understandings of who and what is being foregrounded. Centralized in Beijing but held online with invited speakers from four different continents, the workshop was organized around a series of provocations, most of which were included in the *SFRA Review* special issue. Xenofeminist Amy Ireland articulated a view of darkside empathy that positioned sinofuturist visions as methods of inculcating weaponized empathy, while media anthropologist Gabriele de Seta argued that sinofuturism functions as a framework for denying the possibility of coevalness to China on the part of the West. I discussed sinofuturism as an aestheticized projection that fixed images of the country in a perpetual *futur antérieur*; while political theorist and accelerationist Vincent Garton argued for a reappropriation of the term by Chinese theorists and politicians in order to reconstruct a new world system inclusive of heterogeneous futures. The organizer, Dino Ge Zhang (without whom neither the original symposium nor the special issue — nor, for that matter, much of the forthcoming work on sinofuturism — would be possible), expanded on his concept of Sino-no-futurism to describe a world post-pandemic, which in many ways now reads as a science fictional dream for an American and British audience trapped in the perpetual now of our own countries' ongoing pandemic-based immiserations.

Since Yunying Huang was doing her initial research and since the publication of the *SFRA Review* special issue, interest in and articles on sinofuturism have increased exponentially. To some extent, this is simply a reflection of the confluence of interest in Chinese science fiction and interest in a more global China itself — the two are part and parcel of the same globalizing turn towards imagining futurity. For example, podcasts on sinofuturism and Chinese science fiction have proliferated in the past year in both English — such as Angus Stewart's Translated Chinese Fiction podcast — and Chinese — such as Culture Potato's (中化土豆) podcast episode unpacking accelerationism — while the number of science fiction novels written in Chinese and translated into English, written in English by Chinese and diasporic authors, and as products of science fictional exchange between countries has increased so much that it would be difficult to exhaustively list it all. Theorist Yuk Hui, long a leading voice outlining alternative epistemologies across time and place, continues to articulate possibilities for futures thinking in his public and academic work, while within the last year superstar new scholar Xiaowei Wang has published a book on the entanglements of technology and global innovation in rural China while also finding the time to speak with Ling Ma — author of the eerily prescient pandemic SF novel *Severance* — about how, when writing "about China for an American audience, fantasy and sci-fi are always palpable" and, in fact, inextricable. This entanglement itself is nothing new, although its recognition has been ramping up in the last year. Writing in December 2020 for the Chinese-language news and culture outlet, *The Paper* (澎湃), Wang Xin wrote about the historical impact of futurism and its global impact on Chinese art and literature — without naming sinofuturism directly, but laying the groundwork for future developments in the arts. In this, the past is future and the future is already past.

To a more limited extent, however, some of this development has resulted from the *SFRA Review* special issue itself. The aforementioned special issue of *Screen Bodies* on queer sinofuturism, while in production at the same time, made several references to the *SFRA Review* issue in its introduction, touching briefly on a number of salient points introduced by *SFRA* contributors. Developing out of my previous collaborations with Gabriele de Seta, a special A&Q section of the journal *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* is forthcoming that focuses on sinofuturism(s) in a digital context. Drawing on essays from both of these publications, an edited collection of essays on sinofuturism will soon be published in Chinese by the independent publisher Pulsir — the first collection

Lawrence Lek, *Geomancer*, 2017. Poster from CGI Film. Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.

of academic writings on sinofuturism to be published in Chinese at all. And as for the *SFRA Review* itself, it will soon host another special issue on Chinese science fiction in a global context, collected and edited by comparative scholar Jinyi Chu. It's safe to say that as much of a bumper year as 2020 was for sinofuturism and Chinese science fiction, 2021 promises an even richer yield of scholarly and popular interest.

So what next? It's possible that sinofuturism will follow in the footsteps of the techno-Orientalist turn towards Japan that characterized so much of the cyberpunk and global economic focus on the pre-Nineties boom years — that is, a cultural and economic anxiety on the part of the West that posited a specific Asian country as the harbinger of the future while also maintaining its ineradicable otherness. Projecting an imaginary China forward in time and simultaneously insisting on its total opacity to some kind of monolithic "Western thought" (look no further than the innumerable thinkpieces claiming to understand China as a product of "Confucian values" or reposition their economic nationalism as a Sun Tzu-inflicted art of war strategy game) is itself a science fictional approach, but an unsustainable one of alienness and alterity. At the same time, as Yangyang Cheng has pointed out, Beijing is itself complicit in "self-orientalizing gestures" to excuse the crackdowns on free speech and ethnic minorities within its own borders, explaining that people with "Confucian values" welcome such authoritarianism (Cheng). Of course, what this points to more

than anything is that no large-scale entity — national or political — can speak to either a national or political future drawn up in broad, othering strokes. Perhaps more to the point, "China" itself is not a discrete entity around which a future can be built — what of the diaspora, of non-Sinitic national minorities, of bridge translators and fourth-generation immigrants and non-Han émigrés? Aside from Beijing's own national myth of "56 recognized ethnic minorities" (China 2010 Census Report) — itself an ethnonationalist convenience on par with the American myth of society as a "melting pot" — the idea of a single unified China has far-reaching repercussions. Xi Jinping's oft-repeated maxim, the "Chinese Dream," sees the future as a collective "reclamation" or "rejuvenation" (Xi) of a collective national greatness predicated on technological and economic progress. In this unified dream, all individual ethnic or cultural groups are enfolded into a collective national identity with similar developmental goals. This emphasis on a singular national goal is perhaps most apparent in the ongoing political and carceral efforts Beijing continues to exert over Taiwan and Hong Kong (especially in the recent crackdowns on pro-independence activists in Hong Kong), as well as in the repression of Uighur citizens in Xinjiang. Hidden from view both literally (in concentration camps) and figuratively (in the party emphasis on a unified ethnonationalist state), efforts to develop a singular Chinese future require that both China and those in the West continue to posit a "Chinese future" as, essentially, a Han future developed

by the party. A singular "Chinese future" is itself already an imaginary one that erases the complicated, overlapping, messy reality of political and ethnic difference in favor of a monolithic entity favoured by Chinese, American, and British governments alike.

I think — optimistically, utopianly — that eventually sinofuturism will look as anachronistic as the katanas that symbolically stood in for a Japanese-inflected (but never fully hegemonic) future in the 70s and 80s. As a pure aestheticization, sinofuturism is easy and appealing, but ultimately misguided as a discrete theoretical approach. What future do we want that's organized around a nation? Individual national powers rise and fall; China's global ascent may be short or it may be long, but it will eventually be eclipsed by another national entity that will be invested with exoticism and alterity. To imagine a future based on a set of imaginary national characteristics is to remain mired in presentist ideology, unable to imagine an alternative. Science fiction can do better than that, and *should* do better than that. Without flattening historical nuances and cultural differences into a homogenous neoliberal ontology, science fictional approaches to global development can — and should! — imagine more complex, beautiful, potential paths forward. By pulling back from national borders and focusing instead on a bottom-up, collaborative web of theoretical and fictional voices shaping a communal future, we're better positioned to imagine a future for people, not for imaginary political entities. Sinofuturism may be an important step to thinking outside of a standard "Western" vision of progress, but it's just that: a stepping stone to something larger. Thinking through and beyond sinofuturism, beyond any national futurism, we can leave ethnonationalism and its futures in the past where they belong.

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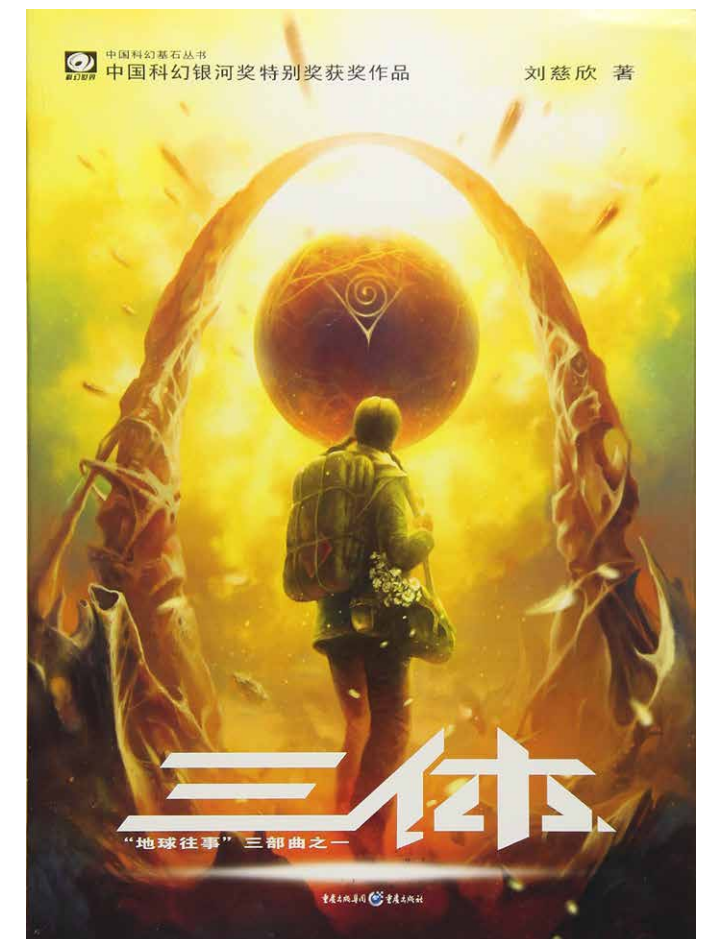Xu, Jing. "'Golden Age' Dawns for Chinese Web-Writers." *China Daily*, June 9, 2015

VIRGINA L. CONN HOLDS A PHD IN COMPARATIVE LITERATURE FROM RUTGERS UNIVERSITY. SHE STUDIES VISIONS OF THE FUTURE IN SOCIALIST SCIENCE FICTION, WITH A PARTICULAR FOCUS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE "NEW SOCIALIST HUMAN" AND ASSOCIATED POPULATION PLANNING POLICIES.

Chinese Science Fiction and its English Translation: A Small Boat in a Frenetic Sea

Emily Xueni Jin

In an article titled "Why Sci-fi could be the Secret Weapon in China's Soft-power Arsenal," published in May 2020 by *The Financial Times*, Yale Professor Jing Tsu provides an overview of various stakeholders involved in the cultural phenomenon that is contemporary Chinese science fiction, grounding her discussion in personal interviews conducted with leading figures in the Chinese science fiction industry. "Under the current atmosphere of mutual blame and the battle of words between China and the West, the soft power of storytelling may play its most important role yet," writes Tsu, pointing to the recently found prominence of the cultural realm in establishing new world orders (Tsu, 2020).

Over the last decade, Chinese science fiction has quickly risen to become the exemplar of China's cultural exportation success. Liu Cixin's Hugo-winning novel *The Three Body Problem*, translated into English by Ken Liu, has attracted readers ranging from tech giants such as Mark Zuckerberg, well-revered literary scholars like David Der-wei Wang, Mingwei Song and Jing Tsu as aforementioned, to President Obama. Despite the Chinese state long dedicating support to cultural exportation, such efforts have been generally of no avail until *The Three Body Problem* came through. Since science fiction — a genre deemed "pulp, popular, secondary" and rarely regarded as Chinese high culture — was generally beyond the scope of the state's consideration, the translation and overseas publication of *The Three Body Problem* was only one of the many attempts of China Educational Publications Import and Export Corporation (CEPIEC), a state-owned publishing corporation, to promote contemporary Chinese fiction to an Anglophone audience. Amongst the batch of contemporary Chinese literature sent out into the sea, *The Three Body Problem* did not in fact receive much attention from the Chinese state. The Chinese state was more interested in promoting "high literature," such as the Nobel-winning writer Mo Yan's works; the Anglophone readership, on the other hand, viewed Chinese literature more closely associated with the ivory tower where only Sinologists bothered to tear into and take apart its delicacy, instead of something that could actually be read in subways and parks, for the sake of pure entertainment. *The Three Body Problem's* subsequent popularity, therefore, was unexpected to most. It was after *The Three Body Problem* won the Hugo Award for Best Novel in 2015 that the Chinese state, as well as many Anglophone readers interested in finding out what Chinese people are reading on a daily basis, turned their heads in the direction of this particular book — and naturally, the genre of science fiction.

Yet, apart from marvelling at Chinese science fiction's quick — and largely arbitrary — ascension into the global spotlight, we must simultaneously stay aware of the undercurrent surrounding its translation. What role does translation play in Chinese science fiction's popularity? How have translators made their approach, and what are the difficulties they face? Through this article, I will attempt to tackle these questions from both the perspective of a literary scholar and a translator actively working in the forefront of translating Chinese science fiction into English, the world's lingua franca. I need to point out before we dive into this essay that I am limiting the scope of my discussion to the English translation of Chinese science fiction. My personal experience as a translator revolves around the Chinese (Sinitic)-English exchange, a typical periphery-to-center model in the context of world literature, which I will elaborate on soon. However, we must not forget that there are a multitude of topics stemming from Chinese science fiction in translation beyond the massive shadow that English casts. For example, how does Chinese science fiction interact with non-Anglophone languages and cultures? The recent success of Liu Cixin's *The Three Body Problem* and Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide* in Japanese, as well as Italian writer and editor Francesco Verso's attempt to connect Chinese science fiction with an Italian readership, are quickly bringing this discussion into the foreground. More so, Chinese culture, instead of a unified, single vision or a stereotypical cardboard cutout in the Western gaze, is complex and multifaceted in itself. How do different dialects, languages and cultures in China contribute to the writing of speculative fiction in general, and how are they translated? Those are questions that I myself, as both a scholar and a translator, am exploring.

Bonnie McDougall, scholar and translator, discusses the state of contemporary Chinese fiction in a well-renowned article written in 2014 titled "World Literature, Global Culture and Contemporary Chinese Fiction in Translation." McDougall highlights the strong political undertone of translated contemporary Chinese fiction, coining it as "literature to enhance China's national identity domestically and internationally and to extend its global soft power" (McDougall, 2014), where stakeholders in China are primarily concerned with the perceived status and prestige of Chinese literature in the world — yet such a concern, ironically, made the output of contemporary Chinese literature even less successful because it was essentially "trying too hard." However, taking academia by surprise, the foundational arguments of McDougall's article grew outdated in merely a year's time. Certainly, if McDougall were to witness the global success of *The*

Three Body Problem in 2015, many claims in her article would have been different. The way that Chinese science fiction now sits firmly in the intersection of popularity (with general readers) and prestige (award-winning and widely recognized by scholars as well as celebrities) has almost completely changed the Chinese state's game plan of cultural exportation. Since Chinese science fiction's rise to popularity in the first place was also largely arbitrary, it was a plan that McDougall could never have foreseen. Moreover, rather optimistically, McDougall points out that there are plenty of works of contemporary literature from non-Anglophone cultures that have achieved global popularity, such as *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson, in whose footsteps China can certainly follow, and that "these points taken together undermine the myth that contemporary Chinese writers face unfair discrimination in global literary culture" (McDougall, 2014). However, my experience working with translating Chinese science fiction — despite the current attention it is winning — would suggest quite the opposite. A successful example taken from Sweden cannot be sufficiently applied to the case of China. Sweden, as a country with the majority of its population white and fluent English speakers, bears more resemblance to the dominating countries in the global literary scene, namely Anglophone countries like the USA and the UK.

Here is an example. I attended the open discussion during the Dublin WorldCon in 2019 on whether a new "Best Translated Work" category for the Hugo Awards should be established. This proposal, first raised in July 2019, has engendered great controversy within the global science fiction community. In short, a few members on the board of the World Science Fiction Society suggested that the Hugo Awards should create a separate category to evaluate all works translated into English separately. Rachel Cordasco, a prominent voice in the science fiction and fantasy translation community, and Barkley, one of the proposers, suggest that even though the world science fiction community has a long history of welcoming translations, it rarely "[gives recognition] to texts beyond the Anglophone world." Therefore, establishing a Hugo category for translated works is a form of acknowledging and highlighting the importance of translated works, giving them more representation (Cordasco & Barkley, 2019). Neil Clarke, as one of the few American science fiction editors with extensive experience of working with translations, pushed back with an essay: "Anglophone SF is something of an invasive species in many markets … breaking off translated works on their own reinforces the negative perception that Anglophone SF is the king of the hill and

that they aren't welcome or as worthy" (Clarke, 2019). Furthermore, Clarke argued that the reason why several non-Anglophone countries have established a "Best Translated Work" category in their literary awards is that translation from English into most other languages is already prevalent and almost overrepresented. In order for non-English speculative fiction to become a steady presence on the so-called "world" science fiction market, it must first be normalized through the publication of even more translations.

Neil Clarke's highlighting of the issue of inequality in treating translated works as a separate category of the Hugo Awards parallels a prolonged debate in the field of world literature, "the center and the periphery," most notably discussed by Franco Moretti. As Moretti points out, literature on the global market is "profoundly unequal," as Anglophone literature realistically sits at the center of the global market and plays the role of the gatekeeper, evaluating literature from peripheral cultures and languages with its own established standard before deciding who gets to play the game and who doesn't (Moretti, 1991). Thus, examining translation in the context of this inequality is essential. The combination of the low presence of contemporary Chinese fiction in general, the attention placed on Chinese science fiction and the expectations coming from various stakeholders, makes translating contemporary Chinese science fiction into English a work of delicacy. The translators in this case are often asked to straddle the line between different demands and overcome obstacles in translation as they trot along the way.

The issue with "Chineseness" in translated Chinese science fiction, however, remains fuzzy. What makes Chinese science fiction Chinese? Since 2015, this question has become almost unavoidable to every Chinese science fiction writer at international events while communicating with their English readership. Xia Jia, both a writer and a scholar of Chinese literature and culture, points out that "contemporary Chinese science fiction writers form a community full of internal differences. These differences manifest themselves in age, region of origin, professional background, social class, ideology, cultural identity, aesthetics, and other areas" (Xia, 2016). Likewise, Ken Liu asks the international readership to consider, "imagine asking a hundred different American authors and critics to characterize 'American science fiction' — you'd hear a hundred different answers. The same is true of Chinese authors and critics, and Chinese science fiction" (Liu, 2014). As Liu summarizes, the only thing that makes Chinese science fiction Chinese, is that it is written for a Chinese audience.

Here, instead of furthering or arguing against Xia and Liu's claims, I wish to question the very underlying premise of this question: does Chinese science fiction *have to be Chinese?* The "Chineseness" in Chinese science fiction is a space of ambiguity. From my observation, consciously or unconsciously, Chinese science fiction writers and translators together are struggling against Anglocentric assumptions, striving to establish a sense of self on the stage that is the "world" literary market by deconstructing the frameworks that constrain them. English translation, in this case, becomes both a tool of self-expression and a venue of reflection.

The case of Chen Qiufan, one of the most prominent figures of the younger generation of contemporary Chinese science fiction, can also provide a fruitful answer to this question. Chen, fluent in English, has long been intensely involved in the translation and editing process of his works translated into English. Having worked with Chen extensively, I always go through several English translations with him, discussing certain wording and structure and examining editorial opinions together. The translation process never happens in isolation. Moreover, Chen's critically acclaimed skill in short forms and strong technological background have made him a favorite amongst Chinese science fiction writers when English publishers seek for direct commissions on given topics. *Slate* magazine's new column "Future Tense" that publishes science fiction on designated topics related to our immediate future has also commissioned Chen in 2019 to write a short story, *Space Leek*, on space colonization (Chen, 2019). Stories like *Space Leek* bear an even more peculiar position in the archive of contemporary Chinese science fiction, because the translated English versions are, technically, the true canon: primarily written for an Anglophone audience and published first in English. Therefore, the finalized Chinese version — which has started as drafts to be translated — is based on the English version, which is a hodgepodge of the writer's original material, the translator's interpretation, and the editor's changes. Occasionally, Chen would make direct changes to the translation, sometimes adding sentences and paragraphs in English, instead of going through the translator. The Chinese original, on the other hand, is also open to change: for example, the new edition of *Waste Tide* in Chinese published in summer 2019 (first edition was 2011), has included many edits that were made in the process of putting together the English translation of *Waste Tide* by Ken Liu, which was published shortly before the new Chinese edition. In this case, the translation opened up a new space in which the author could reflect upon their past authorial decisions and occasion-

ally come to use translation as a second chance of life for the original. The line between the original and the translation thus becomes dangerously blurred. Chen also admits to having drawn inspiration from a myriad of sources all across the world, upon his own traveling experiences and exchanges with people, and most of the science fiction that has significantly shaped his writing style are works translated from different languages. By doing so, Chen, wielding both languages and a wide range of cultural allusions with ease, writes to a truly global audience while redefining the scope of "Chineseness" as well as translation. In this case, then, could we still label *Space Leek* as "English-translated contemporary Chinese science fiction"? If we use the criteria of "Chineseness" coined by the Chinese state or the general Anglophone readership to evaluate these texts, we would find them as indefinable outliers. Chen's example leads us into questioning the fundamental premise of "Chineseness": cultural enhancement or invasion, preserving authenticity or orientalism…Chen's works, in this case, are arguably more cosmopolitan and representative of his own uniqueness of being a multicultural, multilingual Chinese writer than anything else.

As a translator navigating the issue of decolonization, I tend to lean towards the radical side upon making decisions on culture. In general, I actively strive to question existing boundaries through refusing to conform to popular English translations of particular Chinese terms. For example, when I translated *The Facecrafter*, a novella by Anna Wu based on deities in classical Chinese mythology living in an apocalyptic world, I had to pay particular attention to my wording, especially when it comes to lengthy descriptions of the deities' appearance, history and power, to avoid evoking the "ancient, magical China" trope through my English translation. When rendering the lóng(龙) and the fèng(凤) as I translated *The Facecrafter*, I deliberately shied away from mapping them respectively onto "dragon" and "phoenix," mythical creatures in Anglophone mythology that bear resemblance to the lóng and the fèng but are in fact culturally different, despite that those translations being much more widely accepted. I chose, instead, to preserve the original pinyin and offer extra in-text explanations as to what those two creatures entailed: "Storm clouds gathered in the sky, shrouding the outline of a giant beast: half indigo and half purple; antlers like a stag, claws like a hawk, and body like a snake. It was the lóng, the guardian of emperors and bringer of prosperity in mythology" (Wu, 2018). Here, the sentence "half indigo and half purple; antlers like a stag, claws like a hawk, and body like a snake" does not exist in the original Chinese version; Wu and I jointly agreed to

Liang Qichao

the change made in the English translation. By rendering a more meaning-specific yet unfamiliar translation instead of opting for approximations, I aim to avoid the lóng and the fèng from becoming essentially exoticized versions of the Dragon and the Phoenix. Such attempts, I argue, oftentimes as a joint effort between the writer and the translator, are freeing English-translated Chinese science fiction from existing frameworks of cultural expectations.

David Damrosch speaks with hope of an "elliptical approach" to translation in his constitutive work, "What is World Literature?", where he first delineates the tenets of world literature:

> From Henry Cabot Lodge and Charles Eliot to the HarperCollins and Norton anthologies, world literature has oscillated between extremes of assimilation and discontinuity: either the earlier and distant works reflect a consciousness just like ours, or they are unutterably alien, curiosities whose foreignness finally tells us nothing and can only reinforce our sense of separate identity. But why should we have to choose between a self-centered construction of the world and a radically decentered one? Instead, we need more of an elliptical approach, to use the image of the geometric figure that is generated from two foci at once. We never truly cease to be ourselves as we read, and our present concerns and modes of reading will always provide one focus of our understanding, but the literature of other times and eras presents us with another focus as well, and we read in the field of force generated between the two foci (Damrosch, 2003).

Surely, as I have argued in this essay, it is difficult to escape the two poles of assimilation and discontinuity as a translator working to translate from a peripheral culture into a prominent one. It is a burden that we must bear, as least for now, to always stay alert to the larger context as well as to stay true to our writers and beloved stories.

However, before we leave with a gloomy conclusion that working as a Chinese science fiction translator in this age is generally all about sweat, blood and hard choices, let's first take a pause and travel back to more than a century ago, to late Qing China, when a plethora of science fiction and an epoch of wild imagination was welcomed into the chaotic social order of the early 1900s. Through translating the adventure science fiction of Jules Verne, Lu Xun, deemed one of the greatest writers in modern Chinese history, developed his own, newfound writing style, essentially reinventing the Chinese language and narrative tradition. Liang Qichao, the pioneer of China's political as well as literary reformation, actively adopted writing techniques from European and Japanese modern literature via translation, which then in turn contributed to the formation of vernacular Chinese that we are using up till this day — unsurprisingly, Liang was also an avid science fiction lover, and his original story, *The Future of New China*, is often regarded as an exemplar of how utopianism was carried out in the early Republican period. Instead of dwelling on the constraints of translation, perhaps we can instead turn to the robust possibilities that translation offers us: how can translation expand the linguistic, rhetoric and narrative repertoire of contemporary Chinese science fiction writers, just like it once guided their predecessors navigating an equally treacherous political, social and technological landscape? In this case, translators are not only the filter they speak through, the bridge that connects them to the other shore, but they are also the travel companion with whom they explore alternative worlds, whipping out flashy gadgets to garnish the telephone box that is a story.

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EMILY XUENI JIN IS A SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY TRANSLATOR, TRANSLATING BOTH FROM CHINESE TO ENGLISH AND THE OTHER WAY AROUND, SHE GRADUATED FROM WELLESLEY COLLEGE IN 2017, AND SHE IS CURRENTLY PURSUING A PHD IN EAST ASIAN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE AT YALE UNIVERSITY.

Global Perspectives on Chinese Science Fiction

Mingwei Song, David Der-wei Wang, Feng Zhang, Yan Feng, Chen Qiufan (Stanley Chan), Emily Xueni Jin, Regina Kanyu Wang, Feng Yuan (Shuang Chimu)

The 77th World Science Fiction Convention, Dublin

Mingwei Song:

A warm welcome to everyone here who is interested in our discussion concerning Chinese science fiction (SF). My name is Mingwei Song, and I feel deeply honoured to lead this 'all-star' panel, which is on the academic track, focusing on 'The Global Perspectives of Chinese Science Fiction.' Two major questions we are going to ask our panellists are: 1) what Chinese SF is in the context of the geographical territory not limited to PRC *per se*, but in a larger Chinese-speaking world beyond mainland China; and 2) when Chinese SF has become an international sensation attracting a lot of attention from readers all over the world, therefore considered the pivotal centre of world SF, what changes has Chinese SF been experiencing since the days when it was basically marginalised in China, unknown to the world, up to today when it is currently such a focus of the SF world?

I am going to very briefly introduce the panellists. The first speaker is my own professor, Prof. David Wang from Harvard University, who not only wrote about Late-Qing and Late-imperial Chinese SF two decades ago but in recent years has also been paying attention to writers like Liu Cixin, Han Song, before they were known to the literary critics in China. The second speaker is Dr. Feng Zhang from Peking University Shenzhen Graduate School. He is a researcher of the historical materials of Chinese SF. The next speaker is Prof. Yan Feng from Fudan University in Shanghai, who is among the first scholars interested in the writings of Liu Cixin, long before we knew anything about him. The fourth speaker is a very famous writer, Chen Qiufan, whose most recent novel translated into English is *Waste Tide*. The next speaker, Emily Jin, is actually my former student, and now she is an accomplished translator and writer herself. Then, we have Regina Kanyu Wang, a SF writer, activist, and also

the director of Storycom based in Shanghai. The last speaker is Feng Yuan, a PhD student in philosophy and aesthetics from Renmin University of China, also known as Shuang Chimu for her SF stories.

So, please can I ask Prof. Wang to say a few words on the above questions?

David Der-wei Wang:

I want to thank Prof. Mingwei Song. We have nicknamed him the 'Godfather' of Chinese SF overseas. It is truly my great honour to be here and as I understand the constraint of time, I am going to make my observation very short. I think I will start with a general question. Everybody is probably familiar with writers such as Liu Cixin and so on, namely writers based in the PRC. But my question has to do with the geographical territory beyond the PRC. What else do we have in terms of discovery or inquiry into the world of SF in the Chinese language? So, I am going to introduce one term, i.e. 'Sinophone.' Maybe some of you know what I mean, while others do not. Basically Sinophone literature refers to the literature produced in the Chinese language, but outside the geographical territory of China.

I wanted to say that over the past fifty or sixty years, a lot of things have happened not only in the mainland but also overseas. Let me just give you several examples, and then I will conclude by making a few observations. Think about those Chinese writers based in Malaysia such as Zhang Cao who wrote about a Chinese historian who is sent back to the sixteenth century China to help stop a coup launched by eunuchs in the imperial court of the Ming Dynasty. This trilogy takes our hero from the past to the future. Think about another writer, Kim Chew Ng, who is based in peninsular Malaysia writing about an unlikely and impossible People's Republic of the South Seas. Supposedly that Republic was founded around 1949 and somehow it evaporated in the subsequent decades. And think about Hong Kong writers such as Kai-cheung Dung who was imaging a mysterious V-city,

probably in Victorian settings, which would eventually descend into the deep sea two hundred years from now, and is certainly quite relevant to the political allegory for our contemplation. The young woman in this story who was carrying a clock in her heart reminds us that the time is running out with regard to the fate of Hong Kong in the past and the future. And then think about a writer based in Taiwan – Luo Yijun. His most recent novel depicts a fictional male writer, i.e. a character referring to Luo Yijun himself, who happens to have some medical problem at the most embarrassing parts of his body underneath his testicles. Somehow there is a black hole which leads this writer to get into an impossible space in the cosmic or galactic sense. Through this mysterious black hole, our writer has been seeking incredible and fantastic encounters of the third or fourth kind.

All in all, we have so many intriguing examples, produced by the writers in overseas Chinese communities. All these facts lead us to ask one further question: beyond the problems raised by writers such as Liu Cixin, Han Song, Chen Qiufan who have been extremely established, what can we think about these overseas Chinese-language writers? In the world of SF, do we still have to comply with the political territorial boundaries – so-called the PRC, Taiwan or Hong Kong? The new term of 'Sinophone' could help us enter a different kind of imaginary space in which the sound waves of the 'Sinophone' carries us as far away as the immense galaxy. This is the space where those overseas writers can probably enjoy more freedom to create a new space of their own, and hopefully more dialogue could happen between these writers and their counterparts on the mainland, as well as their prospective readers in different worlds and different languages.

Therefore, 'Sinophone' literature should also take us to another type of literature which I personally coined as 'Xenophone' literature, which refers to the encounters or contacts of the most unlikely kinds. This 'Sinophone' and 'Xenophone' literature not only leads up to think of the encounters and dialogues on this planet but also takes us to a planetary scope in an immense territory of the Milky Way, the black holes, so on and so forth. I think in the Chinese domain, our writers are really motivated to create a lot of new and different themes, and of course the underpinning question we still have to ask is: how much political stake are we taking at this critical moment of Chinese history?

Feng Zhang:

Thank you Prof. Wang for the introduction of this new term. I am based in Hong Kong, and I have been living here for more than ten years. Recently I have been doing some literary research on Hong Kong's SF history, where I did find some new interesting stuff. We know that since 1949, Hong Kong has been separated from mainland China politically and geographically, but in terms of culture and literature, they are still strongly interconnected. In the realm of 'mainstream' literature, of course, Hong Kong plays an important and indispensable role in Chinese literature and its history, and there is no exception in SF.

Recently, I found a novel published in 1960, written by a Hong Kong writer, which was probably the first SF novel that came after the establishment of New China. Interestingly, the writer Yang Zijiang, whose name refers to Yangtze River, was a Hong Kong local, but had been educated and worked in mainland China for a few years after 1949. He came back to Hong Kong as a writer, completing the aforementioned novel *The Mystery of Sirius A-001*, telling a story of a spaceship diving deeply into the universe. The novel itself is not a very good story, which was mainly about space science and how the young generations can fly into space, but it shows the connection between Hong Kong and mainland China. Another intriguing factor of this author is that he had actually published a short version of the same story in the mainland before coming back to Hong Kong. We could not have discovered this story without Prof. Mingwei Song's help, who happened to find the only copy in the world in Harvard–Yenching Library.

Since then, Hong Kong SF stories have started emerging, and I found that basically there are two streams of SF writing. One is 'popular' or 'genre' fiction in Hong Kong. We have several good examples in this case, such as Ni Kuang, whose Wisely series involves more than one hundred books, and is extremely popular among the Chinese-speaking world, not only in Hong Kong but also in Taiwan. Just like members of the younger generation, I admit that I read the Wisely stories as part of my SF inspiration. Following Ni Kuang, there is also Huang Yi, and more recently Tan Jian, author of the famous *Humanoid Software*. He is probably the 'face' of Hong Kong SF right now.

There is another stream of Hong Kong SF, more inclined to the 'mainstream' literature. We have, for example, Chan Koonchung, author of *The Fat Years*, and

as Prof. Wang mentioned, Dung Kai-cheung, author of *Chronicles of V-city.* I found Dung's new novel *My Beloved Wife* very interesting with good SF ideas.

I will give you one simple observation out of the two streams of literature in recent years. I noticed that, no matter whether it is genre fiction or 'mainstream' fiction, they both reflect the fear and anxiety of Hong Kong people in this small city, in such an awkward place at such an awkward time. For example, in the famous online fiction *The Midnight After* written by a Hong Kong popular fiction author Mr. Pizza, Hong Kong becomes vacant because of the explosion of a nuclear power plant in mainland China and is consequently transformed into a penalising enclave for criminals. This story has even been adapted into a movie directed by Chen Guo.

The other day I was on another panel, where someone was curious if the political movement in Hong Kong right now could inspire new SF stories. I think that is for sure. There will be new SF novels written by genre or 'mainstream' writers in Hong Kong, reflecting the new trend and ideology of Hong Kong people in the near future, that I can guarantee.

Yan Feng:

Thank you Prof. Song for organising this panel discussion. I am very excited to be here and glad to share my excitement about the development of Chinese SF. However, I would like to begin with a few confusions of mine. I have been studying Chinese SF for many years, but still cannot figure out the answers for questions like: why is there such a sudden boom of Chinese SF? Especially if we put it into a bigger context of the history of global literature, that would be even more weird. Liu Cixin often remarks that he is an outdated SF writer, since he neither fits in the current SF scenario, nor does he write about cyberpunk. As a number of critics pointed out, there is a tendency of 'cyberpunk-ish' narrative miniaturisation or fragmentation in contrast to the 'Golden Age' of SF marked with space opera and grand narratives. Now we are heading for a digitalised matrix filled with VR and other types of electronic devices. Liu Cixin is all against such tendencies, and through saying that he belongs to the generation of Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov, he claims that he might not be able to catch up with the temporality anymore. According to Liu Cixin himself on different occasions, the whole world of SF is declining.

So, why has such an outdated subject not only attracted the attention of the world to China but also of China to the world? I have asked several writers regarding these questions and wish to share my preliminary

thinking about this. To put it in a simplistic way, why is there a boom of Chinese SF? And the answer is that the reality in China is already very much science fictional. It is not the reality we are used to being familiar with, but instead, it is rapidly changing. The world is becoming unrecognisable, therefore appearing to be weird, more fiction than fiction.

And there is some kind of 'cult' of science and technology, which is obvious in China, together with the doubts, suspicions and fears over the power of science. I think behind the momentum of the rise of Chinese SF, some spirituality, or the longing for spirituality, can be identified. Although we do not have any 'real' religion in the long Chinese history, we have later developed different '-isms' or ideologies to be our belief. Therefore, we need spirituality. We need our faith in the future. But where? What? It is not in sight. Suddenly, we have this kind of grand scheme in SF, a vision in the future involving the promise of eternal life, as well as transcendental salvation. Also, Liu Cixin has written an article called 'SF Religion,' which could not be published in China.

This is a very interesting topic. The rise of Chinese SF emerged in a scenario of the rise of China's economy, along with our will to export our culture to the world. Obviously, Chinese SF probably is the most successful cultural product reaching out to the world. We have done a lot to push our fictions, dramas and films, only to witness a bunch of failures. However, the English version of Liu Cixin's *Three Body Problem* has sold over 1.5 million copies in the English-speaking world, which is quite a phenomenon. He also has some fans such as Barack Obama and George R.R. Martin. If he is outdated, just like what he said for himself, then why is the world still interested in these classic and traditional space operas? Probably that is something not only necessary for China but also for the world in general. Especially in the current context that is gradually being reduced to cyberpunk, we need some return to the past SF, but in a new way and from an 'alien land,' i.e. China as the land of fantasy in the eyes of the Western world.

Chen Qiufan (Stanley Chan):

Thanks to Prof. Yan for his very insightful questions and thoughts. There are two things I would like to elaborate here. Firstly, the conclusion that world SF is declining is highly doubtful to me, because while the physical version of my book is indeed not as popular as before, the sales of digital publications, however, are increasing remarkably. If you see SF as a genre in general, actually you would find it everywhere, since TV series on Netflix can be mostly

put under the 'SF' category. Therefore, the format of SF should not be limited to physical books or literature. Right now, especially in China, SF is making its way into an uprising 'mainstream' trend on various levels. Even the state government has tried to leverage the power of SF narratives not only for national propaganda but also for teaching the younger generation about being more passionate about science and technology. So, I think, during such a specific era, SF is definitely resonating with the Zeitgeist, where, just like what Prof. Yan has mentioned, we need new religions and new spiritual solutions. As the world is falling apart, Chinese people have lost their solid belief on which we can rely – the belief that can be extracted from new narratives. In this case, *Three Body Problem* provides us with such a kind of new vision, creating an imaginary community. While facing outer space, frightened, we have to put every civilisation and every society together to confront such challenges. This is exactly what we are dealing with in reality.

Secondly, I think Liu Cixin is too humble on what he has written. He is not outdated at all. I believe that he has put pretty much elements and sub-genres to make an integration on a higher level. Therefore, we can also find some cyberpunk in *Three Body Problem*, such as the virtual game in the first instalment. At the same time, we can also identify the features and structures of the 'Golden Age' and the New Wave.

I would say, however, that the success of *Three Body Problem* is an exclusive case. Although currently we have a lot of attention on Chinese SF and even 'Sinophone' literature, the problem is: are we ready? Do we have good writers, or high-quality stories to represent established Chinese SF to the whole world? This, to me, is a big question and challenge as well. As I can read from those western SF and speculative fiction writers who are highly skilful and well-educated, I have noticed that they are benefiting from their profound creative writing tradition, which is what Chinese SF writers lack. I think we need a lot of exchange experiences and to learn much from the world before saying that Chinese SF is a 'phenomenon' or a 'super-power.' We still have a long way to go.

Emily Xueni Jin:

Many thanks to Prof. Yan for giving us this question to think about. Just now Stanley has basically shared with us how to look into the future. Since I have a perspective of a translator, I will be talking a bit about Chinese SF in the context of the world through my knowledge concerning SF translation. My point down here is that the reason why so many people are focusing on Chinese SF now is exactly because it has recently become exposed to the

world. And the aspect of globalisation is very helpful for us to think about how Chinese SF is related to not only local but also global audiences. For my friends back in college in the US, their first few books read in translation are actually the *Three Body Problem* trilogy. Because it has become so phenomenal in the US, people gradually start to realise that contemporary Chinese literature is now a thing which is becoming increasingly accessible. But before that, people's knowledge towards Chinese literature was still based on Tang Dynasty poems or the 'high' literature that only literature students would touch in their class.

There are a lot of people who would like to read 'China' in Chinese SF, which is another important reason why it has become so popular especially overseas. A question that many scholars, writers, and translators could probably ask is what makes Chinese SF 'Chinese'? It occurs to us that people are interested in regarding China as a super-massively evolving country of the world cultural and political matrix through SF, touching upon those issues related to society, technology, and basic values over the past few decades.

My point to make as a translator is that Chinese SF, even though it seems to be the largest group in the world, still has a long way to go, because many English writers are still *not* used to reading translated literature, since English has been the centre of the literary world for so long. The Chinese language, its associations, and the attached culture especially, have always been on the periphery. Therefore, when we translate Chinese SF into English, we have to meet a lot of problems and judgements, because, as Stanley mentioned earlier, the way in which we write Chinese SF does not really fit the ideal of how SF is normally viewed under the English context. It does not fit into the creative writing books and thus the editors are not sure what to do with it. In this case, many times we are asked to make changes because 'it sounds weird' or 'you twisted this a little,' or sometimes just because of unspeakable things that no-one really knows how to elaborate. The editors have already been very familiar with the preferences of American and British readers under such a rich SF tradition. However, when Chinese stories come in through translation, they are unsure of the cognitive processes that go behind those SF works.

This is one of the difficulties that we have been meeting in translating Chinese SF, for which we have to capture a delicate line between representing what we already have in our culture to really demonstrate its essence through translation and controlling the 'weirdness' or unfamiliarity inherent in the language difference – to a

degree where the Western readers' curiosity towards Chinese culture can be encouraged, but not so much that they would jump over them with confusion.

On the other hand, we are speaking about globalisation. It is not only that Chinese SF is gradually making its way to the world, but also, as we can see from our panellists here who are perfectly 'bilingual' writers, that they live upon the influence of a lot of different literature and cultures from all over the world. In their writing, when we ask them what makes their Chinese SF 'Chinese,' it is actually not the proper question, because no-one can really tell apart their 'authentic' Chinese experience. They have been influenced by many writers from the US, the UK, and everywhere. Those bilingual writers have access to the raw materials from other languages and are able to incorporate these elements in their own writings, in this way producing something that does not just belong to a single language or culture, but something that inherently belongs to the world under dozens of sources of influences.

For example, when I was working with Stanley to translate his stories, sometimes his edits would be made in English. And when the final product comes out in English, it looks like a collaboration of both the translator and the writer himself. This new English translation, in this case, could also become a canon as part of world SF.

Regina Kanyu Wang:

I feel very grateful to be invited here today and listen to the brilliant ideas of previous panellists. As Prof. Song introduced, I have multiple identities – I am a writer myself, I have been organising SF events for many years, and I am now also working within the SF industry. Therefore, I can probably contribute more from the industry's perspective. Back in 2015 before Liu Cixin's *Three Body Problem* won the Hugo, the company I am working for, Storycom, reached out to *Clarkesworld*, which is a famous English SF magazine, asking if we could start translation projects featuring Chinese SF. At first, the chief editor Neil Clarke seemed to be hesitant, not because he did not want to publish translated Chinese SF works, but because he had not heard of our company. Even before that, Neil had actually published various stories by authors like Stanley and Xia Jia. They have been known and well-accepted by English readers before Liu Cixin himself. So, although Neil was not very sure at the beginning, he still said yes to conducting our projects.

Over the following five years, more than forty Chinese SF short stories and novellas have been translated into English. It is usually acknowledged that publish-

ers are more often interested in novels and American authors will have to complete a fairly long story to leave their names in the book market, while short stories could receive far less attention from publishers, translators, and therefore, from those SF readers. However, due to these projects, more and more magazines in different countries have contacted us to see if we could collaborate and translate Chinese SF stories into a number of other languages. For example, we have been cooperating with Italian, German, and Spanish publishers, as well as their counterpart in the UK. But I wanted to say that while Chinese SF is going global, when we think about the very notion of 'global,' it would be very easy for us only to consider those English-speaking countries, since English has been the dominant language for quite long. Actually, we are also gaining our reputation in other languages in the meantime. Therefore, such an outward interaction of Chinese SF should not only be limited to English, but also open to multiple directions.

Another issue is related to Chinese SF films. *The Wandering Earth*, which is a large-budget movie screened earlier this year during the Chinese New Year, has already become the runner-up throughout the history of Chinese film as regards box office performance. It is now even available on Netflix. When speaking to my foreign friends, I have actually found that, although from various countries like Germany and Finland, they all consider it different from the Hollywood tradition. Right before the apocalypse, instead of putting people on the spaceship, we are taking the Earth away together with us, because Chinese people love our hometown and do not wish to abandon it. We need to take the Earth, with everyone.

The handbook of *The Wandering Earth* has even been published in China. Although in the beginning readers were reluctant to trust this handbook not only because they did not know how the film will perform in cinemas but also because no one else before has published a film production handbook. So, the publisher just agreed to print 5,000 copies, but within one month, more than 100,000 copies have been sold. Even more interestingly, many scholars doing research on Chinese SF regard this handbook as the only reference they can find about this film and Chinese SF film in general, and therefore look forward to a translated version, and that is the project we are currently working on. It can be estimated that scholars focusing on Chinese SF from all over the world actually do not have enough academic materials to cite from, which indicates that there are still lots of academic gaps to be filled.
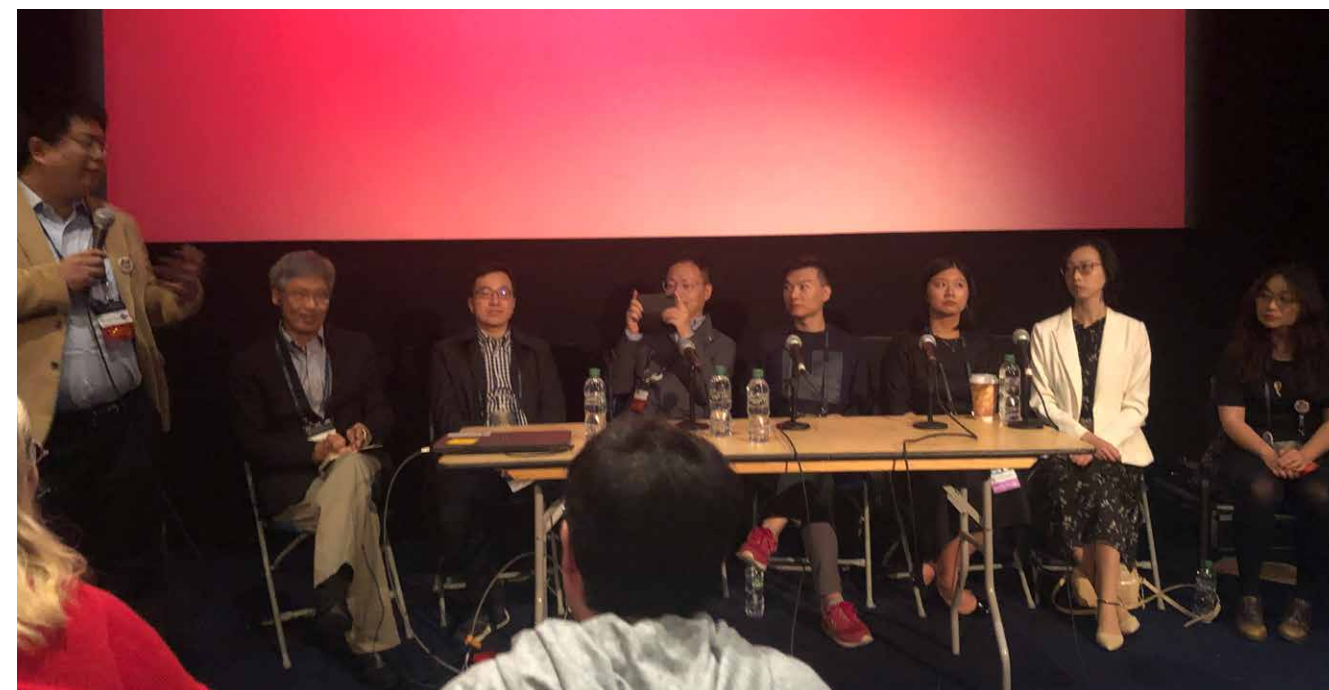
Feng Yuan (Shuang Chimu):

Great, thanks to the other panellists. I am from the background of aesthetics, normally considered an important branch of philosophy. Although the department of cognitive philosophy, that is my own department, is usually believed to be conservative, we have been paying more and more attention to the question of how technology can be understood in our contemporary world. There are many new theories related to people's perception of technology and science, which for me are quite relevant to how Chinese scholars and readers comprehend Chinese SF stories. When I began to think about my PhD thesis structure, I could not find a proper space to accommodate some studies of Chinese SF, because I was afraid that other examiners could not review it appropriately. But just two years later, I feel I can at least add two chapters, given that Chinese SF is now increasingly becoming the focus of academia from various perspectives and is thus known to more scholars.

Yesterday, there was another panel entitled 'Art from All Cultures.' It was really interesting when I showed the cover of an old *Science Fiction World* issue. Most of the audience were intrigued by the cover illustrations. They wished to know how they could learn of more SF illustrations or paintings reflecting the combination of technology and Chinese culture. The only two examples I can immediately think of are firstly in cyberpunk, which involves a well-established imagery of Asian cities, while the other is silkpunk, a new genre marked by Ken Liu in recent years. Therefore, from the aesthetic point of view, there is still a long way to go for Chinese SF writings and art, before entering the horizon of readers from other countries and languages.

Transcribed by Guangzhao Lyu.

Chinese SF industry

Regina Kanyu Wang

According to Science Fiction World, the concept of "science fiction (SF) industry" was first proposed in academia in 2012, when a group of experts were brought together by the Sichuan Province Association of Science and Technology to comb and research SF related industry, and put together the *Report of Research on the Development of Chinese SF Industry*. Narrowly defined, the SF industry includes SF publishing, SF films, SF series, SF games, SF education, SF merchandise, and other SF-related industries, while a broader definition also includes the supporting industries, upstream or downstream in the industry chain.

According to the 2020 *Chinese Science Fiction Industry Report*, the gross output of the Chinese SF industry in 2019 sums up to 65.87 billion RMB (about 7.4 billion GBP), among which games and films lead the growth, with publishing and merchandise following (Check out more in Chinese: www.kpcswa.org.cn/web/news/110144342020.html). The SF industry plays an important part in China's cultural economic growth.

We have invited seventeen organizations, companies, and projects that play a role in China's SF industry to introduce themselves to the English readers. You can see the diversity and vigour from the texts they provided. We've tried to keep editing to a minimum in order to show how they posit and define themselves in the SF industry. Here they are, ordered alphabetically.

National Science and Film Exchange program
科影融合项目
The National Science and Film Exchange program, supported by the China Association for Science and Technology (CAST), is to help film practitioners address important development challenges and improve creativity in SF. It draws on the experiences of the Science and Entertainment Exchange Program, under the National Academy of Sciences United States (NAS). Improving film quality while taking the opportunity to realize the dissemination of science among the public, this program is considered to be a new mode for science and technology communication.

The project team was set up in 2017, and supported by the Science Popularization Department of CAST. The initiator of this program, Effy Wang, has worked as a science communication researcher and manager

for many years, and interviewed hundreds of scientists from many fields, including dozens of Nobel Laureates and Academicians. The project supervisor, Yuzhi Lin, is not only an extremely experienced manager in science communication, but also an outstanding person in the field of innovation. At the end of 2017, this team produced the first domestic report, titled *China Science and Film Exchange Report*. Soon afterwards, the team held forums in universities and research institutes around China to promote the concept of science and entertainment exchange. Meanwhile, Effy Wang has published several important articles in top domestic media to introduce the concept, triggering discussion of feasible paths for this program. Many scientists and scholars have been participating in these discussion.

In order to attract more film workers' attention, the team held the Science Communication Cross-border Forum at the 28th China Golden Rooster and Hundred Flowers Film Festival, which is the highest-level film festival in China. Effy Wang was invited to attend this forum as the Keynote Speaker at Xiamen in November 2019. She was also invited as the Keynote Speaker at the Award Ceremony of the second Blue Planet Science Fiction Film Festival in Nanjing, Dec 2020.

The program facilitated the establishment of the National Science and Film Exchange Platform, which was jointly unveiled by Prof. Jinpeng Huai (party secretary of CAST & Academician of CAS), Mayor of Beijing and the Deputy Director of the National Film Administration, and some famous scientists and film directors on 3 November, 2019. After that, the program gained support from multiple governmental departments, such as the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China (PDCPC), and the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (MEPRC). Subsequently, CAST set up a formal management organization to administer this program on 1 November, 2020, which was named the Science Communication and Film and Television Integration Office of CAST. This office will be responsible for communication between governmental departments.

Under the guidance of CAST, the project team founded an association on 18 December, 2020, called the China Science and Film Exchange Professional Committee of China Science Writers Association. As

the first communication platform between top domestic scientists and top film directors / producers in China, the program will continue to vigorously promote exchanges between science and films and support more excellent SF works.

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Chengdu 2023 Worldcon bid
成都申幻
A major tourist destination and well-known for its laid-back lifestyle, the city of Chengdu is proud of its long-standing cultural history, and its prominent and respected status in terms of SF culture. The fact that it has won the competition among major cities in China to be included in the first-tier club in recent years has attracted much attention and brought many young creatives to the city. In 2021, Chengdu will host the 31st World University Summer Games. A new international airport, the largest one in Asia, will be put in use in the same year, making Chengdu the third mega-city only after Beijing and Shanghai to have a double-airport system. To match its rapid economical-cultural development, the city has put much effort into updating its image: "The Capital of Chinese New Music" and "The Capital of Expos," "The Capital of Science Fiction" is its new calling card. With experiences of five international SF conventions in the past, Chengdu has been trying for years to host a Worldcon, actively sending members of its Science Fiction Association to attend each Worldcon along with other fans and fan-based organizations from China. Together they witnessed both *The Three-body Problem* and "Folding Beijing" winning the prestigious Hugo Awards, bringing Chinese SF literature to the world's attention, and they began to bid for 2023 Worldcon site selection officially at Dublin Worldcon in 2019. Among the bidding team, two major players, the Science Fiction World and the Eight Light Minutes Culture, are leading the majority of the work. In 2019 and 2020, 8LM staff also participated in Smofcon, a convention for the convention runners within the world SF community to exchange ideas and share best practice in running conventions.

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Chinese Science Fiction Academy
中国科幻研究院
The Chinese Science Fiction Academy is a research platform under the College of Literature and Journalism of Sichuan University. The aim of the Institute is

to 'produce ideas.' It brings together the forces of SF industry, academia and research in southwest China to provide government consultation, industry research and theoretical guidance. The academy currently has over twenty researchers, and has established long-term partnerships with government agencies and enterprises at all levels, including the China Association for Science and Technology and the Sichuan Province Association for Science and Technology. It is currently in the process of establishing the Science Fiction Future Lab, which is expected to become a booster for the development of China's SF research and creative industries.

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Eight Light Minutes Culture
八光分文化
Eight Light Minutes Culture (8LM) is a startup company established in 2016 in Chengdu by some highly-experienced editors and young fans, focusing on publishing SF works and representing writers in film/TV adaptations of their works. The key product lines include the Chinese edition of official Doctor Who novelizations authorized by BBC, the Chinese edition of *Galaxy's Edge* in collaboration with its US-based e-magazine, *An Oral History Project on Chinese SF* (volume one published in 2017), and *The Three-Body Problem* online graphic novel adaptation, which was launched in November 2019 and received 100 million reads with a score of 9.3/10. It also puts much effort into nurturing young and upcoming new talent, publishing three original novels so far, titled *The Stars*, *Orphans of Mars* and *Seven States of Galaxy Saga*, two of which have been optioned for films, and are in the process of being translated into English. It also branches into other activities and events to raise awareness and foster public appreciation of SF culture. In 2018，8LM co-founded a new SF award with a high cash prize in China, the Lenghu Award, together with a major outdoor events planning company. The award site is permanently located in Lenghu, an abandoned petroleum-industrial small town in northwest China, famous for its Mars-like landscape. In July 2020，8LM co-founded the Chengdu Science Fiction Association with other major SF cultural organizations in Chengdu for the Chengdu 2023 Worldcon bid.

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Fishing Fortress SF Centre

钓鱼城科幻中心

Just on the northern outskirts of Chongqing, China's cyberpunkish mega-city, lies the small yet thriving town of Hechuan. It was here at the Fishing Fortress that 'the Scourge of God' broke. The death of Möngke Khan during that infamous siege in the 13th century resulted in the immediate withdrawal of Mongol troops from Syria and East Asia which forever altered the course of world history. Good stuff for an alternative history novel, right?

Today, at the heart of Hechuan, something special is happening. Established on December 28th, 2019, Fishing Fortress SF Centre (FFSF) is a non-profit organization that embraces all things SF and fantasy. Supported by Xiangmei Education Group and the three universities under its umbrella, the Centre also sees as its mission to promote college SF education. With a staff of over 88 and still expanding, including celebrated writers and scholars such as Prof. Wu Yan, Prof. Yan Feng, Francesco Verso, Shanky Chandro and A Que, and total space of 2800 m² exclusively devoted to SFF-related activities, the Centre aspires to facilitate Chinese SFF and fuel imagination of the next generation.

The Centre currently administers the one-million-RMB Fishing Fortress SF Awards, awarded biennially to the best Chinese-writing SFF writers from around the world; Future Fiction Workshop, a joint initiative by the Centre and Italian press Future Fiction to incubate future SFF talents, and Science Fiction Movie Master Class, an IMAX-theatre-based all-immersive teaching programme to bring experienced screenwriters, directors, producers, cinematographers and film scholars on campus. Additionally, the Centre holds the annual SFF Translators' Forum, Fishing Fortress SF Short Film Festival and runs China's largest on-campus SF club.

Come to Fishing Fortress SF, where the present is projected into the future and the imagination to dream the impossible is made possible.

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Future Affairs Administration

未来事务管理局

Future Affairs Administration (FAA), an SF brand of Shanghai Guoyue Culture and Creative Co. Ltd., was founded in 2016. FAA focuses on the development of all sectors of the SF field, with the core business being SF works' cultivation, commercial co-operation, and project development, empowering related industries with SF, to make the synergy of creating, studying and researching that facilitates the development of the whole SF industry.

As an SF works cultivator, FAA has published SF works of more than ten million Chinese characters (around seven million English words), brought up over three hundred new authors, won various awards — domestic and overseas. FAA has more than twenty books published with a total market value of ten million RMB (one million GBP), and another twenty books underway. FAA developed SF related courses of over 200 lesson hours, with more than four thousand attendees and nearly fifty thousand person-hours in total.

As an SF commercial agency, FAA is representing works of Liu Cixin and over one hundred other SF writers (living in China or overseas), along with their copyrights of over a thousand SF works and commercial rights. FAA is helping to bring on the co-operation between several dozen SF writers and such brands as Ant Group, Bilibili. com, Iflytek, CGN, LEGO, BMW, Wanda Group, CAS, SASAC, reaching tens million people on the internet.

As an incubator of SF products, FAA has set up the SF cinematic project 'Messenger,' originated by famous SF writer Han Song; built various general SF brands such as 'Non-Exist' (publishing), 'APSFcon' (SF convention), 'Chinese New Year's SF Gala' (the largest online writing event of Chinese SF community), 'Diudiu SF Radio' (a very popular SF podcast), 'Time & Space Moviegoers' (a highly influential SF brand of cinematic publicity), 'FAA SF Workshop' (a cross-cultural SF event), 'Space Drawers' (Designer's Toys R&D); it is also involved in SF content development in multiple areas including film and television, variety shows, gaming, immersive entertainment, audio products, education, conferences, and arts.

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Future Light Culture 翌星文化

Chengdu Future Light Culture Co. Ltd. (hereafter referred to as 'Future Light Culture'), which was established in 2014, is a promoter of popular SF culture in China, it includes two major brands: 'SCIFI Fanspace' and 'Master of Future Award.'

SCIFI Fanspace is committed to creating and sharing high-quality and unique products for all those who love SFF culture. So far, it has obtained authorizations from famous IPs including *The Three Body Problem*, *The Wandering Earth*, *The Captain*, and *Kiki's Delivery Service*, across which the overall sales volume of merchandise has exceeded 10 million. In 2020, Future Light Culture cooperated with China's Mars Exploration Program and China's Lunar Exploration Program, with an aim to draw the attention of young people to the aerospace industry by selling peripheral products and holding fan activities.

The Master of Future Award is one of the earliest awards for original SF writing in China. The competition was founded in 2012 and has now been held nine times, aiming to discover and cultivate excellent new SFF authors and works, and to incubate excellent fantastic IP. Many of the new generation of young writers in China emerged from the award.

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NP Entertainment 南派泛娱

NP Entertainment is a company specialized in the development and operation of multiple self-owned IPs and aiming to build an ecological production chain. By partnering with the famous SF writer Wang Jinkang, NP Entertainment started to develop SF literature for film and television. Since 2019, NP Entertainment has selected more than ten young film directors and began to prepare a SF short film series based on Wang Jinkang's IP. NP Entertainment represents *Grave Robber's Chronicles*, *The Mystic Nine*, *Ling De Qi Dong*, *The Reincarnated Giant*, and others. While promoting the visualization of SF, the company is also committed to introducing the translation of Chinese SF literature to foreign languages and sharing interesting content with the world.

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Research Center for Science and Human Imagination

科学与人类想象力研究中心

The Research Center for Science and Human Imagination is a research institution trying to evaluate and predict the development of science, stimulate scientific and technological creativity, promote SF creation, and explore the future of mankind through imagination performance. The center is involved in basic research on imagination, future studies and development of SF. Through interdisciplinary methods, the center tries to find a way to integrate science and technology, as well as education and culture. In addition to providing imagination education for students of the Southern University of Science and Technology, it also provides SF writing courses for society through external cooperation and develops creative works.

After the establishment of the center, it has successfully held several conferences: From the Frontier of Science to the Frontier of Science Fiction, Chinese Contemporary Neoclassical Science Fiction and Liu Yang's *Orphans of Mars*, and Historical Experience and Future Dream of Humankind in Modern Civilization. *Nine Cities, Millions of Future*, an SF artistic project curated by the center, won the Grand Prize of the Organizing Committee in the 2019 Bi-City Biennale of Urbanism/Architecture (Shenzhen).

At present, the main work of the Center is to continuously explore the cognition of imagination, Chinese SF creation, and industrial development within the innovation environment of global SF. The center also does research and releases the annual SF industry report.

rw.sustech.edu.cn/a/En/E&R/Scientific_ research_work/2019/0513/293.html

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Science & Fantasy Growth Foundation

科学与幻想成长基金

We believe that SF enlightens thinking about the future. Every work of SF is an attempt to answer mankind's questions. Every future we paint brings us a step closer to 'the possible future.' Our mission is to cultivate the imagination and inspire creativity.

Science & Fantasy Growth Foundation (SGF) was co-founded by scientists, investors, SF writers, engineers and public activists who are passionate about SF. It was established in March 2015 and operates largely in mainland China.

SGF is the first and only NGO in China exploring and supporting potential writers and artists to become the new generation of SF creators. During the past five years, we have raised funds to help promote SF industry in China. With our help, many top-notch SF works have been created. Hundreds of people have realized their dreams of becoming SF writers, illustrators or film directors. In the light of the primitive status of SF in China, we set up the Morning Star Award, an award to discover upcoming SF trailblazers, so that young writers who are eager to enter the realm of SF can see the light of hope. SGF has donated more than two million RMB (about 200k GBP) as the total prize money and grants, aiding potential SF creative talents of more than sixty people, resulting in eighteen books being published, three SF

related companies incubated, five movies in progress and one movie to be released this year. Mr. Liu Cixin and Ms. Hao Jingfang, both Hugo Award winners and renowned SF writers in China, served as judges of the Award.

Our major annual activities include:

The Morning Star Science Fiction Award Contest.

STICK Club. STICK (Science, Technology, Imagination, Creativity, Knowledge) Club is committed to building a platform that encourages discussion on topics from the perspectives of science, technology, imagination, creativity, and knowledge.

Science Fiction & Popular Science Lecturing on campus. SGF invites SF writers and technical experts to give lectures in higher-education institutions, primary schools, and secondary schools. It has been held in the schools at Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Beijing, Shanghai, and other cities with over twenty lectures per year.

China Science Fiction Conference. In 2018, SGF was one of the co-organizers of the 3rd China Science Fiction Conference in Shenzhen, which was the biggest annual conference on SF in China hosted by China Association of Science and Technology. The three-day event gathered writers, scientists, movie makers and fans across China to discuss the country's rising enthusiasm for SF and its links with China's ongoing tech boom.

International Exchange Program. In order to enhance international cultural communication, SGF has been cooperating with Festival International de Sci-Fi de Nantes (FISFN) since 2017. Together with FISFN, we managed to organize awarded SF works from Europe to exhibit in Shenzhen, China and awarded SF works from China to exhibit in Nantes France. We have also connected the governments of Shenzhen and Nantes to become sister cities. With the support from both governments, we have helped dozens of SF creators to go to each other's country to live and create.

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Science Fiction Base & China Science Fiction Research Center
中国科普作家协会科幻创作研究基地
&
中国科幻研究中心

The Science Fiction Creation Research Base of China Science Writers Association (hereafter referred to as the Science Fiction Base) was established in December 2016 as a second-tier organization of China Science Writers Association.

The Science Fiction Base was established to unite Chinese SF creators, cultivate talents in SF creation, research, translation, and communication, enhance Chinese SF research and creation practice, to connect domestic and foreign research resources and to serve as a cooperation platform, and to promote the prosperous development of Chinese SF. The Science Fiction Base's research mainly involves thematic research on the works of major authors, children's SF, the SF awards' evaluation system, trends in SF, SF film and animation, SF media communication, etc. The honorary director of the Science Fiction Base is Liu Cixin, and the director is Wang Jinkang. The Science Fiction Base consists of over 100 members, steering group members and academic advisors, including writers, research experts and scholars, film and television choreographers, editors, and media staff. At present, the Science Fiction Base and its writers' studio and center are licensed to Science and Technology of China Press Co. Ltd.

Established on October 31, 2020, the China Science Fiction Research Center of China Research Institute for Science Popularization is a comprehensive SF platform that gathers resources, brings together talents, exchanges ideas, and spawns creative innovations. The China Science Fiction Research Center aims to address the hotspots, difficulties, and pain points of SF development, conduct in-depth research on SF creation, SF education and industrial transformation, and create a pool of ideas, information, and talents for SF culture and industry.

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Science Fiction World (SFW)
科幻世界

Science Fiction World (SFW), founded in 1979, is China's most influential and professional SF publishing house, subordinated to Sichuan Province Association for Science and Technology. Science Fiction World maga-

zine has nurtured a large number of local Chinese writers, including Liu Cixin, Wang Jinkang, Chen Qiufan, Xia Jia etc., who have now become the backbone of Chinese SF.

Apart from magazines, books are another important project of SFW. A total of 300 kinds of SF books have been published by SFW during the years, including the works of Robert Heinlein, Arthur C. Clark, Philip K. Dick, Robert Sawyer and so on. The Hugo Award winner, *The Three-Body Problem* by Liu Cixin, is published by SFW as one of the 'Chinese SF cornerstone series.'

The Galaxy Awards, established by SFW in 1985, is China's first SF award and honored as the highest achievement in the SF community, chased after by all Chinese SF writers. The China (Chengdu) International Science Fiction Conference, organized by SFW, was born in 1991 and is now held every two years, making it the most international conference in the Chinese SF field. In order to introduce more Chinese writers and works to foreign readers, SFW has also been cooperating with foreign institutions in many ways.

Nowadays, SFW is transforming into a comprehensive SF publishing group which encompasses magazines, books, intellectual properties, SF events and internet commerce. A film and television company was established in 2020 by SFW in order to adapt SF novels into SF films.

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Storycom 微像文化

Storycom, established in 2013, is the first professional story commercialization agency in China. Holding the rights to stories that have won awards including one Hugo, twenty-six Chinese Galaxy Awards, fifteen Chinese Nebula Awards and one Morning Star Award, contracting eight Chinese SF writers, including Xia Jia, Zhang Ran and A Que and fully representing their works, Storycom is dedicated to bringing excellent Chinese SF stories to the domestic as well as global audiences in various formats.

Storycom has produced SF films including *The End of The Lonely Island* (Silver Award for Professional Dramatic Feature at the Raw Science Film Festival, Winner of the Best Drama Award of the 5th Philip K. Dick Film Festival), *The Mailbox* (first place of the Waterdrop Award for Best Film and shortlisted for Golden Goblet Award of Shanghai International Film Festival) and *Deep In*. Storycom has also co-organized events such as the

Galaxy Award Ceremony and China Science Fiction Convention, as well as two Film & TV Venture Capital Summits attached to the latter.

In partnership with *Clarkesworld* from America, *Future Fiction* from Italy, Kapsel from Germany, and *Galaxy 42* from Romania, Storycom has recommended dozens of Chinese SF stories to be translated into other languages and published the first Chinese-English bilingual anthology of Chinese SF – *Touchable Unreality* 1 & 2. The successful Kickstarter project on Xia Jia's first English collection – *A Summer Beyond Your Reach* (in collaboration with Clarkesworld Books), the first all-female/non-binary anthology of Chinese speculative fiction in English – *The Way Spring Arrives and Other Stories* (in collaboration with Tor.com Publishing), and the first non-fiction book on Chinese SF film making – *The Routledge Handbook of The Wandering Earth: Behind The Scenes and Film Production* (part of the Studies in Global Genre Fiction series) will soon come out in English.

Apart from that, Storycom has actively participated in events such as Worldcon, the SFWA Nebula Conference, Smofcon, Eurocon and more. In order to support communication between Chinese SF fans and the international SF community, Storycom has established the Shimmer Program Facebook/Twitter account to introduce Chinese SF, initiated the Shimmer Program Mutual-Communication Fund and the Worldcon Attending Fund.

Situating itself as a pioneer of the Chinese SF industry, Storycom is eager to enlighten the world with the shimmer from stories.

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Tadpole Stave 蝌蚪五线谱

Tadpole Stave (www.kedo.gov.cn) is a large public popular science website supported by Beijing Municipal Government and built by Beijing Science and Technology Association, with a goal to provide high-quality scientific and cultural services to the public, particularly to teenagers.

Tadpole Stave, as one of the most popular publishing platforms for original SF stories, provides a platform for Chinese SF authors and spaces for SF fans.

The "Lightyear Award" Original SF Writing Competition is the second-biggest SF writing competition in China, successfully held annually for nine years.

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Thema Mundi 传茂文化

Thema Mundi is an SF and Artech cultural brand founded by Stanley Qiufan Chen, chairman of the World Chinese Science Fiction Association and multiple Nebula Award winner.

In Stanley Qiufan Chen's eyes, science and technology should not stand on the opposite side of human's well-being. In the upcoming new tech era, only by making technologies more beautiful and warmer and giving 'Aesthetic' more powerful voices could the conflicts between former tech and human nature be alleviated. We advocate the value and dignity of human beings, guiding the public to construct a cultural mindset centered on human beings' development rather than giving priority to financial gains and the life of convenience. We want more and more people to choose to build joyful connections between themselves and nature. We construct a cultural system with SF novels, films, exhibitions, and other art forms to enrich the spiritual life of the public and create popular science work close to the essence of science, empowering the future industry.

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Three-Body Universe 三体宇宙

The Three-Body Universe is an SF/fantasy IP developer and operator built around its Hugo Award-winning core IP – The Three-Body Problem. We strive to collaborate with The Three-Body Problem-loving creatives and top artists across the globe to create diverse forms of art, expanding the Three-Body IP into a full-fledged universe.

The Three-Body Universe is currently in full-scale adaptation mode, with numerous The Three-Body Problem-based products, from an English-language series at Netflix, a Mandarin-language series at Tencent Video, films at Enlight Pictures, an animation series at Bilibili to many more forms and media in the works, including radio drama, audiobooks, a stage play, and location-based exhibitions. Meanwhile, we are also developing designer toys, video games, commercial real estate, theme parks, and other kinds of merchandise, covering all segments in entertainment consumption.

The Three-Body Universe's mission is to introduce The Three-Body Problem to a global audience, engage more and more young people, and turn the Three-Body IP into a world-class SF icon.

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Time Vision 时光幻象

An assembled force of the SF cultural industry emerged in the last decade in China. It is a brand new pattern to provide products, services, and connections to Chinese science fiction (CSF) writers, fans, and the wider community. As one of the CSF career representatives, Chengdu Time Vision Culture Communication Co. Ltd., which is a legal enterprise sponsored by World Chinese Science Fiction Association (CSFA), was founded by an active group of CSF volunteers in 2010. Since then, it has helped CSFA to set up the Xingyun Awards for Global CSF (AKA the Chinese Nebula Awards). Furthermore, it aims to persistently expand the awards' value, influence, and business cooperation. During the past ten years, Time Vision has organized to publish more than 100 CSF books, and held carnivals and awarding ceremonies across China, from Chengdu, Taiyuan, Beijing to Chongqing. The Chinese Nebula Awards winners include works such as The Three Body Problem by Liu Cixin, The Living Trilogy by Wang Jinkang, The Year of Heaven by He Xi, The Hospital Trilogy by Han Song, The Heart of Galaxy Trilogy by Jiang Bo and Waste Tide by Chen Qiufan (aka Stanley Chan). The CSF International Summit 2016 invited Cat Rambo, President of SFWA, Taiyo Fujii, President of SFWJ, and Crystal M. Huff, Co-chair of 75th World SF Convention as guests. Meanwhile, there is the Time Vision CSF Museum based in Chengdu, which displays many original manuscripts, out of print publications, collection and exhibition on cultural heritage, academic study and research on the history of CSF. By overcoming future difficulties, companies such as Time Vision and mass organizations such as CSFA will find a path that leads to accelerating the development of CSF, and ensure that it becomes a peaceful power on this planet.

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Accelerated History: Chinese Short Science Fiction in the Twenty-First Century

Niall Harrison

1. Introduction

This coming August will mark the tenth anniversary of Clarkesworld Magazine's English-language publication of "The Fish of Lijiang" by Chen Qiufan. It's the first-person account of a middle-aged businessman sent to a commercial beauty spot for some forced rest; he is recovering from "time sense compression," an experimental procedure to make him a more productive employee. He meets a woman who has undergone the reverse procedure, enabling her to work as a carer for rich old men who are having their last days stretched out to subjective years. They bond; they go their separate ways.

"The Fish of Lijiang" was not, of course, the first translation of genre science fiction from China into English — there have been occasional stories for decades; just a couple of years earlier, in the first Apex Book of World SF, Lavie Tidhar included stories by Han Song and Yang Ping — but it was still a milestone. It's a neat if-this-goes-on commentary on class, wealth, and labour conditions, and as an ambassador story for Chinese SF, I think it was a smart pick: following on from novels like Lauren Beukes' Moxyland (2008), Paolo Bacigalupi's The Windup Girl (2009) and Ian McDonald's The Dervish House (2010), its sardonic take on a near-future non-Western setting felt comfortably familiar. It went on to win the (short-lived) Science Fiction and Fantasy Translation Award the following year.

It also became the foundation for Clarkesworld's ongoing collaboration with Storycom, a Chinese 'story commercialization agency' with a focus on SF; and it was the first published translation by Ken Liu. Many readers of Vector will be familiar with the outline of what happened next. Liu became a powerhouse of translation — according to his website, he has translated over 50 works to date — and when his translation of Liu Cixin's novel The Three-Body Problem was published in 2014, it became not just the first translated novel to win a Hugo, but a genuine commercial success. A trickle of Chinese SF has

become a healthy and continuous flow, with the volume of new stories, collections and novels probably exceeding the ability of most readers to keep up with it (Figure 1).

That, in part, is the impetus for this review. Here in front of me (physically or virtually) I have most of the collections of work translated from Chinese to English that have been published in the last decade. They include one academic journal issue (Pathlight [2013]); one anthology that is an expansion of a different journal issue (The Reincarnated Giant [2017, expanded from Renditions 77/78, published in 2012]); two anthologies from a genre publisher (Invisible Planets [2016] and Broken Stars [2019], both edited by Ken Liu); and three single-author collections (The Wandering Earth [2013/2017] and Hold Up the Sky [2020] by Liu Cixin, and A Summer Beyond Your Reach [2020] by Xia Jia). There is some overlap between the contents: in total they include 84 stories by 27 authors, accounting for perhaps two-thirds of the total number of stories that have been translated since 2011.

There is some time sense compression going on here for us as readers, as well. These collections, appearing over the course of eight years, include stories drawn from a twenty-year span, and obviously they have not appeared in their original order. The joint-most-recent translations are seven of the stories included in Liu Cixin's second English-language collection, Hold Up the Sky, which was published in the autumn of last year: but in their original publication, five of them predate not just 2011, but the original publication of "The Fish of Lijiang" in 2006. They're a bit like the cryogenic passengers on a slower-than-light starship who discover that they've been overtaken by FTL colonists while they were sleeping. So it struck me that it might be an interesting exercise to break up the collections into their component parts, and read the stories in order of departure date (that is, first Chinese-language publication), rather than arrival.

It's important to be clear about the limits of this exercise. First: there are a large number of stories that are now available in English but have not yet been collected. (In

particular I'm pretty sure Chen Qiufan has enough translated to publish his own single-author collection by now.) With a handful of exceptions, I didn't have time to read any of them. Second, this is not an attempt to characterise the nature of Chinese SF, or even to provide a definitive history of Chinese short SF in the twenty-first century. By the time they reached the books under review, at least four or five filters had been applied: initial editorial selection in Chinese; reader reception in Chinese; selection for translation; initial publication in English; and, for those not commissioned directly for a book, English reception and editorial selection for inclusion. That's far too many sieves to conclude much about the original mix, and wordcount is going to force me to be selective even within the pool I have read. Third, focusing on stories that have been collected imposes a lag factor: the sample includes no stories from 2018, and only one each from 2019 and 2020 (*Figure 2*). Fourth, although there are some exceptions, for the most part there aren't enough data-points to comment on the careers of individual writers, and I've omitted biographical information except where it seemed particularly relevant (there are biographies in all the anthologies considered). Lastly, I'm not qualified to comment on the work of translators [1]; but I have allowed myself to comment on the choices made by editors.

What I hope that looking at the original chronology of stories does do, however, is provide another angle on the portrait of Chinese SF that has been presented to readers in English. To a limited extent it also makes it possible to contrast what was happening in English-language and Chinese-language SF at the same time; to think about the conscious and perhaps less-conscious choices made in the filtering process; and, most optimistically, to notice gaps, and provide a tentative framework within which future translations can be understood. In that spirit, in place of the original collections, I've organised my discussion into some rough periods, but I will revisit the books themselves at the end.

2. Liu Cixin Era

There's nothing Liu Cixin likes more than a big picture, so let's start there. With two single-author collections in the pile — *The Wandering Earth* (2013 / 2017 retranslations) and *Hold Up The Sky* (2020) — it's not a surprise that he is the most-represented author, accounting for one-third of collected stories. In fact the skew is greater the earlier the period you look at. He accounts for over half of the 49 stories that first appeared before August 2011, and nearly three-quarters of the 28 stories that were first published

in 2005 or earlier. In English, the story of Chinese SF in the early twenty-first century is overwhelmingly the story of Liu Cixin.

And to judge by the results of the best-known Chinese SF award, the Galaxy, which is awarded by readers of *Science Fiction World*, this is not without justification. Liu won nine Galaxy awards in eleven years; for comparison, Connie Willis's eleven Hugo wins span from 1983 to 2011, and while Charles Stross received thirteen Hugo nominations in the first decade of this century, he only won two. That said, it's worth noting that for an English-language audience there is some symbiosis at play. One could argue that in English, the Galaxy award is recognised because it has been so integral to promoting Liu's work. *The Wandering Earth*, in both its 2013 Beijing Guomo Digital Technology edition and its largely retranslated 2017 Tor/Head of Zeus edition, has a prominent "Awards List" at its start, highlighting Liu's wins in 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, and 2005; and the 2001 and 2004 wins appear in *Hold Up the Sky*. The remaining two awards are for *The Three-Body Problem* and *Death's End* in 2006 and 2010, respectively — the latter of which also established his commercial dominance in China, and was one of the catalysts for the opening of the translation gates.

In an essay published in a 2013 special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* (co-edited by Wu Yan, probably the leading science fiction academic in China), Liu, who trained and worked as an engineer, offers this bracing opening: "Never did it occur to me that I would ever be this closely associated with the world of literature, especially as I to this day feel no particular fondness for it." The cheap shot about his work is to say that this shows. Take the earliest story of Liu's that is in these collections, for instance. "Contraction" (1999) is a pure idea story. A threshold is approaching — scientists and politicians are gathering to observe the moment at which the universe reaches its maximum expansion, and then begins to contract — and the story consists merely of talking heads explaining to each other what is going to happen and why it matters. As a result, there is a lot of dialogue like this:

> Excitedly, the observatory head welcomes the governor and brings her to Ding Yi. "Why don't we have Professor Ding introduce you to the idea of universal contraction…" He winks at Ding Yi.

"Why don't I first explain what I understand, then Professor Ding and everyone else can correct me. First, Hubble discovered redshifts. I don't remember when. The electromagnetic radiation that we measure is shifted toward the red end of the spectrum. This means, according to the Doppler effect, galaxies are receding from us …"

That wink may as well be directed at the reader: I know you don't care about characters, setting, or plot either; let's just get down to business, shall we? This is indeed the method of someone with no particular fondness for 'literature' as it is generally defined. It's also, of course, a very familiar science fictional method, part of a lineage of which the exemplar may be Isaac Asimov's "Nightfall" (1941), and when the idea is big and striking and compact enough, the result can be potent. "Contraction" can be taken, in part, as a passionate statement of intent, an argument in favour of this method. Part-way through the story, the governor laments that she lives in a different world to the professor:

> "My world is a practical one. No poetry. Bogged down with details. We spend our days bustling around like ants, and like ants, our view is just as limited. Sometimes, when I leave my office at night, I stop to look up at the stars. A luxury that's hard to come by. Your world is brimming with wonder and mystery. Your thoughts stretch across hundreds of light-years of space and billions of years of time. [...] To be frank, Professor Ding, I truly envy you."

Liu's stories are absolutely full of attempts to convey the world that Professor Ding lives in, most literature is not, and if you're not at least a little bit sympathetic to that project, you're probably reading the wrong journal. But if that's *all* you require from your reading, you're also probably reading the wrong journal, and for me at least, "Contraction" falls flat. Most readers, I suspect, will work out what's going to happen before the official big reveal, and it's not an original enough idea (even in 1999) to carry me away by itself. It's not the only story to fail in this way; others are let down by casual worldbuilding sexism; and a few are more strikingly obnoxious.

So reading Liu is, for me, a hit-and-miss affair. When he hits, it's because he's presenting a big idea with the poetic force the governor dreams of; or sometimes literal poetry. In "Cloud of Poems" (2003) [2], a dinosaur-alien takes one of their livestock humans to see a god, to ask why dino-culture seems so technologically stagnant compared with free humanity [3]. The answer is art: the

human's citing of classical Chinese poems intrigues the god to the point where he insists he will master the form, first by reincarnating Li Bai, and then, when that doesn't work, by brute-force writing every possible poem using quantum computing, a process which, as side effects, requires repurposing most of the matter in the solar system and turning the Earth into a hollow sphere. It makes for a majestic vista, at least:

> In place of the solar system was the Cloud of Poems, a spiral galaxy a hundred astronomical units across […] It wasn't that the Cloud itself was made to glow, apparently, but rather that cosmic rays would excite it into silver luminescence. Due to the uneven spatial distribution of the cosmic rays, glowing masses frequently rippled through the Cloud of Poems, their varicolored light rolling across the sky like luminescent whales diving through the cloud. Rarely, with spikes in the cosmic radiation, the Cloud of Poems emitted dapples of light that made the Cloud look utterly unlike a cloud. Instead, the entire sky seemed to be the surface of a moonlit sea seen from below.

This is a little laboured (the repetition of luminscence/luminescent is ungainly), but spectacular nonetheless and, for me, such moments of science-engineering rhapsody are the most consistent pleasure of reading Liu. "Cloud of Poems" finds spiritual companionship in stories like "Sea of Dreams" (2002), in which an ice-sculptor inspires an alien traveller to create a vast and wonderful monument out of the Earth's oceans, or "Mountain" (2006), in which another alien visitor is so massive that they pull the Earth's water into a peak that reaches to the top of the atmosphere, challenging a swimmer to climb it.

But all three stories also highlight competing tendencies in Liu's writing, namely that as often as he is drawn to portraying the impersonal scientific-romance grandeur of the universe, he undercuts it by insisting on the Campbellian primacy of humanity. The whole of "Mountain" is a paean to the outward urge, the necessity of humans in space. In "Sea of Dreams," the ice-sculpture results in an environmental crisis that requires humanity to master mega-technology to save their planet: the purpose of art is to provoke development. And in "Cloud of Poems," the god is ultimately forced to acknowledge he cannot surpass Li Bai because, although he has created every possible poem, he has no way of *finding* a specific poem in his massive database, and so his efforts have been effectively meaningless.

This belief in the righteous human ability to not just know the universe, but to *solve* it, arguably reaches its apotheosis in "Moonlight" (2009). An energy minister receives three calls over the course of one night, all from future versions of himself. The first is from a drowned world, and offers improved solar technology to avert climate disaster — wonderful, we think. But the second call is from the new future that has been created and reveals that the fix, which involves using nanotechnology to convert sand into tiny solar cells, has led to widespread desertification and a different climate collapse. So this time they offer geoelectricity … but you've guessed it, the third call reveals this has led to the collapse of the magnetosphere, and an earth whose surface is scoured by cosmic radiation, forcing humanity to live underground. So the third caller begs our minister to go back to the original timeline: "The choice presented to you the first time may also be the best, but there's no way to know without traveling down other timelines." The moral, clearly, is that technological solutions should not be avoided on the basis of negative effects, because every intervention may have negative effects; the point of technology is to enable progress, so humanity should grasp the opportunities it provides and sort out the secondary problems later; and very literally, anthropogenic climate change is a price worth paying for abundant energy. This would be annoying enough in any context, but as one of the very few Chinese stories to tackle anthropogenic climate change at all, to read an argument so transparently rigged with junk science (geoelectricity just … stops working one day, without warning) is infuriating.

I framed the effect of the Clarkean/Campbellian tension as 'undercutting' earlier, but that's partly because I'm a Clarkean sympathiser. In Liu's best stories — which tend to be novellas, such as "The Wandering Earth" (2000), in which the entire planet is re-engineered as an interplanetary spaceship to escape the sun's growth into a red giant, or "The Village Teacher" (2001), in which a pure golden-age space opera is collided with an attempt at rural Chinese realism — the canvas is big enough, and the vistas are extraordinary enough, to make the exceptionalism easier to swallow, and even to make the tension productive.

His very best, perhaps, is "Sun of China" (2002), a near-future history seen through the life of one farmboy from a Northern province. Shiu migrates urban-wards in search of a better life, and at first his goals, stated at the beginning of each chapter of the novella, are humble: earn a little more money, see brighter lights. But he progresses rapidly through hard work, fearlessness, and lucky contacts, from a shoe-shiner to a skyscraper

window-cleaner, and from there, in a dramatic leap, to one of a team recruited to clean a giant geostationary mirror, the sun of the title. It's framed as a great breakthrough in the industrialisation of space, 'normal' people proving they can do space-set jobs. But Liu does not end the story there. In the late 21st century, when the sun is due to be decommissioned, having been instrumental in the creation of a better world, Shiu helps to retrofit the artefact as the solar sail of an interplanetary vessel. Strikingly, Shiu is a passenger in the story: he is not, as he perhaps would be in the equivalent twentieth-century US SF story, the driver of his own destiny. He is admirable, and has ideas, but many things happen to him, or are enabled by the society he lives in. It's part of Liu's point, I think: humanity has extraordinary potential, but good societies are required for that potential to flourish. In his foreword to *Hold Up the Sky*, Liu states that his goal is "to imagine and describe the relationship between the Great and the Small"; "Sun of China," despite being (relatively!) constrained in time and space, does that as well as anything else he has written.

So that's what Chinese SF of the first part of the twenty-first century looks like to an English-language reader: large-scale imagination, written for true believers. At the same point, UK and US SF were debating the New Weird (can unmixed genres even be interesting any more?) and New Space Opera (can conventional storyforms even be interesting any more?). Perhaps the most striking juxtaposition for me is with Ian R. MacLeod's "New Light on the Drake Equation" (2001), which is, in a sense, about how Liu Cixin's dreams have not come true for the West. In 2002, "Sun of China" would have found itself in dialogue with novellas such as Neil Gaiman's dark YA fantasy *Coraline*; John Kessel's lunar-matriarchy in "Stories for Men"; and Paul di Filippo's weird urban fantasy, *A Year in the Linear City*. I think it would have made for an interesting conversation.

3. The Chinese New Wave
The first year for which translations of stories by Liu Cixin are outnumbered by translations of stories by other writers is 2004; and one of those translations is of "The Demon-Enslaving Flask," by Xia Jia, who is to date the only other Chinese science fiction writer to publish a full-size single-author collection in English [4]. The story is a bit of an oddity in Xia Jia's bibliography: it is a thought experiment about thought experiments. What if James Maxwell had been visited by a literal demon, and Maxwell's speculation about how the second law of thermodynamics could be violated by a creature small enough to sort high- and low-energy gas molecules was actually a

wager with that demon? As the story goes on, we learn that the demon has visited physicists down the generations — and, somewhat endearingly, almost always lost the wagers it agrees to. The best thing about the story is its lightness of touch: it's enough to clearly differentiate it from Liu, who is almost always earnest.

So for English-language readers of these anthologies, 2004 is a moment of transition for Chinese SF. In the larger context, the extent to which Liu Cixin is a solo act, or part of a wave, is debated. He has certainly achieved the most substantial commercial success, and has not obviously inspired a cohort of similarly-minded writers (at least, not that have been translated). However, Mingwei Song has grouped Liu Cixin with not just Xia Jia, but other writers such as Chen Qiufan, Fei Dao, and Zhao Haihong, as part of a "Chinese new wave," seeing "subversive, cutting edge literary experiment" in their work that echoes the anglophone new waves [5]. He acknowledges the term as "controversial," and I do think anyone who comes to their work expecting to read the next Delany, Russ, or Ballard is likely to be disappointed; most of the stories that have been translated are quite conventional in form.

Nevertheless it seems clear that *something* has happened in Chinese SF over the last two decades, as a generation of writers born in the late 70s and 80s have entered their pomp; a "new wave" is as good a way as any to characterise it; and for English readers, the arrival of Xia Jia feels like the next milestone. So the next period I'm going to look at is 2004-2011: the new wave before translation. The 34 stories translated from this period are by fifteen different authors; Liu Cixin is still the most-represented (nine stories), but Xia Jia is not far behind (six stories), and four other authors are represented more than once: Chen Qiufan (three stories), and Hang Song, Ma Boyong, and Cheng Jingbo (two each).

The most obvious thing to say about this cohort of authors is that many of them do clearly feel a fondness for the world of literature. Xia Jia is the archetype here: it's an easy move to position her at the opposite end of a spectrum from Liu Cixin, but it's hard to resist. Compared to Liu's work, the horizons of a Xia Jia story are typically smaller; its characters more rounded; their narrative challenges more conventional. One of my favourites, "Heat Island" (2011), is another of the very small number of stories to address climate change, and the comparison with Liu's "Moonlight" is instructive. "Heat Island" is told in the first person — a rare choice for Liu, who needs the breadth of perspective that third-person can provide. The narrator is a woman who can't sleep on a hot night, recalling a time years ago, when she was

a student preparing for her thesis defense. "So many things happened over that summer," she muses, like a Kazuo Ishiguro narrator. She worked in a meteorology lab alongside a male student studying Beijing's heat island. By the end of the story, it becomes clear that he is actually building a system to control the weather: in Liu's hands, that would probably be the cue for a superstorm, but for Xia Jia the accomplishment is more neutral, its final impact unspecified. The focus is primarily on emotional texture: the tentative and unconsummated navigation of the two characters, the wistfulness of age for youth. Consequently, when the story does focus on its science, the emphasis is on its subjective impact on the narrator:

> The model was now far more impressive than it had been two weeks ago. Gradually, I shifted the perspective, feeling as though I was entering a giant metropolis: everywhere around me coordinates and numbers flashed in phosphorescent green; the sky was a web woven from isobars and isotherms, like the dense peaks of overlapping mountains or a sea of clouds and mist; tiny arrows in various hues dashed and darted hither and thither; flow fields, temperature fields, divergence and vorticity, latent heat flux and vapor flux — everything was connected to everything else through the most rigorous set of equations, order constraining chaos.
>
> I was awed by the harmonious and intricate spectacle, grand and stately. Everything was so beautiful, so beautiful that I held my breath, an artistic soul wearing the guise of a scientific investigator.

"A harmonious and intricate spectacle, grand and stately" could come from a Liu story, but the rest is much more embedded within a perspective than Liu ever gets: Professor Ding's world from the inside, the poetry of the technoscientific mind, not just the poetry of technoscience.

Somewhere around the mid-point of my specious Liu Cixin-Xia Jia spectrum is Chen Qiufan. His aesthetic, as mentioned earlier, feels familiar, jaded, demotic and contemporary. Here's how Lijiang, the rest resort in "Fish," is described:

> The ancient city at night is filled with the spirit of consumerism, but we can't find anywhere we want to go. She has no interest in hearing Naxi folk music played by a robot

orchestra: "Sounds like a braying donkey with its balls cut off." I don't want to see a folk dance demonstration by a bonfire: "Like a human barbecue." In the end we decide to lie down on our bellies by the side of the street, watching the little fish swimming in the waterway.

On its original publication, "The Fish of Lijiang" appeared in the same year as Ian McDonald's "The Djinn's Wife," and Paolo Bacigalupi's "Yellow Card Man," and makes sense in that company. The slightly earlier "The Year of the Rat" (2005) does as well, although it's closer to conventional military SF, and suffers for it: the working-class narrator, his squad-mates of varying types (the smart one, the cruel one), the literally inhuman enemy ("neo-rats") who turns out to not be as inhuman as the narrator has been told, the girlfriend who exists purely as a symbol (and "really had a way of capturing a man's soul" when she took off her makeup) … it's all there. More interesting is "The Endless Farewell" (2011), perhaps because it doesn't have to worry as much about human interaction. A man who has had a stroke, and been paralyzed, is offered a deal by the military: they'll give him an experimental treatment, if he will repay them by mind-melding with what appears to be a sentient deep-ocean worm. He takes them up on it, and the story is about his exploration of their differences or similarities in perception: they experience time physically, and they have interpenetrative hermaphroditic sex, but they share class-based emotional responses to different places.

"Farewell" is also an example of one of the more common themes in the translated stories: the transfer of minds or, sometimes, entire brains. Wang Jingkang's "The Reincarnated Giant" (2005) tackles the topic as a horror-inflected fable, in which a Japanese ("J-nation") captain of industry recruits a neurosurgeon to research and enable a brain transplant to an infant body. Through legal shenanigans, this gets defined as a body transplant — on the basis that the brain is the consistent seat of identity — which means the businessman can continue to administer his financial empire. However, after the operation, a flaw is discovered: the operation has, somehow, disabled the normal limit on human physical growth, with the result that the businessman grows to a gigantic size, eventually collapsing and dying under his own weight. This comes across as a kind of satire on capitalist over-consumption, but there is an odd coyness about the way sex and human biology are described throughout that, I think, limits the story's impact. Meanwhile, Fei Dao's "The Demon's Head" (2007) tackles a similar scenario but as a moral conundrum. This time the brain-in-a-jar is a war

criminal whose body is destroyed in an ambush; when he realises whose brain he has, the operating doctor is horrified, but feels unable to kill. Over time, he finds a way to communicate with the brain, and an intellectual rapport develops: it seems that freedom from embodiment has led to freedom from desire, and hence the brain no longer has the same cruel urges. This is quite provocative: upload/transfer stories tend to assume (as "The Reincarnated Giant" does) that identity is severable from embodiment, and even those that insist on the value of bodies tend to focus on their positive aspects. In "The Demon's Head," the brain ends up on trial, with the court debating to what extent it is culpable for the original human's crimes. The resolution is not comforting. Lastly in this period, in Yang Ping's "Chronicles of the Mountain Dwellers" (2011), we get a more familiar treatment of upload as escape, but within an overall nostalgic frame. The narrator reminisces about hanging out in a "recon" (nerve reconstruction) shop as a teenager; run by a local celebrity, it felt like the future; when he returns as an adult (and as a journalist) he finds it cramped, small, and selling fried chicken as a side-hustle to make ends meet. It turns out the owner has a terminal neurological disease, and made a terrible bargain as a result. The contrast between future potential and melancholy reality is effective.

"Chronicles of the Mountain Dwellers" is also an example of another recurring theme: the consequences of rapid development. It's there in everything from Liu's "The Village Teacher" to Qiufan's "The Fish of Lijiang," but the masterpiece of this subgenre, at least up to 2011, is Han Song's "Regenerated Bricks" (2010). The narrator is the son of a family in an area devastated by an unspecified disaster [6], and one of a number of people who begin making the titular bricks out of the disaster rubble, following the method of an architect whose work has been received internationally (in a savage burn) as a kind of artwork. It transpires that — somehow — the voices of the dead echo from the bricks after their creation; new buildings are filled with ghostly noises. But this is not framed as fantasy. Here's Song's equivalent of the technoscience raptures by Liu and Xia Jia that I quoted earlier:

> But what is regenerated brick? Around this question, the academic world produced any number of definitions, which were often contradictory. [...] In order to resolve this vexing issue, regenerated-brick studies developed into an interdisciplinary field, not restricted to architectural studies. It absorbed the most recent achievements of physics, chemistry, and biology, among others.

Regenerated brick came to be understood as a kind of composite material, a kind of helix based on the energy of shock waves, or even a kind of effect of a Bose-Einstein distribution. It perhaps had to do with high dimensional space, a wormhole in time-space. Regenerated brick had reordered the electromagnetic and gravitational fields, transformed some of the qualities of physical space, and renewed its geometry. All this produced extraordinary results, allowing us to hear the voices of dead relatives.

What I notice here is the uncertainty; not just that how the bricks work is not known, but a sense of postmodern hesitancy that it will ever be known. And despite the mention of Bose-Einstein distributions, this is obviously not rooted in real science in the way that Liu pretends to be and Xia Jia often is; it is science as a human and political process, inseparable not just from immediate human activity (the rebuilding work), but also culture (bricks as artwork), and later on, a cruel commerce ('artisanal bricks' become sought-after). A conceptual acceleration towards the end of the story takes the narrative to some extraordinary, haunting places: "Regenerated Bricks" has a heft that few of the other stories can match.

And Han Song's earlier story in this period, "The Passengers and the Creator," is very nearly as good, a classic metaphoric dystopia that retools some aspects of generation-ship stories to a more immediate context. The nameless narrator has a seat in Economy class of the World, which (it is quickly apparent to us) is a Boeing aircraft that seems to have been in the air for years, flying through continuous night. The World is tightly regimented: a holographic instructor provides education; Economy never visits Business or First (except when women are taken up, and then return pregnant). When, as the result of a birth nearby, the narrator is moved to a new seat, he encounters "18H," a good-looking young man who starts to reveal the true nature of the World. (The queer subtext is never consumated but is notable for even existing). First the cannibals in the luggage hold (!); then the 20,000 other planes in the sky with them; then, finally, the narrator's original identity. The nature of the catastrophe is never fully explained, but it doesn't need to be, the story sustains its weird logic. And there is no advocacy for intrinsic human potential here: the achievement is technological, but not social, and that matters.

"The Passengers and the Creator" was published in 2005, which is the first year from which we have enough stories — eight — to say anything at all about context. It is contemporary with a pair of Liu Cixin stories, "Taking Care of God" and "For the Benefit of Mankind" that read like a try-out for some of the 'dark forest' morality developed in *The Three-Body Problem* and its sequels; Ma Boyong's "The City of Silence," a more conventional and *1984*-like dystopia; "The Year of the Rat"; "The Reincarnated Giant"; and a couple of others. "The Passengers and the Creator" is head and shoulders above all of them, and together with "Regenerated Bricks," indicates that a full collection of Han Song's work is overdue.

4. The Big Bang

Between 2010 and 2014, things happened very quickly. The catalyst seems to have been the commercial success of Liu Cixin's *Death's End* in China, which led to a broader interest in Chinese SF, both in the media and at conferences. In his essay "A New Continent for China Scholars: Chinese Science Fiction Studies," which is printed in *Broken Stars*, Mingwei Song describes a major event on Chinese literature in Shanghai:

> Almost nobody had heard of Chinese science fiction before this conference concluded with a late-afternoon roundtable discussion that gave two SF authors, Han Song and Fei Dao, ten minutes to talk about their genre. [...] I remember I was sitting in front of Yu Hua and Su Tong, two literary giants who kept chatting in low voices. But they suddenly became silent, and they listened attentively when Han Song began to talk about the amazing new development of SF over the past decade, and when Fei Dao strategically linked the contemporary authors' artistic pursuits and social concerns to Lu Xun, the founding father of modern Chinese literature, who was also an early advocate for 'science fiction' (*kexue xiaoshuo*) at the turn of the twentieth century, I could say that the entire audience, during the ten minutes, kept silent and listened with great interest to Han Song and Fei Dao.

> It was a moment that changed the field. July 13, 2010, 3:30pm.

In his remarks, Fei Dao compared Chinese science fiction to a "lonely hidden army," powerful but unrecognised; but it hasn't stayed that way. Following the round-table, Theodore Huters commissioned Song to co-edit an issue

of *Renditions* to be dedicated to translations of Chinese SF, which appeared in 2012 (and in 2017 was revised into *The Reincarnated Giant*); Chen Qiufan approached Ken Liu for an opinion on a translation he had commissioned of "The Fish of Lijiang," and Liu offered to re-do the translation, leading to its publication in Clarkesworld in 2011 — and in autumn 2012, leading to a request for Liu to translate *The Three-Body Problem*. The Chinese Nebula Award — a public vote followed by a panel selection of winners — was also established in 2010. Other projects were also in train, and in Spring 2013 two journal special issues appeared, one of fiction (*Pathlight's* "The Future" issue) and one non-fiction (*Science Fiction Studies* #119), and later that year Beijing Guomi Digital Technologies released a first edition of Liu Cixin's collection *The Wandering Earth*. In other words, by the time *The Three-Body Problem* appeared in English, in November 2014, the stage had been set.

Of the 84 stories I read for this project, about a quarter were first published between 2012 and 2014, in the window when Chinese SF was just beginning to receive sustained English-language attention. None are by Liu Cixin. Five are by Xia Jia; there are two each for Chen Qiufan and Hao Jingfang; and thirteen authors with a single story, making it the most varied few years so far. There is more work by Han Song and Fei Dao: from the former, "Submarines" (2014), a strange short piece in which huge shoals of submarines appear in the Yangtze river and are taken up as temporary housing by the poor of a nearby city; and from the latter, "The Robot Who Liked to Tell Tall Tales" (2014), a picaresque that ranges through space and time to make an argument for the power of imaginative play. And there is more by Chen Qiufan: "The Flower of Shazui" (2012), notable for near-simultaneous publication in English and Chinese, is a pendant to his novel *Waste Tide* (2013 Chinese/2019 English) and shares its flaws [7]; and the much better "A History of Future Illnesses" (2012), which is a striking collection of short-shorts, some of which are a bit If This Goes On — (iPads lead to neurodivergent communities, social media leads to fragmented personalities) and some of which are more radically strange (the arrival into Earth's orbit of a second moon gives rise to a generation with altered metabolism). It's notable that most of the diseases are psychological, or human-transformative in some way, and that (despite what my synopses may lead you to believe) they mostly avoid easy morals.

Xia Jia's stories stand out for starting to develop a shared future history, known as "The Sinopedia," in which ubiquitous AI, VR, and telepresence are collided with existing ways of living. The connections are never the most important aspect of an individual story: "Tongtong's Summer" (2014), for instance, probably one of her better-known stories, works well alone. A young girl watches as a carer robot is brought into her home to help her grandfather. She is the one who figures out that it's not actually a robot, but is instead remotely operated by a human; and over time this leads to a more two-way relationship. It's a fine example of Xia Jia's approach, alert to the nuances of human relationships; and if you later recognise the unnamed narrator of "Goodnight, Melancholy" (2015) as a grown-up Tongtong, undergoing AI therapy for depression, it adds a layer of resonance, but is not essential [8]. Xia Jia's stand-out story from this period, however, is probably "A Time Beyond Your Reach" (2012), a standalone novella, a doomed romance, and an interesting companion-piece to "The Fish of Lijiang."

The story is told by the narrator to her love, in three acts, and until the third, it's not clear that it's speculative at all. In act one, the narrator is a child in a small village in Southern China, and is captivated by a boy she encounters who plays beautiful, somehow time-distorting music, and who lives recklessly even after breaking a leg and starting to use a wheelchair. In act two, a decade later, the narrator has gone to university, and finds that the boy is now there: he has grown up to be something like a demi-god, handsome, smart, popular, athletic, lucky. She describes him as living fast while she is living slow. After a few passing encounters, they share something resembling a date, and a kiss. The language is heightened ("there were fireworks again, resplendent, one bloom after another unfurling in the dark of night, glittering jewels of light and shadow spilling inside, casting wildly across the faded plaster walls [...] Neither the past nor the present existed; there was only this one, eternal, moment"). It should all be soundtracked by Lana del Rey. Eight years on again, and in act three they meet on a highway, eat at a diner, hook up in a motel. (The evocation of American road movies is clearly deliberate). There are two revelations. First, the narrator has spent the past eight years researching metabolism-accelerating technology, which she is using to bring herself up to her boyfriend's speed. Second, he is on the run from the police. She helps him escape. It's a high-wire act, and perhaps not every reader will find it successful. But it worked for me as a character study, of obsession and the yawning gap that can exist between two people when only one of them is desperate to be truly in sync.

The other major writer to have two stories translated and collected in this period is Hao Jingfang. This is a retrospective judgement: I'm confident identifying her as major based on the erudite yet guileless critical-most important aspect of an individual story: "Tongtong's most important aspect of an individual story: "Tongtong's

utopian novel translated into English as *Vagabonds* (2016; published in English in 2020), which describes a period of challenge and change for a Martian colony that in the late 22nd-century has been independent for forty years. Her stories share the same careful, compassionate approach to exploring how we should try to live. "Folding Beijing" (2014), a deserving Hugo-winner, is the best known: a dystopia in which Beijing has been reorganised to apportion time and geography according to wealth. Third space is active from 10pm to 6am, and responsible for waste processing; second space exists in the same geography, but from 6am to 10pm, and is blue-collar and administration; and first space, which has a fraction of the population of the other two, is white-collar and has a full day at its disposal. At each transition, the inhabitants of a given space go to sleep, and their buildings fold down and away to let the next inhabitants wake up. So for English readers, it's another critique of urban divisions reminiscent of *The City & The City* but — very notably, and characteristically of Chinese SF — confident enough to apply its transformation to an actually existing place.

Very nearly as good, "The Last Brave Man" (2013) [9] is Jingfang's take on the consciousness-transfer tale discussed above. It begins with a man on the run: first in eerie quiet, then under fire. He reaches and takes shelter in a warehouse, where he has a conversation with a worker. It turns out they are both clones. The man on the run is the 47th clone of a man who espoused the banned political theory of "independent individualism" — that is, clones have their own identities, separate from that of their progenitor — and the authorities are trying to eradicate his genetic profile. (Savour the ironies in that situation). The worker is the 32nd clone of a worker. They debate the limits of identity, what they are capable of, and what they owe their progenitors, intellectually and morally. End scene. In the morning the 47th clone is handed over to the authorities and executed. Then the narration skips a couple of generations: the world has hardened further into dystopia. "Genetic selection means that differentiation between personal abilities becomes even more pronounced [...] everyone feels content within their role and thus blends into the world." Under a waterfall, the 35th clone of the warehouse worker tells the 36th a great secret: that warehouse workers have been selected for memory and the ability to retain information; and then he passes on the 47th clone's genetic profile, orally, to await the day he can be recreated. The reversals and revelations are expertly paced, and leave enough space for a serious-minded depiction of clone identity. As with Han Song, I'm impatient for a collection.

5. Convergence

The hidden army is now fully visible. Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* won the Hugo Award for Best Novel in 2015; Hao Jingfang's "Folding Beijing" won Best Novelette in 2016 [10]. Rapid translation and anthologisation of new work is common. There are fourteen stories in my sample that were first published in Chinese between 2015 and 2020, and all of them — by definition — have appeared in English in the same timeframe; a couple of them have even appeared in English first. Once again, the most-represented author, with six of fourteen stories, is Xia Jia; there is one from Liu Cixin this time, but it's a chapter adapted from *The Three-Body Problem* (the one with the medieval soldier-computer, which if you haven't read it, is exactly as neat as it sounds). The remaining seven are a grab-bag, but more Xia Jia-like than they are Liu Cixin-like.

There is a short, nastily ambiguous tale about dreams and destiny by Tang Fei ("Broken Stars," 2016); there are minor stories by Han Song ("Salinger and the Koreans" [2016], which probably requires me to know more and care more about J.D. Salinger than I do) and Hao Jingfang ("The New Year Train" [2017], about how we perceive our progress through time) and there is a short, effectively ambiguous consciousness-transfer story by Regina Kanyu Wang ("The Brain Box," 2019). There's also one of Chen Qiufan's better stories, "The Coming of the Light" (2015): an antic anti-heroic piece which starts out with the marketing manager protagonist coming up with a profoundly sexist campaign for an image-authentication app (advertise to 'loser' men by showing them how the app can reveal the 'truth' about retouched photos of women), and via a backlash that doesn't quite ring true (women are said to object to "the hoary trope of treating a woman's right to pursue beauty as a twisted form of narcissistic deceit") escalates into some much more interesting techno-Buddhist weirdness.

Xia Jia's entries range from "Night Journey of the Dragon Horse" (2015), which is an evocative post-apocalyptic fantasia inspired by an actually existing metal-and-resin mechanical creature created as an East-meets-West tourist attraction in Nantes, through a couple of short sharp riffs such as "Tick Tock" (2015), which imagines the recursive use of personality copies as workers (an actor who thinks he's real but is a copy of a director who thinks he's real who is a copy of etc.), to a pair of lovely, low-key emotive tales.

"Duet of Love" (2019) is the more recent story, and an effective summing-up of Xia Jia's strengths and weaknesses. The biological/chemical basis of love is now understood, and a "love lock" is applied to children, who

can decide whether or not to remove it when they reach eighteen (and not everyone does). They still form bonds; they still have feelings; they still have sex; but the specific emotional vortex we call romantic love is absent, which, everyone believes, make chilldhoods and teenage years calmer and healthier. The story is epistolary, and begins with a student asking her professor about old art: is that really how the world was? But over the course of their correspondence, she admits there is more going on. She had agreed to open her lovelock on the same day as a male childhood friend, on their shared birthday, but he wants to delay. Should she wait for him, as a marker of their friendship? She thinks the professor will have the answer because of his own happy relationship — but it turns out the professor never unlocked. Love escapes biology; or in Greek terms, there is more to love than eros. The correspondence is Xia Jia at her best; but the ending perhaps appeals a little too much to the ineffable human spirit for my taste.

"Light of Their Days" (2015) is set in 2025, the 80th anniversary of the end of the second Sino-Japanese war, and is written with the self-investigative feel of autofiction: the narrator's veteran grandmother is being publicly celebrated, but the narrator isn't sure how to handle it. So, in search of understanding, she sifts through the public timeline of her grandmother's life; visits a virtual memorial and talks to an old man there; and finally visits her grandmother, who turns out to be enjoying an app that brings old photos to life, with motion and depth, and finding a measure of peace through it. This story, more than any other, embodies the shift in feel over twenty years of stories, from Liu Cixin to Xia Jia, from cheerleading for the abstract concept of progress to the work of understanding its concrete impact.

I want to end as I began, however, by discussing a time-inversion tale. Baoshu's "What Has Passed Shall in Kinder Light Appear" (2015) is the lengthy, witty, fully-realised, *literary* counterpart to Liu's schematic "Contraction." It's one of the stories that appeared first in English (in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*), but puts paid to any notion that such convergence might diminish the distinctiveness of Chinese SF. The idea, originating from an online message-board discussion and summarised by the author in a note appended to the story, is that "while each person lives their life forward, the sociopolitical conditions regress backward." It begins when the narrator is born on a day when "strange flashing lights appeared in the sky all over the globe [but] in the end, nothing happened." And for a few pages we might agree with the narrator's assessment of the situation. But then, while the narrator is a child, the Arab Spring is

followed by the financial crisis, is followed by the SARS pandemic [11]; and by the time the Irag/Afghanistan war ends with 9/11, we've figured out what's going on.

Obviously the premise requires a certain amount of hand-waving — the concept of "history" as it exists in this timeline is not very clearly examined; Marxism exists even though Marx is in the world's future) — but it's consistently clever enough to forgive, as when the USSR emerges from the failures of 'reforming' capitalist governments, and rich enough in the detail of the narrator's personal life that it's easy to feel the reality of events. And there are jokes, not just a litany of regression: a remake is deemed superior to a childhood favourite, despite the worse special effects; and while on a visit to New York, the narrator gets to see *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*: "to re-experience the wonder of my childhood memories, I bought an expensive ticket. But Episode IV turned out to be far less spectacular than the previous three …"

The kernel of the story is reached when Sartre visits China after the Cultural Revolution, and discusses the condition of history with the narrator: the world, he says, is absurdist, progress is not a given, and so on:

> Whatever direction time takes, what meaning does all this have? The world exists. Its existence precedes essence because its very existence is steeped in nothingness. It is absurd regardless of the order of events within it. Perhaps you're right — had time picked another direction, the universe would be very different [...] but such a universe would not be any better. In the end, joy belongs to those who are born in times of joy, and suffering belongs to those born in times of suffering.

Perhaps for this project I should have read all the stories in reverse order from 2020 back to 1999. I wonder what patterns would have emerged then.

6. Conclusions

I promised to bring it back to the books in the end. Of the single-author collections, it's probably not a surprise that I prefer Xia Jia to Liu Cixin. I don't actually think *A Summer Beyond Your Reach* is that well-organised — it opens with a trio of stories I think are among her weaker efforts — but the core of the collection is a suite of thoughtful, humane near-future stories after the fashion of Maureen McHugh, and there's never enough of that to go around. If you do like the sound of Liu's fiction, I'd probably go for *The Wandering Earth* over *Hold Up the Sky*, on the grounds that it includes "Sun of China," plus the title story. In addi-

tion, you can get the "The Village Teacher" and "Cloud of Poems" — albeit in perhaps slightly less polished translations — in *The Reincarnated Giant*, which is my pick for the best of the anthologies.

That might be a contentious statement, so it deserves a bit of justification. I think the Spring 2013 *Pathlight* is probably only for completists, although it does include good work by Chen Qiufan ("The Endless Farewell"), Yang Ping ("Chronicles of the Mountain Dweller"), and Hao Jingfang ("The Last Brave Man"). But it was a surprise even to me to find that when I made my list of recommended stories, there were barely any from Ken Liu's anthologies, *Invisible Planets* and *Broken Stars*. More than that, only four of the fourteen were actually translated by Liu — significantly out of proportion to his actual contribution.

In one sense, perhaps it shouldn't be surprising. Reading by language isn't (or shouldn't be) like reading by theme, subgenre, or author; there is no particular reason to expect that just because I like one story in English, that I will therefore like all stories in English. So anthologies built around translation from a specific language should be treated even more than most anthologies as a sampling buffet: it's not a knock on the spread if you don't like everything. *The Reincarnated Giant* includes three novel excerpts, none of which really work for me; but it also includes two of the most notable Liu Cixin stories, Xia Jia 's debut ("The Demon-Enslaving Flask"), the two magisterial Han Song stories ("Regenerated Bricks" and "The Passengers and the Creator"), plus more that I haven't discussed: a delicate historical by Zhao Haihong ("1923: A Fantasy"), a short but rich post-human ecology ("The Rain Forest" by Chi Hui), and a brazen far-future riff on nationalism ("Songs of Ancient Earth" by Baoshu). It ranges broadly and deeply; it's a challenging and rewarding book to work through.

Invisible Planets is, deliberately, not challenging. It is framed as "an introduction," and opens with three stories by Chen Qiufan, the writer whose rhythms are most familiar to an anglophone audience. (*The Reincarnated Giant* throws you straight in with "Regenerated Bricks"). In his introductory notes, Ken Liu is also at pains to tell his readers how *not* to read the stories: to resist framing them as 'representative,' and resist understanding them through a specific, national framing. This reaches a state of near-parody when it comes to Ma Boyong's "City of Silence," where we are urged to avoid reading a dystopian tale of language and thought censorship, which was itself altered to avoid Chinese censorship, as

being about Chinese censorship. Obviously it is not *only* about that, because no story worth reading is only about one thing. But Liu's framing of it borders on denial.

And here's the rub of it: not only do I think I understand why Liu felt he had to do things this way, I think he was right, because I think it worked. He was introducing work to a field not known for its literary adventurousness [12], and that was at the time in a peak of racist backlash against the progress of writers like Liu himself, and he got the writers he was promoting two Hugo awards. The framing he had to use to get us to accept what he was offering is on us, not him; but for me, reading it now, in *Invisible Planets*, his approach resulted in a somewhat milquetoast collection, with only a few high-points (notably "Folding Beijing," which is not in any of the other anthologies). By the time of *Broken Planets* the tone has loosened up a bit, and he has a larger page-count to play with: it's still a little frustrating, however, that he frames "What Has Passed Shall in Kinder Light Appear" as a risky, challenging tale for English-language readers, rather than simply introducing it as the magisterial piece it is.

All of which is really a way of reiterating one of the limitations I highlighted at the start of this piece. What I've discussed here is not a portrait of Chinese SF; it's a filter of a filter of a filter of a filter of Chinese SF. There are writers we are told are significant in China, who have not been translated in sufficient volume or with sufficient impact to achieve equal significance in English (Han Song would be one; Wang Jingkang, even more so). The sample is not as gender-imbalanced as you might fear, with thirteen different women translated against sixteen different men, which compares favourably to a background rate of about 33% of translations being by women [13]. However, nine of the men are represented by more than one story, against only four of the women. Queer representation is almost entirely absent, although that is due to be partially rectified by Tor's next major anthology, in 2022 [14]. Climate fiction is also, as noted earlier, a striking gap: although on that front the same could be said of much English-language SF of the last twenty years.

So will my periodisation hold up? Probably not, except in the broadest strokes. That 2010 conference really did happen, after all; Liu Cixin really did win nine Galaxy awards in eleven years. But that's why what I'm looking forward to most is not just finding out what happens next — and I do think the speed at which contemporary work is being brought to us in English is incredible and admirable — but filling in more of the gaps.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

[1] With apologies, I'm not even going to mention every translator for every story, although in cases where a story has been translated more than once, I'll specify which version I'm discussing. Suffice to say that although Ken Liu dominates with 39 attributed translations (plus, more than likely, some from the 2017 edition of *The Wandering Earth* that are not individually assigned), I counted 32 other individuals who translated one or more stories, and as readers we are in their debt: Adam Lanphier, Adrian Thieret, Brian Holton, Bruce Humes, Cara Healey, Carlos Rojas, Carmen Yiling Yan, Chen Zeping, Cheuk Wong, Chi-Yin Ip, Christopher Elford, David Hull, Emily Xueni Jin, Holger Nahm, Jesse Field, Jiang Chenxin, Jie Li, Jingling Chen, Joel Martinsen, John Chu, Karen Gernant, Katherine Poundstone, Linda Rui Feng, Nathaniel Isaacson, Nicky Harman, Pang Zhaoxia, Petula Parris-Huang, Poppy Toland, Rebecca Kuang, Theodore Huters, Thomas Moran, and Zac Haluza.

[2] I am here considering the 2020 translation by Carmen Yiling Yan in *Hold Up the Sky*, not the 2012 translation by Chi-Yin Ip and Cheuk Wong in *Renditions / The Reincarnated Giant*, which was titled "The Poetry Cloud." In addition, unless otherwise specified, all references to stories collected in *The Wandering Earth* are to the 2017 edition, not the 2013 edition.

[3] "Cloud of Poems" is, for reasons that are unclear, written as a very loose sequel to the silly and nihilistic "Devourer" (2002), which is a military adventure describing how humanity is conquered by the aforementioned dino-aliens and their great planet-devouring ring machine. It can be safely skipped.

[4] A short collection by Han Song, *A Primer to Han Song*, was published by Dark Moon Books in September 2020, but not seen in time for this review. It contains six stories (three reprints, three new translations by Nathaniel Isaacson), as well as a comprehensive bibliography of Han Song's fiction (in both Chinese and English).

[5] See Song 2015 and Song 2016, as well as the introduction to *The Reincarnated Giant.*

[6] The story is likely inspired by the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, which killed over 69,000 people, injured nearly 400,000, and left at least 4.8 million people homeless, and was followed by a massive investment plan (worth about US$146bn) to redevelop the affected areas.

[7] This is not the place for a full review, but *Waste Tide* is a visceral near-future thriller, set on an island where electronics recycling has led to both human and environmental ruin. The setting is compelling: the narrative less so, and the struggle that some of Qiufan's short stories have to depict rounded female characters seemed to me unpleasantly exaggerated in the novel.

[8] So far as intertextuality goes, "Goodnight, Melancholy" also contains a footnote about Liu Cixin that I'm pretty sure is an in-joke about "Cloud of Poems," but does also sound like something he might do.

[9] "The Last Brave Man" appears in the Spring 2013 *Pathlight*. my ebook edition does not provide previous publication attributions for any of its contents. Based on a cross-check of the Internet SF Database (www.isfdb.org/) and the Chinese SF Database (csfdb.scifi-wiki.com/), I'm reasonably confident that it's original to the anthology and thus a 2013 story, but not certain.

[10] It's hard not to look at the Hugo ballots of 2015 and 2016 and note that both Liu Cixin and Hao Jingfang were competing against Sad Puppy-blighted shortlists, with only one genuine alternative to

each. But both *The Three-Body Problem* and "Folding Beijing" are, in themselves, notable works; they would have been worthy winners even in a full-strength field.

[11] "During those months in the shadow of SARS, the adults had gloomy expressions and sighed all the time. Everyone hoarded food and other consumables at home and seldom went out — when they did, they wore face masks."

[12] You may question my focus on Liu here as the driver of this effort, given that I am simultaneously championing *The Reincarnated Giant*, much of which was first published in 2012. The simple truth is that an academic journal, or an anthology from an academic publisher, do not have as much impact as a string of translations from an already high-profile writer in one of the most prominent online magazines and from one of the most prominent genre publishers.

[13] This is a number for all literary translations, based on "Women in Translation by Country" data collated by the Three Percent blog.

[14] *The Way Spring Arrives and Other Stories,* edited by Yu Chen and Regina Kanyu Wang, will be published in Spring 2022, and focus on women and nonbinary creators. The announced line-up looks strong, with stories by Xia Jia, Zhao Haihong, and among others Chi Hui — although sadly no Hao Jingfang.

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Hold Up the Sky by Liu Cixin (Head of Zeus 2020: ISBN 9781838937638)

A Summer Beyond Your Reach by Xia Jia (Wyrm Publishing 2020: ISBN 9781642360394)

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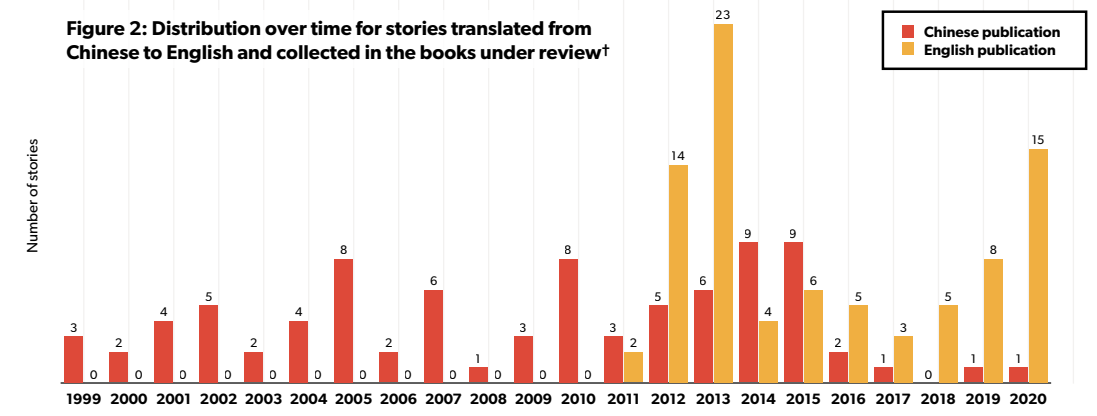## Recommended stories and where to find them

"Sun of China" by Liu Cixin (2002; 2013 trans. not specified, *The Wandering Earth*)

"The Thinker" by Liu Cixin (2002; 2020 trans. John Chu, *Hold Up the Sky*)

Figure 1: Selected milestones for Chinese science fiction translated into English in the 21st Century
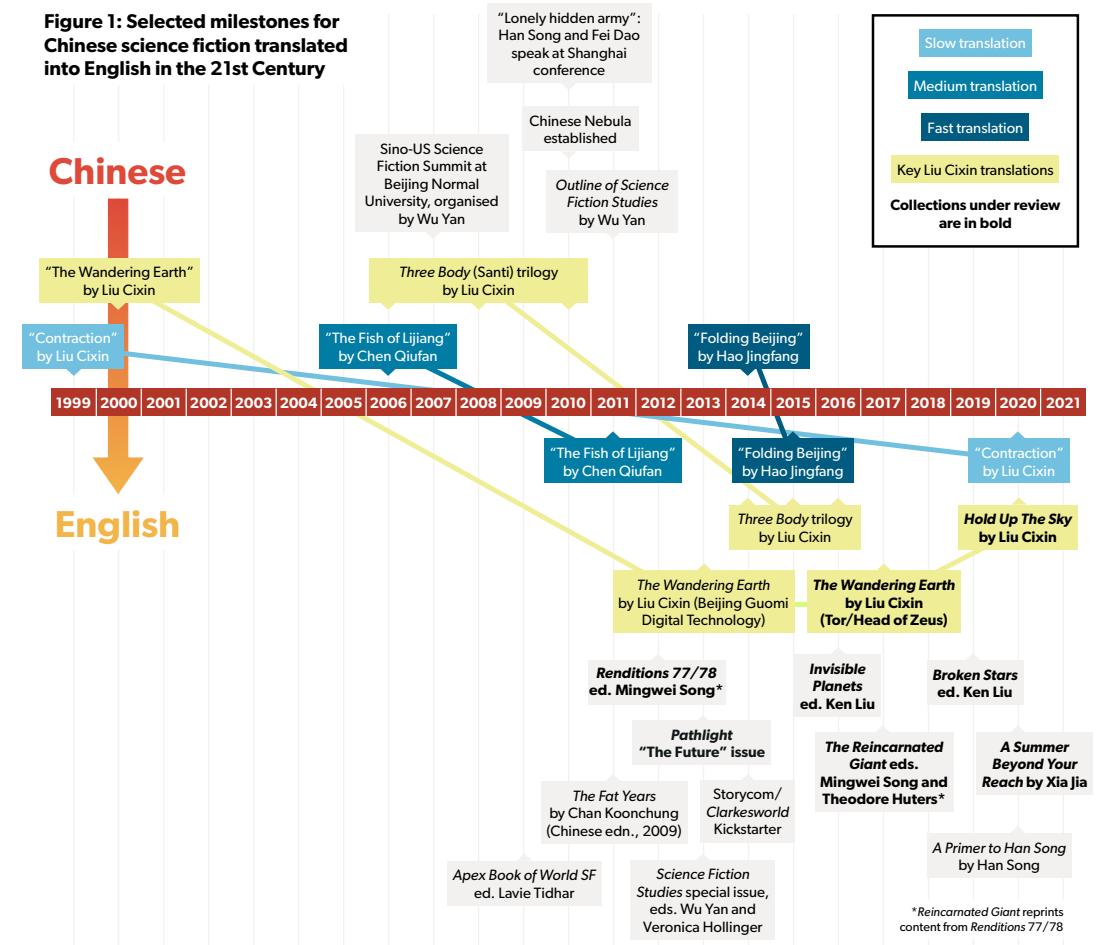
Figure 2: Distribution over time for stories translated from Chinese to English and collected in the books under review†

†This figure only shows the first translation of stories that have subsequently been collected in a book, or which first appeared in a book; hence the 2013/20 English-language peaks.

"Cloud of Poems" by Liu Cixin (2003; 2020 trans. Carmen Yiling Yan, *Hold Up the Sky*). Also translated as "The Poetry Cloud" by Chi-Yin Ip and Cheuk Wong (2012 *Renditions*, 2017 *The Reincarnated Giant*)

"The Passengers and the Creator" by Han Song (2005; 2012 trans. Nathaniel Isaacson, *Renditions*). Reprinted in *The Reincarnated Giant*

"The Demon's Head" by Fei Dao (2007; 2012 trans. David Hull, *Renditions*). Reprinted in *The Reincarnated Giant*

"On Miluo River" by Xia Jia (2010; 2020 trans. Emily Jin, *A Summer Beyond Your Reach*)

"Regenerated Bricks" by Han Song (2010; 2017 trans. Theodore Huters, *The Reincarnated Giant*)

"Heat Island" by Xia Jia (2011; 2015 trans. Ken Liu, *Pathlight*). Reprinted in *A Summer Beyond Your Reach*

"A Time Beyond Your Reach" by Xia Jia (2012; 2020 trans. Carmen Yiling Yang, *A Summer Beyond Your Reach*)

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Cao Fei, *Asia One*, 2018, Video, 63'20". Courtesy the artist, Vitamin Creative Space and Sprüth Magers.