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China Turns Outward: On the Literary Significance of Liu Cixin's Science Fiction

Edited and translated by Nathaniel Isaacson

From the moment *The Three-Body Problem* (English translation, 2014) won the Hugo Award and global renown, the cultural and academic spheres have lavished increasing attention on Liu Cixin and his writing. *THE THREE-BODY TRILOGY*, in the midst of its canonization, is not merely an exemplary work of Liu Cixin the individual author; it is also the greatest accomplishment of Chinese sf since its resurgence in the 1990s. Beyond this, astute scholars have pointed out that Liu Cixin's sf writing has kindled hopes of "rebuilding the totality" of comparatively circumscribed mainstream Chinese literature. The uniqueness of Liu Cixin's science fiction and its historical significance are not given their due if they are understood only in terms of the development of the twenty-first-century literary field. Looking backward through the lens of characteristic features of Liu Cixin's sf to the developmental history of Chinese literature from the early twentieth century onward engages a new historical perspective on areas (especially sf and other marginal genres) ignored or given short shrift by previous literary histories.

Prior to the late Qing, aside from religious and fantastic writing and a smattering of poetic travel writing, the subject matter of Chinese literature rarely strayed from the homeland. A handful of works chronicling foreign lands, such as *Shanhai jing* [The Record of Mountains and Seas, anon., c. 4th-1st-century BCE],¹ Wu Cheng'en's *Xiyou ji* [Journey to the West, 16th century), and Li Ruizhen's *Jinghua yuan* [Flowers in the Mirror, 1827] still painted the lands beyond the reaches of Sinitic imperial rule as places of odd customs and queer traditions, inhabited by exotic birds and strange beasts, or even as mystical heterotopias. Only in the wake of the late Qing transformation of knowledge and outlook that necessitated "opening [our] eyes to the world" (*kai yan kan shijie*)² did realistic writing about the world beyond China's borders and an attention to foreign customs take hold. While travelogues chronicling journeys abroad enjoyed a brief heyday, the late Qing enthusiasm for novelistic accounts of the world is even more instructive. Liang Qichao's reformist periodical, *Xinmin congbao* [New Citizen, 1902-1907], published during his exile in Japan, would go on to be the vanguard of China's turn to twentieth-century literary revolution. An ad for the journal that appeared in volume 14 of "China's only literary journal: *New Fiction*" enumerated fifteen individual genres slated to appear in Liang's journal. Under the banner of

“political fiction,” Liang Qichao offered this synopsis of his own novel, *The Future of New China* (1902):

This story begins during the Boxer Uprising, narrating forward through fifty years from now. Through imaginations and inversions, it recounts a history that seems entirely as if one were there in the flesh to experience it firsthand. In terms of plot, it begins when a province in the south declares independence, and the brave heroes of the nation [China] ally with them to establish a constitutional republican government and then negotiate and ratify a peace treaty with all the nations of the world. A few years later, the rest of the provinces follow suit and declare their independence, many of them establishing republics. Through the valiant efforts of these heroic figures, they unite as a federated republic. The three provinces in the east opt for a constitutional monarchy, joining the federation soon after. The people of these many nations are united with a single heart in pursuit of national development. The glory of their *belles-lettres* and the wealth of national strength surpasses the entire world. When the question of Tibet and Mongolia leads to a war with Russia, they join forces with England, the US, and Japan through diplomatic means, dealing a severe defeat to the Russian Army. A faction of political activists among the people then privately ally themselves with Russian nihilists in order to carry out a coup against the government. Finally, because of the mistreatment of the “yellow” races on the part of England, the US, Holland, and other nations, a race war erupts and the US and Europe unite against us. In response, the Yellow Nations unite with China leading an alliance with Japan, the Philippines, and other countries mustering their troops. As the war ends, the Hungarians broker a peace treaty resolving the conflict. It concludes in the Chinese capital where the international community holds a peace conference. The book ends when China’s Prime Minister, serving as chairman, establishes the equality of the white and yellow races, their mutual harmony, and other such provisions.³

Although *The Future of New China* cuts off abruptly at the end of the fifth chapter and never describes the great military confrontation, Liang Qichao’s reveries laid the foundation for a notable new literary imagination. The Middle Kingdom was no longer synonymous with All Under Heaven (*tianxia*, i.e., the whole world), instead becoming one state in the “international community” (*wanguo*) and becoming a competitor on the world stage alongside other nations (some of whom were more powerful than China). Narrating and imagining this Spring and Autumn (771-476 BCE)/Warring-States (475-256 BCE)-like world—rife with intrigue and competition among states for global hegemony—became a pressing matter for literature. According to Liang’s list of genres, aside from political fiction, philosophical science fiction, military fiction, adventure, and even historical fiction, there were numerous narrative forms that unfolded on the world stage. In keeping with this line of thinking, Liang’s *The Future of New China*, Jules Verne’s *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* [Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea, 1870], Camille Flammarion’s *La Fin du Monde* [The End of the World, 1893], and similar narratives and translations featuring a global outlook appeared in the inaugural October 1902 issue of *New Fiction* (1902-1904), another of Liang Qichao’s reform-oriented editorial endeavors.

Drawing upon such influences, late Qing novelists broadened their imaginative horizons. Biheguan Zhuren's novel *Huangjin shijie* [The Golden Realm] was published in 1907 and his *Xin jiyuan* [The New Era] appeared in 1908. In terms of content, the latter is derivative of the summary of *The Future of New China*, while the former drew inspiration from an ad for *Xin taoyuan* [The New Peach Blossom Springs] (also known as *Haiwai xin Zhongguo* [New China Abroad])—a novel Liang Qichao advertised in *New Citizen* (18 Aug. 1902) but failed to actually write. Other works that “looked abroad”—such as Cai Yuanpei's *Xinnian meng* [Dream of a New Era, 1904], Wu Jianren's *Xin shitou ji* [The New Story of the Stone, 1904], Lu Shi'e's *Xin yesou puyan* [Mad Ramblings of a Dotard, 1909], and Gaoyang Shi Bucaizi's *Dian shijie* [Electric World, 1909]—were influenced by *The Future of New China*. As conditions deteriorated, literati feverishly imagined how a strengthened China could remake the global order. As well as a utopian spirit born of the fusion of Darwinian and Great Unity thinking, the enduring image of China as the leader of the Celestial Empire played a critical role.⁴

The literary trend in “turning to the outside world” suffered a setback during the Republican era (1912-1949). Political instability and warlordism characterized the nation's dismal reality, and many who had pinned their hopes on constitutional reform fell into despondent silence. Some journalist-authors refocused their efforts on urban entertainment writing, and literary examinations of world affairs were confined to anarchist utopianism.⁵ After the New Culture Movement—which advocated social, political, and literary reform in the name of democracy and scientific modernization—began in the mid-1910s, self-critical writings trended toward examinations of the national life and spirit. Whether writing of the countryside or the self, May Fourth Chinese literature was universally introspective. Although Zhou Zuoren advocated “individualistic humanism” and “considerations of humankind's common fate,” he also noted that “there are moments in our writing when we tend to write about China, a place we see and hear more clearly.”⁶

This is not merely a question of trends in literary realism. To be clear, intellectuals during this period, both recognized scholars and naïve young students, all emphasized the establishment of a nation-state founded on the transition from a focus on the individual to a focus on the collective. From the very beginning, modern Chinese literature drew inspiration from the outside world and did not lack stories of foreign lands. These stories included travelogues such as Qu Qiubai's *Chidu xinshi* [Spiritual Journey to the Red Capital, 1924], Zhu Ziqing's *Ou you zaji European* [Travel Diary, 1931], and Xu Jie's *Yezi hyue liulian* [Coconut and Durian, 1931]. They also included Yu Dafu's “Chenlun” [Sinking, 1921], Lao She's *Erma* [The Two Mas, 1929], and Ai Wu's *Nanxing ji* [Journey to the South, 1935]. When these works did not center principally on Chinese hardship and consternations, however, they tended to use foreign territories merely as backdrops in romanticized stories of the strange, as in the case of writers such as Xu Xu (Xu Chuancong) and Wuming Shi (literally, “Anonymous,” pen name of Bu Ning). Readers endowed with a truly global perspective were essentially limited to stories of

other places, such as Lao She's "Xiaopo de shengri" [Little Po's Birthday, 1929] and Ba Jin's "Wangming" [Exile, 1927] (see Shen Qingli 110-25).

As the national crisis dragged on, only stalwart anarchists such as Ba Jin were able to break away from the subject of the nation's fate, being suspicious of artificial differentiations among races, nationalities, and nation-states. He adhered to Zhou Zuoren's exhortation from 1920 that "the only truth I recognize is that humanity exists on the grand scale, and that on the small scale there is me" ("Xin wenxue de yaoqiu" [The Requirements of New Literature], 1). As in Tan Sitong's *Exposition of Benevolence* (1899), there is apparent in Ba Jin's work a yearning that "the earth be governed in such a way that there is only one world, but no states.... If there were no states, there would not be any boundaries, wars, suspicion, jealousy, power struggles, distinction between the self and others, and equality would emerge" (Tan Sitong 367).

After the establishment of the PRC, the literary field renewed its outlook on the world; this was inextricably intertwined with state leadership and support. Because the state saw translation as a fundamental aspect of a great new cultural wave and placed high value upon literary translation, the mission of bringing foreign works to a Chinese audience progressed rapidly, especially in the case of the oft-neglected Asian, African, and Latin American literary fields; a prodigious expansion occurred (Ji and Liu 151-71). At the same time as the now-institutionalized literary environment brought literature from around the world pouring into China, however, it also placed limits on native authors' literary production. Although famous authors had many opportunities to avail themselves of visits abroad, these cultural exchanges were often limited to an official capacity, with authors writing on assignment.

In comparison to mainstream literature, those answering the call to "march toward science"⁷ through a resurgence of sf writing were less constrained by the limitations of literary realism, and indeed had the opportunity to imagine the changes wrought in a socialist China in the wake of modernization. Espionage stories such as Wang Guozhong's *Heilonghao shizong* [The Missing Black Dragon Battleship, 1963] and Qiu Jianmin's *Bianfang anshao* [Hidden Sentry at the Border, 1961] never broke free of the formula of technological salvation that prevailed in sf from the late Qing period through the Republican era. Zheng Wenguang's award-winning short story *Huoxing jianshezhe* [Pioneers of Mars, 1957] took this a step further in exploring a magnificent mission for all humanity. In the story, the captain of the Mars mission Xue Yinqing recalls many years later that

We would develop Mars into a second home for humanity that would go on to serve as a base for humankind to conquer the universe. This lofty ideal began to take root in this moment ... and later, as perhaps you already know, fifty-one countries joined in this heroic undertaking. At that time, the wave of "marching toward Mars" practically blanketed the Earth. (Zheng 26)

Development on Mars inaugurates a new era: "Life churns and people struggle—the era of humanity becoming master of the natural world beyond planet Earth has begun" (26). This brings to mind Cai Yuanpei's vision of a

society of Great Unity from more than five decades earlier: after the elimination of nation-states,

a society for conquering nature will emerge. When human beings no longer fight with one another, everyone shall join forces in the struggle with nature.

We shall make rain and sunshine, heat and cold heed humankind's command, and we shall dispatch ourselves into the heavens to colonize the planets. In this, humanity's spirit of competition comes to realization. (Cai Yuanpei 241-42)

In the epoch of socialism's proliferation and the attendant optimism that science and technology would result in great benefits for humanity, the sense of a human collective that had persisted since the late Qing saw a resurgence in the writings of Zheng Wenguang, and works of the imagination were challenged to address the contradictions between socialism and capitalism. Of course, in the discursive milieu of the Cold War-era, such contradictions were often addressed through a different mode of emotional catharsis in visions of the East overcoming the West. Nevertheless, literary works imbued with such radical imaginings, such as the hand-copied manuscript *Xiangei disanci shijie dazhan de yongshi* [An Offering to the Heroes of WWII, 1969], would only finally emerge when conventions in thought and writing were torn asunder during the Cultural Revolution.

Moving into the post-Mao era of Reform and Opening Up initiated under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping in 1978, as China moved away from a planned economy and state supervision of enterprise, intellectual culture aligned closely with economic and political liberalization. On the one hand, there was a broad acculturation and adaptation of artistic and academic advances, primarily from the Western world. On the other hand, especially in the literary field, grand narratives were gradually supplanted in a turn towards the individual, the personal, and the fragmentary in writing. As Cheng Guangwei has observed in his recollection of post-1985 Chinese fiction, "we are still yet to see a character who believably and adequately embodies 'these last thirty years' of historical life. We have no choice but to seek out our own host of experiences in life—pain, joy, consternation, and confusion—and project our internal sufferings into them" (31).⁸ In the same way, it is quite difficult for us to see the global significance of the artistry and intellectual depth of the last thirty years of Chinese literature, despite the fact that Chinese writers have attained a degree of internationalism unprecedented in any other historical era. Science fiction is no exception. Generic convention compels authors to imagine other planets and stars, but these alien lands are often merely backdrops to the action. Although some works among them are endowed with genuine compassion, most are introspective and self-referential. Clearly anti-imperial and anti-colonial works such as Liu Xingshi's *Meizhou laide Gelunbu* [The Columbus of the Americas, 1980] represent the fading sentiments of a previous literary generation.

The above broad outline of one hundred years of Chinese literary history draws attention to many writings and ruminations on globalism. We can see a passion in literature that turns toward the world at large emerging during the late Qing, but after the May Fourth Movement, an introspective turn gradually

takes hold once again. The worldview of this movement was resuscitated and expanded in the first thirty years of the New China (though it achieved little), but this again withered into obscurity in the next thirty years. The key factor differentiating inward and outward (or domestic and foreign) in this instance is not the appearance of foreign characters in literary works, nor whether the story takes place in a foreign territory, nor is it whether the work has been influenced by foreign literary trends or prominent authors; it is whether authors were able to express opposition toward or imagine reconfigurations of the global political and economic system through artistic means. The historical significance of Liu Cixin's sf is a reflection of this trend: beyond representing another turn outward for Chinese literature, it also represents a tangible contribution to the intensification of what we might refer to as *literary extraspection*.

As China's most recognized contemporary sf author, Liu Cixin has a deep and endearing passion for sf: "for us, sf is more than just a literary form, it is an entire spiritual realm, a way of life" (*Zuizao de yuzhou* [Best Universe, Worst Earth] 62). He fell in love with sf stories that liberate the beauty of science from "the cold equations" because these stories "have no nucleus other than technology, [and] their descriptive artistry is concentrated entirely upon technology, attempting to poetize it" (*Zuizao de yuzhou* 8).⁹ This "technological nucleus" fiction is not central to Liu Cixin's oeuvre, however. Liu critiques works that deviate from "pure sf" and that delve even more deeply into contemporary politics and society as "roundabout national salvation" and "pandering to the market," which is to say, capitalizing on local flavor. *China 2185*, an earlier work, was written around the same time as the manuscript for *Chaoxingxing jiyuan* [Era of the Supernova, 2003], a book whose content had changed by the time of its official publication to reflect developments in Liu's political thinking. The international intrigue that frames *China 2185* and that evolves into an atrocious world war in *Era of the Supernova* is also significant. In *Santi* [Three Body], Liu laments through one of his characters that "in China, any idea that dared to take flight would only crash back to the ground. The gravity of reality is too strong" (16). It is none other than the introduction of "reality" that brings his flights of fancy back down to earth. Through this, his multivalent aesthetic style emerges.

After becoming an author for *Kehuan shijie* [SF World], which began publication in 1979, Liu published the stories "Quan pindai zuse ganrao" [Full Spectrum Barrage Jamming, 2001], "Hundun hudie" [The Butterfly of Chaos, 2002], "Tianshi shidai" [Age of Angels, 2002], "Guangrong yu mengxiang" [The Glory and the Dream, 2003], and a number of other stories voicing his concern for the fate of the nation. "Full Spectrum Barrage Jamming," set in the Russian snowfields, tells the story of Russia's Great Patriotic War in the information age. When NATO forces, assisted by a rebel army, dispatch a massive invading force to its borders, Russia attempts to resist. Owing to its inability to fend off digital attacks, however, it suffers a series of defeats. In a climactic moment, Mikhail (an astronaut and astrophysicist and the only

remaining crew member aboard the ship *Eternal Storm*) pilots the massive vessel meant for astronomical research into the Sun. Through a precise blow to the sun, he causes the star to emit a massive burst of electromagnetic radiation, interrupting the signals of most wireless communications on Earth and turning the tide of war. The story was originally set in China but to avoid censorship it was relocated to Russia before actually going to press. Questions of censorship do not entirely account for the change, however. On the one hand, in the epigraph the author pays homage to the Russian people, stating that "their literature influenced my entire life" (185) and, on the other hand, Russia is the only nation other than China that would fit the narrative framework of a believable counterstrike against NATO. One could even say that the former is more suitable—a fact that reminds one of the series of challenges these two major non-Western nations have posed to the Western-dominated global system in and beyond the twentieth century. But if the story is confined to moot comparisons between young upstarts and old powers, it would be little more than a depoliticized version of a Thucydides trap (the idea that when one superpower threatens to displace another, war will almost inevitably result). Liu's expansive pen imbues the story with further layers of meaning, however. Commander of US forces General Parker, going mad because he is receiving radio broadcasts through his dental implants, is suddenly reminded of Clark Air Force Base, thousands of miles away, because his incisors have been knocked out by the Filipina mistress he left behind:

Parker thought silently, where are you now, my daughter. Passing your days in some shanty in Manila? Your dad is fighting for you now in a way. After a democratic government comes to power in Russia, and NATO's vanguard closes in on China's borders, Subic Bay and Clark Naval Base will both be under our Pacific Command again. They will be even more glorious than they were last century—you'll be able to find a job! If you are a girl like your mother (what's her name again—ah—Aliana) who's to say you won't meet an American officer.... ("Full Spectrum Barrage Jamming," *Daishang tade yanjing* [With Her Eyes], 211)

This passage, brimming with satirical ridicule, reminds us of the global significance of the war. Western colonists will return to bestow "glory" and "fortune" to the colonized, practically guaranteeing the nullification of the fruits of twentieth-century world revolution. But even though these colonists have not yet staged their comeback, the people of the non-Western world—or more precisely the Third World—remain under the yoke of hegemony, subject to its tyrannies.

The devastating bombing of Belgrade in "Chaos Butterfly," the show of force from a naval carrier battle group off the coastal waters of the fictional small African country of "Sambia" in "Age of Angels," and Southwest Asia under a 17-year blockade and sanctioned into ruin in "The Dream and the Glory" all crystallize Liu's clear concern regarding international relations in recent years. For the most part, this sort of feeling is one of the products of the Chinese revolution's third-world consciousness. Luo Yalin argues that Liu's "writing is effused with a clearly marginal perspective, with a third-

world map draped over the top of it.... [I]n these works that depict the US (and NATO) and their war with the Third World, he always places his inspirationally heroic imagery on the side of the World” (Luo 83).¹⁰

Clearly, this sense of third-world identity does not originate from a sense of sympathy for the Other; rather, its origins are intimately intertwined with China’s own historical and material vicissitudes. Lu Xun and brother Zhou Zuoren’s *Yuwai xiaoshuo ji* [Works From Abroad, 1909]—a collection of translations comprised mostly of writings by oppressed authors from Eastern Europe—called upon their countrymen to join in opposition and refocus their efforts on social renewal.¹¹ Likewise, Liu Cixin’s “third-world sf” draws upon a shared experience of hardship to express China’s national sentiment.¹² To an even greater extent than the Zhou siblings, he imagines the citizenry of the Third World deploying technology in opposition to oppression and foreign incursion in a never-ending struggle to attain freedom. One role of popular literature is to voice the sentiments of the people, but from the late Qing onward, popular literature perennially oversimplified the idea of “technological salvation,” often leaving that idea impoverished and pedestrian. In Liu’s writing, however, this form of resistance occasionally ends in failure, even when great sacrifices are made. This tragic tone contributes to a profound sense of the perils and tribulations of resistance to colonialism and imperialism. More importantly, Liu lucidly maintains a critical distance from the popular logic of the internet literature of “wish-fulfillment” (*shuangwen*).¹³

Two twenty-first-century tales of historical time travel—A Yue’s online serial *Xin Song* [New Song Dynasty], begun in 2004, and the sprawling serial *Zaizhi tianxia* [Master of All Under Heaven], posted under the pen name “cuslaa” in installments beginning in 2010—diverge markedly from official state ideology and policy, shamelessly expounding upon colonial expansion as a demonstration of national strength and revelling in the hegemonic fantasy of “enfeoffing the South China Sea.” In comparison, Liu’s “Xiyang” [Western Seas], written in the 1990s, had already trenchantly satirized such nationalistic fantasies of self-defense recast as foreign incursion. “Western Seas” is a typical alternate history: in the year 1420, after Muslim naval commander Zheng He’s (1371-1433) vast navy sails to Mogadishu on the east coast of Africa, rather than returning home to the Ming Empire—as they did in historical fact—they sail on, thus altering the course of history. By 1997 in this alternative timeline, China is a powerful country presiding over the global order. Though they have reached a treaty to end Chinese occupation of Northern Ireland, returning it to England, China is still the global police force and its national territory includes both the Old and New Worlds. The Renminbi is the international monetary standard and Chinese painting floods Europe. This would appear to fulfill the wishes of many readers for Zheng He to become a “conquistador.” As soon as the protagonist’s son takes the stage, however, Liu’s intent in the story clearly shifts. The fifteen-year-old boy is an overbearing, often hysterical, racist. Immersed in the glorious history of European conquest, he advocates withholding membership dues as a way to strengthen China’s position at the UN and regularly presses others with the

challenge, "Are you a real Chinese?" Another character, Amy, is a young English study-abroad student, plain and self-effacing, but stalwart in her mission to promote local art.

In one fell swoop, Liu satirizes both contemporary hegemonic practices and nationalistic jingoism. He uses his protagonist, a Chinese diplomat working at the UN, to voice the position that the progress of civilization is the greatest gift of East-West exchange:

We come to a display case with an assortment of deeply yellowed Latin tomes from the European Middle Ages arrayed inside. Homer's epics, Euclid's *Elements*, Aristotle's *Physics*, Plato's *Republic*, and Dante's *Divine Comedy*.... Many of these books were banned in the fifteenth century by the Inquisition. They had all been translated to Chinese and read by Zheng He after his arrival in western Europe.

I say to Amy, "You see, he [Zheng He] read your books, and got a lot out of them: he had a compass, but didn't have accurate European clocks needed for navigation. He had the biggest boats—three times bigger than yours—but lacked the skill level of European cartographers.... [E]specially in scientific fundamentals, the Ming lagged behind Europe at that time. In geography for example, the Chinese still believed that the heavens were round and earth was square. Without your science, or that is to say without the blend of Eastern and Western culture, Zheng He couldn't have continued west, and we wouldn't have come upon the Americas. ("Xiyang," *Meng zhi hai* [Sea of Dreams], 38-39)

The deeply introspective protagonist also tells his son and Amy an unexpected tale: although Zheng He conquered Europe, he was captivated by European culture, as represented in the robust and beautiful statues of ancient Greece; and in a bewildered haze he developed a deep longing for home. In his journey ever-westward toward home it was he who discovered the new mainland of America. "Western Seas" displays a careful rationality that transcends the distance of a century to join in chorus with Lu Xun in criticism of "animalistic jingoists" and the "cult of aggression" (Lu Xun, "Po e'sheng lun" [Toward a Refutation of Malevolent Voices] 59, 61).¹⁴

3. Liu Cixin's stance on international relations continues to garner considerable academic attention.¹⁵ Although their approach and methodologies diverge markedly, many analyses converge on the question of nationality, be it a "national culture" endowed with 5,000 years of history or a "political nationality" that has been subjected to invasion, oppression, and enslavement and that seeks amelioration through, as the popular slogan has it, a "rich nation and strong army." In this respect, Fredric Jameson's concept of "national allegories" has provided an important critical perspective in the field of Liu Cixin studies. Jameson writes that "Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic, necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society" ("Third-World Literature" 69). The echoes of this passage are clearest in Wang Yao's discourse: "In the

contemporary body of sf literature, even those works that appear to have transcended political means and instrumentalism, to have surpassed the ‘small-I’ of state and nation, to take the ‘collective fate of humanity’ as their subject matter—sometimes plainly and sometimes not—use the form of national allegory to express their political and cultural desires” (“*Quanqiu hua shidai de minzu yuyan*” [National Allegory in the Era of Globalization] 169). Elsewhere Wang Yao argues that “Those of Liu Cixin’s works that focus on ‘humanity’s fate in the universe,’ such as ‘*Liulang diqiu*’ [The Wandering Earth, 2000], *Tunshizhe* [The Devourer, 2002], and *THE THREE-BODY TRILOGY*, all read neatly as national allegories for contemporary China” (*Quanqiu hua shidai de kongju he xiwang* [Fears and Hopes in the Era of Globalization] 280). Reading Liu Cixin’s work through the lens of “national allegories” means precisely to understand the value of apprehending its political dimension. My analysis above is tempered by this point of view. The limits of national allegory must also be acknowledged, however.¹⁶ If we become complacent and read Liu’s work only in such terms, we risk walling this work off alongside Lu Xun’s “*Kuangren riji*” [Diary of a Madman, 1918], which established the category, failing to recognize facets of his work that defy such simplifications. That is to say, while Liu Cixin is a torch-bearer for the *fin-de-siècle* Chinese desire for national salvation, he has not abandoned his exuberance for the shimmering aura of Third-World internationalism born in the Mao era, and his works also embody a true universal humanism, expressing profound concern and hope for the challenges and fate of humanity.

In an sf retrospective published in 2010, Liu explained that he originally focused on “pure sf,” having “no interest in the society of human relations,” and in his second stage he “went from pure sf narrative description to illustrations of the relationship of humankind to nature” (*Zuizao de yuzhou* 217). This was not a pursuit of “harmony between humankind and nature,” but rather it took the limits and restrictions that “nature” imposes on human beings in the universal sense as a premise opening the door to a vigorous imagination of how humankind might use technology to respond to existential challenges. Liu has speculated, for example, that through genetic engineering, nanotechnology, and other technoscientific means, human beings might shrink themselves down to the scale of mice or even bacteria, expanding their habitat by reducing their size and carrying out “reverse civilizational expansion” (*Zuizao de yuzhou* 81). With advances in neuroscience and information technology, humankind might also cast off its “cumbersome meat-body” entirely to live in cyberspace (*Zuizao de yuzhou* 190). He still advocates a “forward civilizational expansion,” however, in the exploration of space. “*Yuanhang! Yuanhang!*” [Travel Far, Travel Far!, 2003], “*Yige he shiwange Diqiu*” [One and One Million Earths, 2012], “*Yongbao Xingjian wenming*” [Hold Fast to Starship Civilization, 2013], and a number of other informal essays with similar titles have expressed his enthusiasm and musings on this subject. Liu advocates using all manner of programs to develop space exploration and to migrate into outer space. Because “Earth’s resources are limited, the day they run out is inevitable; and at the same time Earth’s

biosphere is an unstable system which could potentially suffer dramatic change in the future, whether caused by humans or nature, that result in it becoming inhospitable to human life” (*Zuizao de yuzhou* 263-64). Because of the highly complex nature of Earth’s biosphere, the intense fluctuations in the terrestrial environment, and the rapidly expanding demands placed on the environment by human beings, to rely only on passive environmental protections will not adequately address environmental issues. The capital and technology needed to implement comprehensive measures to balance or change the global environment are far greater than what would be needed for travel within the solar system (*Zuizao de yuzhou* 25-26). Apart from the technical problems, the limitations and challenges of migration into space are mostly political and economic: “there is no apparent short-term benefit to human terrestrial beings; on the contrary, even those endowed with greater governmental foresight are confronted with imagining the unique dilemmas presented when we imagine the successful establishment of extraterrestrial colonies.” Therefore “the impetus for interstellar migration on a grand scale requires a great leap in thought and culture on the part of human society, something that is more difficult to attain than technical progress” (*Zuizao de yuzhou* 25).

Liu Cixin’s commitment to such a “great leap in thought and culture” can be read in a considerable portion of his oeuvre. “The Wandering Earth” and “Micro Era” (English trans. 2013) are stories of solar cataclysm in which human beings use different methods in an attempt to preserve their existence. “The Devourer,” “Shanyang renlei” [For the Benefit of Mankind, 2005], and *THE THREE-BODY TRILOGY* use imaginary extraterrestrial invasions to awaken readers to the other existential threats under which they live. Written in 2016, “Buneng gongcun de jieri” [Mutually Exclusive Holidays] uses a satirical tone to express opposition to the idea of “reverse civilizational expansion.” In the eyes of an extraterrestrial observer, 12 April 1968—the day that Yuri Gagarin became the first human being to journey into outer space—can be seen as the “birthday” of humanity. The technological breakthrough on 5 October 2050 that allows brain-computer interfaces will eventually be seen as the date of humanity’s “miscarriage,” as it sets humans on the course of abandoning reality and moving entirely into the virtual realm (*Zuizao de yuzhou* 281). Dedication to writing about humanity characterizes Liu Cixin’s outlook on sf: “as an sf writer, I am inclined towards seeing humanity as a whole. In the sf subconscious, humanity is one single person” (*Zuizao de yuzhou* 281). For Liu, “the contribution of sf is the imagination of other races and other worlds” (*Zuizao de yuzhou* 113), but this dedication is not rooted in mere attention to genre or the pursuit of form; it has a deeper intellectual motivation.

Regarding his voracious reading of the past century’s worth of sf both foreign and domestic, Liu has lamented that “it is as if we are wandering down a hall constructed of darkness, disaster and terror.... [I]n our depictions of future darkness and disaster, sf authors have created the most unforgettable of fantasy worlds, have excavated a profound subject matter” (*Zuizao de yuzhou* 25-26). In academic studies, the critical and prescient qualities of sf are often remarked upon, and its role in contemplating the deleterious influences of

technology on modern society has been recognized as an important cultural function of the genre, but Liu Cixin's opinion diverges in this respect. He recalls an old war buddy of his father's telling him, "Science fiction—huh! We made revolution for so many years, and we still haven't let the common folks know what communism is all about!" These words "to this very day are the most profound criticism, engraved indelibly in my heart" (*Zuizao de yuzhou* 25). This indelible criticism has its origins in the history of the establishment of the revolution, and in the unfulfilled collective desires of science fiction:

That which allows everyone to endure hardship and suffering in the course of life's tribulations, that which allows all of humanity in the face of capricious and callous nature to build up a splendid civilization, the most fundamental spiritual mainstay, is our aspiration for the future. If all of our hopes have been torn asunder, perhaps a single ant can struggle on. To illustrate only the world that humanity should strive to avoid—and not to illustrate humanity's great and unimaginable sacrifices to achieve the world that has been sought after for generation upon generation with every fiber of the soul—this is not superior science fiction....

Putting a beautiful future on display for people is a capacity unique to science fiction; in the world of human culture, there is nothing else that can achieve this aim. Mainstream literature does not have this capacity: its depiction of reality inspires vivid and profound memories of the struggles human beings have endured, but it is completely ignorant of where human beings are headed.... [T]he fundamental aspiration of human life is rooted in hope for the future, and for sf—uniquely endowed with the ability to paint this hope in vivid strokes—to do nothing in this respect can be considered nothing other than a great tragedy. This great tragedy perhaps stretches beyond the boundaries of sf; it is perhaps a bitter loss for human spiritual life overall. (*Zuizao de yuzhou* 26-27)

The idea of clinging to hope is reminiscent of what Wang Hui identifies as "resisting despair" in the title of his iconic analysis of Lu Xun's work. In terms of literary evocations of an ideal society it resonates with other proponents of utopianism such as Oscar Wilde, Karl Mannheim, and Ernst Bloch. Liu believes that "the most brilliant sf should be optimistic," and he calls for Chinese sf authors to commit themselves to narrating a bright future: "we should raise a 'utopian' trilogy from Chinese soil. Perhaps this mandate can only be fulfilled by a Chinese person, because in comparison to Western culture, Chinese culture is an optimistic one!" (*Zuizao de yuzhou* 30). Although he pins his hopes on the optimism of Sinitic culture, the object of this hope is the whole of humanity. In Liu's most representative "techno-utopian" work, "Micro Era," fluctuations in solar power turn Earth into a hellscape, but human beings reduce their size a billion-fold and move underground on the eve of the apocalypse, escaping catastrophe. Terrestrial life is unable to recover, but it offers unlimited natural resources for the survival of the "micro-people" in the "micro-era":

An entire grassland! What would a grassland mean? A green cosmos for micro-humanity! And a small brook in the grassland? What a majestic wonder the sight of the brook's clear waters snaking through the grassland would be in the

eyes of micro-humans. Earth's leader had said there would be rain soon. If rain fell, there could be a grassland and that brook could spring to life! Then there could certainly be trees! My God, trees!

The Forerunner envisioned a group of micro-human explorers setting out from the roots of a tree, beginning their epic and wondrous journey upward. Every leaf would be a green plain, stretching to the horizon.

There could be butterflies then. Their wings would be like bright clouds, covering the heavens. And birds, their every call angelic trumpets blaring from the heavens. ("Wei jiyuan," *Daishang tade yanjing* 183; "Micro Era" 271)

The marvelous vision of the "Micro Era" is perhaps too ethereal, and the pronouncement that "Sinitic culture is an optimistic culture" is oversimplified, but examining Liu's fiction and essays it is easy to see that he is no starry-eyed optimist. Indeed, his writing rarely exhibits the carefree exuberance on display in "Micro Era," and more often it expresses consternation regarding the fate of humankind. In the face of disasters such as the onset of an ice age, solar shifts, a nearby supernova, or other astronomical disasters with the potential to bring about the extinction of the human race, human beings remain engrossed in the pursuit of individual fulfillment, rarely considering their collective legacy and failing to plan sufficiently—either in theory or in practice—for potential disaster. In *Death's End* (English translation, 2016), the third volume of Liu's trilogy, when the entire solar system including Earth is wiped out, it appears at first to be the fault of the Swordholder Cheng Xin; as the guardian of humanity, she fails to maintain the Dark Forest deterrence, leaving the Earth unprotected against a fatal strike by a more powerful species. In fact, however, it is human beings who choose their own ruin. Cheng Xin, elected to the position of Swordholder for her beauty and virtue, proves to be a poor choice. Bound by human morality, she is unwilling to carry out the threat of mutually assured destruction for Earth and Trisolaris. Intuiting her restraint, the Trisolarans begin their invasion. Humanity arguably dooms itself by electing the virtuous Cheng Xin.

Even if a natural calamity never comes, human beings may still be imperiled by disaster. "For the Benefit of Mankind" tells the story of a dystopia divided by massive inequalities in wealth and a global technocracy under the care of the Social Machine—an enforcement system that ensures that the right to personal property is inviolable. The inviolable "sacred law" forcefully controls all aspects of human society, dictating the separation of rich and poor into disparate species (reminiscent of the Eloi and the Morlocks in H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* [1895]); ultimately it brings capitalism in this world to an apotheosis wherein ninety-nine percent of the world's wealth is in the hands of a single person known as the Last Capitalist. Land, sea, and sky are all the private property of the Last Capitalist, and the other 200 million people are breathing their last breaths in a sealed enclosure:

My home sat next to a small river, edged by green grass. The meadows stretched down to the riverbed and beyond, sweeping all the way to the emerald foothills in the distance. From inside, we could hear the sounds of birds twittering and fish leaping from the water, and we could see unhurried

herds of deer grazing by the riverbanks, but it was the sight of the grass rippling in the breeze that I found particularly bewitching.

But none of this belonged to us. My family was strictly cut off from the outside world, and we could only watch through airtight portholes that could never be opened. To go outside, it was necessary to pass through an airlock, as if we were exiting a spaceship into outer space. In truth, our home was very much like a spaceship—the difference was that the hostile environment was on the inside! (“Shanyang renlei,” *Meng zhi hai* 327; “For the Benefit of Mankind” 202)

The same field that is a limitless universe to the micro-people is a forbidden zone for the poor people who can see it but never venture there. Although Liu’s dystopia is echoed in the slogan “we are the 99%” from the Occupy Wall Street movement, it also expresses a persistent theme in his work: human beings are not up to the task of acting as stewards either of “humanity” or of planet Earth. If we confine ourselves to the Earth, it is possible that we may destroy ourselves in the eruption of a social catastrophe or we might well devolve into subhumans as a result of the pernicious burgeoning of avarice. Both in the blessings of utopia and the curses of dystopia, these works embody Liu Cixin’s concern for humanity. His lamentations, perturbations, vexation, and cynicism are all characterized by a modern skepticism, full of suspicion for concepts such as human nature and virtue: “standing in awe at the stars overhead, but feeling no such sentiment for our heart’s virtue,” as he puts it (*Zuizao de yuzhou* 182). He is uniquely a destroyer and in the same moment he is a radiant and deeply thoughtful proponent of “building up.”

How should we understand Liu Cixin’s oeuvre? The fact is we can clearly see the scars of the Red Era, and in phrases such as “the age of exploration,” “existential space,” “colony,” and others, we can sense a counterstrike at the logic of modernity. We can also unearth a “political unconscious” (Jameson, *Political*) from within its depths, thus understanding these stories as projecting a particular national sentiment. If we ignore the very apparent imagery and thought experiments regarding the shared fate of humanity, however, we risk falling into the trap of mainstream literary criticism, tacitly assuming that literature lacks the capacity to transcend the bounds of individual experience. This is to lack faith that writers can negotiate history and reality, and that they can also influence the future. It is to disbelieve that the unprecedentedly expansive perspective on time and space afforded to modern intellectuals and expressed in the aphorism—“a plan not meant for the long term is inadequate to serve a single hour; a plan not meant for the realm is inadequate to serve one corner”—is plainly visible in his writing. Liu Cixin has remarked that sf, which diminishes the image of the human and reinscribes the image of the human race, offers anthropocentric literature an opportunity to “transcend narcissism” (“Chaoyue zilian” [Beyond Narcissism] 75-81). We might also say that the profound meditations on and examinations of human fate in Liu’s fiction have provided the parochial and habituated subjects of contemporary Chinese literature an opportunity to move beyond self-aggrandizement and insularity.

At one end, Liu Cixin's fiction is rooted in early modern Chinese history, and at the other it is tied to the future of humanity.¹⁷ In between are the contemporary Chinese people, or more precisely the perplexity and hope of Chinese people living in the everyday world. His works embody the great literary burden of an author who models himself on Tolstoy and Balzac.¹⁸ His comprehensive scrutiny and concern cause his works to turn away from in-depth studies of personality and psychology in favor of "looking outward," even as they avoid sinking into the abyss of clichéd imagery such as "seas of stars" and "national renewal," expressing instead a capacity for both arousal and contemplation, for both writing and acting upon the world at large. This world is not a Chinese perspective on a world constructed primarily by Europe, America, and Japan, with Chinese suffering as an adjunct. Instead, it is a literary world that more closely approaches the true image of the world, endowed with the profundity of the Third World but at the same time one world among the myriad stars, with infinite other worlds occupying the galactic expanse surrounding it. Such writing requires an expansive worldview, broad knowledge, and even broader vision. The fanciful wanderings of Liu Cixin's stories, travelling across the universe in narrative and description, his lamentations and commiserations with the weak, and his embodiments of and concerns for the human collective have received accolades. His successes in the field of world literature and the fever for sf literature and culture that this has spurred domestically are milestones that promise a new beginning. As China's growth continues to encourage civilizational confidence and awareness, we will see more examples of "turning outward" in Chinese literature and more holistic narratives—the return of concern for "All Under Heaven" and the dream of a "Great Unity."

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Translator's note: Whenever possible, I have cited the English translations of primary and secondary sources. In the case of literary scholarship translated into Chinese, citations are given for both the English original and the Chinese translation used by the author. All citations of Liu Cixin's original Chinese works refer to editions collected in *Liu Cixin zuopin diancang* [Liu Cixin Anthology, 2016].

NOTES

1. On *Shanghai jing*, see Strassberg, 1-11.

2. This phrase describes a shift in political and national consciousness beginning in the late eighteenth century, preceding the collapse of the imperial tribute system that recognized the Qing throne as the primary East Asian polity, and fully taking hold after China's defeat in the Opium War (1839-1842). Although Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) China was at the greatest geographic expanse of any historical Chinese empire, an

understanding that China was one power among many rather than the ruler of “all under heaven” began to emerge during this period, and intellectuals slowly began to acknowledge the need to learn from the world at large. While 1949-1976 was a period of economic and cultural isolation (especially after the Sino-Soviet Split of 1956-1966), catchphrases and slogans regarding the need to learn from and engage with the world at large have been a perennial feature of public discourse in China. As this essay indicates, the hegemony of western thought continues to be a point of contention in questions of China’s modernization.

3. “Zhongguo weiyi zhi wenxue bao *Xin xiaoshuo*” [China’s Only Literary Journal: *New Fiction*], *Xinmin congbao* [New Citizen] 14 (18 Aug. 1902): 1. *New Fiction* was established by Liang Qichao in 1902.

Translator’s note: The phrase *wanguo*, which I render as “the international community,” literally means “ten thousand countries” and appeared in early Confucian classics such as the *Yijing* [Book of Changes, c.11th-8th century BCE] and *Shijing* [Classic of Poetry, 11th-6th century BCE], referring to the surrounding polities of early Chinese dynastic states. Initially used in the context of international law in W.A.P. Martin’s 1864 Chinese rendering of Henry Wheaton’s *Elements of International Law* (1855), the term was later used to refer to the Hague Peace Conferences of 1899 and 1907, and it also appears in a number of turn-of-the-twentieth-century utopian and sf works to describe an international legal body. See Mou Cai; Lydia Liu 271; and Yang Zhuo.

4. “Great Unity” [*datong*] was a term adopted from the *Liji* [Book of Rites, compiled c.100 BCE] by Kang Youwei in the description of his theory of human progress; it appeared in his *Datong shu* (completed 1902, published 1935). For an English translation, see Kang Youwei.

5. See Geng Chuanming 176-90.

6. See Zhou Zuoren’s “Ren de wenxue” [Humane Literature], 575-84. For an English translation, see Tan Sitong’s *An Exposition of Benevolence*.

7. The slogan “marching toward science” (*xiang kexue jinjun*) is derivative of a broader phraseology of exhortations to “march toward X.” Zheng Wenguang’s fictive neologism “marching toward Mars” below is derived from this usage.

8. Various iterations of “thirty years” in quotation marks are used throughout Chen Guangwei’s article to refer to literary movements emerging in the 1980s that attempted to come to terms with the trauma of the Mao era. In Chinese discourse, such periods are often euphemistically referred to by their duration. Thus, 1949-1966, the period prior to the Cultural Revolution, is called the “seventeen years” and the Cultural Revolution is often referred to as the “ten years of chaos” or “ten-year catastrophe.”

9. In Liu Cixin’s opinion, the aesthetics of sf in its purest form are incomparable:

All the peoples of the Earth use their most courageous and magnificent fantasies to assemble their own creation myths, but among them all there is no creation myth as glorious or as heart-stirring as modern science’s description of the Big Bang. Nor can tales about God or Nuwa creating human beings compare with the twists and turns and romanticism of the epic saga of biological evolution. Space-time theory is as expansive as poetics and particle physics offers us a world as marvelous as the spiritual realm. Not only does the world of science exceed our imagination; it exceeds the potential of our imagination. (*Zuizao de yuzhou*, 2-3)

10. The idea that China is a third-world country is controversial. Viewed as a whole, China is currently the second largest economic entity in the world and is much more influential than any other country in the traditional “third-world” category. As a term proposed during Cold War period, however, “Third World” represents a special political recognition as well as an identity choice far beyond any simplified economic

view. Whether China can be properly taken as a third-world nation depends both upon its own positioning in global politics and its recognition in the international community.

Even if China is no longer regarded and/or no longer sees itself as a third-world nation, Liu Cixin and critic Luo Yalin both characterize his work in these terms. As a person born in the 1960s, Liu's compassion for the small countries under the shadow of hegemony demonstrates the influence of his revolutionary education. These countries, including the Philippines, "Southwest Asia" (i.e., Iraq), the fictional "Sambia," etc., are all traditionally part of the Third World. In terms of third-world consciousness, the difference/tension between Liu Cixin's science fiction and Chinese literature at large (even the popular genres, as I briefly mention later) reminds us of the former's special value.

11. In 1936, Zhou Zuoren noted that "During that time, I'd say that Yucai's [courtesy name of Lu Xun] thinking could be described as nationalistic, and as most of the work he translated took oppressed peoples as its subject matter, Russia became a symbol of resistance" ("Guanyu Lu Xun" [About Lu Xun] 32).

12. Humanity's resistance to the Trisolaran invasion in *THE THREE-BODY TRILOGY* can also be read in this way. A joke is circulating on the internet that if the strokes in the Chinese characters for "Trisolaris" are rearranged, they read "Japan." Perhaps this is just a coincidence, but Liu Cixin has in fact said that, "among the civilizations of the Milky Way Galaxy, the entirety of humanity is but one race. Would you be willing to stake your hopes on a traitor to the Japanese in 1940 being willing to sacrifice themselves for the terrestrial civilization in an alien invasion in 2140?" (*Zuizao de yuzhou* 127).

13. *Shuangwen*—or wish-fulfillment literature—is one of a number of genres that have emerged in the age of internet fiction. The form is categorized by the rapid wish-fulfillment of its main characters: if a need arises, it is rapidly fulfilled. *Shuangwen* is a literature of pure enjoyment, eschewing both emotional lows and highs in the name of easy consumption.

China's internet is also a robust forum for speculative genres such as alternative histories and time-travel narratives. Monetized for views-per-page, they regularly exceed hundreds of chapters in length. The most successful online works are then frequently picked up by commercial publishing houses and printed in book form.

14. Lu Xun, "Po e'sheng lun" [Toward the Refutation of Malevolent Voices] 33-36. For a full-length English translation, see Lu Xun, "Toward a Refutation of Malevolent Voices." See also Li Guangyi 13-28.

15. In addition to Luo Yalin's essay quoted above, Jia Liyuan's and Wang Yiping's perspectives are representative. Jia Liyuan notes that, "although science itself is the most internationalized [project], thoroughly beyond secular concerns, for those like Liu Cixin who came of age during the Mao era it is intriguingly intertwined with a sense of responsibility for the collective political body of the citizenry; these ethereal imaginings must necessarily be tied to China's most palpable traumas" (42). Liu Cixin's work embodies "China's one hundred years of national strengthening and the national style" (Jia 44). Wang Yiping argues that "Liu Cixin's narratives are perennially rooted in imagining the response of the masses of small and weak to massive challenges. This precarious crisis, the meek confronting the almighty, is a way of building reader engagement, but it also reflects this country's national history and lingering spiritual memory, with an unmistakable aura of national allegory." It also reflects the resistance and overcoming of challenges and "displays the true character and strength of the Chinese people.... [T]he swell of so-called national strength and demeanor" has garnered both official and popular affirmation (Wang, 17, 23).

16. Wang Qin argues that both devotees and critics have fundamentally misread Jameson's concept of "national allegories." For Wang, "taking 'national allegory' as a convenient theoretical category describing the content of 'third-world literature' misses Jameson's underlying problematic, i.e., his concern about 'third-world literature' as an immanent deconstructive force leading to the breaking down of chains of signification of capitalist culture" (Wang Qin 654). Wang Qin's reading offers a unique intervention into a fundamental debate in literary criticism which I cannot adequately address in the context of this essay. Readers interested in the debate over "national allegories" will surely find his work compelling. Because critics cited in this essay such as Wang Yao, Jia Liyuan, and Wang Yiping all deploy the concept in analyzing subject matter and content, my discussion proceeds in the same vein.

17. "I've been at the bottom for a long time, so I have some familiarity with those vast numbers of sf readers there at root level in the grass. I know what their hopes for the future are, I know what the stars look like from their eyes, and it's relatively easy to find commonalities between my imaginary world and theirs" (Liu Cixin, *Zuizao de yuzhou* 221). Stories such as "Di huo" [Inferno, 2000], "Xiangcun jiaoshi" [The Village Schoolteacher, 2001], and "Zhongguo taiyang" [Chinese Sun, 2002] are all narratives of the subaltern.

18. "Painting a society from its lowest levels all the way up to the peaks of its golden pagodas is the dream of all mainstream writers and sf writers, but actually achieving this is a rare feat; after all there aren't many Tolstoy or Balzacs" (Liu Cixin, *Zuizao de yuzhou* 172).

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ABSTRACT

The history of modern Chinese literature has seen more than one wave of realist movements aimed at effecting change by “writing the world.” This is both a reflection of writers’ national consciousness and a modern expression of the classical political ideals of “All Under Heaven” and the “Great Unity.” Liu Cixin’s science fiction is characteristic of China once again “turning outward” to engage with the world at large. His works carry on the nationalist tradition of Chinese salvation from ruin prevalent since the late Qing Dynasty. Though they have not abandoned their exuberance for the shimmering aura of “third-world” internationalism born in the Mao era, his works also embody a true universal humanism, showing profound concern and hope for the challenges and fate of humanity. The concept of “national allegory” is insufficient for understanding the significance of Liu Cixin’s work as an author and his investigations as a philosopher. Only by understanding his fiction and essayistic oeuvre as a whole, placing it in the context of the birth of Chinese sf at the turn of the twentieth century and its evolution through the socialist period and beyond, can contemporary Chinese literary studies adequately breathe in the vital air of Liu Cixin’s science fiction.