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Variations on Utopia in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction

In the near future of 2066, China dominates the world as its sole superpower. A team of Chinese *go* players is sent to the poverty-stricken United States to show off China's cultural superiority. By 2066, the United States has been forced to adopt the policy of *biguan suoguo* [closing doors to the world], exactly what the Qing Empire, China's last imperial dynasty, did in the nineteenth century when confronted by the aggressive expansionism of the Western powers. In 2066, however, China's experience as a "weak nation" repeatedly invaded and manipulated by "strong powers" since the late Qing has been decisively erased: China and the West have reversed their roles in world politics and the Chinese are finally triumphant. This is the future setting that opens Han Song's *Huoxing zhaoyao meiguo: 2066 nian zhi xixing manji* [Mars Over America: Random Sketches on a Journey to the West in 2066], a novel published in 2012 that presents readers with an apparently utopian vision of China's rise.¹ Under China's global leadership, a new world order is being formalized and humanity enters a period of prosperity and peace.

That China will become a superpower has been a central motif of Chinese sf since the genre's appearance in the first decade of the twentieth century, motivated in part by the sweeping sense of crisis among late Qing intellectuals on the eve of the empire's collapse. Known as *kexue xiaoshuo*, science fiction was one of the "new" literary genres (Chen and Xia 62) promoted by Liang Qichao (1873-1929). Liang was a key leader of the late Qing reform movement who saw in this Westernized "new fiction" an effective vehicle of enlightenment that might "renovate the people of a nation" (David Der-wei Wang 24) and thoroughly reform China.² Through the efforts of Liang and his contemporaries, science fiction was constituted as a utopian genre that could provide both reflection on reality and hope for change. Thus from its inception Chinese sf has been characterized by a strong political investment; its utopian narratives project political desires for reform onto idealized futures that serve as contrasts to China's reality.

Liang's first attempt at fiction was *Xin Zhongguo weilaiji* [The Future of New China, 1902], a novel that imagines the history of Chinese political reforms as they extend over the next sixty years. It outlines Liang's blueprint for China's self-strengthening, national rejuvenation, and eventual ascendancy to a world power. Liang's splendid vision of China's future was immediately appropriated by many other late Qing sf novels, including Wu Jianren's *Xin shitou ji* [New Story of the Stone, 1906], Biheguan Zhuren's *Xin jiyuan* [New Era, 1908], and Lu Shi'e's *Xin Zhongguo* [New China, 1910]. These novels defined Chinese science fiction as a genre closely associated with the discourses of an emerging nationalism; the image of a transformed future China functioned

as the most significant “novum” through which to characterize the nation’s cultural dynamism.

Nearly a century later, the utopian vision of China’s rise is again a prominent theme, recapitulated as well as parodied in much contemporary Chinese sf. After a long dormant period following its short boom in the late Qing, the genre has undergone a sudden revival and gained unprecedented recognition from China’s mainstream media.³ This is occurring at a time when China’s increasing political, military, and economic influence is viewed as a “threat” to the West, while Chinese government officials continue to confirm the nation’s commitment to “peaceful rise.”⁴ Deeply entangled with the politics of a changing China, science fiction today both strengthens and complicates the utopian vision of a new and powerful China: it mingles nationalism with utopianism/dystopianism, mixes sharp social criticism with an acute awareness of China’s potential for further reform, and wraps political consciousness in scientific discourses about the powers of technology and the technologies of power. By now science fiction in China is no longer “a fairly marginal phenomenon” (Huss 92), as it was described in the only article on Chinese sf published in *SFS* before this special issue. The latest wave of sf in China has formed a distinctive “selective tradition” within the field of contemporary literature; it has become a unique voice evoking experiences ranging from the grotesque to the sublime, from the apocalyptic to the transcendent, from the human to the posthuman.⁵

This essay aims to introduce Anglo-American readers to the most recent developments in Chinese science fiction, emphasizing utopian motifs in the major works of the three most influential contemporary authors, China’s “Big Three”: Liu Cixin (b. 1963), Wang Jinkang (b. 1948), and Han Song (b. 1965).⁶ Each of the following sections deals with a specific trope in contemporary Chinese science fiction—China’s rise, the myth of development, and the posthuman vision—which are profoundly interrelated in the works of these authors as well as evocative of both earlier writings and historical events.

The Rise of China. In Han Song’s future China of 2066, China has replaced the United States as the global superpower and is helping to restore peace around the world. At the same time, however, the novel reveals a hideous side to this success story. By the middle of the third millennium, the Chinese control the most advanced technology in the world: a super-powerful A.I. network called “Amanduo” (a word that looks like the transliteration of a foreign name but has no real meaning in Chinese). Amanduo is an omnipresent computer program connecting everyone to a central processor that dictates what people think, feel, and do. Yet this is not a version of Orwell’s oppressive dictatorship because Amanduo programs everyone to seek personal happiness. Rather, this situation recalls Jeffrey Wasserstrom’s description of contemporary Chinese politics as Huxley’s “soft” vision of authoritarianism that stresses “the depoliticizing effort of keeping people apart and providing them with distracting forms of activity and entertainment” (110). In Han Song’s novel, the Americans refuse to submit to its control and soon witness their country’s downfall, but the Chinese people

indulge themselves in joyful dreams when Amanduo creates a new “harmonious society” in the land of the old middle kingdom.⁷ Some of the elite intellectuals in the novel point out that, without Amanduo, human beings are doomed to miserable lives full of self-inflicted agony and they will all become idiots and cripples—which, of course, is what they have already become, since their happiness has actually been programmed by Amanduo (*Mars Over America* 12).

This irony points to the multi-layered connections between China’s imagined future and the historical memory of its past. In other words, while the projected future seems to evoke change, it also illuminates *what has already been*. The novel presents a paradoxical vision that combines a futuristic showcase of national pride—China’s “destined” triumph over America—with a strong sense of self-reflection supporting modern intellectual criticisms of China’s long tradition of authoritarian politics and culture (Schwarcz 2-4). Is not Amanduo a completely efficient program for establishing a centralist system to which each individual will voluntarily submit, a fictional version of China’s millennium-long patriarchal system? The irony may appear even stronger when Mao’s revolution is taken into consideration. For 2066 is not a randomly chosen number: 2066 will mark the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the mass movement that put Maoist utopianism into practice and under which many lost their lives and many more lost their freedom.

A rather obvious sign of the novel’s parody is contained in its title. The first part, *Mars Over America*—which can also be translated as *Fire Star Over America*, for Mars is called “huoxing” (fire star) in Chinese—is clearly modeled upon the most influential book about Mao’s rise as a political reader, *Red Star Over China* (1937), written by the American journalist Edgar Snow. Snow’s reportage gave Western readers their first positive glimpse of China’s red army and its supreme leader, Chairman Mao Zedong (1893-1976). The Chinese translation of Snow’s book was released in 1938 under the title *Xixing manji* [Random Sketches on a Journey to the West] and these same words are borrowed by Han Song for the second part of his own title. The “journey to the west” in *Red Star Over China* refers to Snow’s trek to China’s northwestern provinces, where Mao’s revolution saw its first victories. But its implied meaning—seeking “truth” from the West—recalls a master plot established in the classical Chinese fantasy novel *Xiyouji* [Journey to the West], an account of the monk Xuanzang’s (602-664) famous westward pilgrimage to Buddhist India.⁸ For traditional Chinese readers, “the journey to the west” means the search for an ultimate truth that will guide the Chinese people to Buddha’s spiritual realm. Contextualized by the modern remapping of global politics since the late Qing, the “journey to the west” signifies the reorientation of Chinese intellectual thought that extensively borrowed concepts and ideas—such as liberty, democracy, nationalism, socialism, and Marxism—from the modern West. Symbolized by “the red star over China,” Mao’s Communist revolution was the result of a westward pilgrimage in this modern context.

These diverse meanings are carefully appropriated in Han Song’s *Mars Over America*. While it is no longer oriented toward ancient India, it maintains the

significance of the journey toward truth and remains closely involved with the nationalist urge for China's self-strengthening. In Han Song's narrative, the westward journey leads specifically to the United States, a country that China both emulates and identifies as a major rival in international affairs. More interestingly, it is also the home country of Edgar Snow, the first person who presented the myth of Mao's political and military achievements in narrative form. Han Song's novel mirrors Snow's account with self-reflexive parody and in this way his recapitulation of the plot of Red China's rise in his novel of future history foregrounds the mythical nature of Snow's original narrative.

Han Song's *Mars Over America* skews the meaning of the westward journey even further: instead of seeking "truth" in the West, the Chinese *go* players are expected to bring "truth" to the West. *Go*, as China's national game, is said in the novel to contain the ultimate means to peace and harmony, which the future Chinese government wishes to ensure through introducing the game to other nations. What unfolds in the novel, however, is the story of an unexpected discovery that uncovers a more authentic "truth" for the novel's young Chinese protagonist.

For the duration of the young *go* player's journey through the United States, he is disconnected from Amanduo and has to learn the nature of the Real for himself. The narrative becomes a *Bildungsroman* that tells of how this young man acquires a self-consciousness that is not underwritten by the A.I. technology. Ultimately, when the Amanduo system backfires reality sinks in—the protagonist begins to see the chaos prevailing in the third millennium that was previously excluded from the harmonious world image programmed by the A.I. The novel remains ambiguous regarding how the protagonist's American experience will affect his psychological maturity. The "truth" of the real world that he sees in America seems to reinforce his desire to return to a China under the care of Amanduo. When he finally returns and sees the prosperity of Shanghai City, he begins to think that his journey to America was only an illusion. The "truth" is too frightening and he is careful not to tell his parents that he "has learned the skill to kill people and practiced it" (418; my translation). Here, at least, something like an independent self-consciousness seems to have been generated outside the system of Amanduo.

Edgar Snow's account of the rise of Mao's regime opens with the statement, "[T]here had been perhaps no greater mystery among nations, no more confused an epic, than the story of Red China" (35). The sense of mystery and confusion which he notes can also be seen in the many imaginative constructions of a Chinese utopia that converge in a sublime image of China's prosperous future that is in sharp contrast to its dissatisfying reality. The first modern Chinese utopian novel, Liang Qichao's *The Future of New China*, already portrays a splendidly idealized future, but the story of the process of its realization remains untold. In a grandiose opening chapter narrated in the future perfect tense, Liang informs readers that, by the year 1962, China *will have* dominated the world as a superpower, the Chinese Emperor *will have* become the head of the World Peace Congress, and the Confucian virtues *will have* inspired the transformation of the world into a harmonious unity. Then Liang's novel jumps back to the

present of 1902 in order to construct the grand narrative of how China's future prosperity *will have* been achieved. This novel was never completed, however. As David Der-Wei Wang notes, "due to its abrupt rupture in chapter 5, the novel performs a mysterious leap in time. We know its beginning and ending all at once, but not the middle part that would have bridged the beginning and the ending. What is missing is the *progressive* narrative as well as the *historical* time to make the future accessible and intelligible" (304). What readers are left with is an extravagant image of the idealized future and a conspicuous silence as to the means of achieving it.

A century after Liang's novel first appeared, a new wave of sf writers has reintroduced the utopian narrative of China's rise and their work is more sophisticated in both literary technique and political consciousness. Complex plots are carefully designed to translate ideas into images, which are concrete and convincing both politically and technologically. Compared with Liang Qichao's *The Future of New China*, Han Song's *Mars Over China* presents a much more palpable and vivid image of China's future approach to wealth and power. It is a rather disheartening image, however: with Amanduo controlling China, the superpower is now portrayed as manipulated by a machine. Thus when the mystery and confusion are cleared, a substantial difference has also become clear in the transformation from Liang Qichao's Confucian New China to Han Song's Amanduo-programmed China. The late Qing reformer's ideal of national rejuvenation and self-strengthening is sabotaged by the depiction of the entire nation's loss of sovereignty and submission to a system that manipulates the consciousness, sensibilities, and sensations of every one of its citizens.

The irony could not be more obvious: in Han Song's version of China's 2066, the ideology of "strengthening the nation" is treated with poignant parody as China's rise is built upon the systematic manipulation of its citizens. Nothing is voluntary; submission is the only rule. The harmonious society, presented by the nation's current leadership as an ideal aim for China's reform, is incarnated in the novel as a neat product of the orderly operation of the machine that concretizes the technological mechanisms of power. The irony is enhanced by Han Song's contrasting construction of an America in decline exactly because Americans refuse to submit to the power of the artificial intelligence. The political chaos, terrorism, and civil war in America of the third millennium are contrasted to the harmony, peace, and integrity of China.

The future in Han Song's novel is revealed to be even more dystopian when the narrative becomes framed by an eerie vision that turns the story of China's future into a posthuman story. The protagonist recounts his story retrospectively, when he is already 76 years old, which means that his journey to the United States has taken place 60 years in the past. In 2126, it is implied that both China and the United States have been wiped out by a superior alien species that arrived on Earth in 2066 and transformed it into a *fudi* [land of happiness] (10). In Chinese, *fudi* is used as a metaphor for the land of the dead, referring to an afterlife of eternal rest or "happiness." The novel does not directly portray how this transformation of the entire planet into a "land of happiness"—or a land of the dead—occurs. The aged narrator is so caught up

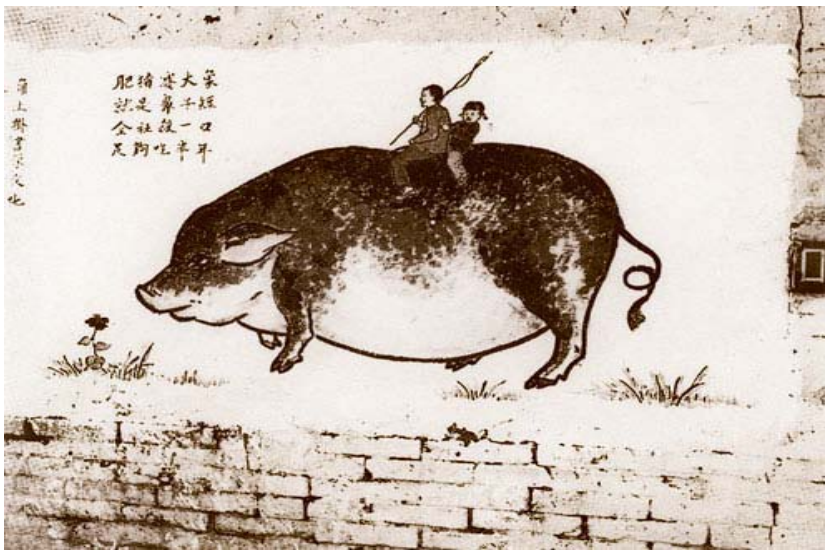
in the memory of his youthful years that he rarely mentions his current situation. The last sentence of the novel describes Mars rising to the middle of the night sky, the enormous shadow of a UFO appearing over the protagonist, and dogs barking fearfully (419). Thus China's future remains uncertain. What really happens in 2066 remains a mystery. Has China really become a superpower? Or has China been conquered—this time by the Martians? Is the narrator still alive as a “human being”? Is he genuinely “happy” and is society truly “harmonious” in 2126? With the fire star (the Chinese name for Mars) replacing the red star to shine over the land of happiness/the dead, the future becomes suspiciously inauspicious. Perhaps a utopian vision of China's rise constructed in the current political/cultural context is itself ambiguous: which direction it will take is impossible to foretell.

As a journalist working for China's Xinhua News Agency, Han Song is a keen observer of the interrelationships between China and the US. Their possible conflict in the future if China develops into a major power has motivated Han Song to write several stories, in addition to *Mars Over America*, about the Sino-American rivalry. “Chengke yu chuangzao zhe” [The Passengers and the Creator, 2006] offers a “counter-image” to *Mars Over America*.⁹ In this story, Chinese people live in a universe that is exactly the size and shape of a Boeing 7X7. They are born in the plane and will spend the rest of their lives there. Their knowledge of the universe is limited to the main cabin of the aircraft until one day some revolutionaries look outside and find out the “truth” of this universe: thousands of Boeing 7X7 planes carrying the Chinese people fly endlessly around the Earth. A revolution breaks out. The passengers take over the plane and force it to land. As they disembark, they are confronted by armed US soldiers. In this future, China's rise has been eclipsed by American technology, consumerism, and military might. It is America that overshadows China—the Chinese live in a “universe” produced, contained, and controlled by an American company. The epic exile of the entire population of China to the air—their nation turned into a consumer society that has lost sovereignty to foreign manipulation—can be read as a national allegory expressing profound anxiety about China's future. Will it rise—up into the air?

The Myth of Development. Another significant motif in contemporary Chinese sf is the obsession with development, as well as its ethical and technological effects. “Development is the only hard imperative”: this famous slogan, introduced by Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997), the architect of China's post-Mao economic reforms since 1978, has “been enshrined as a cardinal principle of state policy in the People's Republic” (Jones 4).¹⁰ But the Chinese discourse on development has a longer history, originating in the “evolutionary thinking” first introduced into China in the late Qing; this “offered Chinese readers and writers not only new terminology, but a new *narrative mode*, a way of telling stories about the growth and progress of nations and national subjects” (Jones 7). Evolutionary theory provided an organic model of change from simple to complex, from less to more, and from weak to strong, marked by teleological inevitability. Understood as such, development is not merely tantamount to

economic growth, on which China's recent reform has focused, but also provides a cultural paradigm of modernization as a linear movement of continuous progress.

Since the late Qing, the political appropriations of the discourses of development have played a central role in the visions of China's future that surpass the past and the present, and have served to sustain faith in the various reforms and revolutions of the past century. In this context, Mao's socialist campaign can be seen as sharing the same yearning for development that drove Deng's later reforms. In Chinese sf the myth of development has been a constant focus, particularly since the early years of Mao's republic. For example, "Gediao bizi de daxiang" [Elephants with their Trunks Removed, 1958], a children's story written by Chi Shuchang (1922-1997), presents a vivid concretization of the vision of unbounded development in the figure of a genetically-engineered pig. This pig, weighing twelve and half tons, is so huge that children mistake it for an elephant without a trunk. Its gigantic bulk



(The 1958 mural "Raising a pig as big as an elephant")

blatantly symbolizes the Maoist urge for *da yuejin* [Great Leap Forward], a campaign launched by Mao in 1958 to transform China into a fully developed Communist society through rapid industrialization and collectivization. At the height of the Great Leap Forward, the image of an enormous pig the size of an elephant actually appeared in government propaganda, symbolizing the "impressive" statistics of industrial and agricultural production. A blatantly political myth, the giant pig was the very symbol of China's cult of development. In real life, however, the Great Leap Forward led to the Great Famine (1959-1962), when fake production statistics resulted in economic crises that sabotaged normal operations in both agricultural and industrial areas.¹¹

The myth of unlimited development and its disastrous effects have received self-reflexive treatment in the new wave sf in China. A remarkable example is “Zhuansheng de juren” [The Reincarnated Giant, 2006] by Wang Jinkang, a veteran sf writer whose *oeuvre* include dozens of short stories and several award-winning novels.¹² Wang Jinkang, a successful engineer by profession, began his literary career at the age of forty-four and has since been the most productive of the “Big Three” writers. His dystopian novel *Yisheng* [Ant Life, 2007] is a sober reflection on the ethical effects of Mao’s social revolution: carried away by his idealistic impulses, a young scientist designs a method for spraying people with an “altruistic element” extracted from model “communist” creatures—ants. He creates an apparently utopian community which eventually turns into a nightmare in which individual lives, no longer respected, are sacrificed to the collective demand for constant social development.

While *Ant Life* looks back at the historical past, “The Reincarnated Giant” contextualizes the motif of development during China’s recent economic reforms. This story foregrounds an unsatisfied desire for *zengzhang* [growth], a prominent keyword in current news coverage of China’s economic leap that is understood as a continuously increasing GDP. The author cautiously designates the setting for this story as “J-nation,” clearly referring to China’s neighbor and competitor Japan, a nation that has exerted extensive influence on the Chinese economy. The characters in the story all have made-up Japanese names that punningly highlight their Chinese meanings. The name for the protagonist of the story, Jinbei Wuyan, pronounced *Imagai Nashihiko* in Japanese, has an easily recognized meaning in Chinese: “this person is shameless.”

Wang Jinkang’s shameless protagonist is an industrial tycoon who has complete control of the J-nation’s economy. He personally owns more than one sixth of the land in the country, and his wealth stands for the J-nation’s tremendous achievements in economic development. This character is clearly a reminder of China’s *nouveaux riches*, the new class that has gained wealth rapidly in the reform era. Portrayed as ruthless and greedy, Mr. Imagai—much like China’s First Emperor who united the nation in 221BCE—is obsessed with the search for eternal life.¹³ Ancient magic is reinvented as new technology. When Mr. Imagai reaches old age, he has his brain transplanted into the body of an infant so that he can begin his life anew. This project is doomed from the very beginning, however, as the surgeon forgets to monitor the brain’s control over the infant’s body. The extremely greedy mind of Mr. Imagai motivates the infant’s body to grow so rapidly that in a few months he requires a thousand wet nurses to provide enough milk to satisfy his appetite. Like the marvelous economic growth that Mr. Imagai brought to the J-nation, the unstoppable growth of his body becomes a modern scientific marvel. Four months after his rebirth, his body is as large as an island and the scientists have to feed him whale milk. This growth is impossible to control, however, and eventually Mr. Imagai is smothered by the overwhelming weight of his own giant frame.

The allegorical meaning of Wang Jinkang’s story is clear: the overwhelming desire for development leads to uncontrollable results that will eventually

collapse back on to the developers. The figure of the reincarnated giant represents the utopian desire for unlimited progress but it also reveals the tremendous human costs and dangers that accompany the realization of utopia. The giant body of Mr. Imagai reminds us of the gigantic elephant-like pig, which establishes a subtle connection between Mao's Great Leap Forward campaign and China's current rapid economic leap. The apocalyptic consequences of Mao's experiment with the Great Leap Forward have deeply influenced contemporary Chinese sf that thrives on, but is at the same time also deeply suspicious of, China's prolonged dream of development.

Han Song's novel *Ditie* [Subway, 2011] suggests the disastrous transformation of the myth of development into a dystopian nightmare. The novel is set in the underground of Beijing's subway system. Its construction began in 1965 under Mao's direct order, and it functioned initially as an underground haven from potential nuclear war as the Sino-Russian relationship worsened. In the reform era, Deng Xiaoping's admiration for Japan's *Shinkansen* [bullet train], stated during his first visit to Japan in 1979, emphasized the connection between high-speed transportation and high-speed transformation. The advanced subway system, high-speed rail, and the maglev have all become celebrated symbols of China's pursuit of non-stop economic development.¹⁴ In Han Song's novel, the myth of high-speed development is incarnated as a train that endlessly travels Beijing's subway circuit. At first angered, disoriented, and horrified, the passengers all gradually adapt to their new conditions. As the train continues its journey into an unknown future, evolution begins its work on them, transforming them into a variety of posthuman species. Grotesque scenes take place on the train: some people become cannibals, others become insects without self-consciousness. Evolution is figured as a process of degeneration that is killing humanity.

Subway was published shortly before a major accident took place on China's high-speed rail line in July 2011 that received intense media coverage and motivated severe criticism of the nation's obsession with speed. This incident inspired Han Song's *Gaotie* [High-speed Rail, 2012], a novel that depicts the transformation of a high-speed train into an enclosed universe after an accident cuts it off from normal space and time. A pastoral "harmonious society" seems to be developing on the train as its speed keeps increasing. In reality, China's high-speed train is named *hexie hao* [harmony], a combination of ideology and technology epitomizing China's commitment to high-speed development. Han Song's *Subway* subverts conventional "harmonious" versions of the development myth, however; the universe of the high-speed train spins completely out of control and, while the train continues on endlessly, all life eventually dies out.

In a similar vein, Han Song's recent "Zaishengzhuan" [Rebirth Bricks, 2010], which won China's Nebula Award in 2011, presents a ghostly vision of the reconstruction of China's urban landscape. The inspiration for this story was the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 that cost nearly 70,000 lives. The disaster provided unexpected opportunities for realtors and construction companies, identified as a major force in China's recent economic development that has

sustained an enormous real-estate market since the early 1990s.¹⁵ In Han Song's story, architects discover how to recycle the ruins of the earthquake for new construction projects. The mingling of human remains with construction materials leads to the production of "rebirth bricks" that are intelligent and can feel emotions. People are awed by the beauty and power of these humanized bricks. Following China, nations around the world begin to turn ruins and human remains into the materials for construction on an ever-larger scale. New civilizations emerge because of the intelligent qualities of the rebirth bricks. Eventually the bricks are sent to outer space as construction material for human colonies on other planets. Thus history is revised as a Chinese disaster inspires developers to turn "waste" into the vehicle of unstoppable development. All the buildings, cities, and colonies built with these bricks, however, contain the remains of human victims. While human progress is spurred on by this landmark invention, it is also forever haunted by the whispers and weeping of the dead.

The Posthuman Narrative. In contrast to Han Song and Wang Jinkang, Liu Cixin is more concerned with depicting an apocalyptic posthuman world in his writing. He also appears to be the least influenced by Chinese politics. He is a major advocate of "hard science fiction" in China. Some of his most ambitious work focuses on speculative changes to the fundamental principles of the physical world itself. After publishing his first stories in 1999, Liu quickly established himself as China's most popular sf writer. His *SAN TI TRILOGY* [The Three Body Trilogy, 2007-2010], at a total of over 880,000 characters, is hailed as a major work that has "lifted Chinese science fiction to a world class level" (Yan Feng 3; my translation).

In his recent monograph on the theories and typologies of science fiction (2011), the first study of its kind written in China, scholar and sf writer Wu Yan (b. 1962) notes that an idealized "utopia of science and technology" is a central motif in contemporary Chinese sf (107-12). This echoes the government's call for "advancing scientific and technological modernization," a goal that has influenced Chinese educational policies since 1978. It is deeply rooted in a commitment to the certainties of science after decades of a constantly shifting political climate, especially during Mao's chairmanship. Popular visions of a scientific utopia provide the foundation for Liu Cixin's advocacy of "hard science fiction," based as it is on faith in science and technology instead of faith in human moral consciousness. This is expressed very clearly in the title of a 2008 interview, "Daode de jintou jiushi kehuan de kaishi" [The End of Morality is where Science Fiction Begins].

In Liu Cixin's fictional worlds, human society is often presented as a minor problem against the extravagant and grandiose backdrop of a universe measured in light years. Human life may be at the mercy of a supremely powerful alien species and human extinction has little impact on the universe. Most of Liu's work can be considered "posthuman" because of its highly technologized and omnipotent perspective. Experimenting with ideas about changes in physical reality, he creates entire new universes— "like God" (Liu, "Cong dahai" 277).

His master plot is humanity's encounter with the unknown of the universe, a vastness that remains radically alien to human understanding. Filled with imposingly grand superhuman, transhuman, and posthuman figures and events, Liu Cixin's fictional worlds are fiercely lofty and awe-inspiring.

"Xiangcun jiaoshi" [The Village Schoolteacher, 1999] was the first of Liu Cixin's stories to be well received.¹⁶ It combines realistic depictions of the bleak state of education in rural China with wondrous evocations of an intergalactic war that extends throughout the Milky Way. The former story is merely a detail in the unfolding of the latter's divine drama, even as it proves crucial for human survival. When one side of the war sets out to construct a five-hundred-light-year-wide buffer zone in the first arm of our galaxy, requiring the destruction of all the stars in this enormous expanse, it conducts a lifescan to make sure that no advanced intelligent species is eliminated in the process of its military operation. Many stars are wiped out as the creatures who inhabit their planets fail to respond intelligently to questions concerning the basic laws of the universe. Eighteen Chinese children are singled out as representatives of the life forms on the third planet of our solar system; they have just learned Newton's three laws of physics, their teacher's final lesson before his death. Their recital of the correct answers in unison saves the Earth from destruction. The story can be read as a touching testimony to human agency, particularly as it is manifested in children, but it also clearly points to the sheer vulnerability of humanity in spite of all its mastery of scientific knowledge. Human life is a contingent phenomenon in the universe, while the laws of the physical world remain constant. From this perspective, Liu Cixin incorporates into his seemingly sentimental story of a selfless, devoted teacher and his students a cosmic determinism that overwhelms human agency.

Another story, "Shiyun" [The Poetry Cloud, 2003], portrays an alien species that is not nearly as benign as that of "The Village Schoolteacher."¹⁷ This highly acclaimed story depicts the apocalyptic end of humanity when an immense alien intelligence destroys the solar system. Appearing to humans as a perfect sphere, it shows only cold contempt for so-called human civilization. By accident, however, this god-like creature becomes captivated by traditional Chinese poetry. Its unimaginably advanced technology enables it to explore all eleven dimensions of the quantum universe but it has yet to learn how to write poetry. It keeps one Chinese poet alive and uses all the energies of the solar system to create a "poetry cloud" that can produce and store all the poetry that it is possible to write. At the end of the story, the alien creature assumes the identity of China's greatest poet, Li Bo (701-762CE).

"The Poetry Cloud" dramatizes an ambivalent negotiation between poetry and technology and, on a larger scale, between humanity and the universe. This story of an alien creature's admiration for traditional Chinese poetry has deeply moved at least one contemporary Chinese poet, who sees in it a reaffirmation of the power of the poetic imagination (Liao). But the ambivalence in Liu's story comes through clearly in his solution to the problematic tensions between poetry and technology: the poetry cloud will generate and encompass all possible poetic creations. Although the god-like alien still cannot identify real

poetry—and bitterly admits its failure—all of poetry has been produced and stored in its enormous “computer.” The poetry cloud is a powerful symbol of the possible eventual triumph of technology over culture; the story’s last section depicts the two Chinese poets’ happy life after the total extinction of the solar system (one of whom is the alien), but this can best be read as a simulacrum, a virtual reality fabricated by the technologized mimesis of the poetic vision after its creators have been wiped out.

In Liu Cixin’s most important work to date, the *SAN TI TRILOGY*, the universe is portrayed as a dark forest in which the only moral imperative is the recognition of zero morality and in which all intelligent species compete to the death with other species. The most advanced intelligence in the universe dares to change the laws of physics to eliminate its rivals. The question that Liu Cixin asks is whether the human race, as a species with moral consciousness, can survive in a universe that has no place for morality. Can humanity survive in a universe that obeys only the inhuman laws of “hard science”?

I have no space here for a thorough discussion of Liu Cixin’s epic trilogy, but it would be interesting to consider the intricate relationship between its depiction of the Cultural Revolution and its delineation of a radically amoral universe.¹⁸ Here I will only present a short analysis of the beginning of the saga. Liu’s narrative takes us all the way to the end of the universe, but it begins during the Cultural Revolution. In the late 1960s, during the peak of the ruthless public humiliations of Chinese intellectuals, a young woman named Ye Wenjie witnesses the death of her father, an aged astrophysicist. This changes her view of humanity and she begins to have radical doubts about the possibility of human morality. At the same time, a secret science project is launched by a top leader of the Chinese revolution—it is implied that the order comes from Mao himself—to discover extraterrestrial civilizations before either the American or Russian imperialists, and to win these alien societies to China’s side. A science team is set up to send messages into outer space. Ye Wenjie joins this team and receives its first response from the aliens, which reads more like a warning than a greeting: it asks the human recipient not to reply because those aggressive members of this alien society will then obtain Earth’s coordinates and attack the planet. Disillusioned by the utter lack of morality of the Cultural Revolution, Ye Wenjie calmly replies, “Please come to Earth; my species is hopeless” (205; my translation). The events in the trilogy are now set in motion: Ye’s decision will bring a fierce space war to Earth and humanity will pay for its enlightenment about the amoral nature of the universe with its life.

I do not mean to suggest that Liu Cixin’s space saga is underwritten by the politics of the Cultural Revolution, nor can I do justice here to the complexities of his plotlines through an oversimplified synopsis. Given the above summary, however, it certainly seems that the moral crisis manifested during Mao’s revolutionary campaign finds its parallel in this cosmic vision of zero morality. Ultimately, Liu Cixin’s answer to the trilogy’s central question—can humanity survive in an amoral universe?—is “no.” The universe is a dark forest where only those unafflicted by moral concerns can survive. This vision is no doubt deeply rooted in memories of China’s recent past. Mao’s conviction that human

beings find endless pleasure in the eternal battle between heaven and earth as well as in their ongoing battles with other humans is the very root of a utopian vision of social revolution, human progress, and cosmic change forever energized by struggles that transcend anything resembling human “morality.” What remains central to the utopian discourse of the People’s Republic—Mao’s ideal of permanent revolution—is the foundational belief in the possibility of revolutionizing humanity through dehumanizing the revolutionaries.

Another short story by Liu Cixin will serve to conclude this essay. “Weijieyuan” [Micro-era 1999] offers, in the course of its somewhat ambiguous parody, a vision of the de-humanized future of humanity. It creates an unusual utopian vision of downward development as humanity devolves into degenerate micro-posthumans. An apocalyptic story, it begins with the last man returning from space to an Earth that has been torched by the explosive Sun. What he finds at home are the reengineered offspring of extinct humanity. Because of their extremely small size, they have survived the extinction by burrowing into the depths of the Earth’s crust. They are a completely non-human species whose sense of anxiety is directly proportionate to their microscopic size, roughly one trillionth of an ordinary human. Thus they have no worries and are shamelessly cheerful all the time, living in a kind of eternal carnival. The last man feels sad at the extinction of the entire human race but sheds happy tears as he looks at the cheerful faces of humanity’s micro-children—do we not all hope that our descendents will live happily ever after? For this reason the last man betrays the orders he received centuries ago—to restore humanity—and destroys all the human embryos that he has brought from Earth before its destruction. The human race as we know it comes to an end. Will these microscopic posthumans be more successful than us, the so-called “macro-humans,” burdened as we are by morality and historical consciousness? There is no question that they have developed into a superior species in terms of both biology and psychology and that they are free of guilt and anxiety. The last man is satisfied with a future that severs all ties to human morality. The scene depicting humanity’s final moments remains ambiguous and it is unclear whether or not this story really celebrates a completely dehumanized and completely *carnivalized* utopia—a utopia that looks suspiciously like a permanent revolution.

Coda. The history of Chinese science fiction is a history of breaks and ruptures. A series of brief booms can be identified: the late decade of the Qing dynasty (1902-1911), the first four years of China’s reform era (1978-1982), and the beginning of the twenty-first century. The earlier two periods of growth were interrupted by changes in both political cultures and literary trends and the third boom is still in process. As this essay has tried to demonstrate, the utopian motifs that characterized China’s early modernity have since been treated with irony and parody, have been reconsidered and reconstructed, and have become the containers of different visions in new wave Chinese sf. The ambivalence of a story such as “Micro-era” complicates the very meaning of utopia and raises questions about the meaning of terms such as “progress” and “evolution.” It also raises specific questions about China’s century-long program of national

development, social revolution, and cultural reform. Visions of the coming “micro-era,” like visions of 2066 and of unstoppable high-speed trains, seem to defy any easy categorization as either utopian or dystopian. In new wave Chinese sf, these may be the same thing.

NOTES

1. The first edition of Han Song’s novel was published in 2000 by a provincial press in Heilongjiang. A revised edition was recently released by Shanghai People’s Publishing House, a major mainland China press. I am referring to the second edition in this essay.

2. The Chinese term literally translates as “science fiction.” In Chinese, “kexue” means “science” and “xiaoshuo” means “fiction.”

3. Between the late Qing and the twenty-first century, there was a brief revival of science fiction in China between 1978 and 1982. For a historical analysis of Chinese sf during this period, see Wagner (17-62) and Wu Dingbo (xi-xli). In the most recent revival of the genre, Liu Cixin’s sf saga *SAN TI* [The Three Body Trilogy] has appeared on the bestseller lists of several major newspapers and become a topic for discussion on several of the most popular talk shows in both China and Hong Kong. It has also received serious attention from literary critics outside the sf ghetto. Other indications of the current boom in Chinese sf include the establishment of awards such as the Global Chinese-Language Science Fiction Association’s Nebula Awards and the *Kehuan shijie* (Science Fiction World) Galaxy Awards; the annual conventions for the awards ceremonies have attracted large numbers of participants and been covered in major media. To date, 97 original Chinese sf novels have been published in 2012, more than in any previous year, and the membership of the sf group at < www.douban.com >, one of the major social networks for Chinese netizens, has reached nearly 38,000 (as of 30 Nov. 2012).

4. The idea of “China’s peaceful rise” was introduced by Zheng Bijian, a Chinese official, at the Boao Forum for Asia in 2003 (Zheng 14-19). It was later reiterated by Premier Wen Jiabao during his 2003 visit to the United States.

5. The idea of science fiction as a “selective tradition” is borrowed from Milner (395).

6. In some English sources, these writers are referred to as “the three generals.” See Jonathan Clements and Wu Dingbo’s entry on “China” in the online *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*.

7. “Harmonious society” (*hexie shehui*) has been a key concept in the state administration of China’s leadership under President Hu Jintao. As explained by Barmé,

The concept of the ‘harmonious society’ was originally introduced at the National People’s Congress in 2005.... It was developed into a fully blown Party resolution in 2006 that included a blueprint for social and political governance; its proclaimed goals included producing more equitable economic and social outcomes by reducing the egregious disparities in income and living conditions between China’s haves and have-nots. The mantra-like formula ‘harmonious society’ is repeated ad nauseam by officials and in the official media, but in popular usage it has acquired a negative connotation. It is often used as a satirical euphemism for the government’s efforts at maintaining stability, including censorship and the suppression of dissidents.

The word “hexie” has been parodied by Chinese Internet users, who “created a slang pun on harmony: river crab (pronounced *héxiè*, homophonous with harmony or *héxié*). To be censored is sometimes referred to as ‘being harmonized’ or ‘being river-crabbed.’ and ‘river crab’ sometimes indicates censorship” (Barmé, 69).

8. *Xiyouji* is a fantasy narrative of the monk's travels to India, framed by traditional Chinese mythologies and Buddhist religious imagery. It is attributed to Wu Cheng'en (ca. 1500-1582).

9. "The Passengers and the Creator" has been translated by Nathaniel Isaacson and appears in a special issue of *Renditions* on "Chinese Science Fiction: Late Qing and the Contemporary."

10. This slogan was introduced by Deng during his 1992 tour of Southern China. It was widely circulated by the media and is included in *Deng Xiaoping wenxuan* [Collected Works of Deng Xiaoping].

11. For a recent account of the Great Leap Forward and its disastrous results, see Dikötter.

12. "The Reincarnated Giant" has been translated by Carlos Rojas and appears in a special issue of *Renditions* on "Chinese Science Fiction: Late Qing and the Contemporary."

13. According to Sima Qian's *Shiji* [Records of the Grand Historian, c. 100 BCE], the First Emperor consulted the magician Xu Fu about a remedy for human mortality (49).

14. Since its construction began four years ago, China's high-speed rail system has become the most extensive in the world, with a network of nearly 8000 miles. Shanghai's maglev train, which can reach a top speed of 268 mph, has been in commercial use since April 2004.

15. There was no real-estate market in the People's Republic of China before the 1990s. In 1998, the Chinese government began to privatize housing units previously owned by the state and since then the housing market has had a crucial influence on the nation's economy.

16. "The Village Schoolteacher" has been translated by Christopher Elford and Jiang Chenxin and appears in a special issue of *Renditions* on "Chinese Science Fiction: Late Qing and the Contemporary."

17. "The Poetry Cloud" has been translated by Chi-yin Ip and Cheuk Wong and appears in a special issue of *Renditions* on "Chinese Science Fiction: Late Qing and the Contemporary."

18. For a more extensive discussion of Liu Cixin's trilogy, see my "Tanxingzhe yu mianbizhe: Liu Cixin de kehuan shijie."

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on the variations of utopian narrative in contemporary Chinese sf, with a view toward appreciating the genre's historical development since the late Qing. Through analyzing the writings of three writers, Han Song, Wang Jinkang, and Liu Cixin, this essay examines three themes that characterize China's current new wave of science fiction: China's rise, the myth of development, and posthumanity. Deeply entangled with the politics of a changing China, science fiction today both strengthens and complicates the utopian vision of a new and powerful China: it mingles nationalism with utopianism/dystopianism, sharpens social criticism with an acute awareness of China's potential for further reform, and wraps political consciousness in scientific discourse about the powers of technology and the technologies of power.