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The Worlding of Chinese Science Fiction

A Global Genre and Its Negotiations as World Literature

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Science Fiction and the World Image

Just a few months before Liu Cixin wrote *The Three-Body Problem* (Santi), which is now arguably the most famous contemporary Chinese novel that has been introduced to international readers and certainly a popular pick for passengers sojourning at airport bookstores, he had written a somehow obscure novella, "Mountain" (Shan).[1] It depicts an intelligent species evolving into a civilization that is stuck in a bubble world hidden at the center of a rocky planet. The world they know is a rather limited, enclosed space. In the beginning, they have no such concept as an "outside world," and the space beyond the planet's solid rocky mantle is completely invisible to them. Liu Cixin narrates this "bubble" civilization's epic journey of launching their own geographical discovery, as their own Copernicus and Columbus's thoughts and actions discredit this civilization's intuitive conceptualization of the visible reality as the only one, "a Solid Universe Theory" that "the bubble is absolutely the center of the universe," and "infinite layers of rocks encircle the bubble world." It takes extraneous efforts for the brave ones to test the gravitational pull and travel through layers after layers of rocks to the surface of the planet, where they finally see the night sky full of stars. The moment that they touch upward on the surface of the planet signifies two landmark events at the same time: the invisible, unknown universe is now seen by their own eyes, as the entire world is presented to them, and their unseen civilization is now part of that universe, because they can put their own realm in the atlas of an enlarged world.

World-building is essential to science fictional narrative.[2] Almost any story that develops its narrative exclusively around a self-reflective plot design concerning the process of world-building is likely to be read as a "mega-text," or a science fiction story about science fiction. To borrow the words of Robert Scholes, such science fiction represents a structural fabulation, permeated by "an awareness of the nature of the universe as a system of systems, a structure of structures" (1975, 41). Liu Cixin's concise, economized narrative of "Mountain" belongs to the same line of

literary works that features Jorge Luis Borges's "The Library of Babel" (1941), Isaac Asimov's "The Last Question" (1956), Arthur C. Clarke's "The Star" (1955), and Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life" (1998). A story like "Mountain" serves as a reflection on the master plot of science fiction: the encounter with the unknown, together with a self-conscious effort to understand such an encounter. The unsentimental, technically concrete discourses the story uses for depicting the "mountain" world reflect the genre's structural conventions, alluding to a scientific collection and processing of the knowledge that drives the narrative.

"Mountain" echoes the provocative, sublime grand design of "The Three-Body Trilogy"'s world-building, which culminates in the "dark forest" image of the immense and infinite unknown. The human race steps into outer space, entering physical-rule-changing interstellar wars and approaching the dark secret of the universe, where lie the ruins of the ancient wars. In the alien universe of which "we've caught a few glimpses," as a character in the novel describes, "a bottomless abyss exits in every inch" (Liu 2016a, 555, 243). The will to knowledge leads the post-apocalyptic diaspora of the human race farther into the deep darkness of the immoral, inhuman universe (Song 2018). Different from the techno-optimism cherished in "Mountain," the contact with outer space and higher intelligence in "The Three-Body Trilogy" presents "the worst of all possible universes" (Liu 2016b, 367), but that does not discourage an exploratory spirit that characterizes the narrative of Liu's magnum opus. The eager exploration of what lies beyond the visible and the humble, almost calculated endeavors to unfold the image of a civilization and put it in the atlas of stars happen simultaneously.

The story of the "mountain" civilization serves as a mega-text of not only the genre itself, but also the genre's Chinese entry to world literature in tandem with Liu Cixin's journey to the world stage. "Mountain" epitomizes the same narrative strategies about the Earth civilization's forced odyssey into space, exploring and integrating into a new world, as in *The Three-Body Problem*, *The Dark Forest* (Heian senlin), and *Death's End* (Sishen yongsheng). In a larger context, it also serves to allegorize the national experience of China's entering a new world order defined by modern time-space and political economy. Rhetoric in news reports about the novel's success in the United States and around the world shows that Chinese science fiction has been taken as an index of China's endeavor to not only survive but prevail in the larger world. Landing on the surface of the planet science fiction, the Chinese new wave becomes a global phenomenon.

Through retelling the story of "Mountain," I intend to introduce the term "worlding," which, in the Heideggerian sense, denotes the opening of the world (Heidegger 1993), a constantly unfolding process of becoming. It is related to another key concept in Heidegger's philosophy: "being-in-the-world." He describes how worlding is possible: "Men alone, as mortals, by dwelling attain to the world as world. Only what conjoins itself out of world becomes a thing" (Heidegger 2001, 180). For him, it is poetry that joins the world and things, "gathering into a simple

onefold of their intimate belonging together" (Heidegger 2001, 203). David Der-wei Wang borrows this concept for the writing of Chinese literary history, suggesting that "the concept of worlding nevertheless may help us to understand Chinese literary modernity in the broader sense of *wen*, as a vehicle 'bringing the world home,' and, more importantly, as an agency that continuously opens up new configurations of the world" (2017, 14). Besides emphasizing the poetic force of literature, Wang's application of this idea to the context of literary history also implies the making and becoming of literature as well as literature's agency in opening up horizons for China's being-in-the-world and its negotiation with world literature.

I apply the term "worlding" to the poetics of the new wave science fiction to characterize the genre's narrative mode as a process of world-building: revealing the invisible, creating a virtual form of the world, and expressing a poetic topology of literary imagination. I also use "worlding" to characterize three interrelated movements in historical contexts: Chinese science fiction's history of creating a unique literary world, negotiations with world literature, and representation of the invisible China to the world. In this chapter, I will elaborate on the genre's nature as global literature and discuss how it came to the center of a global stage and what still remains invisible after the success of "The Three-Body Trilogy."

The New Wave

"As a minimum, we must demand from SF that it be wiser than the world it speaks to" (Suvin 1979, 36). Darko Suvin characterizes the genre with a cautious optimism and a lasting utopian impulse that could create both utopian and dystopian narratives. Science fiction, as perceived by fans, authors, translators, and advocates, enjoys the elite privilege as a "selective tradition" that speaks to alternative world images (Milner 2011). For the new wave of Chinese science fiction, this is even truer, considering that it has carried over the spiritual heritage of the 1980s, a decade of enlightenment and hope. Despite its long history as an obscure, if not completely unknown, genre, Chinese science fiction underwent a sudden revival thanks to the post-1989 reflections on enlightenment and revolution, the failure of the mainstream literary efforts to represent reality in the older, largely realistic ways, the boom of new sciences and technologies, the rise of the internet, the maturing markets for genre fiction, the flourishing of Netizen communities, and so on. Science fiction strongly signifies that we are now entering a new age, a future world that has just begun unfolding, and a time for seeking alternation and subversion of conventions.

This new trend of Chinese science fiction, pioneered by Han Song, Wang Jinkang, and Liu Cixin, quickly entered its golden age and created its own new wave subversion. I have borrowed the term "new wave" from Anglo-American science fiction to underscore this new trend's cutting-edge experimentalism with subversive cultural and political significance (Song 2015). The term "new wave" implies a

strong avant-garde position, as it is interpreted in cinema studies according to its etymology in the French "nouvelle vague," which defines the genre's tension with the mainstream literary paradigm. I have thus also used the term to recognize the entire new trend of science fiction as a *new wave* in relation to the contemporary Chinese cultural establishment.

Various voices, or a SF heteroglossia, enable the genre to be both popular and subversive. In particular, the new wave mingles utopianism with dystopian anomalies, challenges the conventional ideas of humanity through post-human images, and questions some of the key concepts of Chinese modernity, such as progress, development, nationalism, and scientism. Compared with other popular genres, including fantasy fiction, the new wave of Chinese science fiction has engaged more seriously with social, political, and philosophical themes.

The world images created by Liu Cixin and Han Song are not necessarily better than the real world, but they try to shed light on realms of "invisibility," seeking the deeper truism beneath the glossy, shiny surface of reality, pointing to the hideous side of the splendid visions of the universe and the success story of the nation as well as to the unsettling, unnamable darker dimensions in the physics and psychology of our world (Song 2016). When translated into English, the works by Liu Cixin and Han Song, as well as Bao Shu, Hao Jingfang, and Chen Qiufan, present an unconventional, folded image of China. If they are wiser than the world they speak to, the "wisdom" that Chinese science fiction brought into the world is not a cautious optimism but rather a cautious revelation that foregrounds rich possibilities in alternative visions of our worlds. During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Chinese science fiction entered an unprecedented new epoch of experimentation and success, and truly put forward some brave warriors to change the heaven and earth. For these two decades, this new wave of Chinese science fiction represented a new hope for change, a curiosity about the larger world, and a promise of more wonders and revelations for Chinese readers. From here, this genre brought China to the center stage of world literature.

Chinese Science Fiction Goes Global

Marketed as China's national bestseller when the *Wall Street Journal* (2014) made a sensational announcement that China had launched a sci-fi invasion of the US, *The Three-Body Problem* crossed the national borders smoothly, and achieved unrivaled international bestselling scores among all translations of Chinese literature only weeks after its release in the United States (Xinhua News 2018). Ken Liu, a Chinese-American science fiction writer who established his reputation after winning the Hugo, Nebula, and World Fantasy Awards with one single short story, "The Paper Menagerie" (2012), has fine-tuned Liu Cixin's novels with a smooth combination of the original Chinese text's dynamism and the stylish accuracy and neatness of American science fiction. Tor Books released *The Three-Body Problem* to critical

acclaim in November 2014, followed by its sequel *The Dark Forest* (translated by Joel Martinsen) in August 2015, with the final volume of the trilogy, *Death's End* (translated by Ken Liu), released in August 2016. The publisher's promotion campaign imitated what happened with *The Lord of the Rings* or *The Hunger Games*, and the strategy of releasing the trilogy at a steady pace within a less than three-year time frame was apparently aimed at creating a similar momentum to entice American readers. Liu's novels received endorsements from American writers and celebrities, ranging from the Utopian novelist Kim Stanley Robinson to the popular fantasy author George R. R. Martin, as well as from President Barack Obama and Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg (Kakutani 2017).[3] The "Three-Body" universe eventually remapped world science fiction through renditions in over a dozen languages. In 2015, Liu Cixin won the Hugo Award for Best Novel as the first non-English author. He also won Spain's Premios Ignotus Award as a non-Spanish writer and Germany's Kurd Laßwitz Award as a non-German writer.

While Liu Cixin has quoted American and British space opera writers like Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke as major influences on his own writings (Liu 2014, 88), his fans consider *The Three-Body Problem*'s winning the Hugo as a game-changing event that has pushed Chinese science fiction into the limelight for Anglo-American audiences. Liu Cixin's novels quickly took on a new life as "world literature," which David Damrosch defines in terms of circulation and reading across the borders of national literatures (2003, 5). Outside China, Liu Cixin's work thrives in a translingual status, mirroring his prediction of the invented hybridity in the future world languages in *The Dark Forest*, a trendy success that is not too distant from the triumph of "global English" (Damrosch 2014). Strategic usage of "global English" can lead to socially meaningful literary experiments, but it also highlights the fact that nothing remains intact or "authentic" after being (re)written in English. Editing the English version was extraneous when the narrative discourse had to be readjusted to remove words considered "improper" in English, such as the gender-biased expressions that permeated Liu's literary texts. However, even so, against the grain of such cautious literary theorists like Emily Apter (2013), who warned about untranslatability based on a critique of the commercialized "world literature" that exploits cultural equivalence and identity politics, *The Three-Body Problem*, together with other Chinese science fiction novels, including the recently published *Waste Tide* by Chen Qiufan and Ken Liu's anthologies *Broken Stars* and *Invisible Planets*, seems to do well, or even better, in English.[4] A situation that differs drastically from Apter's suspected "identity" cultural game, Chinese science fiction rendered into English sometimes defies the boundaries set by political censorships and nationalist limitations.

A few paragraphs deliberately edited out of the original Chinese version of *The Three-Body Problem* have been translated and included in the English version, and the original chapter order was restored; all these chapters are concerned with the Cultural Revolution, a dangerous topic in China. Placing them back in the

English version makes the narrative more coherent and complete. A small number of science fiction stories that have touched upon China's political taboos, such as "Dashidai" by Bao Shu, could be published only in English translation. Bao Shu's story narrates actual historical events in a fictive reverse chronological order paralleling the main characters' storyline; thus, they experience history backward from the Olympic Games (2008) to the Tiananmen Massacre (1989) to the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). This story is impossible to get published in Chinese, and it was only available in English as Ken Liu's translation, "What Has Passed Shall in Kinder Light Appear" (Bao Shu 2019). The English version of another story by Bao Shu, "Songs of Ancient Earth" (2018), was restored to the author's original version, thanks to the English translation, changing the quoted patriotic songs that lure the space crew to a distant star system from Russian songs, an alteration imposed by the Chinese editor/censors, to patriotic Chinese songs from the Mao years, which was the author's original arrangement. These translations make a poignant, yet constructive statement about the awareness of untranslatability, which is not or at least not only a rebuttal of the so-called neoliberal market-driven "world literature," but also necessary to bypass the checkpoints of the old-fashioned system.

An advocate for the new conceptualization of "world literature" based on cross-cultural translatability and border-crossing circulation, Damrosch also presents a sober reminder that "foreign works have difficulty entering a new arena if they don't conform to the receiving country's image of what the foreign culture should be, and the difficulties become all the greater if a work doesn't seem useful in meeting local needs abroad" (2003, 117). What makes Chinese science fiction's "entering world literature" even more complicated is that science fiction is originally already a "foreign" culture to Chinese authors like Liu Cixin and Han Song.

The genre was first introduced to China through Japan more than one hundred years ago and enjoyed several short-lived booms at crucial moments of modern Chinese history (Wagner 1985; Wang 1997, 252–312; Isaacson 2017), but there has not been a continuous developmental history of the genre. Despite a promising beginning, the genre lost momentum after the mainstream of modern Chinese literature was conceptualized almost completely in terms of realism during the May Fourth period. Contemporary writers like Liu Cixin, Han Song, and Chen Qiufan have to reinvent the genre conventions as well as experiment with variations of the customary conventions of literature in general through simultaneously transplanting and transcending the discourses, images, concepts, and world systems loaned from their Anglo-American, Japanese, Russian, and European counterparts. Liu Cixin openly admits to his admiration for Arthur C. Clarke.[5] An emotional moment in *Death's End* (Liu 2016a, 502) is the establishing of a monument to human civilizations, which clearly pays homage to the plot in Clarke's classic story "The Star."[6] Han Song's much darker, often mystic world views, closely connected to his sharp observations on cybernetics, robotics, the political usage of technologies, and posthuman self-consciousness, have established his reputation as China's Philip K.

Dick. Chen Qiufan's insight into the mutating global political economy based on exploitations of the lower-class people, named "waste people" in *Waste Tide*, betrays discriminations according to race, class, gender, and nation in the context of a worsening global ecological crisis, which links his acute social criticism to Taiwan's Wu Ming-yi, as well as to a number of science fiction writers around the globe sharing similar concerns, such as David Mitchell, Paolo Bacigalupi, and Nalo Hopkinson. For Chinese writers, as well as those from other parts of the world, choosing to write science fiction is already an engagement with the "world literature" through connecting their visions to this genre that is "global" by origin.

"Global Science Fiction" and Its Rewrites in Postcolonial/Posthuman Terms

As Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr. asserts (2012, 488): "Sf has had an important role in the Enlightenment striving to view the world as a unitary thing . . . Globalization of one form or another has been the default vector of sf from the beginning." Science fiction, compared to other literary genres, is a modern genre characterized by two forward-looking visions that created the modern world. The first is of utopia that, first inspired by post-Columbus travelogues and given a political meaning by Thomas More, cast an optimistic gaze into the "other" space representing a better place for all. The second is the progress of humankind, a narrative popularized by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution that later had a worldwide impact on the modern mind. The idea of progress means a change created by temporality, a historical movement toward a predetermined betterment of human conditions, pointing to a universal timetable synchronizing world history, including the future history of the world. Both visions, though claiming universalism, were primarily inventions of modern European intellectual thinking.

The first notable science fiction novel, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), may already qualify as a "global science fiction." It carries the two visions mentioned above, both their thesis and antithesis, depicting the world's best scenario and its shadow, a revolution of science and heart together with a profound postrevolutionary dismal. The English novel was conceived among the Romantic exiles in Switzerland. The protagonist is designated, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a noble citizen of Geneva. His Creature follows Dr. Frankenstein's steps to England, Scotland, Ireland, continental Europe, and all the way to the North Pole. The sources of the novel form a European microcosm of "world literature": ancient Greek tragedies, biblical narratives, medieval folklore, German and British Gothicism, French encyclopedias, early anarchism, early feminism, and British Romanticism, together with records of alchemy and papers on modern biological sciences and the new sciences of electricity, magneticity, chemistry, and physics. Important historical figures who influenced the novel's conception make a full gallery of international celebrities of world literature: Aeschylus, Ovid, Goethe, John Milton, Erasmus

Darwin, Luigi Galvani, Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, Mary's father William Godwin, and her mother Mary Wollstonecraft (Spark 1987; Hitchcock 2007; Smith 2016). *Frankenstein* surpasses many later literary works that came to define science fiction in terms of border-crossing and transnational configuration. Both Jules Verne and H.G. Wells had narrower visions of the world, though they both assumed a transnational position. Verne's passion for depicting Anglo-American characters never discounted his own patriotism, and his "extraordinary adventures" happen mostly in exotic locations in the colonies of the European countries. Wells's *War of the Worlds* (1896) is very much limited to the viewpoint of England, but it contains a grandiose moment—the entire human world is compared to a drop of water viewed from deep space. The great tradition of science fiction spearheaded by Mary Shelley, Jules Verne, and H.G. Wells lays a solid foundation for the global science fiction that treats human race as a whole, a tradition that continued in the Golden Age space operas, Asimov's "Foundation" series, and Clarke's "Space Odyssey" series.

This tradition came to Liu Cixin and his fellow Chinese authors at the turn of the twenty-first century. In many ways, *The Three-Body Problem* is not a usual Chinese novel. For example, it features not only Chinese characters but an international, even interstellar cast when counting the Trisolarans and the unknown higher species named "Singer."[7] The English translation of the novel, with chapters rearranged as in the 2007 print edition in China,[8] opens with not only China, but the entire world encountering a crisis, namely, the impending invasion from outside our solar system. Conflicts between nations have to be set aside, a united front formed among all humans, resistance unitarily organized against an external, even invisible, enemy. In the concluding volume *Death's End*, the novel opens with a prelude that presents a Byzantine girl's encounter with a hyperdimensional fragment in 1453 before the fall of Constantinople and then, six hundred years later, a Chinese woman scientist's despair at the dimmed hope for the survival of human civilization. It makes a sweeping account of a global apocalypse from the fall of Constantinople to the endgame destroying the Earth civilization, which is further followed by the demise of the solar system, leading all the way to the end of the entire human civilization.

But after all, this Chinese science fiction novel was written nearly two centuries after *Frankenstein*. The singular shadow in Mary Shelley's narrative, a dystopian anomaly in the overall optimistic, humanist blueprint for the perfection of all individuals, has now grown into a planet-sized darkness. Twice in the narrative of Liu Cixin's saga, the global population of the planet is viewed as an anonymous entity by the superintelligence from the deep space. The first event happens when a Trisolaran device arrives in the solar system. The unknown device, nicknamed the "Droplet" by Earthlings, is interpreted first as a gift of peace, with its perfect shape symbolizing good intentions. This deceptive utopian impulse put all humans in one basket, so when the scientist Ding Yi guesses the real intention of the Droplet ("If I destroy you, what business is it of yours?"), it reveals the contempt for all

lives on our planet (Liu 2015, 412). The second time sees the demise of the entire solar system. For the godlike creature Singer, the human civilization is nothing but an anonymous, invisible, low-level existence viewed from beyond the globe (Liu 2016a, 472): "Singer gazed at the world of the Star-Pluckers. It was an ordinary star that had at least a billion more time grains of life left. It possesses eight planets: four giant liquid planets and four solid ones. Signer's experience told him that the low-entropy entities who had sent out the primitive membrane broadcast lived on one of the solid planets."

Observed from a global point of view, the transformation from utopia to dystopia has characterized the modern epoch that began at the end of the Victorian era in England. H.G. Wells predicted the War of the Worlds, and postwar science fiction projected worse global menaces incarnated in the authoritarian Oceania, the nuked Gojira, and the illusive simulated reality controlled by the Matrix. Global problems demanding urgent actions, such as global warming, ecological crisis, pandemic, famine, extinction, cybernetic insecurity, and political restlessness, have all contributed to the further darkening of science fiction as well as the popularity of dystopian classics like *The Handmaid's Tale* and *The Man in the High Castle*, both adapted into popular TV drama series recently. But does the terrifying, dystopian "contemporary" world completely dismantle the utopian humanism and drag each nation back to its closed territory? Even so, the genetic linkage of the genre determines that even the darkest dystopian vision comes from the same idealism, a pursuit of alternatives to reality, which inspired utopianism in the first place (Song 2015: 7).

However, the discourse has also changed due to rising new theories contesting the ways of interpreting the "other." Back to the conception of "global science fiction," Csicsery-Ronay Jr. further explains the idea of "global science fiction" through situating it in a subtle critique of the European hegemony (2013, 1):

> Gains in scientific knowledge and technology that gave European societies the power to collect parts of the world and populations under their hegemony were in effect producing the prospect of the "one world," a planet governed by the unifying "universal principle" of enlightened progress and modernization. The period of European colonial expansion culminates in a grand claim of "universality" for Western European cultural dominance. The concept of the "universum"—adopted from ecclesiastical hegemony and carrying with it a distinctly non-materialist reference to the centrality of human institutions in the cosmos—was with the post-Copernican enlightenment thinkers reduced in focus to the earth; but it is an earth expanding from within by its future prospects of intellectual liberation for the entire human species, and unlimited communication and material development.

This paragraph historicizes the concept of "global science fiction" by bringing it back to its birthplace, Europe. Universum and humanism are inter-translatable, which keeps alive the same utopian impulse that, despite knowing the illusiveness and limits of both the centrality of human institutions and the science fictional representation of the European version of humanism, seeks an expanding from within.

Humanism evolves together with sciences, and so does science fiction. Edward Said's call for a democratic version of humanism broadens the horizon for more inclusiveness (2004), and the rises of African, Indian, South American, Arabic, and now Chinese science fictions have all contributed to a counterbalance to the former European hegemony's gravitational pull for the genre's development toward "one world." According to scholars like Jessica Langer (2011), postcolonial science fiction is waging a war aiming to deconstruct a world built upon the stereotyped "otherness" in terms of race and gender.

What is at stake is also what is human. The decades following the two World Wars and the countercultural movements of the 1960s–1970s saw the "global" part of science fiction in transformation from Eurocentric humanism to a diversified conglomerate of "different" identities emphasizing the "otherness" among us, or the "difference" in all humans. Looking backward at Frankenstein's Creature, Karel Čapek's Universal Robots, Fritz Lang's cyborgian *Maschinenmensch* (Machine-Person), Alexander Belyaev's Ariel the Fly-man, Osamu Tezuka's Atom Boy, Philip K. Dick's androids, Stanley Kubrick's Hal 9000, Stephen Spielberg's E.T., and Lars Lundström's Real Humans,[9] these various characters of world science fiction have enlivened the current theoretical framework of posthumanism (Hayles 1999; Braidotti 2013). They have all extended the image of humanity in terms of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, ideological orientation, and self-identity. In the popular sci-fi TV show *Westworld*, the Renaissance's Vitruvian Man is being replaced by a cyborg produced on an assembly line.

David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) can be read as the contemporary world's most neatly phrased "global" answer to the European question lying at the heart of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The novel consists of six stories presented in such a disorienting, folded narrative labyrinth that it shines with a new Baroque splendor. The novel has a simple message to convey, traceable to Mary's father William Goldwin's political ideas: an anarchist belief in the goodness of individuals versus the coercive oppression of institutions that take a variety of forms, ranging from a nursing home to systematic slavery to cybernetic total control. Six locations, six historical periods, six personalities, six writing styles, and six interrupted narratives cover the widest possible range of representing different geographical locations, cultural developmental levels, class and social status, gender (including "no gender"), age, sentimentality and passion, race/species, self-consciousness, willpower, technological knowledge, and ultimately visions of destiny and endgame. The novel is a science fictional encyclopedia, deliberately beginning its story on a historical date close to the time when *Frankenstein* was conceived, with clear allusions to various forms and styles of science fiction writing. The message is too simple not to be conveyed in a metaphor: "Yet what is any ocean but a multitude of drops?" (Mitchell 2004, 509). The fabricant, Sonmi-451, comes to a self-realization of her own irreplaceable, un-fabricable individuality, and she gives "singularity," the dreaded word in science fiction signaling the machine's revolt against humans, a new meaning that

is more human than ever: "Truth is singular. Its 'versions' are mistruths" (Mitchell 2004, 185).

What could better convey a new wave utopian vision than the agendas of posthumanism and postcolonialism combined in one—a female Fabricant living in New Seoul, seeking a singular truth that will eventually reconnect all humans and their A.I. offspring (the colonized), all machines and their gods (oppressors)? The question of Frankenstein's monster, asked once by John Milton's Man, is now answered in the new discourse of "global science fiction," with the hope of establishing a posthuman equality of all lives.

A Chinese Tide

The release of the English translation of *Waste Tide* (Chen 2019), an even more complete and authoritative version than the Chinese original first printing that was censored for its explicit depictions of sexuality, has added a Chinese novel to the "global science fiction." Chen Qiufan's 2013 debut novel connects different locations in China and around the globe: China's vibrant economic zone in Guangdong, the American office of the fictive transnational TerraGreen Recycling Company, wartime memories about the Japanese military bacteria laboratory, an environmental protection movement based in Hong Kong, and, as if in homage to Frankenstein, the protagonist's final stop at the Aleutian Islands, near the North Pole. All these are put on the atlas of the world economy, displaying the trade flow, international bargaining, exploitation of the working class, and consolidation of powers represented by the state, the family, and the business. *Waste Tide* presents a timely criticism of global capitalism that seems to have entered the endgame. At the center of Chen Qiufan's new world image is an electronic waste recycling site, based on a real location near Chen's own hometown in Shantou, Guangdong (The Basel Action Network 2002). This so-called "Silicon Isle" takes in millions of migration workers, called "waste people" by the locals, who lead a miserable and invisible life without any means of defending their own rights. Their daily job is to process the electronic waste imported from developed countries. The waste infects them biologically and psychologically. The novel presents a hyperrealistic depiction of the waste people's inhuman condition where they are exposed, and even addicted, to the heavily polluted, unnatural environment, a world that appears to be more virtual than real, the least organic—as an American businessman witnesses (Chen 2019, 31–32):

> Scott observed the men and women living among the trash—the natives called them the waste people. The women did their laundry in the black water with their bare hands, the soap bubbles forming a silver edge around floating mats of duckweed. Children played everywhere, running over the black shores, where fiberglass and the charred remains of circuit boards twinkled; jumping over the abandoned fields, where embers and ashes from burnt plastic smoldered; swimming and splashing in dark green ponds, where polyester film floated over the surface. They

> seemed to think this was the natural state of the world and northing disturbed their job. The men bared their chests to show off the cheap body films they had applied. Wearing *shanzhai* versions of augmented reality glasses, they enjoyed a bit of rare leisure by lying on the granite banks of irrigation canals, filled with broken displays and plastic junk. These ancient canals, built hundreds of years ago to bring water to thirsty rice paddies, now shimmered with the fragmented lights of the process of dismantling the old.

A few paragraphs further into the narrative, he sees (Chen 2019, 31–32):

> On the ground in front of him was a wriggling prosthetic arm. Whether intentional or not, the stimulus loop of the arm was left open, and the internal battery, incompletely disassembled, continued to provide power. The electricity flowed along the artificial skin to the synthetic nerves revealed at the broken end, and triggered cyclic contractions in the muscles. The five fingers of the prosthesis continuously clawed at the ground, pulling the broken forearm along like some giant, flesh-colored inchworm.

Such a grotesque, sensational depiction of the painful struggle of a man whose body consists of synthesized parts echoes the agonized cry of Frankenstein's monster, but here the unnamed person has no facial expression, no voice. His death is part of a world losing its human definition. In the meantime, this grotesque scene, as being observed by the American visitor, is being presented to the world audience, but as someone coming from a highly developed area of the world, this visitor has been part of the global center of capitalism that caused this inhuman condition. Chinese readers, who observe it through the perspective of the foreigner, can recognize it as a part of China already turning into a virtual realm beyond the middle kingdom.

Chen Qiufan studied literature at Beijing University, and he is well equipped with theories of Deleuze, Baudrillard, and Žižek. The world image in *Waste Tide* strategically connects the theories about the virtual, simulacrum, and barred Real to the real experience of China. China's reality is turned into a science fictional narrative that reveals the hidden "real" underneath the conventionally recognized reality. Schizophrenia (Deleuze and Guattari 1983) emerges in the central character of *Waste Tide*, Mimi (originally Xiaomi in the Chinese version), who, after being infected by a virus of artificial intelligence, is stuck in an inner conflict between Mimi 0, the bullied waste girl, and Mimi 1, the fearful, monstrous cyborg with "a machinelike, incomparable precise, controlling power" (Chen 2019, 210). Mimi's schizophrenia points to the inhuman conditions created by the global mutations of political economy in combination with a sweeping corruption of the local power, while her rapid development of superhuman powers and yearning for revenge on humanity make her the first notable cyborg in Chinese science fiction. At one point, her submission to her schizophrenia leads to a breakdown from within and she gives into a revolutionary impulse: *Let there be light*.

> Her vision trembled slightly in sync with the powerful electronica beats and the passionate melody. She was riding a herd of stampeding wild horses.
>
> Hundreds of waste people were connected to Mimi through their augmented-reality glasses, sharing her vision.
>
> (Chen 2019, 286)

But the revolution does not happen in the story. Mimi's surviving humanity, a self-conscious fear of her schizophrenia, a questioning of the intuitive real versus the technologically engineered reality, makes her hesitate to act, which stops her from reaching the decisive point of fighting back against humans, particularly those in power. She does not become Sonmi-451. The latter takes on her mission, following the designated route toward becoming a martyr, even knowing that this is a programmed design. Sonmi-451 makes her sacrifice a choice, as if it were of her free will, thus making singularity happen as a simulated self-awareness of the artificial intelligence. Mimi cannot resist the swelling of her own human sentimentality of tenderness and kindness until the termination of her schizophrenia. "*Your human weakness is going to be the death of you someday*. Mimi 1 faded back into the darkness" (Chen 2019, 339). She eventually dies an anonymous death, like the man whose grotesque death is described earlier in the novel. *Waste Tide* presents a posthuman revelation rather than a posthuman revolution. What emerges is a reconciliation with humanity. Mimi negotiates between her two identities, suppressing the future-facing, posthuman, cybernetic self and submitting to her all-too-human emotional self. From the distinctively vivid, localized story, the narrative culminates in an emphasis on the equally localized sentimentalism that restores humanity in the cyborgian consciousness.

Waste Tide is also a story of homecoming, though it mainly manifests the modernist critique of the traditional patriarchy through the protagonist, a returnee from abroad. Yet its nostalgic sentimentality lies in Mimi's clinging to humanity for some sense of belonging. The successes of these remarkable Chinese science fiction books—Liu Cixin's Three-Body novels, Bao Shu's *The Redemption of Time*, Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide*, and Hao Jingfang's "Folding Beijing"—have brought a global image of the Chinese new wave back to a domestic context. The new wave simultaneously evokes the Chinese ambition to shine and triumph around the globe and a sentimentalist gesture toward elevating what is authentically Chinese.

A related representation of nostalgic sentimentality characterizes the film adaption of *The Wandering Earth* (Liulang diqiu, 2019), which turns a space odyssey into a story of homecoming. *The Wandering Earth*'s embrace of a collective identity of the entire human race is nevertheless anchored in a recognition of the prominent position of the Chinese heroes on the frontline of stopping the apocalyptic event and saving the world. The film strongly affirms the values associated with family and home. Humans, confronting the impending catastrophe caused by a solar explosion, have to go on the road to find another home, but they also take the "home planet" together into exile, making Planet Earth a space shuttle. Despite all the splendors of

the space marvels, the film focuses on some distinctively Chinese traditional morals, such as the heartfelt father-son reconciliation after a long episode of alienation, the emotionally driven decision to take the entire home planet together for a journey into unknown space, and the ultimate commitment to valuing home above other entities. The film was released on the Chinese New Year's Day in 2019, an occasion for family reunions, and it seems to have come full circle from Liu Cixin's earlier efforts to push an enclosed civilization into open space to this film's commercially driven rendition of the endgame into a homecoming journey.

The rise of Chinese science fiction was known to the wider audience at home and abroad around the same time when the Chinese government began to advocate the "China dream," a new slogan dictating a more traditional version of a nationalist and socialist program. The direction of Chinese science fiction's future development, whether it will be appropriated for domestic nationalist projects, seems rather clear. Even though *The Wandering Earth* presents a message about values associated with "home," it simultaneously keeps alive a grand claim to universality when depicting the human race as a whole. But contrary to the anarchist message about free will and a community of responsible individuals in *Cloud Atlas*, the science fiction narrative of humans braving grave dangers in *The Wandering Earth* merges with the mainstream theme that advocates for China's rise and participation in constructing "a community of a communist shared future for mankind" (Gao 2017). Chinese science fiction took center stage in world literature, and at the same time its first big-screen presentation was appropriated as a strategic device for achieving domestic political goals, telling a story about home, homesickness, and homecoming.

What Remains Invisible When Chinese Science Fiction Has Taken Center Stage

There is a different kind of world image that resists emotions associated with "homecoming" and presents a profound questioning of the values associated with home and home culture. This can be seen in Han Song's Hospital trilogy, *Hospital* (Yiyuan 2016), *Exorcism* (Qumo 2017), and *Dead Souls* (Wangling 2018), in which the entire Chinese population is contained in a gigantic "hospital" world that turns out to be the destiny of the state's evolution together with its economy, political system, and military power. The second volume reveals that the hospital is actually engaged in mysterious world wars, and as discovered by the protagonist, it turns into an enormous boat sailing to the other side of the sea. Eventually, in the last volume, *Dead Souls*, all the doctors and patients die, and their souls are taken to Mars, eternally stuck in a phantom hospital built on the surface of the Red Planet. An abysmal pool that imprisons all the souls becomes a mysterious container that makes it impossible for them to escape to other, possibly better, worlds—such as a utopian future of the Buddhist pure land, for example. Such a dark, chthonic, unsettling vision certainly casts a shadow over China's success story.

Although all of Liu Cixin's writings have been translated into English and more than twenty other languages, the majority of Han Song's works, including all his major novels, remain untranslated, and perhaps also less read by the majority of Chinese readers. Furthermore, the published Han Song novels often cause controversies for their uncompromised indulgence in darkness. In February 2020, a statement signed with a pseudonym and published on "Forty-Second History," a public platform for science fiction studies, accused Han Song of "unfairly" only focusing on the dark side of China and denounced him for his "perverted" obsession with the so-called "evils of maggots and worms." The statement, released during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, pledged loyalty to the bright side while almost attempting to ostracize Han Song from the science fiction circle (Anonymous 2020). While Chinese science fiction gleams in the spotlight, representing the dream and glory of the nation's yearnings for lofty goals, Han Song's dystopian, gloomy fiction represents an inversion of the powers and glories associated with the genre.

This forms a stark contrast with Liu Cixin. The sublime images in Liu Cixin's universe appeal to readers all over the world, and they are also easily used to demonstrate a certain symbolic strength. His inventive images such as the dark forest, Wallfacers, and Starship Earths have all become the vocabulary for the new generation of Chinese patriots, who allude to those extraordinary "states of emergency" in Liu Cixin's Three-Body universe as realpolitik cases to testify to the necessity of embracing the rising nationalism and neo-authoritarianism in contemporary China. The lofty, awe-inspiring world-building in his novels corresponds to the worlding of the genre, based on its success, as well as the unfolding of the grandiose narrative about China's ascendency to center stage in global politics.

But Han Song's stories and novels often make "home," "fatherland," or "nation" into estranging enclosed spaces: a hospital, an institution, architecture, or a transportation vehicle that keeps everyone at bay, which can be viewed as a modern iron house. Here, Han Song clearly pays homage to Lu Xun, who has been a major inspiration to Han Song as both an advocate of science fiction in the early part of the twentieth century and a writer who dares to look into the dark side of China's tradition. Lu Xun succeeds in turning the iron house into a central metaphor to symbolize the vileness of Chinese tradition, and through writing about the struggles and deaths of those living in the iron house, he calls for the demolition of institutions, systems, and old homes. Echoing Lu Xun's critique, Han Song depicts a variety of similar scenarios that limit characters' perception of the world and their activities to enclosed spaces like a hospital, a Boeing aircraft (Han 2018a), a compartment of an underground train (Han 2010), or regenerated bricks that contain dead souls from the Sichuan earthquake (Han 2018b). These examples suggest variations of Lu Xun's iron house with enhanced modern technologies. The central characters of the Han Song stories are powerless, ordinary people, neither national heroes nor smart scientists, and they are forced to open their eyes to see the terrifying truth about the

world, but only after they overcome the "fear of seeing" can the truth of the world beyond the iron house be truly unveiled.

"The Fear of Seeing" (*Kan de kongju*) is the title of an early story by Han Song (2012), which denotes a meaning that testifies to the power of science fiction itself as a "device" to reveal the invisible, unsettling aspects of the world. This meaning is similar to what is conveyed in Lu Xun's "Diary of a Madman." Like the madman reading between the lines and discovering the prevailing cannibalism that people hide from the daylight, a scientist goes crazy in Han Song's story after seeing the fearful true face of the world that has wiped away the ordinary life of every person in today's China, including people's private properties and individual freedom. The world, as he discovers, is a deep void. This is Han Song's meta-science fiction. It gives science fiction a fundamental ethical awareness that demands a sensible choice to see, not to be blind to, the truth, even if it is ugly, grotesque, and unsettling. Almost all of Han Song's writings embody a fearless choice to overcome the "fear of seeing" and present to the reader a terrifying truth about the world.

The courageous, self-aware choice to see the horror within the home and picture it as the key image of world-building makes Han Song, together with his characters, into a loner like Lu Xun's madman, who has to confront the leviathan that devours all and covers truth. Whoever chooses to see the truth has to be ready to be ostracized from the seemingly harmonious community. But this unique poetics of representing the invisible in Han Song's science fiction also defines the ethics of his telltale storytelling.

Among the major writers of contemporary Chinese science fiction, Han Song has remained a challenger to the mainstream. In the worldwide market of Chinese science fiction, Han Song is relatively less translated. Except for a few short stories,[10] none of his major novels crossed the border and entered world literature as defined by circulation and reading in foreign languages. Compared with Liu Cixin, whose novels often culminate in a sublime image that attracts and mesmerizes readers across language barriers, Han Song has created a science fictional world invisible to the mainstream readers both inside and outside China. It is a mysterious, dark, chthonic world that lies in the dark shadow of China's success story. The fear of seeing, as depicted in his novels and short stories, has been translated into a looming threat that makes his world-buildings dreadful to both readers and translators.[11]

Near the very end of the Hospital trilogy, Han Song depicts a woman looking into the abyss: "As soon as the deep encounters her gaze, this region that claims nothing to its name immediately erects and struggles, as if it has finally caught the attention of some consciousness after a long wait for billions of years" (2018c, 226). This paragraph epitomizes the method of Han Song's writing and the aesthetics of the new wave. Only when one dares to look into the deep can one see clearly what lies in the darkness. Refusing to see it posits an eternal threat that cannot be simply done away with. What remains invisible but substantially relevant is the foundation of what we can see; the darkness is an enchanting, mysterious existence, unnamable,

but always there as the invisible deep structure of the world, even if we choose not to look at it.

Commenting on the attention that science fiction has received in China, Han Song said that "science fiction dreads such an environment. It does not need a nationwide campaign" (2020). Han Song's science fictional vision crystallizes the personal gaze into the abysmal deep and liberates a power of darkness that dismantles all the Panglossian dreams of the nation and power, wealth and strength. His imagination gives life to the invisible; it constitutes the uncanny subconscious of Chinese science fiction as the genre has stepped into the center stage of world literature.

Notes

1. "Mountain" was originally published in *Kehuan shijie* (science fiction world) in January 2006. It was translated by Holger Nahm and included in a print on demand book (Liu 2013, 47–94). A revised English translation is included in Liu 2017.
2. Despite the debate on the nature of science fiction, most scholars agree that the fictional worlds in science fiction are distinguished "to one way or another from the world in which we actually live: a fiction of the imagination rather than observed reality, a fantastic literature" (Roberts 2000, 1). Science fiction is believed to be permeated by "an awareness of the universe as a system of systems, a structure of structures" (Roberts 2000, 11).
3. Robinson's blurb appears in the back covers of *The Three-Body Problem* and *Death's End*. George R. R. Martin was reportedly "pleased . . . greatly" to see Chinese author Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* win the best Hugo novel—an award given in the past to some of science fiction's major names: "It's a strong book, an AMBITIOUS book, a worthy winner . . . and the first Hugo to go to China, which is cool. Let us put more 'world' in worldcon, by all means" (*The Guardian* 2015, n.p.).
4. The reasons are perhaps not limited, though prominently indebted, to the intentionally fine-tuned translation of Ken Liu, who brings into the text the stylish accuracy and neatness of American popular science fiction.
5. Liu Cixin describes his admiration for Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (2014, 88): "I went out to look at the sky after closing the book. Everything around me suddenly disappeared. The ground under my feet turned into a smooth flat geometric plane that extended limitlessly to the beyond. I stood alone under the splendid starry sky, confronting the enormous mystery that the human mind could not understand. From then on, the starry sky has completely changed in my eyes, a sensation like when one leaves a pond to see the ocean."
6. The reference to a monument to the Earth's civilization established on Pluto is similar to what the Jesuit found in the Vault on the surviving planet orbiting the remains of the supernova in "The Star" (Clarke 2000, 519–20).
7. Singer is a character belonging to a species of higher intelligence, whose origin is not given in the narrative. Singer terminates all lives in the solar system through making it into a two-dimensional flat world (Liu 2016, 467–539).

8. The original manuscript begins with chapters about the Cultural Revolution. The 2007 print version, published by Chongqing Press, rearranges the chapter order by moving some later chapters about the preparations for the war with the Trisolarans to the beginning and alternating stories about the contemporary world and the Cultural Revolution in the rest of the book. The 2014 English version, published by Tor Books, restores the original order of the chapters.
9. The list of the posthuman characters are depicted in Karel Čapek's play *Rossum's Universal Robots* (1920), Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1927), Alexander Belyaev's novel *Ariel* (1941), Osamu Tezuka's comic book *Atom Boy* (1952), Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968), Stephen Spielberg's film *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), Stanley Kubrick's unfinished film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), and Lars Lundström's TV series *Real Humans* (2012).
10. In addition to Han 2018a and Han 2018b, three other stories by Han Song—"The Great Wall," "The Fundamental Nature of the Universe," and "Earth Is Flat"—are published in *Chinese Literature Today* 7, no. 1 (2018), in a special issue dedicated to the writer (4–41).
11. For example, the most popular translator of Chinese science fiction, Ken Liu, has so far only translated two stories by Han Song, "Submarines" (2019a) and "Salinger and the Koreans" (2019b).

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