



Liu Cixin's Alien Encounter SF as Postcolonial Fantasy

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Alien Encounters

Introduction

THE alien has been the most versatile trope of science fiction. Among all the different faces that the alien takes in the history of SF, a colonial face can be argued to be the most common one. Many critics have noticed the close relation between alien encounter stories and colonial history. For example, as John Rieder famously argues in *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2008), colonialism plays a major role in the formation of early science fiction, which “articulates the structures of knowledge and power provided by colonialism”. Whereas earlier, golden age alien encounter stories, like Clarke’s *Childhood’s End*, are often saturated with colonial ideologies and fantasies, latter texts have manifested some new twists to the old trope of the alien other as the colonialist.

This paper proposes to look at Chinese SF writer Liu Cixin’s alien encounter stories, such as the *Santi* (lit. “three-body”) trilogy—*The Three-Body Problem*, *The Dark Forest*, *Death’s End*—and short stories like “Devourer” and “Poetry Cloud,” as postcolonial fantasy. Postcolonial fantasy could be considered as part of postcolonial literature, defined in a broad fashion in *The Empire Writes Back* as writings in cultures that are “affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (2). Postcolonial fantasy not only denotes a fantastical literary subgenre of postcolonial literature, but also the fact that these writings often question and subvert colonial ideologies and also manifest the fantasies of the colonized. I argue that Liu’s alien encounter stories are “fantastic” “resolutions” of colonial trauma and anxieties about technology and dehumanization, and they manifest the fantasy of the alien’s going native.

Alien Invasion as a Metaphor of Colonial Resistance

ONE characteristic that defines Liu’s alien encounter stories as postcolonial fantasy is that

they are alien invasion stories that work as metaphors of colonial resistance. It is stated in the foreword of *The Three-Body Problem* that “the author tries to tell the modern history of China replayed on the scale of light years.” The modern histories that are replayed in the series not only include the Cultural Revolution, but also the very beginning of China’s modern history, which is resulted from the encounter with Western imperial powers around the mid nineteenth century.

The aliens’ failed invasion of earth in the *Santi* trilogy could be argued as symbolizing imperialist powers’ (especially imperial Japan’s) failed total colonization of China. In the story, there is even a direct comparison between the human-trisolaran war and the war between late Qing China and imperial Japan. When the main characters are discussing whether to focus on the development of media-propelled spacecraft or non-media radiation-drive spacecraft in preparation for the war with the Trisolarans, one character who argues for the latter says that depending on media-propelled spacecraft in future interstellar wars will be like repeating the tragedy of the Sino-Japanese war (215).

Fantastical Resolutions of Postcolonial Trauma

Except that Liu’s alien encounter stories are metaphors of China’s colonial resistance, they are postcolonial fantasy mainly in that they serve as fantastical resolutions of postcolonial trauma and anxieties. One of the main anxieties concerns science and technology in the colonial encounter as the defining criteria of civilization. The image of technology is at the core of the intertwined colonial ideology and discourse of time, evolution, and progress. As Jessica Langer concludes in *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction*, “[t]he colonial ideology of progress includes the drive for technological process, and figures time as linear, with technologically progressive societies pushing forward and leaving others behind” (130). John Reider has argued that during a colonial encounter, the colonized are often denied “real contemporaneity,” and technology “is the primary way of representing this confrontation of past and present or of projecting it into a confrontation of present and future” (38).

Liu’s alien encounter stories often reflect an anxiety of the alien’s definition of civilization based solely on technological level. For example, in the short story “The Village Schoolteacher,” the life and death of a whole planet depends on the aliens’ verdict of whether human civilization is standard in terms of science and technology. The story starts by depicting a very not-so-sci-fi scene in a primary school classroom in a poor village in China. The teacher was teaching Newton’s three laws of motion, when suddenly he collapsed, because of overwork and dedication to education. While the students were crying beside

his body, they were beamed into another space, where they are asked a bunch of questions which they can't answer, such as "what is the smallest constitute unit of matter that you've found," "what is the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter," "what is the energy source of a star." It turns out, they are beamed by a group of aliens who are trying to test if Earth has a civilization of 3C or higher before determining whether to destroy it or not. Earth narrowly escaped destruction after the students finally answered several questions correctly, questions about Newton's three laws of motion.

It is indeed a narrow escape. If the teacher hadn't taught the children Newton's three laws of motion (which were the only questions they answered correctly), the alliance would have destroyed the solar system; if a region of even less educated people had been selected, or if the alliance had come during the medieval period, or if a zone of only animals had been selected, the alliance would have destroyed the solar system without hesitation. The way that the encounter with the alien is presented as a deadly quiz reflects an anxiety towards technology as the criteria as civilization and shows how encounters with the colonial other and their system of discourse could result in the dehumanization and destruction of the colonized.

Another story that manifests this anxiety towards technology more explicitly is "The Poetry Cloud." In the story, the aliens divide levels of civilization based on the number of dimensions that they can enter. Only those which can enter six dimensions or more are qualified to be called civilizations. The alien that can enter eleven dimensions is called "God" by the alien that can only enter four dimensions. In the story, "God" is passing by the solar system, and met the human character Yiyi. The former calls humans "foul worms," for humans' not-so-long history is filled with filth and atrocity (59), and humans can only enter three dimensions, thus are not considered a civilization at all. As can be seen, humans are dehumanized in this encounter with the aliens. However, this ideology is questioned in the story by pitting the omnipotence of technology as believed by the alien against poetry. The aliens believe that technology can transcend anything. Yiyi does not believe that and argues that the best poems written by ancient Chinese poets can't be transcended. Thus, god will write poems that transcend those, to prove the omnipotence of technology to the "ignorant" humans. The rest of the story revolves around the suspense of whether the technology of "God" can transcend the arts of human.

This conflict between alien technology and native art is reflective of a recurrent theme in Chinese science fiction since the late Qing period, which is, in Nathaniel Isaacson's words, the "attempt[s] to come to terms with the contradictions between 'indigenous tradition' and

a ‘foreign modernity’”(4). “The Poetry Cloud” plays out this contradiction by representing “indigenous tradition” with traditional Chinese poetry and “foreign modernity” with alien technology.

The Fantasy of “Going Native”

“POETRY Cloud” not only reflects the anxiety about technology by presenting a confrontation between alien technology and native art, but also reflects a fantasy of the alien/colonial other’s “going native.” In the story, this conflict between alien technology and native art is solved by the alien’s appreciation of human art, through its becoming human and “going native.” “Going native” is an age-old fear of the colonists that “the civilized, the conquerors and missionaries” are turned into “dogs, monster and man-eaters” (Lestringant, 326). Here, when it’s applied as a fantasy of the colonized, it means the assuming of the native identity, culture, lifestyle and so on by the colonists.

In the story, the process where “God” tries every way to transcend those poems is also one where s/he gradually goes native. Originally, God was a ball of pure energy. S/he does not have a body, therefore, does not feel pain, hunger, coldness, warmth, and other sensations, and therefore s/he does not feel frustration, anger, love, longing, envy, and other emotions, which are the life force of art. In order to write poetry, s/he turned her/himself into a human form. After acquiring a human body, God clothes him/herself with a gown in the Tang Dynasty style made with white silk, and exclaims: “I, Li Bai.” He considers himself as the “Li Bai” who will surpass Li Bai, the most famous ancient Chinese poet.

When he is about to write a poem, he felt something is missing. He then made (again from pure energy) a jar of wine and several wine bowls. It is known to most Chinese readers that the great poet Li Bai is famous for being an alcoholic and writes the best poems while drunk. And then God got drunk and passed out in his own vomit. As can be seen, in this process of becoming human, God became the opposite of the god-like image, the image of Western modernity itself, which is comprised of control, order, and intellectual power.

Two months later, when Yiyi meets God again, he has changed significantly. His hair is shaggy, his beard long, his face tanned, with a cloth bag on his left shoulder and a wine bottle in his right hand. His gown is ragged, and so is his straw sandal. He has, in his own words, “returned to nature” (70). He no longer makes things from pure energy like magic, but in a more “natural” way. The beef stew he brings to share with Yiyi is hand made by himself using the ancient Chinese Pingyao Beef method (originated sometime around the mid-fourteenth century), the secret recipe of which, he tells Yiyi, is urine alkali. He has also

built several wineries, and the wine he brings this time, Green Bamboo Leaf Liquor, is made by soaking bamboo leaf in fenjiu (an ancient Chinese alcohol, whose written record goes back to the 7th century). In a way, “Li Bai” has become even more “native” than Yiyi, who is less knowledgeable concerning these traditional Chinese cultures.

“Li Bai” has written some poems, but he doesn’t think these poems could transcend those of the real Li Bai. So he decided to solve the problem in another way. Instead of trying to write poems that are better than those of Li Bai, he made a computer program that wrote all poems, every possible poem that could ever be written in the future. Of course, those that transcend Li Bai’s will exist among them. In fact, in this way, “Li Bai” not only transcends Li Bai, but also terminates the art of Chinese poetry itself. Any newly emerged poet will only be a plagiarist, for all the poems s/he writes will have already been written by “Li Bai.”

Although it seems in the end that the alien has won the contest between technology and art, “God” admits that he sees the limit of technology now. Although he has written the top work of Chinese poetry (among the poetry cloud), he could not get hold of it, for he still could not build a poetry evaluation software to search out the best poem from the poetry cloud.

Conclusion

AS can be seen, many of Liu’s alien encounter stories could be considered postcolonial fantasy, in that they are fantastical resolutions of postcolonial trauma. The *Santi* trilogy and “Poetry Cloud” reflect the anxiety of technology as the sole criteria for civilization in colonial encounter, and the fantasy that the alien/west could go native and Chinese tradition and culture could be appreciated as having intrinsic values that can’t be replaced by Western modernity. The concept of postcolonial fantasy is useful in recognizing the vast varieties of postcolonial literature, and in recognizing how the classic tropes of science fiction has been reinvigorate by postcolonial nations around the world in the twenty-first century.

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