

Preface

AS A MODERN LITERARY GENRE, science fiction has a long history in China, or at least its history is as long as most of the other modern genres that were first introduced into Chinese literature at the end of the Qing dynasty, such as political fiction and detective fiction. Compared with the realist fiction that has dominated the Chinese literary scene since the May Fourth era, science fiction has an even longer history. Its inception can be traced to the very beginning of the twentieth century, when Liang Qichao 梁啟超 called for a revolution in fiction in 1902 and named science fiction as one of the major new genres to promote. Known then as *kexue xiaoshuo* 科學小說—literally ‘science fiction’—it was one of the most popular fiction genres in late Qing. Through the efforts of Liang Qichao and his contemporaries such as Wu Jianren 吳趸人 and Xu Nianci 徐念慈, the genre was instituted as mainly a utopian narrative that projected the political desire for China’s reform into an idealized, technologically more advanced world—as exemplified by the wondrous Civilized Realm portrayed in Wu Jianren’s *New Story of the Stone* (1908).

Early Chinese science fiction manifested the cultural hybridity resulting from a combination of the translated modernity and self-conscious yearning for the rejuvenation of the Chinese tradition. Most of the science fiction writings by late Qing writers were under the obvious influence of Western authors, particularly Jules Verne, whose work was much translated in the late Qing. The scientific ‘nova’ that Verne foregrounded in his narratives made a major ‘point of difference’ that has been recapitulated by Chinese authors in their depictions of the brave new worlds in a Chinese context. For example, in *New Story of the Stone*, Jia Baoyu’s submarine adventure and airborne safari are both clearly modelled upon similar images in Jules Verne’s novels. But at the same time, the Civilized Realm that Baoyu visits is shown as a utopian version of the revitalized Confucian world, has all its scientific inventions grounded in Chinese tradition and the merits of its political system rooted in Confucianism. From the very beginning of its appearance in China, science fiction has been a translated literary genre that is brought home.

Despite a promising beginning, however, the history of Chinese science fiction has never been continuous. Only three short booms can be identified: the last

decade of the Qing dynasty (1902–1911); the first four years of the New Era 新時期 (1978–1982); and the beginning of the twenty-first century. These booms alternated with dormant periods that lasted long enough for later writers to be denied any substantial influence from their predecessors. Each time the genre was revived in a later age, the new generation of science fiction writers had to invent their own tradition, giving Chinese science fiction multiple points of origin.

Early science fiction lost its momentum when the mainstream of modern Chinese literature was conceptualized almost completely as realism after the May Fourth. The genre was reinstated during the 1950s as a subgenre of children's literature, which was made possible through imitating the Soviet literary system. Its generic name also changed to *kexue huanxiang xiaoshuo* 科學幻想小說 [Science fantasy fiction], a translation of its Russian equivalent. Some science fiction writers who began to gain recognition in the 1950s, mostly scientists in their own right, survived the Cultural Revolution and contributed to a short-lived revival of the genre at the beginning of the New Era. But this second boom came to an abrupt halt when the Communist Party's propaganda organs named science fiction as one of the sources of 'spiritual pollution' in 1983 and shut down all science fiction magazines but one, the Chengdu-based *Kexue wenyi* 科學文藝 [Science literature], which later was renamed *Kehuan shijie* 科幻世界 [Science fiction world] and became the base for the genre's third revival.

The anthology *Science Fiction from China* (New York: Praeger, 1989), edited by Wu Dingbo and Patrick D. Murphy, introduced English readers to the second generation of Chinese science fiction writers, active between 1978 and 1982, such as Zheng Wenguang 鄭文光, Tong Enzheng 童恩正, and Ye Yonglie 葉永烈. These authors' serious engagement with science fiction lifted it from being a subgenre of children's literature under the socialist literary system and turned it into a sophisticated literary form that enabled both reflections on China's recent past and the representation of hope for change. This generation of science fiction authors was silenced after the middle of the 1980s. Because of their frustrations in pursuit of science fiction, the above-mentioned three authors conferred upon the genre negative or, at best, ambiguous images: the bat that is neither beast nor bird; or the strange bird considered alien and monstrous; or simply Cinderella.

The situation has changed only recently. Since the late 1990s when the Internet became a new platform for literary creation, new authors of science fiction have emerged first as online writers, creating an increasingly large fandom among young netizens. They have begun to gain recognition from mainstream media in mainland China only recently. This new wave of science fiction has led to a sudden boom of this genre for the third time and one that is still in the process

of development. I call this third generation of science fiction writers ‘new wave SF’. Like the two earlier generations, their literary imagination has matured less under the influence of earlier Chinese literature and more from the contemporary West. In particular post-war American and British new wave SF, ranging from space opera to cyberpunk, has left its traces on Chinese new wave SF. But like the earlier writers, the new generation has had to come to terms with its own questions about how to present China in the images of science fiction.

Deeply entangled with the politics of a changing China, science fiction today both strengthens and complicates late Qing utopian visions of a new, powerful China: it mingles nationalism with self-reflective irony and parody, blurs the boundary between utopia and dystopia, sharpens social criticism with an acute awareness of China’s potential for further reform as well as its limitations, and envelops political consciousness in scientific discourses on the power of technology or the technology of power. By 2012, science fiction in China is no longer the ‘marginal phenomenon’ it was seen as by earlier critics. With Chinese SF’s ‘big three’—Liu Cixin 劉慈欣, Wang Jinkang 王晉康, and Han Song 韓松—gaining national fame, new wave SF has formed a distinctive ‘selective tradition’ within the literary field of contemporary China speaking in a unique voice to evoke an array of sensations ranging from the grotesque to the sublime, from the apocalyptic to the transcendent, from the human to the post-human.

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE showcases representative works of Chinese science fiction from its first and latest booms, focusing on the late Qing and the contemporary. Juxtaposing writings from the first two decades of successive centuries has proven to be a meaningful project. Both epochs are characterized by heightened aspiration for change as well as by deep anxieties about China’s future. A comparative reading of the stories from the late Qing and the contemporary sheds light on their common themes. Yet recapitulations of the earlier age’s literary motifs also lead to self-reflexive variations that point to the latter period’s uniqueness. I will leave further comparison to readers. It remains my hope that this special issue will enable fruitful conversations between scholars of the late Qing and observers of contemporary China.

The works selected have all been translated into English for the first time. This special issue is also the first English-language collection of Chinese science fiction since the publication of Wu and Murphy’s anthology in 1989. The thirteen pieces included are divided into two groups, the first four being excerpts from a novel and short stories from the first decade of Chinese science fiction’s development. The other nine short stories are recent works by contemporary authors.

Part One ‘The Early Twentieth Century’ begins with Xu Nianci’s 1905 short story ‘New Tales of Mr Braggadocio’, one of the earliest works of Chinese science fiction, translated here in its entirety. Written in the classical language (*wenyan*), the story presents the splendid space odyssey of a Chinese scholar seeking scientific means to revitalize China. The protagonist’s discovery of the marvels of ‘brain electricity’ and plan to use it to spur Chinese spiritual enlightenment are highly symbolic of the late Qing intellectuals’ pursuit of national rejuvenation through reforming the mind of the Chinese people. Similar yearnings for national rejuvenation are found in Wu Jianren’s 1908 novel *New Story of the Stone*, four chapters of which are presented here. As a modern sequel to *Hongloumeng* 紅樓夢 [Dream of the red chamber], Wu’s novel revives the iconic figure of youth in the classical literary world, Jia Baoyu, and makes him a time traveller. Coming to the modern age with the wish to fulfil his promise to mend Heaven, Baoyu first visits a semi-colonial Shanghai that causes his disappointment at China’s loss of sovereignty under the impact of the West, and then arrives in a futurist Civilized Realm that has regained its glory through reviving the Chinese tradition. But Baoyu realizes his own vow to mend Heaven has been in vain when he finds that the prosperity of China in the future has already been achieved without his participation. Baoyu’s feelings of regret point to the complicated psychology of the late Qing generation when confronted with a new image of historical time that is oriented toward a certain future that does not look back to the past.

The young Lu Xun’s 魯迅 1905 translation of Louise J. Strong’s ‘An Unscientific Story’, which he renamed ‘The Art of Creating Humanity’, is included for several reasons. One is that Lu Xun, who translated several pieces of science fiction into Chinese during his sojourn in Japan, should be recognized as an important early advocate for science fiction. The other is that late Qing translators’ unfaithful renditions of Western science fiction, often through second-hand translation from the Japanese, as in Lu Xun’s case, may well be considered creative rewritings. This rather obscure work by Lu Xun also foregrounds the theme of cannibalism and the image of children, both of which can be found in his later more famous vernacular stories, particularly ‘Kuangren riji’ 狂人日記 [Madman’s diary] that is widely regarded as the first work of the modern Chinese literary canon. In this sense, the themes of science fiction did make their way into modern Chinese literature, though unacknowledged. Xu Zhuodai’s ‘The Secret Room’, published immediately after the founding of the Republic of China in 1912, presents a bizarre anecdote that invites an allegorical reading of aging and memory in the context of historical transition. As one of the last science fiction stories from the genre’s first boom, it concludes this period on a meaningfully ambiguous note.

Part Two, ‘The Early Twenty-first Century’, begins with stories by three widely acclaimed authors of China’s new wave SF: Liu Cixin, Han Song, and Wang Jinkang. The three writers have all produced voluminous amounts of work since the 1990s, and gathered all the major awards for Chinese science fiction in recent years.

With the publication of his magnum opus, the *Santi* 三體 [Three bodies] trilogy (2007–2010), Liu Cixin has been hailed as perhaps the major voice of contemporary Chinese science fiction, who ‘has lifted Chinese science fiction to a world-class level’. Positing himself as a ‘hard SF’ writer, Liu Cixin tends to highlight the ideal of a ‘scientific utopia’, based on a profound faith in the power of science and technology. Most of Liu’s works can be called ‘post-human’ because of its highly technologized and omnipotent perspective. Experimenting with ideas of changing physical reality, he creates and depicts entire new universes. Liu’s master plot is man’s encounter with the unknown dimensions of the universe, a place that remains largely alien to human understanding. Populated by grandiose superhuman, trans-human, or post-human figures or visions, Liu Cixin’s fictional world is fiercely lofty, sublime, and awe-inspiring.

‘The Village Schoolteacher’ (2001) combines realistic depiction of the bleak state of education in rural China with the wondrous imagination of an intergalactic war that extends over the entire Milky Way. The former appears as a nuanced detail in the unfolding of the latter’s divine drama, though it proves crucial for human survival. The story can be read as a touching testimony to human agency, particularly when it is manifested in children, but it also more clearly suggests the vulnerability of humanity even as it bases human survival solidly on mastery of scientific knowledge. Human life is rendered as a contingent existence in the universe, while the laws of the physical world remain constant. In another highly acclaimed story, ‘The Poetry Cloud’ (2003), Liu Cixin presents an ambivalent negotiation between poetry and technology, and, envisioned on a larger scope, between humanity and the universe. The alien creature’s admiration of traditional Chinese poetry seems to reaffirm the power of the poetic imagination, which proves irreplaceable. But the tricky part of Liu’s narrative is his final solution of the problematic of poetry and technology through programming the poetry cloud to encompass all possible poetic creations. Although the god-like alien intelligence still cannot identify real poetry—and bitterly admits that he is a loser in this sphere—all possible poems have theoretically been created and stored in his enormous ‘computer’. The poetry cloud symbolizes the possibility of the eventual success of technology, and the last part of the story—a utopian description of the two Chinese poets’ happy

life (one of them being the alien) after the total extinction of the solar system—can best be read as a simulacrum, a visual reality fabricated by the technologized mimesis of the poetic vision. Interestingly, Liu Cixin sticks to the belief in scientific certainty, but simultaneously highlights the uncertainty and contingency of human affairs, which turns the utopia of science and technology into a potential dystopia for humanity.

A journalist working for China's Xinhua News Agency, Han Song is famous for darkly grotesque, Kafkasque nightmarish depictions of China's reality through the lens of science fiction. His recent novels *Dietie* 地鐵 [The underground] (2010) and *Gaotie* 高鐵 [High-speed rail] (2012) both touch upon politically sensitive themes. Symbolic of China's rise, high-speed trains are out of control and never stop in his novels. Passengers are forever stuck on a train that runs to the end of time and space. Humanity evolves into cannibalistic new species, or a new universe is formed on the train, appearing 'harmonious' on surface but eventually betraying dark secrets. The myth of China's high-speed development, as a utopian motif, meets relentless parody in Han Song's novels.

His short story 'The Passengers and the Creator' (2006) contains a 'counter-image' of China's development. In the story, China's future rise is eclipsed by American technology, consumerism, and military power. It is America that shines over China—the Chinese live in a 'universe' produced, contained, and controlled by an American company. The epic exile of the entire population of China into the air—with the nation turned into a consumer society that completely loses its sovereignty to foreign manipulation—can be read as a national allegory that expresses a profound anxiety over China's future. Will it rise—up into the air?

The myth of China's development, together with its cultural and ethical side-effects, has received self-reflexive representations in many of the new wave Chinese SF works. Another remarkable example is 'The Reincarnated Giant' (2006) by Wang Jinkang, a veteran science fiction writer whose *oeuvre* includes dozens of short stories and several award-winning full-length novels. This particular story contextualizes the motif of development during China's recent economic reform and foregrounds an unsatisfied desire for *zengzhang* 增長 [growth], a prominent keyword in current news coverage of China's economic leap, marked by a continuously upward-moving GDP. The author cautiously designates the setting for this story as a 'J-nation', clearly referring to China's neighbour and competitor Japan. All the characters in the story are given made-up Japanese names built on obvious wordplay that highlights their Chinese meanings. The name for the protagonist of the story, Jinbei Wuyan 今貝無彦,

pronounced Imagai Nashihiko in Japanese, also has an easily recognized meaning in Chinese: ‘this person is shameless’. This shameless protagonist clearly reminds us of China’s *nouveaux riches*, the new class that has gained wealth rapidly in the reform era.

In this story, like the marvellous economic growth that Mr Imagai brought to the J-nation, his unstoppable growth after he has his brain transferred into a newborn’s body becomes a modern scientific marvel. But when the growth does not stop, Mr Imagai is eventually killed by the overwhelming weight of his own giant frame. The allegorical meaning of Wang Jinkang’s story is clear: the unsatisfied desire for development leads to uncontrollable results that will eventually ruin the developers themselves. The image of the reincarnated giant recapitulates a utopian urge that seeks unlimited development and progress, but at the same time discloses the tremendous human costs and dangers that are an essential part of the realization of the utopia. This apocalyptic potential has clearly penetrated into a contemporary Chinese SF that thrives on, but is at the same time also deeply suspicious of, China’s prolonged dream of development.

The last five stories in the volume are authored by younger writers, and they point to new directions for Chinese science fiction’s future development. La La’s ‘The Radio Waves That Never Die’ (2007) and Zhao Haihong’s ‘1923—a Fantasy’ (2007) both reuse themes of revolutionary literature in post-revolutionary narratives. La La’s story, through a puzzle-solving process, shows how a post-human descendent decodes, reconstructs, and understands a radio message, similar to what happened in the story of an underground Party worker that the title alludes to, but what is eventually received is the last message sent from an extinct humanity. Zhao Haihong’s story weaves the revolutionary story into a dreamy romance that turns history into a nostalgic dream; the story intentionally misuses historical information to highlight the fantastic nature of the memory of revolution, which is not unlike the bubbles produced by the machine in the story.

Chi Hui’s ‘The Rainforest’ (2007) implies themes of environmentalism and interspecies transformation; Fei Dao’s ‘The Demon’s Head’ (2007) presents an allegorical image of the evil undead—clearly referring to dictatorship—that is made possible through inventive technology; Xia Jia’s ‘The Demon-Enslaving Flask’ (2004) is a playful experiment with the uncertainty principle that is nevertheless shown as being contained by human intelligence. These three authors are the youngest of the group, and their future writings may decide whether Chinese science fiction will continue to flourish.

IT HAS TAKEN more than two years to select, translate, and edit the stories included in this special issue. Without the collective effort of many people involved in the long process of working on the project it would have remained a fantasy. I am most grateful to Theodore Hutters who first approached me with the idea of editing a science fiction special issue and later devoted a huge amount of energy to editing the translations. My heartfelt thanks also go to Wu Yan, Yan Feng and David Wang, who have given me advice and support, as well as to all the contemporary authors who generously gave us the copyright to their stories, all the devoted translators, and the editors of *Renditions*. This special issue is dedicated to the three generations of Chinese science fiction writers. It remains my hope that the third boom of Chinese science fiction will last.

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