After 1989: The New Wave of Chinese Science Fiction

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the new wave of Chinese science fiction as both a subversion and variation of the genre’s utopianism of the earlier age. Wang Jinkang’s Ant Life (2007), Liu Cixin’s China 2185 (1989), the Three-Body Trilogy (2006-2010), and the short story “The Micro-Era” (1999) are the main texts this paper studies. Their reflections on utopianism speak to the post-1989 changing intellectual culture and political economy. This paper argues that the new wave of Chinese science fiction contains a self-conscious effort to energise the utopian/dystopian variations rather than a simple denial of utopianism or a total embrace of dystopian disillusionment, and this is particularly represented in Liu Cixin’s novels. The paper also provides some preliminary thoughts on the vision of a post-human future depicted in Liu Cixin’s science fiction.


Beginnings: 1989/2185

Darko Suvin, perhaps the most important literary scholar devoted to science fiction studies, once described science fiction (SF) as “at least collaterally descended from utopia; it is, if not a daughter, yet a niece of utopia – a niece usually ashamed of the family inheritance but unable to escape her genetic destiny.” This amusing metaphorical comparison illustrates the two genres’ shared intellectual tendency to envision alternatives to reality. Science fiction, which Suvin defines as the “literature of cognitive estrangement,” has given a modern look to utopianism in terms of scientific, technological, and social advancement since the early days of the nineteenth century – a century characterised by Industrial Revolution and nationalistic movements. But in twentieth-century Western literature, utopianism cast dark, dystopian shadows in science fiction that has increasingly become a forefront literary genre to question modern visions of human progress, the use of science and technology, the institutionalisation of society, and the prospect of a technologised future. Dystopian science fiction that contributed to the rise of anti-utopianism in the West after the World Wars and Stalinism is the rebellious “niece” that Suvin perhaps has in mind, who is ashamed of her utopian heritage – but who cannot escape her genetic destiny, because even the darkest dystopian vision comes from the same subversive pursuit of alternatives to reality that inspired utopianism in the first place.

Suvin’s metaphor can also be applied to a historical analysis of the relationship between Chinese science fiction and a certain utopianism mainly based on the prevailing evolutionary thinking and a cultural confidence in national rejuvenation, which began to dominate modern Chinese intellectual culture at the beginning of the twentieth century. Liang Qichao’s 梁啟超 Future of New China (Xin Zhongguo weilai ji 新中國未來記, 1902), an unfinished political novel that outlines a utopian blueprint for a revitalised Confucian China, has often been recognised as the origin of Chinese science fiction. The utopian vision and narrative structure of Liang’s novel were essential to the earliest Chinese science fiction novels, such as New Story of the Stone (Xin shi jiu ji 新石頭記, 1908), New Era (Xin jiyuan 新紀元, 1908), and New China (Xin Zhongguo 新中國, 1910). It can be said that from its inception in the late Qing, Chinese science fiction “was instituted as mainly a utopian narrative that projected the political desire for China’s reform into an idealized, technologically more advanced world.” The scientific “novum” – submarine, flying car, spaceship, moon colony, or reinvented “sky” – crystallises utopianism in concrete images of a future that is advanced equally in science, morality, and political life. While science fiction suffered long periods of inactivity in twentieth-century China, the sweeping utopianism remained a guiding force in revivals of the genre after the late Qing. Science fiction during the socialist period, when it was categorised as a subgenre of children’s literature, particularly further strengthened the genre’s optimism and ideological correctness. After living through the Cultural Revolution, Deng Wenguang 鄧文光 and his generation added some dystopian reflections on Chinese politics into the genre, but their experiment was quickly silenced by the government campaign against “spiritual pollution” in the mid-1980s.

Here I identify 1989 as the year when a new paradigm of science fictional imagination began to complicate, if not to deny or be ashamed of, the
utopianism that had dominated Chinese politics and intellectual culture for more than a century. What served as the larger political/cultural backdrop for the changes in Chinese science fiction (and in perhaps all of Chinese literature) were the collapse of idealism and optimism as well as a pervasive disillusionment with communism – or, in general, a political utopianism instituted by the state – after the tragic end of the 1989 democracy movement in Tiananmen Square. One unique science fiction novel, the first of its kind, was written in the spring of 1989, and it signalled the arrival of a new wave in Chinese science fiction, which is more sophisticated, reflective, and subversive in terms of mixed representations of hope and despair, utopianism and its dystopian reflection, and nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

Liu Cixin (b. 1963), a young computer engineer who wrote this novel, later became China’s most celebrated science fiction writer, with an unrivalled publication record and all the major Chinese SF awards. But his first novel, China 2185 (Zhongguo 2185 中国 2185), which he began to write in February 1989, has only been circulated on the Internet and has never been published in book form. (9) Without any straightforward reference to the student movement on the square, the novel nevertheless begins with a scene in Tiananmen Square: a young computer engineer crosses the deserted square on a dark night and approaches the Mao Mausoleum that still exists in 2185. He manages to scan Mao’s dead brain cells and turns the simulated consciousness of the great man into a cybernetic existence.

Combining political fantasy with science fiction, China 2185 describes the resurrection of Mao and five other dead old men’s consciousness in cyberspace, where it triggers a cybernetic popular uprising that paralyses the authorities in the real world. The government of China in 2185 has no choice but to shut down the entire Internet, so the cyber-republic, called “Huaxia Gongheguo 华夏共和国,” quickly sees its own demise. It turns out that Mao’s cybernetic existence is not, as one would have thought, the cause of the revolution, which has actually been launched by an ordinary old man’s consciousness that replicates itself millions of times and quickly builds a utopian society that lasts for 850 years – in virtual reality, which is equivalent to only two hours in reality. After the republic is wiped out, when all the democratic outries in the cybernetic uprising die out, the novel ends with a conversation between Mao’s cybernetic spectre and the young female leader of the Chinese government: Mao’s “ghost” honestly tells his future successor that any attempt for immortality is futile, for “immortality is mortality” (yongsheng jiushi yongsi 永生就是永死), he appears to be at ease with his own eventual farewell to revolution. In this novel, Liu Cixin does not seem to either glorify the cybernetic uprising or discredit Mao’s political legacy, but instead he concentrates on experiments of conceiving “alterity” for the future of humanity, which is not only “post-Mao” but also “post-human.”

China’s first political cyberpunk novel, China 2185 creates a dynamic utopian/dystopian variation reflecting on democracy, governance, and revolution in new terms informed by cybernetic technology. Its distance from utopianism is obvious, but neither is it a dystopian novel as defined by the genre’s Western classics such as 1984, which presents a pervasive criticism of totalitarianism. Liu’s novel does not portray an ideal society, and the future society it depicts is actually split into two conflicting parts: the “real” world and the “virtual” nation. The novel holds social criticism at bay while questioning the technological constructs of political consciousness, (cybernetic) subjectivities, and social revolution, and the novel ultimately questions what is “humanity,” as defined by technology, when it depicts the splendid rise and fall of the Huaxia Republic as a virtual community of inter-cybernetic subjectivities.

China 2185 can be identified as the first work of the new wave of Chinese SF that contains a self-conscious effort to energise utopian/dystopian variations rather than serving as a simple denial of utopianism or a total embrace of dystopian disillusionment. Utopianism and its dystopian variety have rather been presented in a complex entanglement in the new wave SF that opens up to new possibilities in restoring imagination in the cultural politics of contemporary China.

The new wave of Chinese SF

I have borrowed the concept of the “new wave” from Anglo-American SF history to point to the subversive, cutting-edge literary experiment that characterises the works of those new authors who have become the main voices in Chinese science fiction since the beginning of the twenty-first century. I include Liu Cixin in this group, though other critics tend to name him a “neoclassical” or Golden Age SF writer, (10) for his epic style may remind us of the space opera novels of the American Golden Age SF: Liu’s Three-Body Trilogy (Santi 三體, 2006-2010) is considered comparable to Isaac Asimov’s Foundation series. I have two reasons for arguing against this categorisation of Liu Cixin as a classical Golden Age SF writer: first, Liu’s science fictional imagination has obviously outgrown the formulas of a space odyssey set for adventure and conquest; second, Liu’s writing style is at the same time sublime and uncanny, with rich references to cybernetic or post-human images against the grandiose canvas of the universe.

Other major writers who belong to the new wave include at least Han Song 漢松 (b. 1965), La La 拉拉 (b. 1977), Zhao Haihong 趙海虹 (b. 1977), Chen Qiufan 陳楸帆 (b. 1981), Fei Dao 飛氘 (b. 1983), and Xia Jia 夏笳 (b. 1984). Wang Jinkang 王晋康 (b. 1948), a veteran science fiction writer, has also written several novels and stories on darker, more subversive “new wave” themes, such as the short story “The Reincarnated Giant” (Zhuan-sheng de juren 轉生的巨人, 2006), which, published unusually under a pseudonym, presents a grotesque allegory of China’s uncontrollable desire for development. (10)

In another essay I wrote on the new wave of Chinese science fiction, I have discussed the utopian/dystopian variations of three motifs: China’s rising as a one-nation utopia; the myth of China’s high-speed development; and the post-human utopia of technologies. (11) In the science fictional representations of all these motifs, prosperity begets apocalypse; the utopian vision of China’s ascendency to a superpower as promoted by the government has often been shown with nightmare and inhuman social and ethical effects.

One good example that can explain the subversive nature of the new wave of Chinese SF is Han Song’s short story “Regenerated Bricks” (Zaishengzhuan 再生磚, 2010). (12) It presents a ghostly, grotesque vision of China’s rapid transformation into a prosperous nation marked by its post-human technologies. The inspiration for this story was the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, which cost nearly 70,000 lives. In Han Song’s story, the disaster became the
opportunity for the success of a so-called “China Model” in a new type of architecture built through recycling the ruins of the earthquake. The mingling of human remains with construction materials leads to the invention of “regenerated bricks” that have artificial intelligence. New civilisations emerge when the A.I. bricks are sent to outer space as construction materials for human colonies on other planets. While human progress, not just China’s, is spurred on by this landmark invention, it is forever haunted by the whispers and vision of the dead. In Han Song’s science fictional vision, the future of a new China, as the popular motif that has characterised the genre from the beginning, may still exist, but its “golden era” has become complicated by the dystopian narrative of its success story.

**The spectre of Mao in science fiction**

On the other hand, the new wave of Chinese SF has not completely discarded the heritage of utopianism from, specifically, Mao’s age. In a highly symbolic way, the new wave began with the cybernetic resurrection of Mao in China 2185. Not a typical SF monster, Mao’s cybernetic ego is dangerous enough to cause panic for the future leadership of the Chinese government. The formidably spectre of Mao stands for diehard utopianism, which can be used to convey a potentially subversive message about the alternative to reality.

Wang Jinkang, Liu Cixin, and Han Song, China’s “Big Three” in science fiction, all lived through the Cultural Revolution. None of them openly claims to admire Mao, but Mao’s spectre often follows their characters in scientific experiments or space odysseys. The eldest of the “Big Three,” Wang Jinkang, was once a sent-down youth. One of his most successful novels, *Ant Life* (*Yisheng* 蚁生, 2007), draws upon experiences from his life in the rural area and reflects on the Cultural Revolution and particularly Maoist utopianism.

It begins with some pastoral descriptions of youths’ lives in an isolated small village, but the plot soon thickens through shifting the narrative’s focus to a mysterious experiment that one of the educated youths, Yan Zhe, is working on. An ambitious young scientist, Yan Zhe shares with Mao the utopian impulse to make a revolution in “the most profound place of people’s soul.” His remedy to “cure” the corruption of humanity is altruism, which he recognises as the key to the success of the species in the seemingly well-organised society of ants. He secretly extracts the so-called “altruistic element” from ants and sprays people – local villains, his fellow students, and finally everyone in the village. In a few days, Yan Zhe makes the village an isolated “utopia” – a community that thrives on altruism, which can be used to convey a potentially subversive message about the alternative to reality.

Yan Zhe is shown as reluctant to make self-reflection on his own utopian idealism. He admits to the failure of his experiment, but he does not consider his principles wrong – he never doubts the moral necessity of practicing altruism. The author’s judgment over utopianism hinges on intriguing balances between the individual will and institutional mechanism, between technological engineering and human nature. For a moment, Yan Zhe has his triumph, for he herds his people like a good-hearted god; but he cannot remain an infallible god.

The novel’s moral lesson, if there is one, is not just a repetition of the story about the evils of dictatorship. It also points to the ethical effects of being either unselfish and submissive to the collective, which is so pervasively depicted as utopian but improbable, or being selfish and individualistic, which is presented in the unpleasant depiction of China’s reality. The last part of the novel begins with this quotation: “Because we admire the altruism of ant society, and because we can always make reflections on our own depravity generation after generation, it means – altruism is deeply rooted in our nature.” All the characters except Yan Zhe have lived long enough to experience the long post-Mao reform years when the selfishness of people propels society toward accumulating more wealth, together with more inequality and difference in the social hierarchy.

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Although *Ant Life* reflects rather negatively on the Mao fad, the spectre of Maoism, incarnated in the utopian urge for equality and justice, is still alive in the science fictional imagination of what is human nature.

**The immoral universe of the Three-Body Trilogy**

Mao also plays a role in Liu Cixin’s magnum opus the *Three Body Trilogy*, in which a Mao-like great leader personally launches a secret mission searching for extraterrestrial intelligence, which eventually brings the space war to planet Earth. The Mao-like leader’s appearance is brief in the novel, but in a broader context, Mao’s revolution serves as the background for the entire plot of the *Three-Body Trilogy*. The online version of its first volume, *The Three-Body Problem*, opens with Red Guards’ public humiliation of an astrophysicist, which leads to his daughter Ye Wenjie’s total loss of faith in human morality. Yet, Ye Wenjie later joins Mao’s mission to look for E.T. When she has finally received signals from a hostile alien civilisation, she does not hesitate for even a second to invite them to invade Earth, a decision that echoes her mixed feelings about the Cultural Revolution. Misanthropy combined with hope for a violent purge of all the evils of humanity transforms her into a charismatic leader of an underground movement that prepares for the arrival of alien starships. However, contrary to her own wish to consider the aliens morally more advanced, she is the one, ahead of all the other characters, who discovers the darkest secret of the universe: universal hospitality does not exist at all, while a permanent struggle between “intelligent” beings, like the permanent revolution Mao called for, has been carried on since the moment the universe came into existence. The space war is destined to last until the end of time and space. Ye Wenjie looks at the setting sun for the last time: she sees it as the sunset of humanity, which ends all hope for human survival in an immoral universe.

This is only the beginning of the saga. With three volumes published over the span of four years, the *Three-Body Trilogy* sealed Liu Cixin’s reputation as China’s foremost science fiction writer. The last volume of the trilogy was on the bestseller lists of China’s major newspapers and became the topic of nationwide discussions on TV and the Internet. With a total length of 880,000 characters, the trilogy tells an epic story that begins with the Cultural Revolution and concludes with the end of the universe. The title of the trilogy refers to a problem in physics and classical mechanics, based on which Liu creates a world of Trisolaris in our sun’s nearest neighbouring star system, Alpha Centauri, where, as Liu describes imaginatively, the irregular movement of three “suns” renders the only planet of that star system inhabitable for the alien “Trisolarans,” as they are called by the Earth humans. The extremely harsh conditions confronting the Trisolarans force them to seek a new habitable planet. Ye Wenjie’s invitation thus sets in motion a chain of events that eventually brings a fierce space war to our solar system.

In post-War (and post-Stalin) Western science fiction, it is an overwhelmingly popular motif that the utopian has irreversibly become Orwellian, in which the institutional oppression of the individual, on the one hand, represents the arch-evil of the twentieth century; and on the other hand, the individual heroes’ battles with totalitarianism in one way or another represent a belief in the integrity of individuality in spite of institutional corruption. However, in the *Three-Body Trilogy*, the Orwellian is not considered evil, and heroes are those who are willing for self-sacrifice. A “collectivist dictatorship” sometimes prevails in the narrative framework of the conflict with the Trisolarans. The spectres of collectivism, communism, and Maoism particularly linger in what Liu Cixin describes as the “starship civilisations,” which may look like the true equivalent of Utopia on the surface: isolated “islands” in the ocean of stars, extremely well-organised societies that can automatically operate without the intervention of individuals. But a further twist of the utopian/dystopian dialectics shows that none of these “starship civilisations” is a paradise for humans. An extremely hostile universe forces the “starship citizens” to prioritise survival to such an extent that collectivism legalises cannibalism, which Liu’s characters nevertheless defend as necessary to sustain the “civilisation” that has, however, already become inhuman.

In the second volume of the trilogy, *The Dark Forest*, Liu Cixin creates the character Zhang Beihai, the founder of one of the first “starship civilisations.” After a simple Trisolaran weapon, nicknamed “the water drop,” destroys nearly all the human starships as well as the last hope for humanity to survive its confrontation with the unfathomably advanced alien invasion, Zhang’s starship flees the battlefield near Jupiter and leaves the solar system forever. He is the first architect of a new type of civilisation that must confront post-human uncertainty in a totally hostile environment with rather limited resources. In the beginning, the officers of the starship have a debate over how to constitute the new civilisation. While the majority opinion is to keep the military dictatorship, Zhang Beihai says absolutely no; and when others suggest democracy as an alternative, Zhang Beihai hesitates, saying: “Facing a disaster like the encounter with the Trisolaran menace, a society built upon principles of humanism is fragile, especially when our world needs the sacrifice of a part of it for the good of the whole.”

Zhang hides his defeatism deeply in his heart. He does not believe that humanity will survive this treacherous space war. He rather believes that only the sacrifice of part or perhaps most of humanity is the condition for the eventual survival of the species, even when it is no longer a civilisation. Zhang Beihai does not lament his own death or the destruction of the starship he leads when another starship attacks it for the purpose of obtaining supplies from it – including the nutrition extracted from the human bodies.

Both Liu Cixin and Han Song write about cannibalism. Han Song takes it as a cultural metaphor for social evil, as Lu Xun did, though with an even more grotesque obsession with the anatomical details. But Liu Cixin openly talks about cannibalism as a necessary step for the survival of the species under certain extreme circumstances, a step certainly necessary for the development of the “Starship Civilisation.” The members of the “starship civilisation” captured by the Earth humans in the third volume of the trilogy are charged with committing cannibalism, but the defender explains what is the bottom line of morality when lacking all the essential resources:

16. In the published version, Mao’s name disappeared from the text. Instead, the name of the leader is presented as three blank blocks. In the English translation, it is presented as XXX.

17. This opening is later moved to a later part of the narrative in the printed version. However, the English translation of *The Three-Body Problem* restores the narrative order of the online version, which begins with three chapters about the Cultural Revolution: Liu Cixin, *The Three-Body Problem* (translated by Ken Liu), New York, Tor, 2014.


21. Such grotesque cannibalism can be found in Han Song’s novella “Menú shouliu zhi’nan” [The guide to hunting beautiful women], which was for the first time published, after having been only available on the Internet for many years, in his recent short story collection *Yu shouliu mubú* [The Tombs of the Universe], Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2014, pp. 275-373.

22. In a conversation with the historian of science, Professor Jiang Xiaoyuan, Liu directly challenges the idea of a Chinese version of the rise of the West.
for life. The cannibals are executed, but the true punishment is not a moral one in Liu Cixin’s narrative. The position Liu Cixin lets his character take when facing moral indictment is based upon a post-human understanding of the sacrifice of self and the futility of humanist subjectivity. In another story by Liu Cixin, the entire human race is wiped out when an alien species exploits all the resources from the Earth. The last standing soldiers lie down on the ground, dying peacefully with a faint hope that the nutrition from their bodies will at least enable small insects to survive so that the Earth may not be a completely dead world. Liu is obviously not a humanist, and his concerns with the fate of humanity are stuck in a deadlock conflict between development and morality, or universe (as a moral vacuum for infinite development of intelligence) and humanity. To prepare for the release of the English translation of the trilogy’s first volume, The Three-Body Problem (translated by the Chinese American science fiction writer Ken Liu), Liu Cixin shared some of his own thoughts on the novel with English readers. He says: “Science fiction is a literature of possibilities. The universe we live in is also one of countless possibilities. For humanity, some universes are better than others, and Three Body shows the worst of all possible universes, a universe in which existence is as dark and harsh as one can imagine.” The worst of all possible universes is a place where every civilisation is a hunting tribe set out to eliminate rivals. The only solution to survival is to avoid exposing oneself. Liu’s statement without a doubt presents the Three-Body trilogy as the darkest possible dystopian novel.

The plot of the trilogy centres on the question of whether morality is possible in a universe that thrives by the law of the jungle. Filled with sublime and awe-inspiring images of space wars, technological utopia, and wondrous mutations of physical rules, Liu Cixin’s narrative is cold-bloodedly realistic in portraying the moral dilemma of its characters when confronted with cataclysmic threats from much more advanced alien civilisations. A dramatic conflict unfolds between the moral instincts of humanity and the necessity for survival. While a few characters choose to follow the former at crucial moments in the story, the latter prevails in a universe with limited resources, such as the members of the “starship civilisation” that feed on the dead bodies of their comrades. Ye Wenjie’s disciple, Luo Ji, the main character of the trilogy’s second volume, establishes the principles of “astro-sociology,” which combines social Darwinism with the Maoist mandate for self-defence and pre-emptive attack. Thus Luo Ji finds the key to human survival in the moral vacuum of the universe. A well-coordinated defence system is established, which will expose the locations of both the Earth and the home planet of the attacking alien civilisation so that some even more highly intelligent creatures will certainly destroy both. Trisolarans’ military advancement is stopped by Luo Ji’s threat of mutual assured destruction. Civilisations on Earth flourish, and expose the locations of both the Earth and the home planet of the attacking the universe. A well-coordinated defence system is established, which will bring not only the demise of rivals but also inevitable mutual assured destruction. Even the superior god-like creatures become victims of the decreasing dimensions of the universe. Foregrounding the destiny of an incredibly dystopian future, Liu’s narrative sometimes remains ambiguous with regards to the conflicts between morality and survival, humanity and technology, hope and despair. Liu makes it clear through the overall plot development that the universe is a cold place with little room for morality. However, the most magical power of the trilogy may still come from the sustained humanity that can be found even in the coldest moments and places. One of the only two persons who live until the end of the universe is Cheng Xin, a kind-hearted woman, who is sarcastically nicknamed the “saint mother” by Liu Cixin’s fans to show their dislike of this character who succeeds Luo ji to become the chief defender of the Earth but submits to the tender feelings that swells in her heart when facing the alien invasion. She does not have the heart to push the buttons that will set off the assured mutual destruction of both the invading Trisolarans and all species on Earth. Her failure to act nevertheless makes her morally self-conscious. Against the backdrop of life-and-death struggle, Cheng Xin remains a person constantly reminding us of the moral principles of compassion and mutual aid. She makes a moral choice in an immoral universe. But she also plays an even more important role in the making of Liu Cixin’s saga: she resists to writing to pass on messages about humanity to the next universe. Liu Cixin ends the novel from Cheng Xin’s perspective and renames the trilogy “Remembrance of Earth’s Past” (Diqui wangshi 地球往事).

The ending paragraph of the novel, only around 200 characters long, is an enchanting description of a small “ecological system” left by Cheng Xin in “our universe” that has come to an end, in which a small fish swims swiftly and the morning dew on grass reflects the fresh sunshine. Is this where a new universe begins? Or is it a testament to poetic justice? The small ball that contains this lively ecological system may well be the last trace of a utopian space in the moral universe of the universe in Liu Cixin’s space saga. Seen from outside the narrative frame of the “Remembrance of Earth’s Past,” all the words, all the literary descriptions, and all the narratives in the three novels can also be viewed as a testament to poetic justice for human morality that cannot survive in an immoral universe. Like “The Poetry Cloud” (Shiyun 詩雲, 2003), an earlier short story by Liu Cixin, which depicts how a god-like alien creature that ruthlessly destroys the entire solar system becomes obsessed with classical Chinese poetry and spares the life of a Chinese poet, the ending of the Three-Body Trilogy also resorts to the literary
imagination as the most powerful manifestation of humanity. An advocate for technology and "hard SF," Liu Cixin nevertheless so romantically and ide- 

ally invests literary imagination with a transcendental faith in hope. The end of our solar system is the climax of Liu’s trilogy. The last monu-

ment of human civilisation is being constructed on Pluto, where the main 

characters (Luo Ji and Cheng Xin) witness the disappearance of the human world. At this moment, all is lost. China’s rise, eternal peace on Earth, and all 
of the most splendid utopian dreams are gone. But it is also from here that Liu Cixin has truly led us to encounter the unknown. His literary imagination 

transcends obsession with China or concerns with utopian/dystopian dialec-
tics. He directly speaks to the infinity of the universe. His space saga shows 

the universe as darker than anyone can imagine, but at the same time, as 
one of his characters says when first entering a four-dimensional bubble in 

outer space, "Even a little tiny part of it is unfathomable." (27) 

Compared with other Chinese science fiction writers, Liu Cixin is the most 
cold-minded about the limitations of humanity, a critic of humanism and a 
disbeliever in optimism. Yet, his world is also the most marvellous, with a 

stirring power of attracting readers to question and explore the unknown, 

and his narrative displays a profound curiosity about the infinity beyond 

what we thought we knew. Above the enormous darkness of an immoral 
universe, there is indeed a light of utopian vision that transcends the inter-
ests of nations and peoples and expands on the scope of light years. It is a 

post-human universe that, contrary to optimistic expectations for realiza-
tion of certain ideals, thrives on unpredictably infinite possibilities. Liu Cixin 
says that he writes about the worst possible universe, but he also leaves us 
the space for imagination of the rest. 

A post-human future 

More than any other science fiction authors coming from China, Liu Cixin, 

who is by profession a computer scientist, is more interested in exploring 
the conditions of post-human existence, through which he questions the 

conventional concepts of humanity in a new age blessed, or menaced, by 

post-human possibilities. What is the post-human? It at least contains a 
questioning of the humanist belief in the self-centred position of humanity 
in the universe. It involves the epistemological shifts brought out by new 

sciences such as string theory and new technologies such as information 
technology, artificial intelligence, and biological engineering, which fre-
frequently appear in Liu Cixin’s novels and stories. Uncertainty and infinity 

challenge confidence in totality and integrity, and dismantle the rationalism 

and self-determination that underline the optimistic version of humanism. 
This paper, however, limits the discussion to only the cultural and ethical 
effects of Liu’s experiment with a post-human image in the context of the 
post-1989 Chinese cultural changes. I consider the post-human future, 
which may not necessarily be utopian, an intriguing response to the various 
symptoms of the problems in contemporary China. In Liu Cixin’s short story “Micro-era” (Weijiyuan 微紀元, 1999), the post-
human “micro-era” is 25,000 years in the future. A world without worries 

and sorrows, it is populated by youths – only youths, and they will never 
grow up to adulthood. Actually, they are some tiny, cute, beautiful people, 
the so-called “micro-humans,” who have been genetically regenerated, with 
their size reduced to roughly one trillionth that of an ordinary human being. 

These “micro-humans” are the only surviving species after the Earth has 
been torched by the sun. Their microscopic size enables them to escape the 
apocalyptic explosion of the sun and later re-emerge as the new rulers of 
the planet, building cities as small as water drops and creating a monument 
to the extinct humanity that is as light as a piece of hair. Their era is char-
acterised by “lightness” and “weightlessness,” and their sense of anxiety is 
proportionate to their extremely small seize. Their life is completely carefree 
and joyous. Correspondingly, they have no burden of responsibilities, no 
memory of the past, no sense of history, and no necessity for self-develop-
ment. Living in a sort of eternal carnival, the “micro-humans” are indulged 
in a dreamy ecstasy of enjoying a childish, innocent, and forever youthful 
life. 

The story is told from the perspective of the last man, or the last so-called 
“macro-human,” who returns to Earth after a 17,000-year long space 

odyssey searching in vain for another earth. Called “the pioneer” in the story, he 
is saddened by the total extinction of the human race, but also surprised by 
what he sees with the aid of a special amplifying technique: a microcosm, 
a utopia of youth, with paradise-like settlements wrapped in water drops, 

floating freely on the surface of the Earth. He is warmly greeted by the 

“micro-humans” and treated as a patriarch, mentor, and leader. The “chief 
executive officer” (zuigao zhizhengguan 最高執政官) of the future utopian 
world, a pretty and cheerful young girl elected to office exactly because of 
these qualities – who actually is not unlike the female leader in China 2185, 
also called the “chief executive officer” in that novel – engages a dialogue 
with the pioneer. She informs the pioneer that in her world, melancholia 

and grief are found only in museums. But after seeing the true sadness in 
the pioneer’s eyes, she is moved to tears, and at the same time thrilled by 
the electrifying imagination of an older world full of tragic, grandiose, and 

sublime historical events, which she considers to be so beautiful, almost 
like an idyllic romance. However, she and her people will never truly appre-
ciate that sadness, for their feeling of sadness is groundless and elusive, and 
during their lifetime, they will only “grow more and more childilsh, become 
happier and happier.” (28) 

This story reminds me of Lu Xun’s allegory about the ancient hero who 
“burden[s] himself with the weight of tradition and shoulder[s] up the gate 
of darkness,” giving “unimpeded passage to the children so that they may 
rush to the bright, wide-open spaces and lead happy lives henceforward as 
rational human beings.” (29) But in Liu Cixin’s story, the pioneer does a simpler 
job than that required for the ancient hero. He is confronted with two 
choices: should he revive the human genes stored in his interstellar ark so 
the ancient “human” civilisation could be restored? Or should he just quietly 
accept the demise of his generation (or species) and let the child-like 
“micro-humans” continue to prosper, without ever burdening them with 
the knowledge of the eventful, tragic history of the “macro-humans”? After 
only a second of hesitation, he chooses to vapourise all the human genes he 
carries from the older world and keep the “micro-era” untouched. Thus the 
pioneer ends the history of the human race and celebrates the arrival of a 
post-human utopia. 

Contextualised in China’s cultural changes since 1989, this story of the 
“micro-era” predicts Guo Jingming’s 郭敬明 recent cinematic representation 
of a less scientific “tiny time” (xiao shidai 小時代) that speaks volumes to 
the lack of sorrow and memory in China’s “new age.” “Micro-era,” a tech-

nologically positive image of a post-human future for Liu Cixin, and the “tiny 
time,” a hedonist version of a post-socialist present for Guo Jingming and 

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27. Liu Cixin, Sihen yongzheng (The Dead End), op. cit., p. 195. 
29. The translation is T. A. Hsi’s See Hsiia, The Gate of Darkness, Seattle, The University of Washington 
his fans, may both serve to terminate the enlightenment ideas concerning
development, progress, self-cultivation, and psychological growth, the very
core values of humanism. The post-human utopia of youth, like the one
imagined by Liu Cixin, is both a culmination of and a counterpoint to the
over-determined symbolism of the "youthful" image of modernity through
simultaneously exaggerating its self-affirmation and dehumanising its self-
identity. If this story remotely echoes Liang Qichao's solemn call for a
"young China" at the beginning of the twentieth century, its bright, cheerful
imagery, created at the beginning of the twenty-first century, may have
emptied the very content of its political interpellation while splendidly keep-
ing its dynamic form.

Such a cultural phenomenon may correspond to a paradigm shift in the
political engagement of China's youth since 1989. In a 1999 literary review of
the fictional writings of a group of new authors born in the 1970s, a genera-
tion I belong to, I commented on a new phenomenon appearing in the
literary depictions of youth, which I named beidong chengzhang (passive growth). In stories by authors such as Ding Tian (b. 1971) and
Zhou Jieru (b. 1976), loss of political innocence, failed idealism, and
a common cynicism are all contextualised as part of a social conspiracy (in
the unspoken post-1989 political environment) that constructs subjectivity
without giving it much free space. Unlike the earlier generations, these au-
thors did not show a clear intention of resisting this conspiracy, except
through mockery and self-mockery. The two most popular authors of this
generation, Wei Hui (b. 1973) and Mian Mian (b. 1970), concen-
trised the youthful figure of their generation as a reckless consumer. Through
their national bestselling debut novels Shanghai Baby and Candy, they
paved the way for a new type of "youth literature" that emphasised a he-
donistic, escapist tendency in the characterisation, reducing the conflict be-
 tween self and society to a self-exhausting pursuit of pleasures. Anxiety
ends, and growth becomes a passive process enabled by the pleasure-seeking
instincts sharpened by a combination of political indifference and a
ready surrender to commercialisation.\(^{[30]}\)

Forgetting "the macro-human" age in Liu Cixin's story, and the self-indul-
gence in Guo Jingming's "tiny times," both point to cultural symptoms of the
post-1989 era in which the forgetting of history is sanctioned by eco-
 nomic development and political indifference. Liu Cixin wrote "Micro-era"
in 1999, and his vision of the post-human utopia of youth became "reality" in
Guo Jingming's "Tiny Time" trilogy. Liu's story brilliantly comments on
the emerging trend in a hedonist celebration of the new age. Through his
literary imagination, Liu creates the "future" of contemporary China.

The future offspring of humanity, as depicted in Liu Cixin's "My-era,"
are a generation of xinrenlei新人類 (new human beings — the same word
being used to name the generation after Wei Hui and Mian Mian), who
enjoy a life full of pleasure and happiness but who have completely lost his-
torical consciousness. An apocalyptic story, it nevertheless points to a future
that evokes a seemingly sweeping optimism. The pioneer sheds happy tears
as he looks at the cheerful faces of humanity's micro-children — do we not
all hope that our descendants will live happily ever after? Would Lu Xun be
satisfied with such an ending, while he ends his "A Madman's Diary" with a
call to save the children? Will these post-human youths who never grow
up be more successful than us, the so-called "macro-humans," burdened as
we are by morality and historical consciousness? Liu Cixin's story does not
hide the hideous side of human extinction: the paradise is built upon com-
plete oblivion to the abysmal darkness of all past traumas and tragedies —
they are a new generation born after the end of humanity's history. Is this
post-human future a blessing or a betrayal for those who are acutely aware
of certain circumstances of China's historical changes over the past several
decades? But who are we? How are we constructed as "humans" — with
memories and regrets of our troubled human condition?

Coda: The ancient songs of earth

Six hundred fifty light years away, a bright star\(^{[31]}\) keeps broadcasting
songs — powerful, militant, and sublime songs that attract a human space-
ship to approach it and explore its history. Bao Shu (b. 1980), a young
writer who rose to fame by composing a pastiche sequel to Liu Cixin's
Three-Body Trilogy, first published this story, originally titled "Star Songs"
(Xingge 星歌, 2012), on the Internet. When the story was published later as
the title story of his first short story collection The Ancient Songs of Earth
(Gulao de diqu zhi ge 古老的地球之歌, 2013), what was changed was not
only its title, but also what the explorers discover in that star. In the online
version, "star songs" are none other than "red songs," the patriotic revolu-
tionary songs of the Mao era. In the print version, they are changed to pa-
triotic revolutionary songs from the Stalinist era. These songs are broadcast
by nanorobots that fell into the depth of the star centuries ago. It is both
astronomically and politically a "red star." The explorers, members of a post-
human, post-revolutionary, post-socialist generation who no longer know
anything about a socialist state that once upon a time existed on planet
Earth, are all deeply moved by these heart-stirring songs. They cannot stop
listening to these songs, and a cult of "red songs" begins to emerge. But
what happens is not just the birth of a chorus, but an alteration of the entire
fate of the universe. The A.I. system that controls the spaceship is converted
to the whatever-isn these songs spread. She (a female A.I., that is) crashes
the spaceship into the star and causes its explosion into a supernova. The
concert of revolutionary songs begins to rock the entire universe. "This is
the final struggle / Let us group together, and tomorrow / The Internationale
/ Will be the human race." (More accurately, "the Internationale will be the
post-human.").\(^{[32]}\) The song is collectively sung by the nanorobots that repro-
duce themselves infinitely.\(^{[32]}\)

Bao Shu's story can be read as a post-human narrative like Liu Cixin's
"Micro-era," but its strong political implication forms a counter-balance to
Liu's technological optimism. The unexpected discovery of the "red star" and
the dissemination of the "Internationale" by the A.I. nanorobots to the entire
universe may well represent, ironically, an ambivalent version of the
historical determinism that dominated Chinese utopianism in the earlier
age. Bao Shu smartly keeps the tone of the story seriocomic. In a profoundly
comical or paradoxical way, it reminds us of a bizarre mixture of nostalgia
and futurism as a pair of angels or demons in the shaping of the
utopian/dystopian vision in the new wave of Chinese science fiction.

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\(^{30}\) Song Mingwei, "Zhongzi jiaolù yu zhanda changren" [The end of anxiety and growing up], Shanghai Wensue (Shanghai Literature), September 1999, p. 9.

\(^{31}\) The star refers to Betelgeuse, the ninth brightest star in the right sky.

\(^{32}\) Bao Shu, Gulao de diqu zhi ge [The Ancient Songs of Earth], Beijing, Xinxing chubanshe, 2013, pp. 126-162.