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Introduction

“Subaltern” No More: of What Does Chinese Science Fiction Speak?

Nathaniel Isaacson

(North Carolina State University)

Chinese science fiction has gone from a largely unseen genre to being a darling of state and private enterprise, the inspirational core of a global, cosmopolitan fan culture, and the object of fascination for scholars hoping to explain the contradictions and triumphs of the People’s Republic of China in the twenty-first century. Previously discounted as a non-member in what Andrew Milner describes as a global “selective tradition” (2012, 202), Chinese science fiction and speculative fiction (hereafter sf) now occupies a prominent position in global popular culture - the form seems poised to offer China inroads to the consumer stardom and soft nationalism of the Korean Wave or Cool Japan.

This special issue takes as its subject aspects of literary and visual culture that elucidate the relationship between science and development from the late Qing through contemporary China. We begin with a question: assuming that, as Damon Knight has posited, sf is simply “what we point to when say it,” (1967, viii) what narrative features, functions and forms might we find at the edges of our imaginary bookshelf? Positioned between sf studies, environmental humanities, the history of science and cultural studies, we aim to locate China in the context of global narratives of industrial development and runaway consumption. Technology and transport have moved from a prominent symbol of China’s colonial plight, to a motivating symbol of affective engagement in the project of modernization, the might of the contemporary engineering state, and the One Belt One Road project’s vision of China as a transportation infrastructure superpower. Understanding China’s relationship to industrial modernity and how its global implications are

expressed in art is crucial to elucidating the significance of developmental ideology and notions of “conquering nature,” even in alternatives to Western capitalism.

The articles in this issue also consider cosmopolitanism, visibility, and world literature. The authors collectively examine global circulations of “Chinese sf” in the 21st century selective tradition both in terms of sf written in Chinese, and in the sense of China as its subject. The ultimate aim of this special issue, through its consideration of works and discourses that we might label “science fiction adjacent,” is to expand the repertoire of the global selective tradition of sf. We further seek to trouble the global selective tradition of sf by re-considering what is “Chinese” in Chinese sf. What languages does Chinese sf speak?

In our first essay, Rui Kunze examines the new ways of seeing and new ways of being seen coming with the advent of aviation in China. “Envisioning the Flying Woman: Technology, Space and Body in China’s Print Culture (1911-1937)” considers how the spatial transformation afforded by aircraft fueled the lofty ambitions and expectations for women of means in China between the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the second Sino-Japanese War. Like her terrestrial and globally mediated counterpart the “modern girl,” (See Barlow) the vertically cosmopolitan aviatrix was subject to a familiar set of gendered anxieties and misprisions. Gazing and gazed upon, she navigated the precarious space between savior and temptress. While these women challenged conventional gendered expectations associated with their privileged economic status, they were projected as dedicated to the cause of nation building and the health of their bodies was portrayed as contiguous with the health of the nation writ-large.

Next, Cara Healey discusses how Stephen Fung’s genre-bending *Tai Chi Zero* (2012), and R.F. Kuang’s *The Poppy War* trilogy (2018-2020) re-imagine China’s semicolonial plight and relationship to technology. Her essay, “Reimagining China’s Colonial Encounters: Hybridity in Stephen Fung’s *Tai Chi Zero* and R.F. Kuang’s *The Poppy War* Trilogy,” examines sf genre mashups as formal mirrors to the question of colonial hybridity. By reappropriating and combining formal tropes from sf, steampunk, silkpunk, *wuxia*, and beyond, these works interrogate the potential and limitations of cultural and technological hybridity. In examining Anglophone fiction from the United States, and a Hong Kong-Mainland co-production, Healey further interrogates what is Chinese in Chinese sf.

In my own essay, “Not Dreaming and Other Techniques of the Body: Trains, Technology and Nation in Socialist Cinema,” I examine a number of films featuring railways from the 17 years between the founding of the PRC in 1949, and the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. I attempt to illustrate how

contemporary postsocialist discourses of transport, development, and ceaseless labor were prefigured by Mao-era aestheticization of similar structures, trends and affective engagements. The seeds of what Han Song describes as “the aestheticization of transportation (*jiaotong de shenmei* 交通的审美),” which I paraphrase as an aestheticization of development (*fazhan de shenmei* 发展的审美), are visible in the socialist-realist discourse of industrial modernization. This aesthetics of national transformation through diligent production soon bleeds over into the glorification of surrendering one’s body to the machine.

In her analysis of Han Song’s *Subway*, five discrete vignettes of urban mass transport gone awry coupled by the rickety metaphorical gangway of a malfunctioning subway that never stops, Mengtian Sun argues that anxieties of belated modernity intermingle with anticipation of a techno-pervasive consumerist future ruled by scientific management. These vignettes consider whether technological and social progress are concomitant, or whether, when the rhythms of human life are subsumed to the needs of the machine, devolutionary regression ensues. Han Song’s disaffected subjects are manifestations of the depersonalizing, cruel optimism of the Chinese Dream, whose national vitality has no need for individual fulfillment.

Finally, in “Machine Ensemble, Mobility, and Immobility in Two Chinese Railway SF Narratives,” Hua Li juxtaposes two narratives of mass transit, Deng Yanlu’s 1979 novel, *A Tour of the 21st-Century Railway*, with Han Song’s *High Speed Railway* (2012), arguing that the *machine ensemble* - the entire system of railway, stations, cars, and locomotives - has “become a significant component of China’s self-image as a modernized nation”. In these works, the imagination of China’s successes and failures to “link tracks with the world” hails the triumphs of the engineering state, and questions its solipsistic metastasization. Like Sun Mengtian, Hua Li elucidates how Han Song’s work subverts the notion of progress by sending the violent inertia of modernity hurling headlong down looping mobius tracks of space-time. Only dreams of mass destruction - the aesthetics of twisted wreckage and spattered blood - offer escape from the lunacy of consumerism and developmentalism.

These fictions of mass production, mass consumption, mass destruction, and mass transportation help us understand China’s relationship to science, scientific education, and technological modernization from the late nineteenth to the twenty-first century. Chinese sf holds a mirror up to contemporary, techno-saturated surveillance capitalism; to the uncomfortable presence of cyber subalterns; the precarity of the global order in the face of a single proton or a slice of genetic code

enveloped in a pernicious, crown-shaped protein; it offers new visions of first contact with galaxies far, far away; it gives us android dreams of electric *wuxia*; it plunges through wormholes that spit us out into our own hyperreality.

I sincerely thank the contributors for their insightful and diligent work in contributing to this special issue during a global pandemic. I also offer my humble thanks to Li Dian, who entrusted me with editing this issue. I hope for this special issue to inspire the global sf community in general and the Chinese sf community in particular to a consideration of the many ways in which fictions of science from China speak, and that readers will find our reconsiderations of the intersections between science, technology, and narrative rewarding.

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Envisioning the Flying Woman: Technology, Space, and Body in China's Print Culture (1911-1937)

Rui Kunze

(University of Erlangen-Nuremberg)

Abstract:

Aviation, which had drastically changed human movement and perception, epitomized the state of the art among all the new technologies developed at the turn of the twentieth century. The discursive Flying Woman in China's mass market-oriented print culture between 1911 and 1937 participated in shaping a new knowledge paradigm, contemporary gender norms, and the collective aspiration to technological modernity in face of constant national crises. This essay delineates the trajectory of how the Flying Woman evolved from the spectacle, which incorporated the male fantasy combining eroticism and new knowledge of science and technology, to the aviatrix of China, whose technological competence, cosmopolitan experience, and patriotism commanded spectatorship, in the vernacular context of the print culture. Examining various ways of "seeing" the Flying Woman, this essay foregrounds the synergy of genres and media to imagine, visualize, and refashion the idea and ideal of femininity and modernity in relation to technology.

Keywords: aviation, modernity, visuality, gender, technological gentility

Among all the new technologies developed at the turn of the twentieth century, aviation, especially that of the airplane, epitomized the state of the art that had drastically expanded the prospects of human movement and perception. Its rapid development, portrayed in texts and visuals of print culture all over the world, created a sense of accelerated modernization. China's mass market-oriented print culture in the early twentieth century, itself the product of new printing technologies, provided texts and visuals (e.g. drawings and photos) that enabled its

readers to read about and see new images and novel things. It thus manifests what Miriam B. Hansen terms “vernacular modernism” which encompasses “cultural practices that both *articulated* and *mediated* the experience of modernity.” The word “vernacular” combines “the dimension of the quotidian” with “connotations of discourse, idiom, and dialect, with circulation, promiscuity and translatability” (60, emphasis added).

This essay examines the Flying Woman, or the pairing of woman and aviation, in China’s booming print culture during the turbulent years between 1911 and 1937. The source materials include an array of texts and visuals, such as news reports, (non-)fictional stories, interviews, travelogues, illustrations and photos. Straddling between fictional and historical, foreign and Chinese, textual narration and visual depiction, the Flying Woman is a discursive icon portraying and producing ideas and ideals of technological modernity and how women should be part of it. More specifically, I analyze a gallery of the Flying Woman to delineate the trajectory of how she evolved from the spectacle – images (of courtesan) incorporating the male fantasy that combined eroticism with new knowledge – to the aviatrix of China commanding spectatorship for her technological competence, cosmopolitan experience, and not the least, patriotism. China’s print media, with their “cross-fertilization of a variety of genres and styles” and “cross-platform saturation of affective immediacy” (Pickowicz et al. 10-11), had actively contributed to the complicated processes of valorizing modern science and technology as new knowledge essential to realizing a unified modern nation-state and reshaping social (especially gender) norms and Chinese society.

The iconography of the Flying Woman in China’s flourishing print culture overlaps in many ways that of the equally discursive Modern Girl, who appeared around the world between WWI and WWII (Weinbaum et al.). Their visibility in public space and visuality as icons rendered them translatable and consumable and therefore gave rise to disputes over femininity and modernity, especially in terms of women’s emancipation. Like the Modern Girl, the Flying Woman is also characterized by “global-straddling multidirectional citation practices,” in which “iconography, commodities, and ideas” travelled and were reworked to be locally deployed (Weinbaum et al. 10). The deeds of foreign flying women were cited and commented upon in China’s print culture to promote women’s education in modern science and technology, but Chinese flying women’s invariable endorsement of nationalism was a local response to constant national crises. Most different from the Modern Girl who upset social and gender norms, the Flying Woman’s relationship to patriarchal social order is highly ambivalent.

Chinese courtesans in the early twentieth century survived and thrived through their clients' consumption of their visibility (public appearance) and visibility (photos, drawings, advertisement, etc.). Their images as the Flying Woman in photos or drawings catered to their client's fantasy of new knowledge and their desire to boast cultural sophistication. Meanwhile male intellectuals and cultural entrepreneurs translated and published stories of foreign flying women. The media coverage of the American aviatrix Katherine Stinson (1891-1977), who flew to Japan and China in 1916 and early 1917, brought to Chinese spectators and readers a real-life Western Flying Woman, who embodied a new genteel femininity featuring technological knowledge, courage, and global horizon. In China's crisis decade of the 1930s – which started with the Mukden Incident in 1931, the Shanghai Incident in 1932, and continued into the outbreak of a total war with Japan in 1937, aviatrixes Lin Pengxia 林鵬俠 (Lin Peng-Hsieh, 1904-1979) and Li Xiaqing 李霞卿 (Lee Ya-ching, 1912-1998) came back to China, bringing with them technological trainings of aviation to save the nation. Both aviatrixes travelled extensively to investigate China's borderlands and their transportation infrastructures. Despite their shared patriotism and technological competence, Lin and Li exemplified different ideas of genteel femininity – with different implications of imagining technological modernity. This essay concludes with a brief discussion of the film *The Women Pilots* (*Nü feixingyuan* 女飛行員, 1966) to open up further discussions on the issues of technology, gender, and social ideals in China.

Visualizing Technological Gentility

In the early 1910s modern science and technology were still curiosities and novelties for most Chinese. As I argue elsewhere, they were not only seen as instruments to save the nation and strengthen its (military) power, but also served as literary resources to feed the reader's appetite for modern fantasy and as a new indicator of their cultural sophistication and cosmopolitanism (Kunze). The cover of one 1911 issue of the *Fiction Eastern Times* (*Xiaoshuo shibao* 小说时报) featured a woman high up in the air:



Fig. 1. Cover image (Artist unknown). *Xiaoshuo shibao*, 1911, no.12.¹

Against the dark background, which appears to be outer space with meteorites, a woman with bound feet in bright-colored clothes sits on the rings of Saturn, waving a yellow national flag of the Qing government which carries a dragon and a flaming pearl. Her hairstyle and attire – high-collared vermillion blouse and green flowered pants – suggest that the image might be modelled on contemporary courtesans.² This sexualized female figure is positioned in a location conceivable only with the knowledge of modern astronomy while the national flag indicates the new awareness of the nation-state.

The first image of Chinese aviatrix may be the one depicted in the 1913 collection *Brand New Illustrated One Hundred Beauties* (*Xinxin baimeitu* 新新百美图) by commercial artist Shen Bochen 沈泊塵 (1889-1920). While the drawing shows a stylish woman flying a plane, the accompanying text situates this audacious modern woman within the classical poetic world of beauties, birds, clouds, and

- 1 All the visual sources (photos and drawings) in this paper were downloaded from the following databases: 晚清期刊, 民国时期期刊全文数据库 and 大成老旧刊全文数据库, which the author accessed through CrossAsia, a research portal hosted by Berlin State Library.
- 2 This image has a similar appearance to that of the courtesans on the next pages of the magazine. It was customary to print copper-palate photos – of beauties (Chinese or foreign), landscapes, and news – in the first pages of magazines in the early twentieth century. Many of the Chinese beauties were courtesans. For the “increasingly blurred parameters of female visibility and respectability” in early Republican China. see Joan Judge 2013.

flowers.³ In her study of Republican ladies' portraits, Joan Judge (2013) brings together woman and airplane through a reading of two groups of photographs, which appeared in, respectively, the *Women's Eastern Times* (*Funü shibao* 婦女時報) (1916) and the courtesan album *New Photographs of Graces* (*Xin jinghong ying* 新驚鴻影) (1914). Like the *Fiction Eastern Times*, both were published and distributed by the Youzheng Book Company (*Youzheng shuju* 有正書局), whose owner Di Baoxian 狄葆賢 (1872-1941) also possessed the Minying Photography Studio (*Minying zhaoxiangguan* 民影照相館). Equipped with the latest reproductive technologies ranging from photolithography and photogravure to collotype printing, the Youzheng Book Company was able to produce a large quantity of photographs with high quality. The *Women's Eastern Times*, China's first commercial women's magazine that shared the same male editors with the *Fiction Eastern Times*, published in 1916 a group of montaged photographs titled "China's aviatrix Miss. Zhang Xiahun (*Zhongguo zhi nü feixingjia Zhang Xiahun nüshi* 中國之女飛行家張俠魂女士)," who made a brave passenger flight when attending an airshow at the Nanyuan Aviation School in Beijing and got hurt in a minor accident there. These montaged photos visualize China's aspirations to aviation technology and a new womanhood embracing dangers and nationalist discourse through her "incursion into global and masculine space" (165). The courtesans in the *New Photographs of Graces*, on the other hand, posed passively in mock airships that were props of the photo studio. Whereas the photos of Zhang Xiahun (1895-1938), a twenty-year-old woman from a good family, record "a singular moment" of "a particular woman," Judge argues, the photos of her courtesan others present "repeatable moments with interchangeable women and identical props" (167). By juxtaposing these two groups of photos produced by the same publisher at a short interval of two years, Judge demonstrates "aviation's multifaceted appeal in the early twentieth century" and the "social distinctions" marked in these images of women (167). Both groups of photos render the female body visible by moving it into public space, but their different visual presentations of the female body in relation to space and aviation technology reveal the print media's biased use of photography technology to treat the linking issues of technological modernity (symbolized by the airplane), social class, and gender.

Given that socialization with courtesans remained an aspect of gentlemanly life in early twentieth-century China, the images of courtesans in the photos and on the cover of the *Fiction Eastern Times* attest to a historical moment, when the

3 For the drawing and an analysis of it, see Louise Edwards, *Citizens of Beauty: Drawing Democratic Dreams in Republican China* (University of Washington Press, 2020), 168-170.

new knowledge of modern science and technology intersected with male literati's "old" cultural life. In both cases the courtesans bear the gaze and projection of fantasy on the part of their (male) patrons/readers, who expected to be entertained and pleased by their new images. Despite the difference between the expressionless (historical) courtesans in the photos and the (imagined) enthusiastic girl riding the rings of Saturn, the photos and the drawing all celebrate the new knowledge of the nature and the technology of aviation. I propose the term "technological gentility" to tease out the relationships between new knowledge, social hierarchy, and gender norms visualized in these sources. As a centuries-old notion, "gentility" calls attention to "deeper veins of norms and belonging" in social and cultural lives and their "continuation and endurance" (Starr and Berg 6) in Chinese society. The notion "technological gentility" intends to describe the reconfiguration of gentility in a new context, in which technological literacy and competence replaced classical studies and literary accomplishments as the major cultural capital to gain social prestige and define genteel femininity and masculinity.⁴ Meanwhile the political ideology of patriotism (of the nation-state) had obtained a strong moral dimension and become a new form of moral righteousness of gentility. Focusing on the process of change, this notion is used here also to reveal a continuity between China's long meritocratic tradition and the technocratic mentality of Republican China and its dream of realizing a developmental state (Kirby). My discussion of gendering technological gentility, furthermore, foregrounds technology, social class, and woman's emancipation as linking issues in this changing process.

"Technological gentility" was articulated and mediated in China's print culture, which offered both texts expounding "useful" modern science and technology and visuals substantiating – sometimes undermining or contradicting – them with images of objects, human bodies, and landscapes. Its extensive use of visual materials belonged to "a global trend of a rapidly expanding scopic desire, abundantly evident from the fascination with and proliferation of panoramas, museums, world expositions, train tours, posters, pictorials, theater, vaudeville, photography, X-ray, and silent cinema" (Pickowicz et al. 11). Christian Henriot and

4 This does not mean classical studies and literature have disappeared from Chinese social life in the twentieth century. Wu Shengqing cogently shows in her *Photo Poetics: Chinese Lyricism and Modern Media Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2020) that literati's classical literary practices productively interacted with the new technology of photography. Masculine gender norms in early twentieth-century China were also remade through the promotion of martial values and military skills, see Nicolas Schillinger, *The Body and Military Masculinity in Late Qing and Early Republican China: The Art of Governing Soldiers* (Lexington, 2016).

Wen-hsin Yeh acknowledge the function of images to introduce “new perceptions and new social figures” (xx), but caution that “[i]mages never tell obvious stories despite – or perhaps because of – their immediacy” (xxiv). As I show below, framing and compositional strategies, (manipulation of) visual conventions, and not the least, the readers/spectators’ expectations and affective needs, all contribute to how visuals are shaped, interpreted, and experienced. The iconography of the Flying Woman from 1911 to 1937 demonstrates constant negotiations among the spectacle, the spectacular, and the spectator, in which the technology of photography did not just put forward evidence based on its visual verisimilitude but also envisioned the ideal genteel woman and the future of technological modernity for China.

Translating the Flying Woman

In 1911 the *Women’s Eastern Times* published stories of foreign flying women. In a short essay introducing British and French aviatrixes, (Zhou) Shoujuan [周]瘦鵑 (1895-1968), one of the most prolific English-to-Chinese translators, novelists, and editors in Republican China, praised these aviatrixes for their courage, flying skills, and handling of dangers with aplomb. Like his colleague Bao Tianxiao 包天笑 (1876-1973), whose 1908 short science-fiction story (*kexue xiaoshuo* 科學小說) “The Aerial Warfare of the Future (*Kongzhong zhanzheng weilaiji* 空中戰爭未來記)” claimed that “the twentieth-century world is a world of aviation” (Xiao),⁵ Zhou stated in this text that the twentieth century would be a century of aviation (Shoujuan). It is difficult to identify the original names of the aviatrixes mentioned in this essay, but one illustration was a photo of Élise L. Deroche (1882-1919) and the other possibly showed Therese Peltier (1872-1926).

Zhou’s translation of a “Diary of Aviation (*Feixing riji* 飛行日記),” authored by a certain American lady Mrs. Julia Thomas (*Meiguo choulihen tuomaisi furen* 美國仇麗痕托麥司夫人), appeared later in 1911. Containing two entries, it offers a first-person narrative of a woman’s experience high up in the air. The narrator told in the first entry about her unforgettable passenger flight in the balloon in 1908 with her husband Dr. Thomas, who ran an aviation business. They travelled from home

5 A genre from Japan, *mirai-ki* 未來記 was a “literary device for refiguring the past” in the sixth and seventh century, whose “Meiji variant” overlapped with the political novel and “attempted to extrapolate past experience and present understanding into accounts of future realities.” See Kyoko Kurita. “Meiji Japan’s Y23 Crisis and the Discovery of the Future: Suehiro Tetchō’s *Nijūsan-nen mirai-ki*.” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 60, no. 1 (June 2000), pp.5-43, esp. 6-7. Liang Qichao’s 1902 *The Future of New China* is perhaps the best known Chinese version of the Meiji variant.

(location unspecified) to New York City in one day. The second entry described how she parted, with difficulty, from her nine-year-old boy who was going to fly to Portland with his father (Wumen). The genre of the diary allows Mrs. Thomas to describe her experience and perspective as firsthand. She had an incredible bird-view of landscapes, felt like an ascending immortal (*dengxian* 登仙) (perhaps a free translation), and savored the physics phenomenon that thinner air conveys sound more slowly than on the earth. Upon arriving in New York City, she observed from above that the national defense facilities around New York Bay were weak. Mrs. Thomas also noted many spectators when the balloon took off, upon arrival, and on the way: the fact that she saw men on the ground taking off their hats shows that the Flying Woman won admiration and respect from those (men) who could not (afford to) fly.

The speed of the new means of transport, as Wolfgang Shivelbusch tells us about the case of the railway, led to “a shrinking of space” (33) while increasing “geographical connections” (53). In this story, aviation as a means of civil transport allowed its passenger to gain sensory experience of even faster speed and, more importantly, as new technology it offered its passengers the opportunity to do things impossible on the ground, such as testing scientific theory and commanding a vantage point of “seeing” from above. Mrs. Thomas’ narrative of her unusual experiences of speed and new horizon also maps the geographical space of the nation (from New York City to Portland). Appearing in the same year (1911) as the courtesan cover image discussed above and in a magazine produced by the same publisher, this translated text foregrounds Mrs. Thomas as an active, female “seeing” subject, even though her narration of flying is contextualized in a patriarchal society – her flight was financed by her husband and she saw it her duty to raise the adventurous offspring with love and stoicism.

When Katherine Stinson arrived in Shanghai and performed airshows to tens of thousands of spectators in early 1917, the American aviatrix and her images in the print media fleshed out the inspiring and aspired foreign Flying Woman. Well-known for her acrobatic flight stunts, Stinson was the first American woman who flew to the Far East. Fan clubs developed all over Japan to honor the “Air Queen.” She held airshows in Shanghai and Beijing. Up to 40,000 people reportedly watched her aerial stunts in Jiangwan, part of today’s Shanghai (Keffeler, Bailey). The portrayals of Stinson and her airshows in China’s print media formed an intertextual and multi-genre network: her life story and speech were told and retold; her performances were described in local news and illustrated with photos, extolled in verses of classical form, and interwoven into fictional narratives by Chinese authors. All these show Chinese spectators’ various experiences of “seeing” Stinson

the Flying Woman and, via print media, they also expanded the spectatorship and their affective responses from those on site to a much broader readership. Stinson as a contemporary figure who operated her machine to fly across oceans and continents, furthermore, stimulated China's imagination of its own aviatrix.

In an unfinished story *The Future of Chinese Women* (*Zhongguo nüzi weilaiji* 中國女子未來記, 1916-1917), possibly inspired by Liang Qichao's 梁啟超 (1873-1929) equally unfinished *The Future of New China* (*Xin Zhongguo weilaiji* 新中國未來記, 1902), Stinson is mentioned as a real-life role model for woman, who masters the newest of new learning – aviation. The protagonist of this story Wu Shaohuai 吳少懷 appears to be an ideal genteel woman in 1910s China, who, under the auspices of her father, studied “new learning” and foreign languages (English and French) with missionary teachers and developed a strong sense of responsibility as a modern citizen. In order to promote the independence of young women from poor families, she founded a school providing them with modern education. Wu the fictional character refers to the historical figure Stinson as “an American lady flying her airplane to Shanghai last year:”

Once she arrived in China, the whole country marveled at her. Tens of thousands of people rushed to watch her airshows, willing to pay much for the tickets. Even those from Suzhou and Changzhou travelled to Shanghai for no other purposes than to see her fly (Yi 89).⁶

Stinson inserted in this fictional narrative, and Mrs. Thomas like her, are translated modern women for their Chinese contemporaries.

From the passage cited above we may also fathom the amazement and excitement aroused by Stinson's airshows. One spectator, for example, wrote a poem in the form of regulated verse to commemorate his/her viewing experience among “tens of thousands of people,” “all looking up” at Stinson “flying freely up and down like a goddess.” The narrator expressed the fascination with her flying ability by comparing her to the immortal with esoteric knowledge: “Now that she possesses the techniques of accessing the heavens, she must know what happens up there” (Lu). This author carried on the social tradition of Chinese literati to write a poem to record a memorable event and have it circulated (published). Now that the content of this poem dealt with the latest modern technology, which went well beyond his/her understanding, the author had no other way but to resort to Chinese

6 All the translations of source materials are mine unless otherwise indicated.

mythology to boast his/her firsthand encounter with aviation and aviatrix. Female poet Zhang Mojun 張默君 (1884-1965) was apparently also one of the spectators on the ground and she also published a poem in 1917 on the event in the *Women's Eastern Times*. As the elder sister of Zhang Xiahun mentioned in last section, Joan Judge (2015) notes, Zhang Mojun briefly mentioned her younger sister's story of flying in her poem. This literary practice, in Judge's view, "implicitly draws global parity between Stinson's stunts as a pilot on a world stage with Xiahun's aborted passenger flight" (215).

Photos of Stinson not only visualize her as the personification of the state-of-the-art technology and social respectability, but also convey vividly the enthusiasm of her spectators. *Pastime* (*Yuxing* 餘興), a magazine distributed by the Youzheng Book Company, printed photos of Stinson and her airshows in consecutively two issues in 1917. They show the aviatrix smiling in front of her machine; the images of the airplane taking off, doing stunts in the air, and landing; and not the least, a large crowd of spectators on the spot.⁷ Remarkably in two photos Stinson posed with the Defense Commissioner of Shanghai Lu Yongxiang 盧永祥 (1867-1933) and his entourage.⁸ In one of them (Fig. 2), Lu sat in the passenger seat of Stinson's plane.



Fig. 2. Shanghai military official Lu Yongxiang posed with Stinson in her plane.
Yuxing 1917, no.26.

- 7 "Photos of American Aviatrix Miss Stinson's Airshows 美国飛行家史天孫女士試演飛機之寫真," *Yuxing* 餘興1917, no. 25 and no 26, pages not indicated. Baily cites photos from the *Eastern Miscellany* 東方雜誌 (254), some overlap those in *Yuxing*. Photographers' names were given in neither of the magazines.
- 8 "Photos of Defense Commissioner Lu and Miss Stinson Sitting in the Same Plane 盧護軍使與史女士同乘飛機之攝影," *Yuxing* 餘興1917, no. 26, no page numbers indicated.

The photo positions the highest military official of Shanghai in the center, whose status of dignitary is further emphasized by his men standing outside the machine, three in civil clothes (traditional robes) and three in military uniform. While the aviatrix leaned naturally forward in her airplane, Lu sat stiffly and passively, ironically reminiscent of those courtesans in mock airships. Despite his awkward position, Lu smiled slightly, appearing proud of trying Stinson's machine personally, even though it stood on the ground. In this photo Stinson was placed side by side with Chinese male elites (military and civil). Her gender was addressed – as the feminine “Miss S(tinson)” in the captions – but not stressed. Her androgynous look in aviator's hat and flying togs and perhaps also her foreignness (otherness) all tone down the fact that this was young woman who grasped the state-of-the-art technology and who could boast her extraordinary mobility across oceans and continents. Her plane, on the other hand, is positioned diagonally across the photo and claims a much conspicuous existence. Consequently, this photo bespeaks less interest in the Flying Woman than in the airplane as the epitome of industrial civilization and aviation as military technology.

Female spectators and women's magazines, in contrast, made sense of the aviatrix in terms of gender and technology. The *Ladies' Journal* (*Funü zazhi* 婦女雜誌), a magazine published by the Commercial Press (*Shangwu yinshuguan* 商務印書館) targeting female readers from middle- and upper-class families and promoting a new womanhood with literacy of modern science for efficient home management, cited Stinson's speech in Shanghai to argue for the compatibility of woman with aviation and even her superiority to men as the pilot. Women, including her sister, could fly and do stunts in the air, Stinson was reported to have said, and that if men, like women, did not damage their brain- and willpower by indulging in smoking and drinking, they would become equally wonderful aviators (Jizhe).

In 1918 the *Ladies' Journal* published a science-fiction story titled “China's Aviatrice (*Zhongguo zhi nü feixingjia* 中國之女飛行家)” (Xie), one year after Stinson's visit. It tells a story about a fictional Chinese aviatrix Su Yufen 蘇毓芬, who spent three years learning flying in London and came back to China to do airshows in order to inspire her countrymen to learn modern technology. She worried about China and was critical of Chinese men, whose self-claimed newness lay only in superficial consumption behaviors such as driving a car or eating Western food (2). In one performance Yufen's plane crashed in a storm. She landed on a wild island, which she found belonged to China, and survived with her knowledge till her compatriots, who came to mine the phosphate reserve on the

island, saved her.

Supported by her open-minded father, a rich Hong Kong businessman, Su Yufen the imagined Chinese aviatrix studied abroad while developed patriotism so she would put her skills into use for China. “Miss Su’s flying skills,” the spectators of her airshows in the story claimed, “is far better than Stinson, the currently best known aviatrix” (3). With detailed description of how Su operated her biplane, how she made fire by grounding her mirror to collect sunlight, and how she made sure to eat enough vegetables to keep herself healthy, this story brings together two kinds of survival through science and technology: Yufen’s bodily survival on the island with her knowledge about nature and China’s national survival with modern technology (e.g. aviation) and science, as demonstrated by Yufen the aviatrix.

The illustration of Yufen (Fig. 3) in the magazine, however, fails to visualize the qualities of a new genteel woman depicted in the story:



Fig. 3. Illustration of the story “China’s Aviatrix.” *Funü zazhi* 1918, no.1. Illustrator unknown.

Following the compositional conventions to portray “women of [poetic] talent (*cainü* 才女)”, this illustration presents Yufen as a frail and sentimental genteel woman: her discreet female body is accentuated by the neat dress and combed-up hair; her poetic sorrow is pictured through her lone position in a melancholy landscape of the cliff over the ocean and the familiar symbol of wild geese in the distance. The fact that the illustrator had to turn to earlier visual conventions of the genteel woman to depict the fictional aviatrix, who should be physically and mentally strong enough to

survive a plane crash on an uninhabited island, exemplifies the epistemological and social changes at the time, when the illustrator failed to envision China's aviatrix and portray the qualities of gendered technological gentility she embodies.

Gendering Technological Gentility

In reality, Chinese aviatrixes emerged in the 1920s. They received attention from China's print media in the 1930s, together with their counterparts in the U.S., Britain, France, and Soviet Union, among them Amelia M. Earhart (1897-1937), Amy Johnson (1903-1941), Maryse Hilsz (1903-1946), Polina D. Osipenko (1907-1939), Dorothy Hester (1910-1991), and Lindbergh's wife Anne Morrow Lindbergh (1906-2001). In addition to Lin Pengxia and Li Xiaqing discussed below, sketches, interviews, and photos portrayed Chinese aviatrixes, such as Zhu Mufei 朱慕菲 (1897-1932), Zhang Ruifen 張瑞芬 (Katherine Sui Fun Cheung, 1904-2003), Wang Guifen/Canzhi 王桂芬/王璨芝 (1900-1967), Zhang Qianying 張倩英 (Hélène Tsang, 1910-2005), Li Yueying 李月英 (1912-1944), etc. Like the fictional characters Wu Shaohuai and Su Yufen, most of these aviatrixes came from prestigious families of high social and economic status, which enabled them to learn flying in Europe and North America. Both Lin Pengxia and Li Xiaqing came from wealthy merchant families originating in the southern provinces of, respectively, Fujian and Guangdong; Zhu Mufei's father served as the head of the Aviation Bureau under Sun Yat-sen's government in 1919; Wang Guifen was the daughter of Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (1875-1907), the revolutionary woman martyr; Zhang Qianying's father was a high Kuomintang (KMT) official in Zhejiang province.

The institutionalization of aviation in China started in the 1920s. The Canton Aviation Bureau was set up in February 1922 and the Guangdong Military Aviation School in September 1924 (O'Keefe 136). During the Nanjing Decade (1928-1937), the Nationalist government built airports and developed civil aviation "through official joint ventures with Pan American and Lufthansa" (Kirby 148). In 1923 Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), then the head of the military government in Guangzhou, and his wife Song Qingling (1893-1981) hosted the inaugural flight ceremony of the biplane designed and built by Sen Yat Young 楊仙逸 (1891-1923). To show her confidence in China's aviation technology, Madame Sun requested to fly as a passenger in the biplane, which was consequently named after her Christian name *Rosamond I*. The prominent couple was photographed in front of the plane and Sun calligraphed "aviation saves the nation (*hangkong jiuguo* 航空救國)" to commemorate the occasion (Chang). It is not known whether this was the first time that Sun pronounced the dictum or whether he was the person who coined it. In any

case this extensively quoted dictum has been attributed to Sun to spell out the eager expectation that aviation would build and defend a unified China.

Amy O’Keefe shows that male aviators were made media celebrities around the period of 1928 and 1933, whose flights symbolically mapped a unified China and whose appearances in, for example, the illustrated magazine *The Young Companion* 良友, embodied the hopes of China’s potentials and competitive power in the world (136). Zhang Huichang’s 張惠長 (1899-1980) publicity flight through twelve provinces from Guangzhou to Nanjing in 1928 was a “symbolic unification of a territory fraught with schisms” (144, also see Chang); while Sun Tonggang’s 孫桐崗 (1908-1991) daredevil flight from Germany, where he was trained as a pilot and received his license, to Nanjing during June-July 1933 in an airplane bearing the dictum of “aviation saves the nation” attracted young people’s interest in aviation when China was facing the real threats posed by Japan (151). For spectators and readers, these larger-than-life heroes epitomized the ideal of technological gentility, especially its norms of masculinity, by sporting their militarized male body intimately displayed with their machines.⁹ They brought back to China “the most powerful technology and training that the West offered” and endorsed an “able, patriotic modernity” (O’Keefe 136-137).

Like their male counterparts, Chinese aviatrixes were also seen as the embodiment of new gender norms gesturing towards technological modernity. Their media coverage (not limited to the *Young Companion*) came slightly later – around 1932 to 1937, which was right in the time of national crises. These historical flying women, as the cases of Lin Pengxia and Li Xiaqing show, were often cited as examples in the debates over women’s emancipation in relation to the nation’s pursuit of (technological) modernity. The discussion of the modern woman, whether in the ideal of the enlightened, patriotic New Woman or the image of the troublesome Modern Girl, had entered mass print culture since the late Qing dynasty. It was in the New Life Movement (*Xin shenghuo yundong* 新生活運動, hereafter the NLM), a cultural movement initiated by Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975) and his wife Song Meiling (1898-2003), that state power intervened to control the idea of the modern woman. Implemented in 1934 and evoking Confucian and

9 For Chinese reformist intellectuals’ advocacy of the militarized male body in the Military Citizen Movement 軍國民運動 in the early twentieth century, see Huang, Jinlin 黃金麟, *History, Body, and Nation: Shaping the Body in Modern China (1895-1937)* 歷史、身體、國家：近代中國的身體形成 (1895-1937). Beijing: Xinxing chubanshe, 2006, pages 46-57, and Schillinger (2016).

Christian values of self-cultivation and corrective living,¹⁰ the NLM was “a post-May Fourth phenomenon” reacting to “the cultural and social revolutions of the twenties,” with the emphasis on controlling individualism and political factionalism (e.g. communism) (Dirlik 962, 979). Its strong technocratic tendency manifests itself in the attempt to transpose the goals of industrial management and engineering – rationality, efficiency, and labor productivity – onto the Chinese everyday life and individual body so as to develop China with “maximal efficiency by concentrating power in the hands of experts and ensuring that people performed their proper social functions” (Clinton 138). Nevertheless mass print culture participated actively in shaping social and gender norms, as shown in the case of Shanghai-based woman’s magazine *Elegance* (*Linglong* 玲瓏) and its urban female readers, who resisted and negotiated with Nationalist conservatives’ control of the female body (Yen). Hsiao-pei Yen notes that the controversies point at two distinct connotations of modernity: for *Elegance* and its readers, “modernity signified individualism and emancipation from traditional confinement”; while for the NLM activists, “modernity entailed technological improvement and institutional innovations that fostered national strength” (182).

Aviatrixes and their media (self-) representations in the 1930s were associated with both women’s emancipation and national modernization. As technological elites they were perceived as the role model of the modern woman. Yet as the cases of Lin Pengxia and Li Xiaqing show, they exemplify very different ideas of gender norms and brought with them arguments which blurred the boundaries – instead of marking out the distinctions – between individualism and national modernization, resistance against and consolidation of patriarchal social order.

Lin Pengxia

Born to a wealthy family with Christian background and educated in Shanghai and Tianjin, Lin Pengxia then studied political economy at Columbia University and learned flying in England (Tai 58). Between November 24, 1932 and May 25, 1933 she carried out a self-financed six-month solo travel to the Northwest of China, covering the provinces of Shaanxi, Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia, and Suiyuan 綏遠 (areas including today’s Inner Mongolia). She contributed her travel accounts to an array of magazines and newspapers – the above-mentioned *Elegance*, *Ladies’ Monthly* (*Nüzi yuekan* 女子月刊), *Borderland* (*Bianjiang* 邊

10 According to Elmer T. Clark, Chiang and his wife sought “the aid of the Christian missionaries of all denominations” at the beginning of the New Life Movement. See Clark, *The Chiangs of China*. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, c. 1943 (war edition), 90.

疆), *Aviation* (*Feibao* 飛報), *Taya-Pictorial News* (*Daya huabao* 大亞畫報), etc. – before publishing them into a nearly 300-page travelogue *Journey to the Northwest* 西北行 in 1936.

At the end of 1934 Lin Pengxia was selected by the *Young Companion* as one of the ten “ideal women (*biaozhun nüxing* 標準女性)” for her “adventurous spirit (*maoxian jingshen* 冒險精神).” Notably, except for her and swimmer Yang Xiuqiong 楊秀瓊 (1919-82, for her sportiveness), most of the “ideal women” represented fairly “traditional” genteel qualities such as social and economic prestige, filial piety, wifely virtue, literary talent, and artistic talents (partly relocated in the 1930s as dance and film).¹¹ Given the reputation of the *Young Companion* to have “reflected and generated the changing perceptions of gender roles, social norms, cultural boundaries and traditional femininity” (Lei 113), Lin’s selection into the “ideal women” shows that her courage displayed in the adventurous trip was acknowledged as a quality of genteel femininity. This “adventurous spirit,” as Lin made it clear throughout her book, was not for individual gratification, but rather served the meaningful purposes of developing the borderland for the nation.

Lin Pengxia’s travelogue situates her trip against the backdrop of national crises. Upon the outbreak of the Shanghai Incident in 1932, her mother asked her to leave Singapore, where she was tending the family business, to go back to China to provide service on the battlefield. Too late for the war in Shanghai, which ended in truce in May, Lin followed her mother’s suggestion to investigate the Northwest. The purposes were to collect firsthand information and to practice the Christian tenet of universal love (3). In other words, Lin made the trip to practice filial duty and patriotic duty at once. Her travel responded to the intellectual and official discourse on Opening Up the Northwest in the 1930s. Jeremy Tai argues that this discourse not just betrayed “territorial anxiety” but also showed a reorientation intertwined with “a pursuit of a command economy and the articulation of Chinese fascism” by conceptualizing the Northwest “as a locus of early Chinese empires” and the “long-forsaken ancestral homeland” of the Chinese (18-20). Lin hoped that her travelogue could appeal to overseas Chinese and persuade them into working with the Nationalist government to develop the Northwest (“Preface One” 3). She specifically disclaimed any individual reasons involved in her trip by stating that her ancestral land (*zuguo* 祖國) was her lover (22). Her travelogue with the first-person narrative provides abundant information on the natural and historical landscapes

11 No Author. “Ideal Women 標準女性.” *Young Companion* 良友畫報 99 (1934): 22.

and resources, local transportation infrastructure, and ethnical groups and societies. She took nearly one thousand photos on her way (“Preface 2”, 4). They were used as evidence and documents to record what she saw in the Northwest and to present herself – as an educated and patriotic traveler, observer, and commentator who strongly promoted women’s education and emancipation. Li’s travel and travelogue reiterate China’s territorial sovereignty and bring in Muslim, Tibetan, Mongolian, and overseas Chinese into the Chinese nation.

Lin Pengxia kept her flying skills low-key in her travelogue. With her friends’ caution of “not carrying out the investigation in the style of a flying tourist” (4), she chose to travel with local transportation means – long-distance bus, car, donkey-drawn cart, raft, etc. – to get into close contact with common people. In an interview with the magazine *Woman’s Voice* (*Nüsheng* 女聲) in 1933, Lin explained that the work of developing the Northwest, especially women’s education there, was much more important than showing off her flying skills (Bi 12). Nevertheless, her aviatrix identity stood out in all the reports on her travel and in her social interactions with local elites and government contacts. She was reported to have delivered speeches on her way, propagating the significance of aviation for civil transportation and national defense.¹² As a matter of fact, Lin’s deliberation to travel with pre-modern means of transport precisely brings into relief her well-known competence with the most advanced technology at the time and thereby reinforces her media image as an enlightened woman of knowledge who, as her friend in the Commercial Press Huang Jingwan 黄警顽 (1894-1979) acclaimed, “was not afraid of cold, hardship, and dangers.”

Lin Pengxia seemed to care little about her appearance. When the journalist from *Woman’s Voice* met her, she “almost failed to recognize her [Lin] as a woman,” because “she was in the flying togs and a pair of heavy leather boots” and “her face was swarthy and reddish” (Bi 11). Lin often travelled in men’s clothes, sometimes mistaken by villagers for a man (62, 214, 232). Her book contains a portrait of her sitting in a chair, wearing men’s suit and tie. If her cross-dressing in travel was for the purposes of safety and convenience, then the self-conscious pose in this portrait seems to indicate a moment of performance – with equivocal implications: does the cross-dressing, which downplays her female body, assert a wish of gender equality, or does it actually confirm the authority of patriarchal social order by concealing her female gender? *Woman’s Voice* published two photos of Lin Pengxia: one shows her on horseback (Fig. 4) and the other climbing a tree. While the reader can hardly

12 No Author. “Aviatrix Lin Pengxia Gave a Speech on Aviation 女飛行家林鵬俠演講航空.” *The Ladies’ Monthly* 女子月刊 1.1 (1933): 102-105.

tell whether the small figure on the tree is male or female, from the hairstyle and small stature one may make out that the person on horseback may be a woman.



Fig. 4. “Lin Pengxia on horseback.” *Nüsheng* 1933, vol. 1, no. 19.

Against the backdrop of upturned eaves of an ancient-style architecture and a man in military uniform on horseback, Lin looks like a woman warrior of pre-modern time waiting to depart for a battle. Again, this photo captures a moment of performance, in which she acts out “crisis femininity.” Louise Edwards uses this term to describe the unusual feminine qualities that (fictional and historical) women warriors in dynastic China demonstrated when “exceptional events provide space for a temporary release from the norms of womanly behaviour (passivity, gentleness and frailty) as they lead armies, wage war and defend cities” (10). The (possibility of) gender parity shown in such crisis femininity, however, is temporary and contained. First, crisis femininity is premised on exceptions – women with exceptional abilities (“remarkable courage and martial skill”) and exceptional situations (crisis). Then their energy and capabilities are controlled and channeled to serve their husbands and fathers, that is, the patriarchal social order (10-11). Like women warriors, Lin possessed the exceptional abilities (among them aviation technology as a military skill) and carried out a feat (the adventurous

travel) during the exceptional situation of national crisis. Her embodiment of crisis femininity is visualized in this photo through the quality of militarization, which is closely associated with discipline and service of the nation. More specifically Lin the female technological elite confirmed patriotism as a new disciplining force to contain women's disruptive desires or social transgression possibly unleashed in the modern society, especially by means of consumption.

Lin Pengxia was introduced by *Woman's Voice* as a modern woman who is exactly NOT the consumption-oriented urban Modern Girl: despite the facts that she had studied abroad and had a rich father, "she neither likes dancing, beautiful clothes nor does she need a lover" (Bi 10). Instead Lin's de-sexualized body was cited as an example to promote a "useful (*youyong* 有用)" feminine beauty. An author attacked the women who wasted their time on such "trivial" things as trying to make themselves sexually attractive with "eyebrows like thin crescents," "blood-red lips," "fine clothes," and "meaningless socializations:"

In a socialist country like the Soviet Union, beauty has a new definition: "The useful (*youyong*) is the beautiful." Measured by this standard, no beautiful women can be found among those keen on painting their eyebrows and lips. Only those like Miss Lin Pengxia, who are fearless in face of long distance and cold and willing to risk herself to serve our society, are the real Chinese beauties! (Hua)

Citing Lin's extraordinary physical mobility and courage to serve Chinese society as the desirable qualities of femininity, this essay chastises the Modern Girl's infatuation with makeup, fine clothes, and socialization as worthless frivolity. In her travelogue, Lin Pengxia herself criticized the Modern Girl, whom she called "*inland modern women (neidi modeng funü 内地摩登妇女)*" or "*contemporary women (shixia nüzi 时下女子)*," for pursuing wrong freedom and emancipation (21). Like the NLM activists, Lin apparently believed that urban consumption corrupted both women and the Chinese culture. She reprimanded the vanity and hedonistic indulgence of "contemporary women," who received modern education yet had no sense of responsibility for the society: "[They] do not seek independence by using their skills and knowledge; all they did was to consume and burden men. They were indeed the origin of social disorder" (236).

She then projected her own Confucian and Christian values, such as filial duty, service, stoicism, and a simple lifestyle onto borderland women. Her praise of the borderland Other, notably, displays her strong disapproval of women's

social transgression of the patriarchal social order: whereas women should receive education to achieve their economic independence, they nevertheless should stay in their “proper” place within the social hierarchy, help maintain the social order, and serve higher purposes of the nation and the society. While she lamented the general lack of education as well as opium addiction and bound feet of women in the Northwest (59), Lin acclaimed the “simplicity and stoicism” of educated women from good families there, with whom those “inland modern women” could not compare (20). Contrasting a poor woman serving her mother-in-law the best food she could get with “educated men” in big cities who spent days accompanying their modern wives in and out of cinema and dancing hall, Lin praised the former for following proper social order and practicing the principle of filial piety (46). She saw in Muslim women the virtue of good housekeeping: cleanliness, order, cooking, sewing, supporting her husband and raising her children (113) and in Mongolian and Tibetan women the strong body, thriftiness and bravery (133). Presenting these “female” virtues of borderland women either as readily useful for or as liable to being channeled into the discourse of nationalism, Lin used them to integrate the Northwest into the China nation geographically, economically, culturally, and ethnically. With her self-consciously elitist prescription of the “correct” way to women’s emancipation, which should have nothing to do with “selfish” indulgence in pleasure or personal good look, Lin actively joined in endorsing the patriarchal control of the female body.

Li Xiaqing

The daughter of a wealthy businessman and a former movie star, Li Xiaqing learned flying in foreign countries and, like Lin Pengxia, she came back to serve the nation and traveled to borderlands in the 1930s. Different from the austere Lin, though, Li wore “eyebrows like thin crescents,” painted her lips “blood-red,” varnished her fingernails and toenails, and danced and socialized often in her form-accentuating *qipao*. Nor did she refrain from sporting her flying skills on public occasions. Admired for her stunning feminine beauty, fashion, and wealth as well as unusual flying skills and knowledge, Li maintained a relationship to mass media that operated on the logic of celebrity culture. While media attention helped to boost her reputation, they also turned her into an object of mass consumption and interpreted her technological gentility in terms of privileged access to modern consumer goods, all these tended to sensationalize and trivialize her engagement with China’s aviation.

Li Xiaqing built up her celebrity status as a teenage movie star with the name

Li Dandan. After marrying a man from a prestigious family at the age of seventeen, she withdrew from the movie world,¹³ but her private life and flying trainings had been well documented in newspapers and magazines. She enrolled for flying lessons at Geneva's Cointrin-École d'Aviation in October 1933 and obtained her private pilot's license in August 1934.¹⁴ She was accepted by the Boeing School of Aeronautics in Oakland, California in January 1935 and graduated as the first woman from the school, receiving her diploma while granted a U.S. private pilot's license (Gully 139-144). Her long-distance flight with her fellow students from Oakland to Chicago in 1935 was reported in the *Ministry of Foreign Affairs Weekly* (*Weibu zhoukan* 外部週刊) and the literary magazine *Saturday* (*Libai liu* 禮拜六), both using the same photo of her in flying togs and high heels posing in front of the Ford Trimotor.¹⁵ Li Xiaqing returned to China shortly before the Chinese New Year of 1936. She was welcomed by women's magazines for raising women's interest in and willingness to work for China's aviation development,¹⁶ but the tone of local entertainment newspapers, such as *Lih Bao* (*Li bao* 立報) in Shanghai, was ambivalent: she was introduced as a former movie star that had transformed into Miss Li Xiaqing "now known for her courage in the world of aviation" (B).

Li Xiaqing helped launch the China Flying Club (*Zhongguo feixingshe* 中國飛行社) in March 1936 and served as its instructor. In February 1937 she flew with the Euroasia Aviation Corporation (*Ouya hangkong gongsi* 歐亞航空公司) to inspect China's civil air routes and aviation facilities, covering Nanjing, Luoyang, Chengdu, Xi'an, Kunming, Zhengzhou, Taiyuan, Beiping.¹⁷ According to Patti Gully, whose book on China's aviatrixes contains a biography of Li, she was permitted by the Captain Walther Lutz to "take the controls of the big 16-seater Junkers JU/52" that was "equipped with state-of-the-art technology" because she had logged some time on a tri-motor aircraft at the Boeing School (154). In March and April 1937 she spent six weeks flying as a volunteer transport pilot to inspect the Southwest for the government-owned Southwestern Aviation Corporation (*Xinan hangkong gongsi* 西

13 Li married Zheng Baifeng 鄭白峯, a graduate from the Sorbonne, member of China's Foreign Service, and the nephew of Dr. Zheng Yuxiu 鄭毓秀 (Tsceng Yu-hsiu, 1891-1959), China's first woman lawyer and judge. See Gully, 126-136.

14 No Author. "China's Miss Li Xiaqing Obtained Pilot's License in Switzerland 我國李霞卿女士在瑞獲飛行員執照." *Aviation* 飛報227 (1934): 17.

15 *Ministry of Foreign Affairs Weekly* 67 (1935), illustration, no page number; *Saturday* 596 (1935), illustration, no page number.

16 No Author. "Chinese Aviatrix Li Xiaqing Arrived in Shanghai 中國女飛行家李霞卿抵滬." *Women's Monthly* 婦女月報2.3 (1936): 30.

17 No Author. "Interview with Li Xiaqing Who Travelled through the Country 航行全國女飛行家李霞卿訪問記." *Social Welfare Daily* 益世報, 12 Feb. 1937: 4.

南航空公司) (154-55). Thus Li actively contributed to developing aviation in China by performing airshows, training pilots, and strengthening China's air sovereignty. The fact that she, in contrast to Lin Pengxia, travelled purely by air over China (both as passenger and as aviatrix) suggests her self-awareness of her status as a technological elite.

Li Xiaqing was presented as an exemplar of the career woman in the *Young Companion*, who symbolized, in the magazine's own English translation, the "modern womanhood."¹⁸ Li Xiaqing herself also wished to be viewed as a patriotic aviatrix with courage and technological competence. She turned the news of her divorce in 1936, which appeared even in KMT's official newspaper *Central Daily News*,¹⁹ into a promotion of her career by claiming her resolve to devote herself to China's aviation (Gully 145-48). In her 1937 interview with *Elegance*, she explained that her inspection tour was to help the Southwestern Aviation Corporation to evaluate the possibilities of expanding civil airlines. In particular, she called attention to the dangers she risked (snow, fog, mountain ridges) in the two inspection tours and her plan of writing a book entitled *The Romance of Airways in China* (never published) to report her inspection results and introduce current aviation developments in foreign countries. Seeing Li vexed by the question evoking her past as a movie star, the *Elegance* journalist concluded: "She seems to want to forget her former career [as a film star]; forget it, so that she can start anew as a strong woman of our time" (1903).²⁰

In a 1937 photo published in the NLM-affinitive magazine *Healthy Home* (*Jiankang jiating* 健康家庭), Li Xiaqing was practicing calligraphy writing the dictum "aviation saves the nation." This photo, however, was printed side by side with another one showing her partying and drinking cocktail with a group of well-dressed young people.²¹ While the latter photo, as the English caption "At a party" aptly indicates, visualizes the upper class glamorous lifestyle of consumption, the Chinese caption "Relatives and friends get together happily" shifts the focus to the values of family and friendship. These photos and their captions exemplify the vacillation of Li's celebrity media image between a patriotic, engaged technological elite and a consumption-oriented Modern Girl.

18 "New Women 新女性." *Young Companion* 良友 1936, no.120, illustration, no page number.

19 No Author. "Aviatrix Li Xiaqing and Zheng Baifeng Divorced 女飛行家李霞卿與鄭白峯離婚." *Central Daily News* 中央日報, 17 March 1936: 3.

20 No Author. "Interview with the Aviatrix Li Xiaqing 女飛行家李霞卿訪問記." *Elegance* 玲瓏 7.24 (1937): 1908-1903.

21 He Hanzhang 何漢章 (photographer). "Private Life of Aviatrix Miss Li Xiaqing 女飛行家李霞卿女士之私生活." *Healthy Family* 健康家庭 3 (1937): 16.

The report of *Lih Bao* upon her arrival in 1936 started with a detailed description of the “magnificent living room” and Miss Li in her light blue *qipao* and brown high heels. In this interview Li talked about her experience of learning flying, revealing that each teaching hour at the Boeing School of Aeronautics cost 16 to 48 dollars, which were exorbitant prices for the newspaper’s average readers (B). Other interviews opened similarly with the journalist’s gaze at Li’s body and her meeting room, which effectively locate Li’s aviatrix career in the popular imagination of a consumption-based technological modernity. Her meeting room, the reader of *Social Welfare Daily* (*Yishi bao* 益世報) was told in 1937, was decorated with a yellow wooden aircraft propeller hung on the light green wall and two silver aircraft models standing on the piano. The first thing the journalist from *Elegance* noticed was Li’s hair “rolled up in a half curve, the latest style of 1937.”²² In 1937, the illustrated magazine *New Life* (*Xingsheng huabao* 新生畫報) and the above-mentioned *Healthy Home*, both promoting the NLM agendas, published photos of Li Xiaqing, with similar titles in English: “The Private Life of Miss Li



Fig. 5. “Private Life of Miss Li Hsia Ching.” *Jiankang jiating* 1937, no. 3

22 *Elegance* 7.24 (1937); *Social Welfare Daily*, 12 Feb.1937. Quoted translation by Gully, 155.

Hsia Ching/Lee Yia-ching.” The sixteen photos in *Healthy Home* and eight on the two-page spread in *New Life* visualize Li as an embodiment of genteel femininity who was versed in both “classical” and new genteel activities: she read (aviation journals), wrote (diary and calligraphy), appreciated the beauty of flowers in her garden; and she also kept her body fit by playing tennis and riding horses (sportiveness); and most important of all, she lived a life surrounded by the latest technological products: the typewriter, the camera, the radio (for weathercast); the car (to drive to the airport); and the aircraft.²³

The captions of the four photos (Fig. 5) in *Healthy Home* intend to present Li Xiaqing’s life as one centering upon aviation: she was studying the airplane model at home and standing in the garden ready to drive to the airport; she was sitting in her machine before departure and pausing in Guangxi during her flight. Yet one of them – the photo of Li in *qipao* holding her handbag next to a car – speaks a quite different message of technological modernity from her patriotic commitment to aviation. The disproportionately large car, which squeezes the aviatrix to the upper right corner of the frame, catches the reader’s attention – and less possibly as a vehicle carrying Li to the airport than as an enviable foreign consumer good and a symbol of modern lifestyle made possible by the new technology of automobile.

The ambiguous relationship between Li’s career, modern technology, patriotism, and her sexualized body in public (both male and female) gaze facilitated tabloids’ gossip and rumors about her, which referred to her past as a movie star to mobilize both social and gender prejudices against her. On October 24, 1936 Li performed flying stunts on the fiftieth birthday celebration of Chiang Kai-shek, when aircrafts bought through a national fund-raising campaign were christened and, according to Gully, “one hundred and fifty thousand souls made their way to the celebration” (151). *The North China Herald*, the most influential English-language newspaper, reported the event as a sign of “the increasing air-mindedness of China and the growing spirit of national solidarity.” It noted the spectators’ liking of Li’s performance and praised her for promoting woman’s role in advancing China’s aviation:

Miss Lee Ya-ching’s part in the day’s ceremonies was, of course, greatly to the taste of the crowd. Women have played so admirable a role in developing aviation in other countries that China is right in welcoming this

23 He Hanzhang, “Private Life of Aviatrix Miss Li Xiaqing,” *Healthy Home* 3 (1937): 14-15; Zhang Wenjie 張文傑 (photographer). “Aviatrix Li Xiaqing 女飛行家李霞卿,” *New Life* 新生畫報 1 (1937), no page number.

young lady's vindication of her sex's ability in the air.²⁴

This report's enthusiasm resonates with Chinese spectators' amazement at Stinson's airshows only two decades ago. And it stood in stark contrast to the sensational rumors emerging around November 1936 in Chinese tabloids that Li was an inferior pilot, whose show was actually performed by a male pilot hidden in her airplane. Some said that all Li could do was to bring the aircraft into the air and flying stunts had to be done by other male pilots (Shenme). Some reports emphasized on her "sudden transformation" from a movie star into an aviatrix and circulated "the unverified information (*chuanshuo* 傳說)" that she could not operate the aircraft at all (Yunü). Yet others defended Li by pointing out that gender prejudice worked against her repeatedly in her application for positions as flight instructor or as pilot (Changgan, Haoshi). Gully also notes that Li "had struggled with government red tape at every turn" before her performance in October 1936 (152), but she does not specify what happened.

Li Xiaqing left China for the U.S. towards the end of 1938 and would spend the next years carrying out her goodwill tours in North America, South America, and Central America, raising funds for civil relief in China. Her last reappearance in China's print media was in 1939, when her was dubbed "China's Amelia Earhart" and, interestingly, her charity efforts were placed side by side with the news of her joining the Paramount film *Disputed Passage* (1939), performing the role of a Chinese aviatrix.²⁵

In Lieu of Conclusion

The examination of the Flying Women as a discursive icon in China's print culture has traced the epistemological, ideological, and social transformations between 1911 and 1937 in response to constant national crises. Embodying the rise of (gendered) technological gentility, the iconography of the Flying Women articulated China's aspirations to technological modernity at individual, collective, and institutional levels and participated in the debates over women's emancipation. The technology of photography as part of vernacular modernism not only offered historical evidence of but also visualized ideas and ideals of the modern woman as translatable and consumable. The case study of Lin Pengxia and Li Xiaqing in the

24 No Author. "Shanghai Notes: China's Air Effort." *The North-China Herald*, 28 Oct. 1936:136.

25 No Author. "Chinese Aviatrix in the USA: Three Positions of Li Xiaqing 中國女飛行家在美國：李霞卿的三種姿態." *Young Companion* 149 (1939): 40.

1930s in particular shows how the interplay among national crises, imaginations of technological modernity, mass print culture, as well as women's social class and physical (but hardly social) mobility shaped and complicated the iconography of China's aviatrix and, essentially, the debates over women's role in modern China.

Socialist China made institutional efforts to improve women's education as part of the CCP's (Chinese Communist Party) programs of women's emancipation and social hierarchy flattening. Such "Chinese socialist feminism," developed from "urban liberal and Marxist feminist discourses of the May Fourth Cultural Movement (1915-25)," stressed "the central role of women workers and peasants" (Wang 596). These institutionalized practices effectively integrated women from worker's and peasant's backgrounds into labor force, while at the same time made their social mobility possible. Women "working with heavy machinery had particular saliency" in the visual culture of early Socialist China (Chen 270); posters of female parachuters depicted empowered, bodily strong women as part of Socialist China's military modernization.²⁶ *The Women Pilots* (dir. Cheng Yin 成蔭, Dong Kena 董克娜), produced shortly before the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, offered another vernacular form (film) to visualize aviation technology, social class, and gender.

A group of young women from various family backgrounds (peasant, revolutionary martyr, teacher, etc.) were trained as female pilots for China's new air force. Through the character Qiaomei, the film dramatized the transformation of a peasant girl into a pilot, whose stoicism, patriotism, and hard work helped her overcome low education level, physical weakness (vertigo), and low self-esteem to become the first woman of the team to fly solo. Technological knowledge remained central in China's modernization project, including the Socialist Era, and those who could access and possess aviation knowledge would enjoy high social esteem. On the other hand, by placing the girls in the army, the film put the female body and its movement in the quintessential context of discipline and control. It therefore conflated, or forced, the rural young woman's personal aspiration to social mobility into the national aspiration to military modernization. The continuities and changes in the relationship between women's technological literacy, femininity, and social respectability and mobility across 1949 deserve a separate discussion.

26 See posters of women parachuters from 1955 to 1984 here: <https://chinese-posters.net/themes/women-parachuters>. The transformation of their image from the calendar girl in the early 1950s and a more muscular and belligerent version in the 1960s is noted by the website.

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Reimagining China's Colonial Encounters: Hybridity in Stephen Fung's *Tai Chi Zero* and R.F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* Trilogy

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Abstract:

This essay considers the unique potential of speculative generic conventions to reimagine China's late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century colonial encounters in fiction and film. It explores how Stephen Fung's film *Tai Chi Zero* (2012) and R.F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* novels (2018-2020) investigate the possibilities and limitations of hybridity, in both form and culture, to reimagine history. These works mobilize formal hybridity to address themes of transculturation under colonialism. The texts reinterpret generic tropes and draw on alternate technologies to explore the ambivalences of colonial mimicry, decolonization, and hybridity, connecting longstanding debates within Chinese intellectual history about modernization and development with broader postcolonial discourse. By bringing Chinese-language and English-language speculative traditions into dialogue, this essay highlights the ways creators are reevaluating modern Chinese history and the role technology has played in China's development.

Keywords: postcolonial, hybridity, mimicry, *shanzhai*, *wuxia*, steampunk, silkpunk, grimdark, alternate history, speculative fiction

Even as contemporary China has become a world power, accounts of nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial incursions remain significant to narratives of modern Chinese history. Confronted with threats of colonization from the West and Japan, China faced a dilemma: how could the nation incorporate foreign ideas and technologies without losing its own cultural identity? Chinese intellectuals

debated conservative nativism, total Westernization, and everything in between.¹ Explorations of this traumatic period and its aftermath pervade modern Chinese literature and film, sparking extensive scholarly analysis on the relationship between history, literature, trauma, and memory.² Expanding on these themes, this essay considers the unique potential of speculative generic conventions to reimagine China's late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century colonial encounters in fiction and film.³

Speculative fiction provides fertile ground for meditation on empire and its aftermath. Here I use Marek Oziwicz's definition of "speculative fiction", referring to "a super category for all genres that deliberately depart from imitating 'consensus reality' of everyday experience," including "fantasy, science fiction, and horror, but also their derivatives, hybrids, and cognate genres." Departure from "consensus reality" allow these genres expanded discursive possibilities. Seo-young Chu, for example, describes science fiction as a form of "high intensity mimesis" with the "capacity to perform the massively complex representational and epistemological work necessary to render cognitively estranging referents available both for representation and for understanding" (7). Recent scholarship has demonstrated that imperialism and colonialism were key to science fiction's emergence as a genre and remain thematically significant to the genre today.⁴ Moreover, the subversive possibilities of speculative genres as tools of postcolonial critique have become more apparent as contemporary Anglophone speculative literary communities grow more ethnically and generically diverse, drawing inspiration from the histories and mythologies of non-Western or marginalized societies.⁵ This contradictory relationship between speculative fiction and colonialism holds true within Chinese literary tradition, as demonstrated by Nathaniel Isaacson and Lorenzo Andolfatto's arguments that late-Qing science fiction and utopian fiction (respectively) can be understood as consequence of and proving ground for China's turn-of-the-

1 For detailed discussion of Qing and Republican China's ambivalent relationship with Westernization, see Hutters.

2 See, for example, Berry; Wang.

3 Portions of this essay were presented at conferences hosted by the American Comparative Literature Association (2021), Duke University (2020), the Historical Society for Twentieth-Century China (2020), the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (2017), and Wabash College (2017), and I am grateful to the organizers, panelists, and audience members for their support and suggestions. I am also grateful to Jeffrey Gower, Guangyi Li, Lorraine Krall McCrary, Karen Quandt, Adriel Trott, and the anonymous reviewer for their feedback on written drafts of this essay and to R.F. Kuang and Harper Collins UK for providing access to an advanced reader copy of *The Burning God*.

4 See Csicsery-Ronay; Kerslake; Rieder, *Colonialism*.

5 See Attebery; Langer; Okorafor.

century colonial modernity. Isaacson's observation that late-Qing science fiction writers attempted to turn "the discursive knives of genres associated with empire [...] against their wielders" (2-3) illuminates a precursor to the transgressive, postcolonial, and anti-colonial explorations of speculative fiction today.

A comparative review of scholarship on postcolonial Anglophone speculative fiction points to hybridity as a common theme. Such hybridity includes not only the authors' identities and the cultural traditions they incorporate, but also the stylistic elements and generic conventions that these works deploy and the cognitive outlooks they depict. Attebery conceptualizes such hybridity vis-a-vis the verbal techniques of the cultural "contact zone," which, quoting historian Mary Louise Pratt, include "[a]utoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expression' (Pratt 4, quoted in Attebery 175). These forms of literary engagement all open new avenues for political commentary and new possibilities for speculative fiction:

Each of these strategies of indirection and redirection allows the writer to bridge a cultural divide while still maintaining a degree of autonomy. Each involves appropriating the forms of the dominant society in order to critique its structures of power and meaning. In a sense, genre itself becomes a meeting place, a contact zone." (Attebery 175)

Scholars of postcolonial Anglophone speculative fiction have noted the creative power of this hybridity. Betsy Huang, for example, highlights how incorporating speculative elements as part of a larger "generic troubling" allows Asian American authors to expand "a representational vocabulary that is still very much limited by a set of conventionalized clichés and stereotypes" (3). Jessica Langer similarly concludes that postcolonial science fiction, through incorporating "narrative and formal elements specific to each writer's cultural heritage" successfully subverts the generic conventions and colonial tropes of science fiction, "hybridizes them, parodies them and/or mimics them against the grain in play of Bhabhian masquerade" (4). In addition to new artistic possibilities, the above-mentioned techniques of hybridity also expand speculative fiction's cognitive outlook, reconceptualizing the relationship between the hegemonic Western technoscientific outlook and what Grace L. Dillon describes as "Indigenous scientific literacies," namely "those practices used by indigenous native people to manipulate the natural environment in order to improve existence in areas including medicine, agriculture,

and sustainability” (25). Though Dillon refers specifically to the Indigenous societies of North America, her larger point about speculative fiction’s ability to reimagine dominant historical narratives and discourses of progress can be applied to colonized and marginalized societies more broadly. Taken together, these studies demonstrate that Anglophone speculative fiction (like Late-Qing science fiction) increasingly weaponizes multiple layers of hybridity to turn the genre against itself, highlighting increasingly diverse subjectivities, cognitive outlooks, and political concerns. Thus, speculative fiction has proven an effective mechanism and example of decolonization.

Given this legacy, speculative generic conventions provide a useful lens for reconsidering China’s colonial encounters. In this article I consider how Stephen Fung’s film *Tai Chi Zero* (*Taiji zhi ling kaishi* 太极之零开始, 2012) and R.F. Kuang’s *The Poppy War* (2018-2020) novels investigate the powers and limitations of hybridity, in both form and culture, to reimagine history. Echoing Caroline Levine’s strategic formalist approach, which brings attention to “collisions” between aesthetic and social forms (16), I show how these works mobilize formal hybridity to address themes of transculturation under colonialism. I argue that the texts reinterpret generic tropes and draw on alternate technologies to explore the ambivalences of colonial mimicry, decolonization, and hybridity, connecting longstanding debates within Chinese intellectual history about modernization and development with broader postcolonial discourse. I situate the various alternatives outlined by each text in the context of both late-Qing discourse on reform and contemporary postcolonial scholarship, concluding that both texts articulate a tentative hybridity. By bringing Chinese-language and English-language speculative traditions into dialogue, this essay highlights the ways creators are reevaluating modern Chinese history and the role technology has played in China’s development.

Colonial Mimicry and Shanzhai Hybridity in *Tai Chi Zero*

Hong Kong director Stephen Fung’s film *Tai Chi Zero* reimagines China’s encounter with the West at the turn of the twentieth century. The film’s protagonist, Luchan (Jayden Yuan), is loosely based on Yang Luchan (1779-1872), founder of Yang-style Tai Chi, although the film takes substantial liberties with historical fact. In the film, Luchan, a martial arts prodigy, fights in the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) nearly thirty years after the historical Yang Luchan’s death. In *Tai Chi Zero*, Luchan’s martial arts abilities come at the expense of his life force, so he must master Chen-style Tai Chi to avoid an early death. In Chen Village he is met with hostility, exacerbated by the village’s own colonial crisis. Zijing (Eddie Peng Yu-

Yen), a young man fostered in the village and educated in England, has recently returned as the British East India Company's representative. When the villagers resist the Company's plan to build a railroad,⁶ Zijing and his British accomplices attack with a monstrous steam-powered weapon. Luchan, in his quest to learn Tai Chi, helps the villagers battle the British forces, destroying the weapon and saving the day. The saga repeats to similar effect in the sequel, *Tai Chi Hero* (*Taiji yingxiong jieqi* 太极2英雄崛起, 2012), also directed by Fung.

The main conflict of *Tai Chi Zero* is not only between tradition and modernity, as Kenneth Chan convincingly argues (25), but also between mimicry and hybridity as responses to colonial incursion. This conflict plays out on the levels of both plot and style. The film critiques what Homi K. Bhabha describes as colonial mimicry, "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is *almost the same, but not quite*" (126, italics in original). Although Bhabha describes such mimicry as "at once resemblance and menace" (127) that "articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial, and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority" (129), the film remains skeptical of mimicry's subversive potential, advocating instead for *shanzhai* 山寨 (copycat) hybridity.

Tai Chi Zero's critique of colonial mimicry centers on Zijing, whose dress, speech, goals, and relationship with technology are all characteristic of Bhabha's colonial mimic man, the "*almost the same, but not quite*" Anglicized colonial Other. In ridiculous contrast to his neighbors, Zijing dresses like an English dandy, complete with breeches and a cravat. He speaks English whenever possible and brings a variety of Western contraptions in hope of convincing the conservative villagers that he holds the way to the future. A plan to dazzle the village elders with a display of electric lights literally backfires when the wires catch fire, leaving the villagers even more skeptical of the planned railroad.

Zijing's attempt to convince his fiancée, Yuniang (Angelababy), daughter of the village Tai Chi master, further highlight the film's critique of mimicry. Zijing initially seems successful: Yuniang wears a Western-style gown and slippers, listens to Zijing's phonograph, ballroom dances, and even tries introducing her friends to coffee. However, the friends remain unimpressed. One spits out the drink, declaring it "more bitter than medicine." Attempting to defend Zijing's project of Westernization, Yuniang informs her friend that where coffee is concerned, the bitterer the taste, the higher the quality, but even she cannot swallow the offending

6 In *Tai Chi Zero*, the railroad is the embodiment of colonial threat. For discussion of how the train's symbolic significance has transformed over time in Chinese literature and film, see the articles in this issue by Isaacson, Li, and Sun.

beverage without a slight grimace. Yuniang's imperfect mimicry of Zijing (who himself attempts to mimic the British) leaves her one step further from almost-but-not-quite Anglicization, pointing to the ridiculousness of such a goal.

At Zijing's failure to convince the villagers to accept the railroad, the British respond with force, further emphasizing Zijing's status as colonial subject and mimicry's limitation as a viable strategy for mitigating colonialism. The Company sends in Zijing's former lover, Clare Heathrow, to replace him. The film codes Clare (played, ironically, by multi-racial Malaysian-American model Mandy Lieu) as British by her fluency in English, her Western-style men's clothing, and especially her pale skin and curly light brown hair. She marches into town accompanied by a regiment of soldiers. When the villagers attempt to defend themselves with martial arts, Clare reveals her secret weapon, a steam-belching behemoth that lays down rails, flattening any obstacle in its path. The contraption is named Troy, an unsubtle nod to the threat of foreign technology. Ultimately Clare, not Zijing, is granted the weaponry necessary to advance the colonial project. Despite Zijing's best efforts to mimic his British employers, he will always remain Chinese. In fact, the British colonial project depends on Zijing's transition remaining partial, "the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English" (Bhabha 128). This "flawed mimesis" is emphasized by the bare torsos of the hairy, muscular, white men shoveling coal in the bowels of Troy, contrasting with Zijing's foppish imitation of a British gentleman, and playing into Orientalist tropes of emasculated Chinese men.

While the film critiques Zijing's attempted mimicry of the British, it also questions a strictly isolationist approach. As a foundling child lacking the Chen surname, Zijing was bullied and banned from learning Chen-style Tai Chi, revealing the homogenous and isolationist bent of the village. Alienated, Zijing studied engineering in England, and his stubborn insistence on mimicking English behavior even after returning to China is presented as an attempt to prove himself to his former neighbors. This portrayal of Western learning as a consolation prize for those denied a traditional Chinese education mirrors the plight of late-Qing intellectuals marginalized by China's civil service examination system.⁷ In the film,

7 For example, Yan Fu (1854-1921), who became "the key mediator between Chinese and Western ideas in the period immediately after 1895" (Huters 45), studied English and navigation as a teen rather than pursuing a traditional Chinese education, likely due to financial difficulties. He then continued his technical training in England. Although it was precisely this training that allowed him to translate influential foreign texts into Chinese and call for more extensive reform following China's 1895 defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War, Yan Fu expressed feelings of inadequacy at his lack of traditional Chinese learning and four-time failure to pass the imperial exam. See Huters 47.

Tai Chi, rather than Confucian classics, stands in for traditional Chinese learning, and thus the local alternative to Western technoscience. Just as Chinese intellectuals eventually questioned the exclusionary nature of the civil service exam, the film condemns Chen Village's stagnation and protection of local knowledge (Tai Chi) against all outsiders, even a helpless orphan child. The tragedy of Zijing's misguided attempts to navigate an exclusionary knowledge tradition raises the question of how society can safely incorporate the alien and evolve without compromising local identity, touching on the very debates that puzzled late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Chinese intellectuals.

The film continues to probe the nuances of incorporating the alien through Luchan's character arc; in contrast to Zijing's earnest colonial mimicry, Luchan engages in playful, subversive *shanzhai* hybridity. While *shanzhai* (literally "mountain fortress") historically referred to the realm of Song dynasty bandits, since the early 2000s its meaning has expanded to encompass "all Chinese counterfeit products and to the attitude of their producers towards authority" (Landsberger 217). Chinese author Yu Hua has noted the term's subversive potential, remarking that it "has given the word 'imitation' a new meaning, and at the same time the limits to the original sense of 'imitation' have been eroded, allowing room for it to acquire different shades of meaning: counterfeiting, infringement, deviations from the standard, mischief, and caricature" (181). Zhou Zhiqiang and Andrew Chubb have observed the resonances between *shanzhai* and *nalaizhuyi* 拿来主义 (grabism), a neologism coined by author Lu Xun in a 1934 essay that called for a "discerning and pragmatic approach to the 'grabbing' of foreign things" (Chubb 263), which Chubb, in turn, relates to postcolonial understandings of hybridity, "the blurred boundaries between purportedly separate cultures" (262).

Even as *Tai Chi Zero* critiques colonial mimicry, I argue that it advocates for the playfulness and practicality of *shanzhai* through both plot and form. The film draws a clear distinction between Zijing's affected mimicry of the British and Luchan's preternatural talent for imitating martial arts moves. Luchan's arrival to Chen Village is met by the villagers' refusal to teach Chen-style Tai Chi to an outsider. One by one, the villagers beat up Luchan, until he is even defeated by a preteen girl half his size. Luchan persists, encouraged by a nameless "laborer" (Tony Ka Fai Leung), who suggests that Luchan use his talent for imitation to turn the villagers' own moves against them. The laborer turns out to be the village Tai Chi master in disguise, loosely based on the historical martial arts practitioner Chen Changxing (1771–1853). Through this strategy of imitation, technically forbidden but unofficially encouraged, Luchan finally wins a fight. His eventual triumph after

a series of humiliating defeats can be viewed allegorically as a reframing of China's "Century of Humiliation" from the vantage point of China's current prosperity and strength.

This allegorical reading becomes more obvious when Luchan turns his talent for imitation against the British. He teams up with Changxing and Yuniang to steal Troy's schematics and reverse engineer its destruction. In true *shanzhai* spirit, the attack relies on the heroes' stolen, incomplete knowledge of the British machine and their own martial arts training, as they fight the British operators, dodging clanking gears and hot steam vents. By using a crude copy of the machine's plans to destroy it, Luchan and Yuniang literalize the menace that Bhabha finds inherent in colonial mimicry (which Zijing, in his attempted Anglicization, fails to grasp), embodying the playful ingenuity of the *shanzhai* ideal. Troy's destruction spurs further attack by British soldiers armed with heavy artillery, and this time the whole village must rally, using martial arts to combat their technologically superior foe. In a moment of fantastic comedic spectacle, the villagers use Tai Chi to animate fruits and vegetables into deadly projectiles. Through special effects, these everyday objects visually mimic the British bullets. Once again, irreverent imitation of foreign technology combined with traditional knowledge saves the day.

Tai Chi Zero gestures at and then sidesteps the ethical ambiguity of *shanzhai*, which has alternately been decried as intellectual property theft and celebrated as a form of Chinese creativity and resistance to foreign economic domination (Kloet et. al 23-28). In the film's denouement, the village council condemns Luchan's "theft" of the Chen-style Tai Chi, nodding to international critiques of *shanzhai*. Changxing comes to Luchan's defense, noting that the supposed "theft" not only saved the village from the British, but also took place in broad daylight, with the villagers themselves demonstrating the moves in their bouts with Luchan. This defense highlights both the pragmatism and creativity inherent in *shanzhai* and alludes to its ability to "disrupt taken-for-granted understandings of 'original/authentic' and 'copy/ fake' [...] by revealing their roots in a global legal-economic system of exclusion and inequality" (Kloet et. al 26). Though the council remains unconvinced by Changxing's argument, Luchan is nevertheless spared punishment when Yuniang agrees to marry him, thereby transforming him from outsider to insider. By relying on this technicality, the film glosses over Luchan's "crime" (and thus any condemnation of *shanzhai*) with a wink and a nod, ultimately celebrating *shanzhai*'s subversive, anticolonial potential. Luchan is begrudgingly accepted into Chen Village in a way that Zijing never was, and *shanzhai* thus emerges as a middle road between total isolationism on the one hand and uncritical colonial mimicry on

the other. The film reveals *shanzhai* as a solution to Qing China's colonial dilemma and a celebration of contemporary China's ingenuity and role as a major world player.

Generic Hybridity

This reading of *Tai Chi Zero* as a vehicle for articulating a China-specific *shanzhai* hybridity is further supported by the way the film playfully engages in generic hybridity, pointing to the way “aesthetic and political forms,” in the words of Levine, “emerge as comparable patterns that operate on a common plane” (16). *Tai Chi Zero* is what Wei Yang describes as an “sf-themed” [science fiction themed] film, “in which sf elements coexist with elements of other genres and are invariably used to support the purposes of these other genres” (133). By combining, reinterpreting, and subverting elements of other speculative genres, namely *wuxia* 武侠 and steampunk, *Tai Chi Zero* compounds each genre's transgressive potential for exploring colonialism's legacies. This generic hybridity reinforces the film's presentation of *shanzhai* as a mechanism of anticolonial resistance.

Wuxia and steampunk both fall under Oziwicz's “speculative fiction” umbrella through their departure from “consensus reality.” *Wuxia* is a genre of Chinese literature and film that “portrays the warrior *xia* and his or her style of sword fighting action as well as the themes and principles of *xia* (chivalry or knight-errantry)” (Teo 4). *Wuxia* is speculative in that it often incorporates supernatural elements traditionally found in *chuanqi* 传奇 (tales of the marvelous), its premodern literary antecedent (Hamm 15). Steampunk, meanwhile, is a subgenre of science fiction originating in William Gibson's and Bruce Sterling's alternate history novel, *The Difference Engine* (1990), which imagines “Babbage's calculating machine start[ing] an information technology revolution in Victorian England” (Rusch 91). Both genres, as participants in what John Rieder terms the “mass cultural genre system,” enjoy extensive commercial popularity while remaining somewhat marginalized within prestigious literary circles. Like other speculative genres, both open discursive possibilities beyond realism. *Wuxia's* transgressive potential centers on the genre's typical *jianghu* 江湖 (literally “rivers and lakes”) setting “at the geographic and moral margins of settled society” (Hamm 17), its frequent depiction of “scenarios of national crisis and themes of cultural identity” (25), and its mediation of “China's encounter with modernity and its emergence as a nation” (Sarkar 166). Steampunk, which features visual markers such as a Victorian context, “a nostalgic interpretation of imagined history,” and technofantasy (Perschon 127-128), has the potential to reevaluate Victorian-era imperialism and rewrite science

fiction's colonialist past, even as it sometimes reproduces the same Orientalism from which it seeks to distance itself (Pho 127-128). Both *wuxia* and steampunk are imbued with the subversive potential to wrestle with and challenge themes of empire, and the interactions between the two sets of generic conventions in *Tai Chi Zero* only compound this potential.

Kenneth Chan notes that steampunk is an apt choice for *Tai Chi Zero* due to the film's temporal setting (late-Qing/Victorian), its articulation of alternate history (particularly one resistant to imperialism), and its retrofuturist outlook (21-23). Building on Chan's observations, I emphasize that *Tai Chi Zero* playfully and self-consciously blends conventions of *wuxia* and steampunk, animating the inherent resonances between the two genres and reinforcing the film's *shanzhai* vision. Take, for example, the "historicism" that typically marks *wuxia* (Teo 6), which overlaps with steampunk's "nostalgic interpretation of imagined history" (Perschon 127). The beginning of *Tai Chi Zero* highlights and parodies this historicism. The film opens with an eight-minute stylized black-and-white flashback sequence that could itself be a *wuxia* film in miniature, tracking beat for beat with exemplars of the genre like Chang Cheh's *One Armed Swordsman* (*Du bi dao* 独臂刀, 1967). In the flashback sequence, Luchan witnesses his mother's violent murder, pledges himself to a martial arts master, and becomes a model student, practicing diligently in his mother's memory. This tableau alerts the viewer that they are, without a doubt, watching a *wuxia* film. Moreover, the sequence's black-and-white aesthetic, exaggerated acting, and use of inter-titles instead of spoken dialogue remind the viewer that they are watching an imagined history steeped in nostalgia, paving the way for the film's later steampunk-inflected intervention.

The film further engages the resonances between *wuxia* and steampunk by playing with the genres' propensity to create visual spectacle with technology. *Wuxia* films increasingly incorporate "special effects, montage editing, and an abundance of wirework," leading to what some fans criticize as obsession with technology (S. Yu 40). Steampunk, meanwhile, relies on aestheticized technofantasy for its genre coding (Perschon 127-128), and *Tai Chi Zero* delivers through extreme closeups of gadgets, especially Troy's intricate gears and steam vents. The film's fight scenes draw parallels between each genre's use of technology. In one battle, as I have previously discussed, Tai-Chi-animated vegetable projectiles mirror British bullets through similar use of special effects. Another example is a comedic "fight scene" in which the spunky village girl who beat up Luchan (Wei Ai Xuan) challenges Troy to single combat. Her cries of "stinky monster" anthropomorphize the machine, and it appears to rise to her taunts. In fact, her challenge coincides

with the precise moment that Luchan and Yuniang gain control of the weapon. Unbeknownst to the infiltrators, their experimental attempts to steer Troy make it appear from the outside to be waking up to the girl's shouts, its limbs mirroring her fighting stance. Thus, in one visually stunning long shot of girl and machine, the film illustrates Chen Village's conflict between tradition and modernity and between East and West, playing on both *wuxia* and steampunk's stylized technofantasy.

Tai Chi Zero is delightfully self-aware of its appropriation of *wuxia* generic conventions. As each character is introduced, titles appear on the screen identifying not only the character's identity, but also the actor's name and real-world accomplishments in martial arts cinema or athletic competition. The cast is filled with cameos of directors, actors, athletes, and martial artists from across the Sinophone world, including a descendent of the real-life Chen Village. Comic-book-like animations are occasionally used to highlight these self-aware meta-textual moments. When Luchan collapses in the final battle, a status bar hovers over him, video-game-style, illustrating his waning life force. These self-reflective moments of parody bring the *wuxia* coding of the film into focus, forcing viewers to remember that they are watching a martial arts film, which in turn makes the departures into the steampunk genre more noticeable. This playful approach to genre echoes the film's thematic focus on *shanzhai* creativity. *Tai Chi Zero's* combination of *wuxia* and steampunk is thus a metatextual exemplar of the film's *shanzhai* ideal.

Ultimately *Tai Chi Zero* embodies *shanzhai's* pragmatism and playfulness in both plot and generic coding. Luchan's *shanzhai* hybridity rather than Zijing's colonial mimicry triumphs. Appropriating and adapting the foreign to local needs proves superior to pure mimicry, which must always fail. The film may be read allegorically in light of present-day China's national project engaging with "foreign" ideologies such as socialism or capitalism "with Chinese characteristics." *Tai Chi Zero's* juxtaposition of *wuxia* and steampunk proves key to the film's reimagining of modern Chinese history. This juxtaposition presents Chinese martial arts as an alternative to Western technology, both engaging with and subverting tropes of "techno-orientalism" that have plagued steampunk (Ho). Moreover, on an extra-textual level, *Tai Chi Zero* embodies a local *shanzhai* alternative to Hollywood science fiction film, echoing Yang's argument that "sf-themed" films "represent a particular phase in the development of Chinese sf cinema, one in which local filmmakers borrow directly from Hollywood sf but also deviate from it in significant ways, through parody, genre mixing, and other intertextual strategies" (134). By articulating a *shanzhai* ideal, both thematically and aesthetically, form

and function align in *Tai Chi Zero*, illustrating how the Chinese film industry can incorporate the visual spectacle of science fiction in ways that resonate with local audiences.

Critiquing Colonial Mimicry in *The Poppy War* Trilogy

Through its hybrid aesthetic and exploration of mimicry and *shanzhai*, *Tai Chi Zero*, like many works of postcolonial science fiction, highlights the divergent ways colonized subjects can respond to colonizers' incursions. One option is to play by the colonizers' rules, engaging in the type of colonial mimicry we see in Zijing's attempt to become Anglicized. The film ultimately rejects this approach in favor of Luchan's *shanzhai* hybridity, which, as is typical of postcolonial science fiction, shows how colonized subjects can "subvert those rules and attempt to chip away at the power of the powerful" (Langer 62). However, such a neat solution relies on an oversimplified narrative of a monolithic China with a continuous history positioned against the threat of Western technoscientific modernity, neglecting the complexity of Chinese history.

In contrast, R.F. Kuang's *The Poppy War* trilogy, comprised of *The Poppy War* (2018), *The Dragon Republic* (2019), and *The Burning God* (2020), offers a more nuanced look at China's multifaceted relationship with empire. Kuang has rapidly emerged as one of the rising stars of English-language science fiction and fantasy, winning the prestigious Astounding Award for Best New Writer in 2020. *The Poppy War* trilogy is inspired by modern Chinese history, though Kuang notes that the novels' fantasy setting (an alternate-China known as Nikan) allows her to present historical trauma through a "distorted mirror" (Kuang, "Distortions" 29). The trilogy centers on protagonist Rin, an orphan raised in Nikan's impoverished south, who tests into the capital's top military academy. Partway through her training, Mugen (alternate-Japan) attacks, and war breaks out. Rin, who possesses shamanic abilities, channels the rage and fire of the Phoenix God to incinerate the Mugenese homeland in one genocidal swoop. In the aftermath, civil war and the arrival of the Hesperians (an amalgamation of Western colonial powers) present new threats. Rin is drawn into a cycle of violence and trauma. As Kuang writes:

The question the trilogy tries to answer is: how does somebody go from being an irrelevant, backwater, peasant nobody to being a megalomaniac dictator capable of killing millions of people? I've always been interested in how people become murderers or perpetrators of genocide [...] suppose this person is actually deeply empathetic and cares deeply about her friends

and the people close to her, genuinely wants to do the right thing and save people, what do you do with a character like that? How do *they* get from point A to point B of genocide? (quoted in Sondheimer, italics in original)

Sprawling over fifteen hundred pages, the trilogy is naturally able to address questions about identity, power, empire, and national development in a more nuanced way than a film like *Tai Chi Zero*, which clocks in at an hour and forty minutes. However, despite operating on a broader scale, Kuang's trilogy similarly invokes, reinterprets, and subverts speculative generic tropes to explore a tentative hybridity in the face of colonial threat, reimagining China's relationship with technology and modernization.

Kuang's trilogy makes a similar case against colonial mimicry. Just as *Tai Chi Zero* juxtaposes Zijing and Luchan to embody two possible responses to colonial threat, Kuang's trilogy sets up a similar foil between Rin and her former classmate Nezha. Whereas Rin is positioned at the margins of Nikan society – a dark-skinned, ethnic-minority, orphaned, peasant girl from the impoverished south – Nezha is the son of a wealthy, powerful northern warlord. Nezha's family attempts to overthrow Nikan's empress, ostensibly to establish a modernized, unified Republic based on the Hesperian model. Rin is initially attracted by the possibility of a new, stronger Nikan, free from the old imperial system and Mugenese invasion alike, but she grows increasingly skeptical as Nezha and his family bend over backwards to court the Hesperians as allies. In the end, their attempts to mimic and impress the foreigners remain futile, only facilitating the Hesperians' goal of conquest, just as Zijing's attempted Anglicization must always fail.

The trilogy underscores its rejection of colonial mimicry by subverting eucatastrophe, a term coined by J.R.R. Tolkien to describe what would become a trope of epic fantasy:

The eucatastrophic tale is the true form of fairy-tale, and its highest function. The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous "turn" [...] In its fairy-tale —or otherworld— setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. (384)

The climactic battle at the end of *The Dragon Republic* encourages readers familiar with epic fantasy generic conventions to expect a eucatastrophic turn. The outcome looks grim as the Empress's forces threaten to overwhelm Republican troops,

but apparent salvation arrives in the nick of time, in the form of the long-awaited Hesperian navy:

There on the seam of the horizon sailed a fleet, waves and waves of warships. Some glided over the water; some floated through the air. There were so many that they almost seemed like a mirage, endless doubles of the same row of white sails and blue flags against a brilliant sun. (Kuang, *Dragon Republic* 571)

At this “sudden joyous ‘turn’” Rin and her friends are saved from certain death, the battle is won, and it appears the nascent Republic will be allowed to flourish. However, in the next scene, the Empress reveals that she had been working all along to save Nikan from Hesperian colonizers. She insists:

“The Mugenese weren’t the real enemy.” [...] They never were. They were just poor puppets serving a mad emperor who started a war he shouldn’t have. But who gave them those ideas? Who told them they could conquer the continent?”

Blue eyes. White sails.

“I warned you about everything. I told you from the beginning. Those devils are going to destroy our world. The Hesperians have a singular vision for the future, and we’re not in it.” (Kuang, *Dragon Republic* 583)

The repetition of “white sails” and the parallelism between “blue flags” and “blue eyes” act as synecdoche for colonial violence, turning the previous scene’s apparent eucatastrophe on its head. The fleet’s arrival is not a “fleeting glimpse of joy,” but rather a promise of horrors to come, a new wave of colonial subjugation and violence. Hesperian aid comes at too high a cost: military occupation, predatory trade rights, missionary presence, and the final say in domestic decisions – in short, the types of coercion that comprised China’s “Century of Humiliation.”

The Poppy War trilogy not only captures many of the same debates about reform and Westernization faced by late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Chinese intellectuals, but also adopts rhetorical and generic strategies of defamiliarization similar to those used by late-Qing science fiction writers. Isaacson elucidates such techniques in his reading of Wu Jianren’s *The New Story of the Stone* (*Xin Shitou ji* 新石头记, 1905). Wu’s sequel to Cao Xueqin’s canonical *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hong lou meng* 红楼梦, 1791) imagines protagonist

Jia Baoyu travelling forward in time, first to treaty-port Shanghai at the turn of the twentieth century (Wu's present) and then to an imagined, technologically advanced future China. Isaacson highlights that both halves of the novel are marked by the "defamiliarization" of science fiction, noting that everyday markers of modernity in the first half are presented as just as estranging as the fantastic utopia of the second: "From matchbooks and newspapers to the rules governing commercial insurance and boat captains, Baoyu regards much of what he encounters with a sense of wonder, skepticism, and anxiety" (Isaacson 61). Rin has a similar encounter in *The Burning God* when she infiltrates New City, a former Nikara garrison turned Hesperian military encampment. Rin experiences New City as "a punch in the face" (237), since it "felt as if a piece of Hesperia had simply been carved out and dropped whole into Nikan" (238). Like Baoyu, what Rin finds most estranging are everyday markers of Westernized modernity: architecture (glass windows and "new installations that imposed a blockish sense of order" (238)), technology (electric lights, steam-powered trams, and dirigibles), sounds ("new strains of music, awful and discordant," "too many voices speaking Hesperian, or some accented attempt at Hesperian," and "an ever-present mechanical heartbeat, its thousand machines whirring, humming, and whining without end" (244)), clothing (a woman in skirts that "arced out from her waist in the unnatural shape of an overturned tea cup" (247)), and condescending ordinances promoting propriety, righteousness, modesty, and frugality (evoking Republican China's New Life Movement). Rin describes her visceral response in science fictional terms: "She felt dizzy, disoriented, like she had been plucked off the earth and tossed adrift into an entirely different universe. She'd spent much of her life feeling like she didn't belong, but this was the first time she'd felt truly *foreign*. (239, italics in original). Rin's comparison of her experience to extraterrestrial travel echoes Chu's conceptualization of science fiction as "high intensity mimesis." In another passage, Rin uses the language of fantasy. As she breaks out in sweat, she wonders, "What was wrong with her? She had never felt a panic like this before – this low, crescendoing distress of gradual suffocation. She felt like she'd been dropped blindfolded into a fairy realm. She did not want to be here" (244-245). Here, Rin not only invokes the fantastic, but also the metaphor of suffocation, which Isaacson shows was a familiar theme in Late Qing science fiction (including *The New Story of the Stone*) even before Lu Xun's metaphorical iron house became a staple of modern Chinese literature (4).

Rin's anxiety springs not only from her sense of alienation at the foreign elements, but also from the ease with which Nikara culture had been replaced. Rin realizes that this erasure might be an even greater threat to Nikan than the

Hesperian's military might: "What if the Nikara *wanted* this future? The New City was full of Nikara residents - they had to outnumber the Hesperians five to one - and they seemed completely fine with their new arrangement. Happy, even" (245, italics in original). Even worse than the speed of the erasure is the complicity of her fellow Nikara, particularly the upper class, who seem to benefit enough from the occupation that they are willing to engage in mimicry:

The Nikara in the New City seemed to adore their new neighbors. They nodded, smiled, and saluted Hesperian soldiers as they passed. Sold Hesperian food. They – the upper class, at least – had begun to imitate Hesperian dress. Merchants, bureaucrats, and officers walked down the streets garbed in tight trousers, thick white socks pulled up to their knees, and strange coats that buttoned over their waists but draped in the back past their buttocks like duck tails. (246)

Nevertheless, Bhabha's observation that to be Anglicized is not the same as being English remains true, a fact that Rin recognizes all too well:

But despite all their pretensions and efforts, they were not the Hesperians' equals. They couldn't be, by virtue of their race. This Rin noticed soon enough - it was clear from the way the Nikara bowed and scraped, nodding obsequiously while the Hesperians ordered them about. This wasn't a surprise. This was the Hesperians' idea of a natural social order. (246)

In other words:

They want to erase us. It's their divine mandate. They want to make us better to *improve* us, by turning us into a mirror of themselves. The Hesperians understand culture as a straight line [...], One starting point, one destination. They are at the end of the line. They loved the Mugenese because they came close, but any culture or state that diverges is necessarily inferior. *We* are inferior, until we speak, dress, act, and worship just like them. (245)

Thus, it becomes clear to Rin that attempts to achieve national salvation through mimicking the colonizer will fail not only due to loss of local identity, but even more fundamentally, due to the impossibility of convincing the Hesperians to view

the Nikara as equals.

The *Poppy War* trilogy goes a step further than *Tai Chi Zero*, refracting its critique of colonial mimicry through a social Darwinist lens, echoing discourse common not only among colonizers, but also deeply internalized by prominent Qing thinkers.⁸ Rin's interactions with a Hesperian missionary scientist, Sister Petra, reveal this mindset, laying bare what Jessica Langer describes as "the inherent contradiction" of the "colonialist worldview," which "lionized the scientific method and its results [...] at the same time as it imposed on indigenous peoples its own patently unscientific system of spirituality" (127). Sister Petra "scientifically" studies Rin to determine the source of her shamanic powers, which the Hesperians see as a flaw. Sister Petra explains to Rin "It's no fault of you own. The Nikara haven't evolved to our level yet. This is simple science; the proof is in your physiognomy" (Kuang, *Dragon Republic* 275). Sister Petra then offers a litany of Orientalist, social Darwinist stereotypes:

Since your eyes are smaller, you see within a smaller periphery than we do." Petra pointed to the diagrams as she explained. "Your skin has a yellowish tint that indicates malnutrition or an unbalanced diet. Now see your skull shapes. Your brains, which we know to be an indicator of your rational capacity, are by nature smaller. [...] The Nikara are a particularly herdlike nation. You listen well, but independent thought is difficult for you. You reach scientific conclusions centuries after we discover them. [...] But worry not. In time, all civilizations will become perfect in the eyes of the Maker. That is [my] task." (276)

Sister Petra's racist monologue interprets social Darwinism through the lens of divine purpose, dressed up as objective science, mirroring the Orientalist discourse that in fact circulated among both late-Qing intellectuals and foreign colonizers. Under such dehumanizing rhetoric, Kuang's novels demonstrate, colonial mimicry cannot pave the way to autonomy or liberation.

Grimdark Ambivalence and Silkpunk Hybridity

With its larger scale, *The Poppy War* trilogy pushes past simplistic understandings of the relationship between colonizer and colonized, recognizing China's own imperialist history and the challenges of decolonization. I argue that the trilogy

8 For a discussion of the history of Darwinian ideas in China, see Jin.

achieves this degree of nuance through anachronistic juxtaposition and generic hybridity, drawing especially on new Anglophone fantasy subgenres like grimdark and silkpunk to explore the ambivalences of anticolonial resistance.

The *Poppy War* trilogy operates within the larger trend of “gritty” fantasy, sometimes known as “grimdark.” The grimdark aesthetic, popularized by authors such as George R.R. Martin and Joe Abercrombie, is characterized by “The dirt physical and moral. The attention to unpleasant detail. The greyness of the characters. The cynicism of the outlook” (Abercrombie). Some consider the genre “excessively and unnecessarily dark, cynical, violent, brutal without purpose and beyond the point of ridiculousness,” but Abercrombie defends it as a response to generic conventions of high fantasy (in the vein of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis):

Gritty fantasy is a reaction to and a counterbalancing of a style of fantasy in which life is clean, meaningful, and straightforward, and the coming of the promised king really does solve all social problems, and there are often magical solutions to the horrors – like death, illness, and crippling wounds – that plague us in the real world.

Kuang similarly notes that “going dark was a logical plot choice, not an attempt to shock the reader” (“Distortions” 52) and that the trilogy “doesn’t employ violence for the sake of aesthetic, but historical accuracy” (“R.F. Kuang”). Of note are the chapters based on the 1937 Nanjing Massacre and the brutal human experiments conducted by the Japanese Imperial Army’s Unit 731 in northeastern China during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). These extensively researched, graphic scenes of colonial violence offer a sobering critique of idealized high fantasy novels that glosses over the brutality of war and empire in the name of chivalric ideals, attempting to rectify what Kuang describes as “the ongoing erasure of sexual violence against women who aren’t white across military history” (quoted in Sondheimer).

Moreover, Kuang’s trilogy uses the moral ambivalences inherent to grimdark to complicate oversimplified historical narratives. Through a condensed timeline and fantasy setting, Kuang’s historical reimagining juxtaposes events and ideologies that, in reality, developed over decades, forcing readers to draw parallels among colonial traumas and cycles of violence. For example, in Kuang’s imagined chronology Rin encounters in quick succession two foreign scientists intent on studying her shamanic abilities. One is Sister Petra, described above. The other is a Mugenese medic, Dr. Shiro, based on Shirō Ishii, commander of Japan’s Unit 731.

Rin begins conflating the two traumatic encounters:

Petra's touch [...] felt like a dark stain, like insects burrowing their way under Rin's skin no matter how hard she tried to claw them out. Her memories mixed together; confusing, indistinguishable. Petra's hands became Shiro's hands. Petra's room became Shiro's laboratory" (*Dragon Republic* 238).

Rin experiences both encounters as equally violating, emphasizing that Petra's social Darwinist rhetoric and Shiro's brutality exist on the same continuum of epistemic violence. The novels similarly draw comparisons to Nikan's own history of imperialist violence, particularly toward peoples indigenous to the neighboring steppe and island regions. Rin, addressing a Nikara compatriot, makes the analogy explicit:

If the Hesperians are so *innately better*, then the next rung on the ladder is pale-skinned northerners like you, and the Speerlies [the island ethnic minority group from which Rin is descended] are sitting on the bottom [...] And then, by your logic, it's fine that the Empire turned us into slaves. It's fine that they wiped us off the map, and that the official histories mention us only in footnotes. It's only natural (*Burning God* 271, italics in original).

This juxtaposition, underscored by Rin's own position at the margins of Nikara society, complicates the binary between colonizer and colonized, challenging the myth of a unified, monolithic Nikan.

The trilogy draws on the moral ambiguity of the grimdark aesthetic to explore the complexities of decolonization, critiquing not only uncritical colonial mimicry, but also Rin's pursuit of revenge and violent resistance at all costs. Rin's transformation from helpless peasant to all-powerful shaman mirrors a pattern of "critical ambivalence" that literary scholar Stephen Hong Sohn detects across Asian American speculative fiction. In this pattern:

One must find a way to act when faced with disparate choices; to dominate or protect, to damage or repair. For the Asian American subject who attains newfound skills or abilities through becoming something "else," whether she is now a ghost, cyborg, or vampire, the question becomes: How does one wield influence when one has been subjected to the damaging and

horrifying regimes of power?” (4)

In such situations, the superhuman protagonist is given a choice, either to “employ astounding skills and enhancements for the express protection of others, ones deemed to be in danger of being exploited, wounded, or even killed” (4) or to “amplify oppressive dynamics” (3). In Rin’s case, she uses her shamanic abilities to protect civilians, particularly the southern peasants who are too poor and uneducated for anyone else with power to care about. However, as Kuang notes, “[the] whole trilogy has been about cycles of violence, abuse, and responses to trauma” (Liptak), and Rin embodies the full range of moral ambivalence that Sohn describes. Though she uses her shamanic powers to defend the oppressed from their oppressors, she also replicates many of those same oppressive acts of violence against civilians. In order to live with herself after perpetrating a genocidal shamanic attack on Mugen (echoing atomic bomb imagery), she compartmentalizes and dehumanizes her enemy, repeating the same philosophy the Mugenese used to justify their invasion of Nikara:

She burned away the part of her that would have felt remorse for those deaths, because if she felt them, if she felt each and every single one of them, it would have torn her apart. The lives were so many that she ceased to acknowledge them for what they were. Those weren’t lives (*Poppy War* 504).

Trauma begets more trauma, and violence more violence. In the course of a lengthy civil war, Rin leads an army of southern peasants against her growing list of enemies (renegade Mugenese soldiers, the elitist northern warlord controlling the Republic, and Hesperian colonizers). Despite her best intentions, she finds herself applying the same bloody calculus against her own people, knowing that she can only win with “thousands of bodies”:

And if a thousand fell, she would throw another thousand at [them], and then another. No matter what the power asymmetry, war on this scale was a numbers game, and she had lives to spare. That was the single advantage that the south had against the Hesperians - that there were so, so many of them (*Dragon Republic* 653).

Rin concludes that the only way to save her country is to “burn down [the] world”

(654), both literally (using her shamanic powers) and figuratively (by uplifting the peasant masses over both foreign invaders and the country's own privileged aristocracy). However, as Rin gains victory over her enemies, she leaves a trail of destruction and starvation in her wake, turning from her people's savior to their butcher.

It is only at the trilogy's climax that Rin fully recognizes the need to break this cycle. Poised to wield "unprecedented power, unimaginable and unmatched power capable of rewriting the script of history," she realizes that exerting such force would only reproduce "patterns of cruelty and dehumanization and oppression and trauma" (612). Ultimately, she decides to "write herself out of history" (612), sacrificing herself to allow Nezha and the new Republic the opportunity to rebuild the country from the ground up. On the one hand, Rin's decision seems like complete, hopeless capitulation to the Hesperian colonizers:

They [Rin and Nezha] both knew that Nikan's only path forward was through Hesperia - through a cruel, supercilious, exploitative entity that would certainly try to remold and reshape them, until the only vestiges of Nikara culture that remained lay buried in the past. (617)

However, despite this grim outlook, the novel also allows a third possibility, a hybrid path threading the needle between total capitulation on the one hand and pyrrhic resistance on the other. "Nikan had survived occupation before. If Nezha played his cards right - if he bent where he needed to, if he lashed back at just the right time - then they might survive occupation again" (617). Nezha reaches this climactic realization on the trilogy's final page, and the details of this compromise remains frustratingly beyond the novels' scope. As Kuang freely admits, "*The Burning God* ends by asking whether an alternate future was possible for China. But that's all I can offer—questions. There are no easy answers to be found in counterfactuals" (quoted in Liptak).

Nevertheless, by considering the trilogy's generic hybridity along with its portrayals of technology, the reader can detect clues as to what that imagined future might entail. Kuang's trilogy incorporates aspects of "silkpunk," a term author Ken Liu invented to describe the hybrid aesthetic of his ongoing *Dandelion Dynasty* quartet. Liu writes:

Like steampunk, silkpunk is a blend of science fiction and fantasy. But while steampunk takes as its inspiration the chrome-brass-glass technology

aesthetic of the Victorian era, silkpunk draws inspiration from classical East Asian antiquity. [...]The silkpunk technology vocabulary is based on organic materials historically important to East Asia (bamboo, paper, silk) and seafaring cultures of the Pacific (coconut, feathers, coral), and the technology grammar follows biomechanical principles like the inventions in [pre-modern Chinese novel] *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The overall aesthetic is one of suppleness and flexibility (quoted in Misra).

Liu notes that he was inspired by writer W. Brian Arthur, “who articulates a vision of technology as a language. The task of the engineer is much like that of a poet in that the engineer must creatively combine existing elements of technology to solve novel problems, thereby devising artifacts that are new expressions in the technical language” (Brady). Liu’s approach “challenge[s] the assumption that engineering was a quintessentially modern and Western practice” (Liang), echoing works of postcolonial speculative fiction from across the world that foreground “the conflict between Western scientific methods and discourse of scientific progress and indigenous methods of knowledge production and understanding of the world” (Langer 9).

The Poppy War trilogy incorporates a silkpunk aesthetic to similar effect.⁹ Over the course of the novels, Rin and her former classmates devise increasingly clever inventions and military strategies to foil their enemies. The inventors often cite Sunzi’s *Art of War* (*Sunzi bingfa* 孙子兵法, c. 5th century B.C.E.) or adopt military schemes borrowed from Luo Guanzhong’s *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi* 三国演义, c. 1321), and the contraptions incorporate the types of organic materials that Liu specifies. Moreover, they echo Arthur’s vision of “technology as language” in that the inventions often recombine building blocks from a number of different technologies. An illustrative example is the technique one strategist uses to poison her enemy’s water source. She uses the sewage pipe of an old Hesperian mission to inundate the river with pigs’ bladders filled with toxic gas leftover from the Mugenese invasion. The acid-resistant quality of the bladders along with the efficient distribution system allow the poison to be deposited on a mass scale without becoming too diluted by the time it reaches its target miles downstream (*Dragon Republic* 254-257). Other examples include floating lanterns filled with

9 There is a reductive tendency among some readers to label any fantasy novel by an Asian or Asian American author as silkpunk, regardless of whether it bears any similarity to Liu’s definition. I want to be clear that I am using the term to refer specifically to the aesthetic and vision that Liu describes, which I find applicable to some elements of Kuang’s trilogy.

small bombs (336-337), slow-burning underwater mines coated in animal intestines (350), and a flying kite made from leather wings and thin rods that allows Rin to “levitate herself using the same principle that lifts a lantern” (537). These blends of foreign and local technologies, like the *shanzhai* playfulness and practicality celebrated by *Tai Chi Zero*, hint at the type of creativity that the trilogy’s ending posits will be necessary for Nikan to survive the coming Hesperian occupation.

Conclusion: Possibilities and Limitations of Speculation

Tai Chi Zero and *The Poppy War* trilogy blend and reinterpret speculative generic conventions to reevaluate late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century China’s encounters with foreign ideas and technologies, grappling with questions that have dominated Chinese intellectual discourse for more than a century. The texts each explore several alternatives, echoing and reframing late-Qing and Republican debates in terms that resonate with recent comparative approaches to postcolonialism.

Both texts condemn uncritical colonial mimicry, despite the potential for ambivalence that Bhabha suggests. *Tai Chi Zero* and *The Poppy War* trilogy demonstrate that uncritical mimicry is bound to fail because of power imbalances and racism. Zijiang will never be accepted as fully English, and the Hesperian’s social Darwinist outlook means they will never accept the Nikara as fully human. In addition, both texts point to the estrangement that comes from abandoning one’s own culture wholesale, whether through the threat of Chen-style Tai Chi being replaced by steam technology or through the alienation Rin experiences in New City. Kuang’s trilogy adds a degree of nuance, echoing postcolonial thinker Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (59-68) in showing how mimicry may allow the local elite to maintain some of their historical power or gain financially (though never as much as the colonizer) at the expense of the masses.

Both works recognize what Fanon sees as the inherent violence of decolonization, which, as Fanon puts it, “will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle” (37), though *Tai Chi Zero* mostly glosses over this eventuality, preferring to depict physical confrontation in a campy, stylized way, invoking humor rather than gore. *The Poppy War* trilogy, on the other hand, explores this violence in detail through the grimdark ambivalence of Rin’s character arc. In her pursuit of violent revolution, Rin convinces herself that the ends justify the means, but as she becomes more powerful, the means become the ends. While violent resistance does indeed allow her to gain power over those who have oppressed her and her nation, in the end it causes more harm than good, as the cost

in human lives proves too high. In this way, the trilogy explores the differences between projects of decolonization and postcolonial nation building, demonstrating that violent resistance is not enough to build a stable society.

Both works ultimately articulate hybridity as a middle road. In *Tai Chi Zero* this takes the form of *shanzhai*, blending what Luchan has gleaned of Chen-style Tai Chi with knowledge stolen from and playfully turned against the British, while *The Poppy War* illustrates hybridity through a silkpunk aesthetic that blends foreign and domestic technologies and military strategies. Both approaches decenter the West as the singular source of scientific knowledge and technology, a move that resonates both with broader postcolonial discourse and with China's growing global recognition as a hub of development, technology, and scientific innovation. In some ways, these models of hybridity echo the types of mental gymnastics late-Qing intellectuals attempted to work through, such as the *ti yong* 体用 (essence-use) debate's attempts at reconciling western technology with traditional Chinese values or the *yangwu* 洋务 (western affairs) movement's attempts at detecting Chinese origins for Western technologies. Parallels may be found in late-Qing science fiction, in which Isaacson detects examples of what Dillon might describe as "Indigenous scientific literacies."¹⁰ However, *Tai Chi Zero* and *The Poppy War* trilogy are less concerned with tracing origins or authenticity, favoring instead a more pragmatic, utilitarian approach.

Both *Tai Chi Zero* and *The Poppy War* trilogy end with a degree of ambiguity, from the continuing threat of the invaders' return at the end of *Tai Chi Zero* (and again at the end of the sequel, *Tai Chi Hero*) to the long road ahead of Nezha at the end of *The Burning God*. While both texts advocate for a degree of hybridity, they ultimately fall short in fully imagining what such hybridity might entail, repeating many of the limitations of late-Qing science fiction. As both Isaacson (92) and Andolfatto (132) point out, such works were often characterized by textual ellipses, whether in the form of unfinished texts or narrative jumps that elide process in favor of result, leaving the reader to do the work of filling in the gaps. The same critiques could be leveled at *Tai Chi Zero*, which, as the first of an incomplete cinematic trilogy, leaves open the possibility of multiple sequels, or *The Poppy War* trilogy, which stops short of imagining the consequences of Rin's decision to write herself out of history. Andolfatto describes an eventual "carnivalization" of late-Qing utopian fiction, in which the genre becomes a parody of itself, pointing to the

10 For example, Xu Nianci's *New Tales of Mr. Braggadocio* (*Xin Faluo xiansheng tan* 新法螺先生谭, 1904) "offers up a number of potential points of resistance to Western epistemology, attempting to fit scientific knowledge within the ken of Daoist cosmology" (Isaacson 25).

impossibility of reconciling utopian spectacle with reality and revealing the genre to be an unsustainable approach to working out the nation's problems (188-198). *Tai Chi Zero* and *The Poppy War* trilogy both share this parodic relationship to generic conventions, transgressing and blending genre norms in a way that only further highlights their message about hybridity. Nevertheless, it is precisely this generic hybridity, the texts' playful and at times subversive engagement with various tropes of fantasy, science fiction, and *wuxia*, that allows the texts to embrace postcolonial ambiguities. It is through these tropes that the texts engage in the forms of "high intensity mimesis" that Chu describes as characteristic of science fiction and other speculative genres. Moreover, such generic transgressions open up the subversive potential of genres initially rooted in deeply colonialist assumptions, following in the traditions of both late-Qing and contemporary postcolonial speculative fiction.

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Trains, Technology and National Affect in Socialist-Realist Cinema 1949-1965

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Abstract:

This paper examines filmic representations of trains in the PRC from 1949 to 1976, as a figure for modernization and the formation of a national body. Within these narratives, I examine how PRC cultural production focused on “citizen science,” how the train was used as a metaphor for the formation of a national body, and how these works depicted the formation of a national body as a form of bodily discipline.

During the 1960s in the PRC, “science” shifted from a rationalized, bureaucratic endeavor focused on understanding natural phenomena through experimental models to a grassroots endeavor aimed at the resolution of pragmatic issues. Mid Century Chinese depictions of science valorized amateur production and dissemination of scientific knowledge, and depictions of trains, railroads and the lives of their passengers were no exception. These narratives also focus on the construction of what I term “quotidian utopias” – utopian spaces carved out in the contemporary moment through a communal investment in mutual sacrifice. This space becomes a metaphor for industrial and social progress, represented by the broad swaths of working class proletarian passengers. Key among the laboring masses aboard the train are the train conductors, attendants, and rail workers. These workers are often depicted as learning new Maussian “techniques of the body” in service of their duties maintaining the trains and the social welfare of the passengers.

Key words: Socialist realism, trains, techniques of the body, science, science fiction

Introduction

Much attention has been given contemporary sf author Liu Cixin, especially in the wake of his global canonization via the 2014 Hugo award for the first novel in his Three Body trilogy, and for the film realization (Frant Gwo, 2019) of his novella, “The Wandering Earth” (*Liulang diqiu* 流浪地球, 2000). In both the film and novella, upon learning that Earth will soon be consumed in the fire of our sun turning into a red giant, a global governing body turns the entire planet into a massive spaceship bound for Proxima Centauri, powered by massive “Earth engines,” which operate by burning the earth itself in massive fusion reactors. This narrative could be read as an allegory for China’s One Belt, One Road project, which promises to link Beijing to Madrid in a trans-continental rail and sea network. Han Song’s Railway trilogy (*Guidao* 轨道) and short stories like “The Passengers and the Creator,” (*Chengke yu chuangzaozhe* 乘客与创造者) present the dark side of this infrastructure frenzy with their morbid fascination with mutilation, mutation, devolution and other Kafkaesque transformations of the human body occurring aboard trains, subways, airplanes, and other vehicles locked in unending loops of samsaric repetition.

In the context of contemporary China’s “de-politicized politics,” these narratives embody what Han Song describes as “the aestheticization of transportation (*jiaotong de shenmei* 交通的审美).” In the 21st Century, this obsession with high-speed transport might also be described as the aestheticization of development (*fazhan de shenmei* 发展的审美) – an aesthetics that soon bleeds over into the glorification of surrendering one’s body to the machine. This contemporary aesthetics of development and transportation, particularly the consumption of fossil fuels, was an important part of the discourse of contemporary China’s discourse of national prosperity; one with roots in the developmental narrative of the Mao era. While the vocabulary has shifted – from “Transforming Nature” (*gaizao ziran* 改造自然) in the 1950s to “development” in the post reform and opening up era, socialism with Chinese characteristics is suffused with the aestheticization of development, and what is gradually coming to be defined as the aesthetics of the anthropocene.

In this essay, I link contemporary developmentalist discourse in part to the discourse of Mao-era social transformation. Following a brief introduction of key theoretical approaches to trains, development, and the aesthetics of fossil fuel consumption, I present a series of cinematic examples of trains and fossil fuels as aesthetic objects. Through these narratives, I examine the meanings of science in China in the 1950s and 1960s, and of the function of art in representing the aesthetics of oil and the contested meanings of science. I demonstrate how PRC

cultural production focused on “citizen science,” the multiple ways in which trains and railroads served as metaphors for the nation, thus aestheticizing trains and development, and by extension also aestheticizing industrial pollution; and how these works tied ideological, scientific and technological advancement to acts of bodily and affective discipline.¹

Based upon a largely Anglophone canon of science fiction (sf), previous studies have taken the paucity of sf from China prior to this century as a given. In this paper, I argue that socialist-realist depictions of science and technology played a similar role to sf in the US and western Europe, helping audiences understand the power of science, their relationship to it, and how it shaped a global imaginary. Reading these and other narratives with an eye towards their treatment of science and technology, and with an ecocritical perspective in mind as a means of reconsidering the canonical “selective tradition” of global science fiction emboldens us to expand the definition of the genre to include new narratives that consider the relationship between science, technology and human beings.

Wolfgang Schivelbusch describes the train and railroad as a machine ensemble in which “[W]heel and rail, railroad and carriage, expanded into a unified railway system... one great machine covering the land” (Schivelbusch, 29). Aboard the train, “the traveler saw the objects, landscapes, etc. *through* the apparatus which moved him through the world. That machine and the motion it created became integrated into his visual perception: thus he could only see things in motion” (64). For socialist cinema, the necessity of maintaining the motion of the train, or increasing its speed, becomes a central theme. At their apotheosis, these depictions of extraction, consumption, and development in service of the machine ensemble aestheticize the incorporation of the human body into the machine ensemble, or the sacrifice of human life in its service.

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin describes the fascist development of the aesthetics of violence, arguing that human alienation has reached the point that humankind “can experience its own annihilation as a supreme aesthetic pleasure” (Benjamin, 42). Benjamin elucidates the swift transition between the aestheticization of development and transportation, and the aesthetic valorization of surrendering or sacrificing one’s body to the

1 Various versions of this essay were presented during the 2020-21 academic year through conferences, roundtables and keynote speeches at the following venues: American Comparative Literature Association, Modern Languages Association, University of Minnesota, Duke University, University of Pennsylvania, University of Edinburgh, and Cambridge University. Though they are too numerous to name individually here, I would like to thank my hosts and all those in attendance who offered their generous feedback and suggestions for revision.

machine, which “demands repayment in ‘human material’” (Benjamin, 42). In this essay, I argue that socialist-realist cinema, displays a similar valorization of such sacrifice.

In “Visualizing the Anthropocene,” (2014) Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that “the aesthetics of the Anthropocene emerged as an unintended supplement to imperial aesthetics – [fossil fuel consumption] comes to seem natural, right, then beautiful – and thereby anaesthetized the perception of modern industrial pollution.” In a visual analysis of paintings of Claude Monet, Mirzoeff argues that the quality of light in paintings like *Impression: Sun Rising*, and *Unloading Coal* is the manifestation of a subconscious attention to industrial coal use. Monet’s shifting effect of light and color is less a matter of artistic genius, and more a sign of the growing urban ubiquity of greenhouse gases. Mirzoeff further notes that the bridge in *Unloading Coal* “is visibly a ‘higher’ level of existence, one dominated by commodities and artificially lit,” and adopts Richard Thomson’s suggestion that the image is constructed from the viewpoint of a train window as the train crosses over the river Seine (Mirzoeff, 223). Amitav Ghosh and Graeme MacDonald have suggested the category of “petrofiction” as a means of categorizing works whose subject matter either directly or subconsciously centers upon fossil fuels and their extraction. In the words of MacDonald’s syllabus on petrofiction, “Our lives are saturated in oil – it is the most significant resource of the post-war capitalist world system. It is everywhere, especially in those places where it appears invisible, scarce, or hitherto undiscovered. It determines how and where we live, move, work and play; what we eat, wear, consume.”

The films examined in this paper were part of a media landscape, and a socialist-realist circulation of fact and fiction. A prominent feature of socialist realism as a narrative mode is its relationship to change in the real world: in its ideal form, the fictional development of class consciousness in turn inculcates the same ideological transformation in their audience. In this circulation from fact to fiction and back again, achievements in industry and education would appear in newspapers or were documented by work units, were often fictionalized or adopted to long-form non-fiction, and then reappeared in a variety of formats from *lianhuanhua* to posters, novels, stage performances and films. Those works were then critiqued through forums like letters to the editor of major newspapers. In meta-fictional fashion, the same posters and newspaper articles appear as the media consumed in these narratives. This paper highlights how these meta-narrative circulations feature in many of the film texts in question.

Guerrillas on the Railway - (*Tiedao youji dui* 铁道游击队 dir. Zhao Ming 赵

明, 1956), for example, was the product of author Liu Zhixia being dispatched to Shandong to interview former railway guerillas. Based on these interviews, he wrote the historical-fiction novel, which was quickly adapted as a Peking Opera, into *pingshu* (评述) and *gushu* (鼓术) storytelling formats, and *lianhuanhua* (连环画). These were in turn adopted into a cinematic realization. The story was further reproduced in the 21st century as part of the craze for revanchist Japanese war entertainments with a 35-part television series.

After 1949, the advancing train quickly became a prominent metaphor for China's pursuit of modernity. Film scholar Lei Jingjing argues that "the advancing train becomes the best metaphor for China's pursuit of modernization during the [early Mao] era." (Lei Jingjing 122) In the early 1930s, even under Japanese occupation, the Republican government identified railroad modernization as a key element of plans for modernization. In Yuan Muzhi's 1935 film, *Scenes of City Life* (*Dushi fengguang* 都市风光), a family arrives at a train station to travel to Shanghai. Rather than an actual train journey, however, we see the passengers delivered to Shanghai and back home again through a peep-show (*xiyang jing* 西洋镜), framing the entry and exit from the story in the city, and metaphorically associating the railroad apparatus with the apparatus of cinema. After 1949, trains became an even more prominent feature of the new socialist cinema. Lei Jingjing argues that films featuring trains can be divided into two main categories: revolutionary histories and war stories that emphasize military and civilian struggles against and eventual triumph over enemy elements under the guidance of the party. Railroads, trains and train stations are the sites of a struggle for national sovereignty and victory over the KMT. The other type is comprised of films set in the post-revolutionary era that focus on socialist industrialization, focusing on goals like increasing the speed of train travel or meeting production goals (Lei Jingjing, 122). In this paper, I focus primarily on the latter category of films.

To the extent that genre actually appears in marketing materials at all, many of these films were promoted or discussed during the period of their release as "war of resistance [to Japan and US incursion in Korean]" films (*kangzhan pian* 抗战片), or as "industrial" films (*gongye ticaï pian* 工业题材片), not train films.² That said, audiences were quick to identify elements of a generic semantics and syntax: meaningful tropes and topoi and their specific arrangement in the story arc that

2 The vast majority of soviet films imported and featured at film festivals during this era also fell into the same general categories. Li Xiaohuan divides Soviet narrative films imported prior to the Soviet split as "war of national defense" (*weiguo zhanzheng ticaï* 卫国战争题材), revolutionary history, (*geming lishi ticaï* 革命历史题材), and "modern" (*xiandai ticaï* 现代题材). See Li Xiaomin 50-66.

rendered the films both predictable and readable to their audience. (see Altman, 1999) Their formulaic quality was not lost on contemporary audiences. Almost immediately after their release in 1955, functionaries at the Ministry of Culture expressed concern about the ways in which industrial films like *Heroic Train Drivers* (英雄司机 dir. Lü Ban, 1954), *The Great Beginning* (伟大的起点 dir. Ke Zhang, 1954), *Infinite Potential* (无穷的潜力 dir. Xu Ke, 1954), *On the Forward March* (在前进的道路上 dir. Chen Yinzhi, 1950), and rural agricultural films like *Spring Comes to Nuomin River* (春风吹到诺敏河 dir. Ling Zifeng, 1954) *Men Ascend the Heights* (人往高处走 dir. Xu Suling, 1954) evinced more similarities than differences.³

Film historian Chen Mo lists eleven ways in which the first three resemble one another, among them: 1) The protagonists, while coming from different backgrounds, undergo similar experiences. 2) Factory or engineering depot leaders saddle workers with unnecessary expectations regarding safety or production based on “superstitious” [*mixin* 迷信] books and superstitious traditional technical practices and ignore the achievements of workers and engineers. 3) The protagonists are suspicious of the degree to which management shares their aims. 4) They are supported by party secretaries. 5) They also enjoy the support of higher-level party functionaries. 6) A Soviet authority figure is present to help guide their work. 7) While some fellow workers support them, others need ideological correction. 8) They are waylaid by a technical setback or accident. 9) There is a mother figure who is anxious for the protagonist to marry and start a family. 10) Party secretaries are always war veterans. 11) [they often] feature a scene where a leader lays awake at night ruminating on production goals, signifying that on the one hand, they are concerned about these goals, but that in their comfort, they are “resting on old achievements.” (Chen Mo 80) Chen quotes one worker on the Tianjin Railroad interviewed by the ministry of culture in 1955 as complaining that “There’s no need to see *Heroic Train Drivers*, it’s just engineers as models; if I want to see a locomotive, I can go see my own locomotive, because it’s real. The resolution of the story is bound to be an increase in production, we promise to increase tonnage and that’s that.” (Chen Mo 80) This particular complaint, gathered by the Ministry of Culture, indicates that for some the films were *generic* in the pejorative sense - unoriginal, interchangeable with one another, and mind-numbingly realistic.

3 When available, I have used English translations of the films appearing in Chinese databases or in other associated materials. In cases where the titles seem ungrammatical, I have substituted my own translations.

Train, Body, Landscape

Bridge (*Qiao* 桥, 1949), was the first feature film produced in the People's Republic of China. The film was produced at Northeast Film Studio, China's first registered film factory, which like the railroads of northeast China, was essentially inherited from the Japanese Manchukuo film association between the end of WWII and the establishment of the PRC (See Hu Chang 1-3). The story centers on the push to repair a bridge over the Songhua River in two weeks, a task that should have taken four months. Lacking both materials and the infrastructure to complete the task, the lead engineers at a steelyard reclaimed from the Manchurian Railroad doubt they can achieve production goals. Protagonist Liang Risheng (梁日升, lit. "the bridge rises day by day"), is an electric furnace operator key to the race to complete the project. When the chief engineer at the steel yard doubts their ability to achieve this without proper refractory bricks made using dolomite, Liang commits to a series of experiments, saying "The spirit of science is in experimentation; let's give it a try." Liang's work establishes science as the trial-and-error province of laborers, rather than the academic purview of educated experts. An editorial by Dongbei regional Propaganda Bureau Chief Li Dazhang appearing in *Dongbei ribao* criticized the film for failing to "bring together the great enthusiasm for production, the scientific knowledge, and scientific prowess of the working class," while readers expressed similar disappointment that Liang's scientific knowledge was not sufficiently highlighted (Hu Chang 74).

Like the majority of the crew at Northeast Film, script writer Yu Min and Director Wang Bin were both trained at Yan'an, and enthusiastically took up the call to focus on workers, peasants, and soldiers (Hu Chang, 71-76). The plot centers on building ideological consensus among the crew, especially on how Liang Risheng, refusing food, sleep and organizational meetings, manages to convince the chief engineer that the two-week deadline can be met (when home, he refuses medicine, and refuses to put down his copy of the "Communist Party Member's Textbook). At one point in the film, Liang argues, "people lay down. Our cause does not lay down," a sentiment he reiterates during the triumphant closing scene.

The film features multiple meta-cinematic moments that would go on to become a staple of socialist cinema.⁴ At one point, having briefly returned home, Liang Risheng gazes at a poster commemorating the war of resistance against Japan. The camera zooms in on the poster, before fading into a battle scene, featuring archival

4 The film is also commemorated as hewing close to reality through the practice of requiring the actors to "*tiyan shenghuo*" in preparation for their roles - in this case to experience actual rail and industrial work as part of the production process ("Dansheng").

footage of the Sino-Japanese war. The memory of a fierce battle in a harsh, snowy landscape, reminds Liang (and the audience) of the stakes of his mission, and moments later, he convinces his comrades that a setback with the furnace can be overcome. Shortly later, the team's successes are announced over loudspeaker at the steelyard in a meta-presentation of the circulation of socialist realism in miniature, depicting a cycle of class struggle, its commemoration in art, and the power of art to inspire further struggle.⁵

Liang, already metaphorically tied to the bridge through his name, also becomes affectively tied to the furnace. One character remarks, that “when the Japanese were here, they wouldn’t let Old Liang near that furnace. He learned how to use it in secret. Now that the Party is here, the furnace is like a member of his family.” Liang’s connection to the furnace, emphasized through extensive scenes of him toiling before it, is most saliently captured in visual terms when he climbs inside to plan a set of repairs. His efforts pay off, and the workers salvage a pile of scrap metal that has been discarded nearby the factory which they smelt into steel beams and bolts for the bridge. Once the materials have been fashioned, Liang Risheng later insists on being sent to work on the bridge itself, which is completed just as the ice on the Songhua River - which had apparently served as a sort of scaffold - begins to break up. The conclusion of the film depicts the apotheosis of Liang’s fellow steel worker, Hou Zhanxi, bestowing the prestige of party membership upon him for his ideological evolution.

Woman Locomotive Driver (*Nü siji* 女司机, 1951) follows the story of Sun Guilan, a fictionalized version of China’s first female train engineer, Tian Guiying, and her cohort of female locomotive driver students at a Dalian railyard. The work and training-centered railyard lay along the China Eastern Railway, connecting China to Russia. Originally begun as a concession to Russia in the late Qing, the railway was ceded to Japan during the early 20th century, was part of Japan’s Manchurian railway, and would be “returned” to the People’s Republic of China (in 1952). The March 13, 1951 issue of *Renmin Ribao* features various commemorations of Tian Guiying, including woodblock prints, photos, and new features about her. Both Tian Guiying and her fictionalized double, Sun Guilan, like her real life counterpart when featured in *Renmin Ribao*, is identified as coming from a low cultural background (*wenhua di* 文化底). Her cultural backwardness is excused as

5 Xie Jin uses similar strategies in films like *Two Stage Sisters* (*Wutai jiemei* 舞台姐妹, 1964), when actress Zhu Chunhua, looking at a woodcut of Lu Xun’s iconic symbol of female suffering, Xianglin Sao from “A New Year’s Sacrifice,” imagines herself in Xianglin Sao’s position shortly before performing a stage adaptation of the story.

the result of Japanese occupation, as one of her comrades argues, “if it weren’t for 40 years of Japanese Occupation, would Sun Guilan’s cultural level be so low?” The women’s education culminates in their “test” of driving a locomotive from one depot to another. Under wise Soviet and Party supervision, the women learn the physical principles of how a steam engine functions, and how to operate it. Particular attention is paid to Sun Guilan learning how to shovel coal - we see her and her teachers losing sleep as, hand-in-hand with them, Sun Guilan is taught the proper technique. If she doesn’t master the form, she won’t be able to shovel enough coal, and the train won’t run fast enough.

The film depicts an education in and adoption of Maussian “techniques of the body.” Socialist-realist cinema presents teaching, learning and executing these techniques as an embodied form of ideological education, by which the mutual expertise and prestige of the party leadership, and the working masses are affirmed and shared. “It is precisely this notion of the prestige of the person who performs the ordered, authorised, tested action vis-a-vis the imitating individual that contains all the social element. The imitative action which follows contains the psychological element and the biological element” (Mauss 73-74). Learning how to power and pilot the train represents coming to terms with the appropriate means of driving national development in a highly embodied manner.

Sun loses sleep practicing in a replica of the locomotive that features a coal tender and firebox, while her teacher loses sleep devising a way to teach her and her fellow students how heat is turned into steam, generating hydraulic pressure and locomotion. Stymied by technical drawings, when their teacher presents them with a scale model, the students finally grasp the lesson. Alongside refusing to acknowledge their exhaustion, at one point early in the film, the women promise that they will no longer cry, thus overcoming both physical challenges and affective responses to their hardship. The relationship between the women and the firebox appears symbiotic: they power the train with coal, and the train seemingly powers them. By the time we see them shoveling coal in a “final exam,” the task has transformed from a toilsome labor into a pleasurable act.

Lu Ban’s *A Heroic Driver* (*yingxiong siji* 英雄司机, 1954) centers on a debate over whether trains can carry extra tonnage (*chaozhou* 超轴). The railroad section chief, relying on theoretical knowledge, doubts trains can be overloaded, but the physically robust protagonist Da Peng, working from his own experience, does. When asked to “observe [the principles of] science” (*jiang kexue* 讲科学), Da Peng argues that scientific principles come from real world experiences and can therefore be changed. The connection between physical prowess and mastery of the train is

elucidated in a scene where Da Peng wins a bicycle race to the top of a hill, despite the extra weight of a railyard worker perched on the bike's cargo rack. He later argues that his strategy - pedalling harder on a downhill to gain speed, and using momentum to overcome the hill - can be applied to freight trains. The need to go over tonnage is explicitly tied to the effort to support North Korea in the Korean War. When a train is damaged carrying too much tonnage, the Soviet expert in residence, Ulanov, later confirms that it was human error, not a technological limitation that caused the accident. The physical limitations of the trains are proven to be the ways in which the drivers interface with them - anticipating turns and slopes - rather than mechanical shortcomings. Da Peng is eventually sent to a national-level meeting, where he learns of plans to increase the tonnage and speed of the entire train system. He compares an underdeveloped rail system to a body with inadequate cardiovascular development, linking the properly disciplined body of the driver to a faster train, and to faster national development.

Produced in 1958, *The First Express Train* (*Diyilie kuaiche* 第一列快车 1958), is dominated by the tone and language of the Great Leap Forward. At an opening plenary meeting of the Shanghai Rail Management Bureau, one speaker argues that development of trains will lead to the East triumphing over the West, again equating the speed of the train with the pace of socialist progress. Described in promotional materials and journals like *Dazhong dianying* as a “documentary-style art film” (*jiluxing yishupian* 记录性艺术片),⁶ dramatic tension again centers upon how fast the train can be safely driven, and how the workers achieve ideological consensus on the issue. The entire 50-minute long film is dedicated to figuring out how trains can move through switching points faster (*guo cha* 过岔).

Expression of political fealty and attainment of ideological consensus are achieved through a new pseudo-technology. Solving ideological problems by writing “big character posters” (*dazibao* 大字报) is just as important as physical work on the railroad.⁷ After confirming that their work on a switch point allows a train to travel over it faster, the workers head inside to write big character posters. Upon learning that the Shanghai Management Bureau have written more than a million of the posters, one worker triumphantly pronounces, “one *dazibao* is equivalent to one opinion, and one opinion solves one problem, more than a million

6 See “Sudu”.

7 Likewise, the short film “A Big Character Poster” (*Yizhang dazibao* 一张大字报), in the collection *A Thousand Li a Day* (*Yiri qianli* 一日千里, 1958), focuses on the power of *dazibao* to popularize science while establishing ideological consensus. In the film, a young woman convinces her brother - and then the rest of the commune - to use a new fertilizer spreader she has designed by writing a big-character poster.

dazibao is more than a million problems solved. The establishment of socialism is speeding up!” Another worker shares that he has the solution to not having yet “leaped forward.” They read the rhyme he has composed aloud:

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Rivers are deep and oceans are wider. | 江无底, 海无边 |
| Let's dig up a thousand li and lay down | 要挖千里, 打入铁 |
| some iron. | |
| Section Chief Yu, oh what a bastard, | 于段长有魔气 |
| He's not optimistic about going faster | 提高速度, 不积极 |

They ultimately prevail, shaving seven minutes off a trip from Shanghai to Nanjing, and the central question in the climactic trip is whether the train will be delayed by another train coming the other direction.

In *The Twelfth Train* (12次列车, 1960), a train from Shenyang to Beijing is waylaid by a severe storm. Though the train is lashed by wind and rain, within the cars an ethos of mutual sacrifice maintains a socialist utopia. Work duties aboard the train and on the railroad are mostly equally divided among genders - Sun Mingyuan is a female conductor who takes on a key leadership role in the crisis, though the top leadership positions of party officials who troubleshoot the situation from the train stations are all occupied by men.

When a flood threatens to destroy a bridge, workers on the ground mobilize to buttress it. Their efforts nearly fail, and the train has to be stopped mid-journey. Time is crucial once again in this film, with the phrase “we won’t be there on time.” (*shijian laibuji le* 时间来不及了), and camera shots of clocks thematically tying the train’s journey to the mission of national development. A moment of chaos erupts when the decision is made to back the train up, moments before the bridge they had stopped on collapses. The camera suddenly switches from steady medium shots to a series of cramped close-ups and dutch angles; personal space is eliminated as chaos threatens to erupt. Order is soon restored by female conductor Sun Mingyuan, who organizes an ad-hoc meeting to understand and meet the needs of the passengers, because in her words “the train is a train guided by the leadership of the party.” Her rousing speech leads to a series of volunteers: first, members of the party stand up and identify themselves with a salute, then workers and students. Having restored the collective, they disembark from the train to save local citizens fleeing the flood, a worker gives his dwindling supply of medicine to a woman in labor, the bridge is repaired and a citizen scientist delivering eggs for research at a science institute in Beijing makes it to her destination in time.

Super Express Train (特快列车 Zhao Xinshui, 1965), features a largely gender-equal crew. The train sets off to much fanfare, and a montage of shots of the train leaving the platform, and pistons driving the wheels is juxtaposed with scenes of the horizontal landscape punctuated by vertical smokestacks as the triumphant music entones “the fatherland flies [by]!” On the platform preparing and aboard at work the crew, on the eve of the cultural revolution, displays an almost militaristic level of regimentation, the scene aboard the train is strikingly similar to that in *The 12th Train* (*Shi'er ci lieche* Hao Guang, 1960) - we see an egalitarian utopia in miniature, characterized by an ethos of mutual sacrifice.⁸ A basket of red apples, anonymously gifted first to the crew, then to a group of school children, and then back to the crew, represent this ethos. Meanwhile, battalion commander Lin, on his way to a meeting, is walking along the tracks during a storm when he sees a tree fall on them. He himself is struck by rockfall, and knocked unconscious, regaining consciousness just in time to warn the engineers of the obstacle on the tracks. They clear the tracks and bring him aboard, where his head injury is diagnosed by a doctor, and they determine they need to get to the final stop where he can be taken to a hospital and undergo surgery for his injury. Pei Lanying, the plucky conductor, again occupies the role of the diligent laborer whose optimism overcomes the pessimism and conservatism of trained experts, insisting that the train can still drop off all passengers at their proper stops, pick up new passengers and still arrive at the destination in time to save Mr. Lin.⁹

In one of the most science-fictional moments of any of these films, a supportive crew of party leaders in a central command room overrule the mid-level engineers who doubt the plan to speed up the train. Not only do they confirm that the train can travel faster, but they manage to ensure that no other trains in the system will interfere with the mission, or have their schedules severely impacted.

When Mr. Lin needs a dose of chlorpromazine (*dongmian ling* 冬眠灵) - an anti-psychotic that can also be used to treat shock, an old woman who had fallen asleep after suffering from motion sickness wakes up, and presents the crew with a bag of medicine her son sent her off with - it just so happens he was worried she would need some anti-psychotics. Shortly after finding the immediate treatment so

8 Both films were commemorated in documentaries stressing how closely the film plot hewed to real life (See “Xiaoshi de Jiayi”).

9 Like Tian Guilan, the character Pei Lanying is based on a real-life individual: Wang Peilan. Wang Peilan accompanied her aboard trains in order to learn about the job of a conductor for the role. The story of racing to save the life of an injured liberation army soldier is based on an incident occurring on the Jilin railroad. Actors working on the film recount how the filming itself was performed under equally urgent conditions, beginning to shoot the film before problems with the script had been fully resolved (“Sudu”).

desperately needed by Mr. Lin, the crew get permission to go as fast as they can “in the spirit of the People’s Liberation Army,” and their successes are announced over the loudspeaker. The train effectively becomes an express train as it moves down the tracks, and this is celebrated in song. The film then reprises the non-diegetic song that accompanied the train leaving its origination point in Tongji. The chorus in the reprisal of the song echoes a phrase heard in the theme song in the credits and opening scene 1957 film, *The Nurses Diary* (护士日记 *dir.* Jin Tao, 1957), in its praise of “the train of our times” (*shidai de lieche* 时代的列车) (See Emma Zhang 256). Pei Lanying charges through the aisles of the train cars with one arm raised triumphantly overhead. Pei Lanying’s race from one end of the train to another is visually echoed by shots of the train itself plunging into and out of a series of tunnels as the tracks surge into the foreground, or plunge into the horizon. Once again, the circulation of problem-solving, announcement, and celebration re-creates the ideal circulation of socialist realism aboard the contained utopia of the train in immediate fashion as the passengers and fellow crew celebrate the achievement. The express trains and its predecessors are the vehicles of trans-national socialist solidarity, conduits between city and countryside, and links between past, present and future.

The above films share a set of semantic tropes - smoke and steam, trains, railroads, and other aspects of the built environment, and perhaps most importantly in the socialist context, visions of an intimate connection between labor and technological progress. They also share the syntactical depiction of roadblocks to development overcome by human ingenuity. At the same time, the language and tone of all the above films hew closely to political shifts, illustrating what Yomi Braester identifies as the merging of form and ideology “to produce the idioms associated with specific political campaigns” (Braester 121). In other words, a more pertinent means of identifying genre during the 17 years might be by political campaign.

Like political campaigns, various military campaigns also offer a convenient rubric of categorizing these films. Wang Ban argues that the Chinese war film can accordingly be categorized as a subgenre under the rubric of the revolutionary historical narrative (Wang Ban 251). Perhaps not surprisingly, Wang Ban argues that these films aestheticize military conflict, noting that, “In *Train Through War and Flame* [*Fenghuo lieche* 烽火列车 *dir.* Zhu Wenshun 朱文顺, 1960] and *Railroad Guards* [*Tiedao weishi* 铁道卫士 *dir.* Fang Ying 方荧, 1960], for example, the railroads and bridges are constantly under attack, and the burden of the narrative is to ensure the transfer of supplies and ammunition from the Manchuria industrial

rear to the battlefield. In *Shanggan Ridge* [*Shanggan ling* 上甘岭 dir. Sha Meng 沙蒙 and Lin Shan 林杉, 1956], the technology, weaponry and strategy are crucial to winning the battle...The film stages a spectacular show of firepower, aestheticizing military might” (Wang Ban 256). Quoting Mao Zedong, Wang goes on to note that, “As a component part of the revolutionary machine, literature and art, ‘operate as powerful weapons for uniting the people and destroying the enemy.’ Art’s rallying powers ‘help the people fight the enemy with one heart and one mind.’... ‘Weapons are an important factor in war, but not the decisive factor; it is people, not things, that are decisive” (259) Wang’s analysis of the films and Chairman Mao’s characterization of their social function points to the alacrity with which the aestheticization of technology and development bleed into an aestheticization of violence.

Citizen Science

During the 1950s and 60s in the PRC, “science” shifted from a rationalized, bureaucratic endeavor focused on understanding natural phenomena through experimental models to a grassroots endeavor aimed at the resolution of pragmatic issues. Mid century Chinese depictions of science valorized amateur production and dissemination of scientific knowledge, and depictions of trains, railroads and the lives of their passengers were no exception. The contestations of science in this paper illustrate the notion that the Mao-era was not anti-scientific, but that science was contested in national terms - was it Chinese or foreign? In class terms - was it the possession of intellectuals or workers? And in ideological terms - if Marxism was the ultimate social science explaining the machinations of history, how were other sciences subsumed to it? The desire for the party to assert authority over science and for the “scientific” principles of Marxism to be borne out as universal truths meant that the principal role of science was legitimation of the party line. During the 17 years, political authorities actively redefined science in order to “dislodge scientific authority over what was termed science in public discourse and to define traditional culture and objects of professional science as superstition” (Gross, 187). In this context, science as a rationalized, institutional practice was devalued in favor of “‘grassroots science’ focused on performing field investigations to resolve pragmatic problems” (Xiao 203-204).

In a single phrase, the difference between science as the exclusive practice of experts in a controlled, experimental setting, and the citizen science of the Mao era is perhaps best articulated as “devising a method” (*xiang banfa* 想办法)

- this phrase is repeated in almost all of the films analyzed in this paper. When confronted with the various technological limitations that slow down the trains, and by extension the speed of national development, the characters naturally and repeatedly turn to the suggestion that they must “devise a method” to overcome them. Science, whether explicitly named, or executed practically by workers in railyards, is depicted as the province of laborers, operating upon experiential rather than experimental knowledge.

In *Locating Science Fiction* (2013), Andrew Milner argues that (mostly Anglophone) SF is over all characterized by a “dialectic of enlightenment and romanticism.” But in these narratives, I would argue, the contestation is not between enlightenment (or reasoned truth) and romanticism (or mystical thinking), but a contestation of who science belonged to - theoretical experts or practicing masses? What is at issue is not a question of science vs. superstition or anti-science, but a contestation of political power - who does science properly belong to? In *Red Revolution, Green Revolution: Scientific Farming in Socialist China*, Sigrid Schmalzer argues that, “the political fluctuations of Mao-era China cannot be characterized as struggles between proscience and antiscience factions. Technocrats and radicals had different perspectives on how science should work, but both groups embraced science as a core value.” (Schmalzer 26) In this politicized context, the inverse of science - *mixin* (迷信) often does not mean superstition so much as it does harboring misguided and politically incorrect, albeit scientific ideas. Chen Mo uses the term in describing the reluctance of trained engineers appearing in industrial films to innovate, but in those films it is clear that the engineers are subject to critique for confronting technical problems using their background in scientific theory, not for superstitions in terms of a spiritual or metaphysical belief system. In the case of scientists who spoke out about ill-advised policies in political health campaigns during the 1950s, such as attempts to treat schistosomiasis faster than was medically advisable were also accused of harboring *mixin*, but their apostasy was going against the party line, not the rejection of science.

Science was contested implicitly along the lines of political fealty, and explicitly in terms of national difference. In *Heroic Engineers*, Guo Dapeng argues, “the engineers on the Manchurian (puppet) railroad were all gnawing on dead books, from the moment their mouths opened, it was all talk of foreign formulas, there’s no respect for the real achievements of the workers!” Chen Mo argues that this and other incidents indicate that “in the eyes of the workers and secretaries, science and technology have national distinctions, or ideological differences, in terms of industrial technology, capitalist scientific ideology and the real achievements of

socialist construction are mutually incompatible” (Chen Mo 82).

Conclusion

The Schivelbuschian spatial transformation of the environment wrought by the emergence of the railroad, its attendant extractive industries, and the new visions of a landscape in perpetual motion were inextricably intertwined with the social, bodily, and ideological transformations at the human level. Though there is no indication that this was a conscious effort, such correlative continuity between individual affect and state development arguably recapitulates the vision of moral refinement leading to state stability as outlined in the Confucian classic, the *Greater Learning* (大学 *daxue*). Socialist realism claimed to wrest moral and scientific authority from the hands of an imperial ruler, investing it in the people.

I now return to the question of bodily discipline and membership in the national community in order to consider its contemporary resonances. To the list of clichés or formulaic moments Chen Mo identifies in the three films (*Heroic Engineers*, *The Invisible Force*, and *The Great Beginning*), I would add refusal to sleep as another cliché of socialist development. Encapsulated in the phrase “not differentiating day and night” (*bufen zhouye* 不分昼夜), its variations, and the valorization of forgoing sleep are depicted in these films as a sign of commitment to socialist development. The phrase is arguably equally reflective of contemporary China, with its culture of overwork characterized in the 9-9-6 workweek (9AM - 9PM, 6 days a week). A variation of these theme appears in Han Song’s unpublished novella, “My Country Does Not Dream” (*Wo de zuguo buzuo meng* 我的祖国不做梦), in which the protagonist learns that China’s thirty years of breakneck economic growth under marketized “socialism with Chinese characteristics” have been driven by drugging the population into working in their sleep. Revolutionary commitment is in this sense fully embodied - best demonstrated through various forms of mastery of the human body. This is arguably an extension of the martyrdom Wang Ban identifies as a prominent theme in Chinese war films of the 1950s (Wang Ban 252). In films like *Woman Train Driver* and *Bridge*, we see protagonists forgoing sleep in order to master techniques and solve technical problems. Sacrificing sleep to maintain the machines leads to other, greater sacrifices. In Korean war films, we see characters sacrifice their bodies to keep trains moving over the Yalu River, by doing things like jumping off trains or jumping into cold water storage tanks.

Socialist realism, grounded in Marxist-Maoist theories of art, is an artistic movement based in what was considered to be the science of sciences; though they hew closely to quotidian experience, they were intended to transform society, and

often did. In hindsight, the disastrous effects of the cult of developmentalism that prevailed in eras like the Great Leap Forward should remind us that the visual verisimilitude and naturalism of the films belies a highly fictionalized account of the nation's scientific and industrial potential in that moment. Industrial film's focus on human labor over technology mirrors construction of third-front railroads in western China after 1949. Covell Meyskens notes that "the CCP acted in ways similar to other industrializers by forming large-scale organizations to oversee railroad construction...It made up for the country's scarce capital with a massive labor force that to a large extent was mobilized via militias. In total, China mobilized roughly 5.5 million people of whom over 80 percent came from rural militias (4.45 million) (Meyskens 239-240). As in cinema, the soldiers of liberation became the workers of national construction.

These moments of sacrifice lead to the construction of what I term "quotidian utopias" – utopian spaces carved out in the contemporary moment through a communal investment in mutual sacrifice.¹⁰ The space aboard the train becomes a metaphor for industrial and social progress, represented by the broad swaths of working class proletarian passengers uniting for a common goal. Key among the laboring masses aboard the train are the train conductors, attendants, and rail workers. These workers are often depicted as learning new, Maussian "techniques of the body" in service of their duties maintaining the trains and the social welfare of the passengers. Simultaneously, we see an emergent aestheticization of industrial developed: the process by which the built environment and industrial pollution come to be seen first as natural, and eventually as beautiful.

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10 Jason McGrath has articulated this in the phrase "Communists Have More Fun!" See: http://www.worldpicturejournal.com/WP_3/McGrath.html (accessed 19 Jul. 2021).

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“Electrical Dragon” and “Hollow Men”: Counter-narratives of Modernity in Han Song’s *Subway*

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Abstract:

One of the icons of industrial modernity is the railway. China’s fast modernization process can be epitomized in the rapid construction and development of subway systems in the last two decades, which is ranked as the most extensive in the world today. This “subway carnival” is most consciously and critically represented in Chinese writer Han Song’s novel *Ditie* (Subway). This paper will look at how this novel uses the image of the train to criticize the modernization process in China and create counter-narratives to question the dominant discourses of modernity. It first analyzes how the subway in the novel works to represent modern Chinese society, before then arguing that the novel creates counter-narratives of modernity in terms of both ideology and affect.

Keywords: railway; subway; train; *Ditie*; modernity; progress; China; counter-narrative

Introduction

When people welcomed the new year as the clock tolled midnight, no one knew that 2020 would become such a special year in human history. A highly contagious virus, which is now known as COVID-19, quickly spread throughout the world, changing it so much that some sociologists and anthropologists are tempted to consider 2020 a watershed in modern human history; many argue that the world will never be the same after COVID-19. It is hard to imagine what life will be like after COVID and if we will ever be “post” COVID. What we do know is that after

almost two years since the outbreak of COVID in Wuhan, China, we are living in a world that is immensely altered by the virus. It can be easily argued that the biggest difference compared to a pre-COVID world is the limitation of travel, especially long distance travel. A look at statistics reveals the scale of impact. Data tracking the frequency of international flights in various countries shows a massive decline since COVID broke out (OAG; Statista); most countries have had 50% to nearly 100% less flights compared to the same time before COVID. We are suddenly brought back to a time period when long distance flights were not so common, when the world seemed large and far away, when humans were still living under the “tyranny” of “natural” space-time. Now, we need to get used to a new (also old) experience of time and space, which our grandparents and humans for the most of history have lived.

It is during this time that it is especially worth taking another good look at the role of transportation in industrial modernity. Like the plane, another transportation method that has played a transforming role in the development and experience of industrial modernity is the railway. It is through the railway that humans, for the first time in history, are able to move both mass-produced goods and the masses themselves across a wide distance at a fast speed. As the icon of industrial revolution, the train represented humanity’s increased control over nature, through the “eradication of space by time,” in Marx’s words (524). It has come to serve as the epitome of modernity, especially modern technology, in modern culture across the globe, since it conveniently embodies many concepts and images that are commonly associated with modernity, such as linear time, notions of progress, packed space (urbanization), the stranger, among others.

Many scholars have looked at the key role the railway and the train play in shaping modernity, how we experience it and how we perceive it; their works show that although the train is widely used in our cultural imagination as a symbol of industrial modernity, how the train is represented and perceived and what feelings are attached to it are still largely shaped by specific historical and social contexts. For example, in *Tracking Modernity: India’s Railway and the Culture of Mobility*, Marian Aguiar notes how the train functioned as a symbol of British colonial power in India at the beginning, and then “played an active part constructing what Benedict Anderson calls a nation as an ‘imagined community’” in the decolonization context (7); Aguiar argues that the train “helped produce India” and a new collective identity (ibid). Whereas the train symbolizes British colonial power in India at the beginning, the advent of the train in Japan (in the Meiji period) is a showcase of how the Japanese government willingly adopted western science and

technology in the pursuit of modernization. In “Haunting modernity: Tanuki, trains, and transformation in Japan,” Michael Dylan Foster cites historian Steven J. Ericson and argues that the train during Meiji Japan was perceived as the “quintessential symbol of progress and civilization, the very epitome of modern industrial power” (3); he reads several Japanese folklores featuring the train and the Japanese mythical creature named Tanuki and argues that these legends are both about the resistance to modernity and also about the inevitability of its triumph.

It is yet another case when it comes to how the train is perceived when it appeared in China for the first time. Li Siyi’s book *Tielu Xiandaixing* (Railway Modernity) dives deep into the cultural and material history of the train from 1840 to 1937. In one chapter, he focuses on the first railway in China, which was constructed by British merchant Jardine Matheson in 1876 without a permit from the Qing government. This train was soon bought by the Qing government and dismantled. Through an analysis of people’s attitude of the train at that time, Li points out that the relationship between the train and modernity is not always the same: it is not the case that the train is perceived by everyone as the symbol of progress from the very beginning; those seemingly backward anti-train attitudes back then, when put into new cultural and social discourses, might offer resource for more modern introspection (22). Similar to the case with India, the first train in China was perceived as foreign colonial powers’ infringement on China’s sovereignty by some intellectuals and politicians; however, Li argues that the actual case is more complicated than that. Anti-train sentiment did not simply result from the perception of the train as a symbol of British colonial power, it was also fuelled by a fear of the train in itself. Li notices that when the train was on a trial run, it ran over and killed a person passing by the railway; this incident caused widespread objection and protest among the local people (138). Locals demanded the British sentence the train driver to death, but they held a trial and proved that the driver didn’t do anything wrong; the victim had walked onto the railway by himself. Thus, the train driver was cleared of all charges and released. Li argues that this incident was a turning point in Chinese history: it showed to Chinese people that the world was not the same anymore—there are certain spaces at certain times, which are reserved for the machine, that humans simply cannot enter (139); the train demonstrated the immense vulnerability of the human flesh in the face of machines (138).

As can be seen, perceptions of railway and train vary around the world in different historical and social backgrounds. Almost one and a half decade after the appearance of the first railway in China, the railway and the train has taken new

forms in both the material realm (for example, subway and high-speed railway) and in cultural imaginations. It is, thus, worthwhile to see what kind of metamorphosis the train has gone through in contemporary Chinese culture.

The subway is a railway train that runs underground. It is not a new phenomenon in any sense. The first subway in the world was constructed in London in 1863 (Han 8). The first subway in China began its operation in Beijing in 1969. However, because of the technical complexity of the construction of the subway, compared to traditional railway running on the ground, the network of subways was developed much later than surface railway. For example, in China, the first Beijing subway took 20 years to complete; the first Guangzhou subway took 32 years; in Shanghai, it took 36 years (Zi). It is not until the 2000s that subway lines started to blossom at a fast rate on the map of China. One key factor that prompted this transition is China's winning of the bid in 2001 to host the 2008 Olympic Games. Beijing's severe traffic jams and air pollution problems which have gained international attention put immense pressure on the Chinese government, which decided to tackle these problems with the expansion of subway lines. In the several years leading up to the Olympic Games, 5 new lines were constructed and put into operation in Beijing itself (Smith). The success of the subway to deal with problems such as air pollution and surface traffic pressures and the development of related subway technologies has resulted into the fastest period of subway development in China (possibly the world too). As of today, the country has the most subway systems in the world, with subway lines in 41 cities, covering a total of more than 6,000 kilometres in length (statista; 163). The boom of the subway in China showcases its rapid urbanization and modernization process.

The writer who is most conscious of this subway phenomenon in China is Han Song. As one of the "big three" among contemporary Chinese science fiction writers (Song, 2013, 87), he chose to feature the subway, an object that cannot seem to be more mundane and less science fictional, in his 2010 novel, *Ditie* (Subway). In the foreword of the novel, which is entitled "Zhongguoren de ditie kuanghuan" (Chinese People's Subway Carnival), Han explains the reason why he wrote this novel. He observes that China was going through a subway frenzy during the 2000s: the country has invested a huge amount of money in the construction of subway lines (8); the opening of the subway lines is celebrated like the New Year's Day (7); everyone, young and old, is excited to catch a subway train (7). Comparing the first Chinese subway line in 1969 with the first subway line ever constructed (in London in 1863), Han argues that Chinese people's subway frenzy is a belated one (8). However, he affirms that the development of the railway in the last hundred years in

China showcases China's modernization struggles and the subway frenzy is a sign of rapid urbanization in contemporary China (9). Han also notices the forming of "subway culture" in China: from Cartoonist Jimi's *Subway* (which has been adapted into movies, TV series, plays, etc) to tons of subway related books and music, such as *Buddha is in Line One* by Li Haipeng and Li Yuchun's "floating subway" (10). He argues that the subway has become a concentrated repository of contemporary Chinese people's emotions, desires, values and fates (11). Han has a keen set of eyes, which might be the result of working as a journalist for the Xinhua News Agency for three decades (or vice versa). He sees not only the subway carnival on the surface of Chinese society, but also the underlying signs of crisis beneath that surface: he notices that the number of homeless people in subways in Beijing is increasing; the number of passengers on the subway is also increasing, and a large security staff is needed to keep order and make sure no one slips off the platform into the railway tracks below; "death is one step away, but no one cares...because everyone wants to catch this train" (11). At the end of the foreword, he argues the time has not come when Chinese people can bask themselves in the heavenly happiness, like the subway frenzy, and that Chinese writers still have a task to do, which is to reveal "the underlying pain in China, the crack in its heart, its struggles against absurdity" (12).

Ditie is Han's answer to this task. This paper will look at how this novel uses the image of the train to criticize the process of modernization in China and create counter-narratives to question the dominant discourses of modernity. Even though Han is, like Liu Cixin, one of the "big three" of contemporary Chinese SF writers, there have been very few studies on his works in English so far in comparison to the number addressing Liu's work. This partly results from his extremely uncanny, eccentric, "cryptic and obscure" (Cigarini 22) writing style, which makes his works hard to understand even for native Chinese speakers. Among the few existing English papers on his work, many are written by Chinese scholars, such as Mingwei Song and Jia Liyuan. Mingwei Song's "Variations on Utopia in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction" introduces the "big three" to Anglo-American readers, in which he gave an insightful analysis of Han's novel *Mars Over America* (*Huoxing Zhaoyao Meiguo*, 2012), which "reveals a hideous side to this success story" of the rise of China (87). Jia Liyuan's "Gloomy China: China's Image in Han Song's Science Fiction" (tr. Joel Martinsen) gives a more comprehensive introduction of the major works by Han, in which he also mentioned *Ditie*, especially pointing out Han's writing is characterized by "impenetrable and illogical dialogue," "peculiar analogies, and difficult language" (111). Cara Healey, in her "Madmen and Iron

Houses: Lu Xun, Information Degradation, and Generic Hybridity in Contemporary Chinese SF,” argues that contemporary Chinese SF are heavily influenced by Lu Xun’s works, using Han’s “Chengke yu Chuangzaozhe” (“The Passengers and the Creator”) and Zhang Ran’s *Yitai* (Ether) as examples. As can be seen, scholarship on Han in English is still mainly at the “introductory” stage, with very few in-depth close-readings of his individual works.

The situation is slightly better in China. Han has been receiving increasing attention from literary critics in China in the last decade. However, most of these essays are either review articles (such as Wu Yan’s “The Speed Paradox in Han Song’s *Gaotie*”) or general studies of Han Song’s works, without going into much detail of one specific novel; for those which did focus on one (for example Chen Yan’s “Unique First-Person Retrospective Narration”), the essays are usually too short to fully explore the text. Past studies, such as Wang Yao’s “Maze, Mirror and cycles,” Jia Liyuan’s “Han Song and Ghostly China,” and Li Guangyi’s “Uncanny and Uncertain,” lay a good foundation for further studies of Han Song; however, more studies need to be done that look at Han’s individual works closely. Several critics did focus specifically on *The Subway* and analyse it from various perspectives. For example, Jia Bin, in his “The Construction of ‘Utopia-Heterotopia-Distopia,’” analysed how the first two sections of the novel constructed a heterotopia with the train and that the last three sections constructed a dystopia; he argues that through the construction of a heterotopia and dystopia with the subway, Han reveals how modern China struggles despairingly under the age-old Chinese problem of “cannibalism” which is now revitalized by western modernity. Han’s criticism of modernity in *The Subway* is also noticed by Kang Ling in his essay “How to Criticize Technological Alienation?” He especially focused on how Han uses the train to criticize the alienation brought by modern technology in contemporary Chinese society. However, how Han uses the train to critically engage with the concept of modernity deserves a closer look and more detailed study. This paper will first analyze how the subway in the novel works to represent modern Chinese society; it will then argue that the novel creates counter-narratives of modernity in terms of both ideology and affect.

The Subway as an Epitome of Modern China

Han Song’s works are often described as “*guiyi*,” a Chinese word which means uncanny and weird. In a recent interview, Chiara Cigarini, a Chinese Studies scholar, asked Han why his writing style is so “cryptic and obscure” (Cigarini 22). He says that form is content. Using the Subway as an example, he explains that he

“used a lot of very sharp and colourful words, sometimes controversial” to represent the subway (21); he felt “the whole [Chinese] society is behaving just like in the subway: people are squeezed together, and they struggle for money, food, basically everything” (ibid). As can be seen, the subway is a metaphor for social conditions in modern China. With uncanny and obscure language and images, Han is trying to represent the very experience of modern China, which he regards as uncanny and obscure.

As a matter of fact, Han self-consciously uses the train as a metonym of modernity in China. In fact, Han considers the train to be such an important image in modern Chinese society that he has written three novels in total, including *Ditie* (Subway), *Gaotie* (High-Speed Railway) and *Dongche* (Bullet Train), which all focus on the image of the train. These three novels are later referred to as the Subway trilogy. The three novels have various similarities in terms of structure and theme. Because of limited space, this paper will only provide an in-depth analysis of the first novel, *Ditie*, which is widely considered as the best one among the trilogy. For readers who are interested in the other two novels, Hua Li’s essay in this issue “Machine Ensemble, Mobility, and Immobility in Two Chinese Railway SF Narratives” gives an insightful read of the second novel in the trilogy, *Gaotie*, and compares it with an early Chinese novel, *A Tour of the 21st-Century Railway*.

The Subway is not a conventional novel. It is composed of five short stories which were previously published separately. There is no easily discernible plot that connects them, as they are only loosely related to each other. In section one—“Moban” (The Last Train), the main character, called Lao Wang, catches the last train, only to find that there seems to be something wrong with it: it is not stopping at any stations. In section two—“Jingbian” (Sudden Transformation), the main character, Zhou Xing, is on the subway to work and the train also does not stop at any station. Xiao Ji, another character, climbs outside the carriage, trying to reach the driver and see what is wrong; in each carriage that he passes, there is some uncanny transformation among the humans. Section three is set in a futuristic city called S city. A group of people go underground to try and find out what has happened to the missing subway trains and the people in them. Section four is set in the underground world, where there are different species of degenerated humans and intelligent mice. In section five, a group of humans (the majority of who have already migrated to other planets) take a spaceship to earth to take a look at the ruins of human civilization.

In the novel, Han makes it obvious that the subway serves as the embodiment of modern China. For example, the subway train is described on many occasions

as like a dragon, the totem of the Han ethnic group (the dominant ethnic group in China) and an image that is widely used to symbolize China. In section one, when Lao Wang's train finally stops at a station, he hurries to escape from the train. As he looks back, he sees that the "tragically green train" was a giant dragon (20). The next day, he takes the morning subway to go to work. The train is again described as like a dragon: "The train is dead quiet, except for the dragon scream from the train that expresses contempt and intimidation" (24). The Chinese have always considered themselves as "long de chuanren," the offspring of the dragon, a mythic deity creature in Chinese folklore; the word dragon already was of cultural significance during the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600-1046 BC) (Zhang 54). By emphasizing the similarities between the subway train and the dragon, the novel not only constructs the subway as a symbol of China, but also more specifically, the symbol of modern China.

This is most apparent when Lao Wang recalls the memory of many years ago when the subway was first being constructed in China: "the first subway line started to be built around thirty years ago... this is already one hundred years after the world's first railway line was built in London" (38, 39); in order to build the circular subway line around the city, to give way to the "giant electric dragon," the ancient city wall of more than seven hundred years was torn down (39-40); "a new dragon is born by destroying the old vein of the dragon" (40). The subway embodies a modern China that is a latecomer to the modern world; this anxiety about being late to modernity has brought about a frantically rapid and violent modernization process: building a new, modern China—represented by the subway—by destroying the old China—represented by the ancient city walls; a hastened rebirth through self-destruction. Thus, the subway effectively epitomizes China's modernization process.

The subway serves as a potent metaphor to represent Chinese modernity in other ways in the novel too. As one of the newest forms of the railway system, subway—the train that miraculously runs underground—has become the point of encounter with the "future" for many Chinese people in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. It epitomizes a whole generations' experience of modernity as something uncanny, luxurious, "dream-like," which seems to have come from the future. As Lao Wang describes in the novel:

It's a whole new experience. The bright train stations, shiny train carriages, and even the electric fans (which were still not very common back then) are uncanny luxuries, giving out an un-describable *modern* vibe.... He

still remembers there were not even many cars back then on the streets; the subway is like an *alien*, an extremely *dream-like* thing, a section of the *future* that has been accidentally inserted into the present reality; all of these made him feel proud as a citizen of this country. (emphasis added, 40)

The subway embodies Chinese modernization also in that the focus and pursuit of high speed for the development of the whole railway system resembles the pursuit of speed in modernization and the fast speed at which China was modernized. This obsession with speed is especially apparent in the modernization process in China. It partly results from a sense of belatedness, being a late-comer to modernity. In the foreword, Han Song notices how the whole China is undergoing a carnival of subways around 2010. However, he also points it out that this is a *belated carnival*—more than one hundred years before China constructed its first subway line, the British government built the world’s first underground subway (8). China’s modernization, as represented by the construction of subway lines, is characterized by a sense of urgency and hastiness. Han describes how people behave in the subway in similar terms, noting that, “everyone wants to catch the train, no matter at what cost” (11). Since China was perceived as late, it has been trying at all cost to catch the train of modernity. As can be seen, the subway works as an apt metaphor for Chinese modernization. Han himself points this out in the foreword of the novel:

As a matter of fact, the construction of the railway in the last hundred years marks the rise of China and is a concentrated representation of the whole process of China’s modernization.... Now, this nation who built the Great Wall has now built a network of railway that spans more than ten thousand miles. It ranks among the top around the world in terms of both speed and length, both density and height. This is hard to imagine even just a decade ago. (9)

In the novel, modernity’s pursuit of efficiency is epitomized in the railway system’s pursuit of speed. This obsession with efficiency and speed is described with immense suspicion and criticism in the novel. One of the characters, who claims to be Frederick Winslow Taylor—known as the father of scientific management who sought to improve industrial efficiency—recounts how the world had changed with the increase of speed that was brought about by industrial revolution:

Before the American Civil War, the world still ran on the speed of

wind, water, animals and human power.... But James Watt was born, and so came the steam engine. Both matter and energy, like girls trying to lose weight, are now obsessed with high-speed movement.... America was the pioneer in increasing speed...by the 1840s, the US had already constructed six thousand miles of new railway lines.... It seems the wheels are cash printing machines. On it rolled mountains of products, transported around the world.... (164-165)

He implies that the world has entered a new era of competition. Not that of arms, but that of speed. In this jungle, the rule becomes “survival of the fastest”; “whoever is the faster can eat its opponent” (165). He expresses his surprise to see how China has become “the best location for the competition of speed” (165-166). But he also laments and cautions that “it’s too fast! The world has changed; nothing can be found; nothing can be seen; everything is disintegrating. Disintegrating!” (166).

Counter-narratives of Modernity

With the subway serving as a symbol of modern China, the novel constructs a set of counter-narratives to the dominant discourses on modernity. Counter-narratives are those which aim to criticize and “offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives” (Andrews 1). Counter-narratives of modernity seek to criticize and overthrow the dominant narratives of modernity. One of the main discourses on modernity is a new sense of time and temporality that is mechanical, linear, one directional and always future-oriented; this temporality works hand in hand with the narrative of progress. The earliest notion of the modern simply designates a transition from antiquity to the new, “a determinate rupture with what came before” (Marian, 2011, 1). However, it can be seen how this notion can give rise to linear notion of time and the narratives of progress. Peter Wagner is among many other scholars who note that modernity “has always been associated with progress” (2012, 28). The narrative of progress, the notion that “historical time had a progressive direction” (Hunt 51), with each human development stage more advanced than the last one (e.g. from hunting and gathering, to agriculture, to commerce), puts different societies and nations on a single developmental timeline—some are modern, some are less modern or even pre-modern. This narrative of progress “dictates that the old ways must give way to the new ones with the inevitability of the past becoming the present” (Rieder 38), all on an eternal pursuit of the “future.”

Since its advent, the train has been a prominent emblem of modernity's new temporality and its narrative of progress. Its fast speed and far reach have changed humans' perception of space and time, which are now experienced in a compressed manner; as was described by English writer Sydney Smith, "Everything is near—everything is immediate: time, distance, and delay are abolished" (549). The train, which runs on an accurate timetable, heralds the birth of a new era that runs on the modern mechanical time—as compared to the natural time (e.g. starting to work on sun rise and finishing work on sun set). As American art historian Leo Marx states, "nothing provided more tangible, vivid, compelling icons for representing the forward course of history than recent mechanical improvements like the steam engine" (13). Because of its relentless forward-driven and destination-oriented journey, the railway has widely been considered as a symbol of the future-oriented modernity and its narrative of progress (Freeman 29).

In Han's *The Subway*, the train performs the duty as a metaphor of modernity to the fullest—it travels relentlessly forward (towards a destination that always seems to be ahead) without ever stopping. However, Han also uses this specific image of the train to create a set of counter narratives in terms of temporality and progress. In this train that never stops, no one knows what direction the train is traveling. The linear and forward temporality is questioned on several occasions in the novel: "suddenly, a strange feeling came to him: the train in fact *didn't move forward at all*, it's the world that is moving backward rapidly" (69, emphasis added); some other characters speculate that the subway lines have been modified into a man-made wormhole that connects to other universes; they wonder, "is it the future, or the past that we are arriving at then?" (137). As can be seen, Han's subway questions the linear and progressive temporality of modernity: what we assume to be forward might be backward; what we are running hurriedly towards might not be the "future," but the "past," or another parallel timeline altogether. This train that forever travels forward/backward creates a temporality that is completely different from the linear and progress notion of time in modernity. What is more, time further rejects this linear and forward temporality by even coming to a full stop in the novel: "he looked at his watch again; it has stopped" (16).

The overall structure of the novel also contributes to creating a counternarrative to modernity's linear and progressive temporality. As has been mentioned earlier, this novel is composed of five chapters which were originally separately published short stories. Each chapter focuses on different main characters and there is no easily distinguishable plotline that runs throughout the novel. The only thread that connects all five chapters is the subway incident, where it malfunctions and travels

without stopping. Chapters one and two—the Last Train and Metamorphosis—depict the incident directly. Chapter three—symbols—follows some characters’ endeavour to find out the truth and the reason behind the subway incident; chapter four—heaven—reveals what happened to humans who lived in the underground to escape the disaster. Chapter five—“Ruins”—is set more than five hundred years into the future where humans have spread to other planets and some have come back to visit earth, which has now become a wasteland. As can be seen, even though the timeline of the novel roughly follows a chronological order, namely “forward,” nothing that happened in the novel can be considered as a form of “progress.” For example, chapter four, which is ironically entitled “Heaven,” delivers a thorough mock of the narrative of progress. It depicts what happens to humanity after they flee to live in the underground world: humans regress to the tribal era, living in eternal complete darkness; since there is no light, not even fire, their sight has regressed; humanity’s language has understandably regressed too (for example, words related to sight, such as “see,” are no longer used); they eat worms and other small animals raw. One revolutionary event that happened in chapter four is one tribe’s discovery of fire. As can be seen, the future of humanity in the underground world is purposefully depicted in such a way as to resemble primitive human civilization. In this way, the future and the past are juxtaposed and meshed together, completely dismantling the linearity of time and the narrative of progress, which are central in the discourse of modernity.

Besides the macro-level of the plotline and human society’s regression in the novel, this counternarrative is also highlighted in several key moments. The notion that today is better than yesterday and tomorrow is better than today is questioned throughout the novel. For example, Zhou Xing, the main character in chapter two, comes to a profound realization about modern life on the train that never stops:

For an iron train with no sensation that travels endlessly in the river of time, whether there is an aim or not is not important. But for the individual passengers who have finite lifespans, this has changed their fate.... He was only a member of this crowd, which as a collective is swept forward by a giant force they can not control. Like stinky mice trembling and gathering into a pile, they are stuck together, forever moving forward with the same speed, unable to stop even for one moment just to catch a breath. As a younger generation, Zhou thought his life will definitely be better than that of his parents. But now, as he is stuck in the subway, he realized that that is not the case. (63-64)

This section of the novel is significant in revealing the theme of the novel in several ways. On the one hand, Zhou's realization debunks modernity's narrative of progress: the notion that today is better than yesterday and that tomorrow will be better than today, is nothing but an illusion, a myth. On the other hand, by comparing individual passengers on the train that never stops to piles of mice unwillingly swept forward, Han criticizes the dehumanizing effect on the individual in a society that focuses solely on speeding into the mysterious destination of modernity. Passengers on a malfunctioned train (which never stops) serve as a potent metaphor for the relation between the individual and the nation in modern China: whereas the nation and society as a whole is in frantic pursuit of a destination called modernity which seems to lie forever ahead, individuals in this society—"passengers on this train"—are trapped in an endless struggle in pursuit of the phantom destination; as one character wonders "how big a disaster it is" for people who (trapped on this train) can never reach their station (62). It is implied that the fervent pursuit of modernity might only mean a malfunction for the nation as a whole, but for the generations of individuals the consequence is disastrous.

Closely entangled with the narrative of progress is the concept of technological advancement and urbanization, which are often considered as key signs or criteria of progress towards modernity. The concepts of technology and urbanization provide some of the most common material evidence of modernity, such as the railway, cars, and skyscrapers. They are so key to the whole discourse of modernity that they are often invoked as metonyms for modernity. The novel questions this seemingly self-evident correlation between technology, urbanization and progress. This is shown mainly through the depiction of the futuristic but uncanny S city in chapter three. The advancement of technology serves not to protect the freedom and privacy of the individual, but the opposite: the air is filled with tiny CCTV drones, which is connected to the supercomputer of market data research companies (93). Nature and the environment are distorted and become hostile to lives: "the visible light is black, the main colour of the city" (93); dark red acid rain, filled with industrial pigment chemicals, pours day and night (93). Citizens have become "sexually dysfunctional" (93) and have "implanted artificial gills that look like measles to filter the dirty, poisonous air" (94). Han's depiction of this futuristic, technologically advanced city dismantles the narrative of technological progress and urbanization and the wishful thinking that technology conquers nature.

The narrative of technological advancement is unravelled also through the portrayal of the relation between machines and humans. In the discourse of

modernity, technology and progress have always been considered as a self-evident equation; it seems that technological advancement will automatically equate social progress, that agency lies in the hands of the people to use and make machines serve them. However, Han's novel reveals an uneasy truth: in the modern society, humans have become machines, whereas machines have assumed life of its own and started to dominate and control humans. The central embodiment of technological advancement and modernity in the novel is the subway. It is portrayed in a zoomorphic way on several occasions. For example, when it is approaching the platform:

All of a sudden, it seems that the *loud breathing sound of a giant carnivore* is coming from the centre of the earth... the train which is painted in the military-uniform green *stuck its fat, Plesiosaur-like head out* from the underground hole. What follows is its *disproportionately swelling body. Swaggering, it slowly stopped...* all the doors *screamed* and opened. The “tombstones” on the platform floated inside, as if they are sucked in by a vacuum cleaner... he was also moved into the carriage, unwittingly. (16)

In this description, the train comes alive, whereas humans are lifeless like “tombstones”. It is the train that seems to have agency and control over humans, who are completely passive, soulless machines.

Humans are described as soulless and mechanical on several occasions in the novel. For example, in chapter one, passengers are described as “hollow.” As has been mentioned earlier, the first chapter of the novel depicts Lao Wang on the subway train to go home, when he suddenly notices that the train is not stopping at any station. With growing unease, Lao Wang looks around the carriage; everyone else sits in their seats, motionless and with their eyes closed. He approaches one of them and pats him on the shoulder. To his astonishment, his hand passes through the passenger's body like passing through air. Lao Wang quickly retracts his hand, “as if he was bitten by a zombie” (17). However, his hand passes through his front chest to the back; he realizes he is also a hollow man (17). In fact, “hollow passengers” is the title name of the following section in the chapter.

Modern man is not just hollow, s/he is mechanical too. Lao Wang is a representation of the modern mechanical man in the novel. He is an average office worker whose work is mainly made up of filling out all kinds of forms. After the incident in the subway, he suddenly realizes that throughout his whole life, “he has simply been filling out empty spaces like a *machine*, without trying to figure

out how to get out of this dark maze” (33); after years of office work that follows a rigid routine, “he has become a *clock* himself” (15). Not just him, everyone else has become like mechanical robots: in the morning, “passengers marching in step are like *mechanical machines produced by factories*” (24). The novel criticizes how the obsession with speed, efficiency and profit in modernization has dehumanized men, making them into hollow machines. By depicting humans becoming machines and machines coming to life, *The Subway* breaks the assumption that machines are subordinate to and serve humans; on the contrary, it is humans who are dominated and controlled by machines (such as the clock and the train) in the modern society. In this way, the novel overthrows the narrative of technology and progress.

Humans’ regression throughout the novel also further disrupts the linear temporality and narrative of progress. Human’s alienation in the modern society is represented through human metamorphosis on the subway train which never stops. The train, which travels so fast that it breaks and does not stop at any station, is a metaphor of Chinese modernization. The forward motion itself becomes the end, instead of the means to live better lives. In this abnormal society (carriage), people go through various metamorphoses. In one of the carriages, people become shrivelled old men and women who are fast asleep; in one of the carriages, only a few passengers are left, and they have become “like wolves in the cage of the zoo, pacing back and forth rapidly, howling with their heads up and necks extended” (73); in one carriage, he sees that people are eating, with their mouths bloody and human hands, human livers and other parts in their hands (77); in one carriage, everyone is naked and they have lost human form and become like apes, crawling on all fours (88).

Han’s depiction of the metamorphosis on the broken subway train is highly metaphorical. This is why he has often been compared to Franz Kafka (Luo; Zhang). The metamorphosis in the broken subway train symbolizes the dehumanization in the modern Chinese society (especially the urban space). In this uncanny space, everything—including humans and time itself—is deformed: “it seems the train is now in a strange time-space, and the physical laws there are completely different from the ones humans know” (69). In this uncanny space, this train that travels at a fast speed without an apparent destination, even time is running at a faster than usual speed; young men and women became shrivelled old men and women (73). Humans have degenerated into wolves, cannibals, and apes. When the train finally and mysteriously comes to a stop in the end and the door slides open, everyone rushes to get out; only, none of them are in human forms anymore; “they are in the shape of ants, of worms, of fishes, of trees, of grass...”

(90). Using the subway train as a metaphor of the modern Chinese society, the novel criticizes Chinese modernization's obsession with speed and its dehumanizing effect on individuals.

Affects of Modernity

The discourse of modernity not only provides master narratives such as linear temporality, progress, technology and urbanization, as ways to think and act in the world; it also prescribes ways of feeling in the modern world. Studies on modernity have largely focused on the former (the master narratives of modernity) in the past; however, in the last decade or so, with the rise of affect theory—often termed as “the affective turn” (Clough and Halley, 2007), critics have started to look further into the latter aspect (the affects of modernity). One recent and immensely influential example is Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011). In it, she looks at the affect of optimism in modernity and how it has become toxic, a “cruel optimism,” in modern American society. She argues that cruel optimism arises when something we desire, such as the fantasy of a good life or a political project, “actively impedes the aim that brought [us] to it initially” (1). She considers the American Dream as the key contributor of a cruel optimism that dominate American society today: the American Dream is turning out to be fraying fantasies of “upward mobility, job security, political and social equality” (1), among others; the blind optimism on the attainability of these fantasies is nothing but “cruel” and “an obstacle to [people's own] flourishing” (ibid).

Across the pacific, in China, the situation is both similar and different. Coincidentally, one year after the publication of *Cruel Optimism*, in 2012, the concept of the Chinese Dream (Zhongguo Meng) was put forward and emphasized by Chinese president Xi Jinping in his inauguration speech. Ever since then, this term has been widely promoted and discussed in both Chinese state and popular media; textbooks have also been revised in order to include discussions of it and essay competitions on it are held in schools (Mohanty 34); the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has even commissioned research projects on the Chinese Dream (Mohanty 34-35). The significance of it in contemporary Chinese politics cannot be overlooked. It is the first time, as is noticed by Winberg Chai and May-lee Chai in their discussion of the term, that “dream” (an abstract and affective word) has been used as a party policy guideline in Chinese history (96). This is a conscious, strategic political turn to using affects, especially that of hope, to mobilize the Chinese populace in the twenty-first century.

In a sense, both the American Dream and the Chinese Dream can be considered

as localized versions of the affective narrative of modernity, combined with that of national development. Both, in essence, invokes the prospect of progress and success. Both reflect one dominant affect prescribed by modernity—optimism. However, they differ significantly in terms of success of who or what. The American Dream, according to historian James Truslow Adams, who coined the term, refers to “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (373). The concept of the American dream emphasizes the achievement of a condition that is beneficial for the development of *individual* potential and happiness. However, the Chinese Dream is imagined entirely from the perspective of the *nation*, instead of the individual. Even though “the well-being of the people” is mentioned sometimes in discussions of the Chinese Dream, the term Chinese Dream itself mainly refers and equates to “the rejuvenation of the nation” (Wasserstrom; Mohanty; Winberg Chai and May-lee). As Xi states in a speech: “we must make persistent efforts... and strive to achieve the Chinese Dream of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (BBC). As can be seen, the focal point for the Chinese Dream is firmly on the nation-state; it is a dream *of* the state and *for* the state; people are second, or means to achieve the end—“rejuvenation of the nation.” In another word, the Chinese Dream is a national project, which everyone needs to work for even when it contradicts with their own wellbeing.

In this sense, the malfunctioned train which persistently speeds forward without caring about anything else and the passengers trapped inside seems to be an apt representation of the Chinese Dream. Whereas Lauren Berlant points out how the persistence on the American Dream, which has turned out to be mere fantasies in contemporary America, creates cruel optimism, Han Song’s *The Subway* reveals a different set of affects that shroud Chinese society today. Affect in this essay means emotional, “visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing” which travel between subjects and animate and drive us (Seigworth and Gregg 1). I use the term affect, instead of other words such as emotions, to talk about modernity’s influence on the psychological and mental state of humans because it covers a wider range of human feelings, such as that of numbness and sense of crisis that are reflected in Han’s *The Subway*.

One key affect that contaminated many characters in the novel is numbness, or a sense of emptiness. Passengers on the train have become “hollow men” in a coma (17); Lao Wang has become a clock (15); people waiting for the train are like “tombstones in a barren plain” (16); everyone has become “mummy-like creatures” (154). All of these descriptions, “hollow men” in a coma, clock, tombstones,

and “mummy-like creatures,” point to the lack of any affect whatsoever. These metaphors emphasize a sense of numbness and emptiness that has taken hold of people. The affect of numbness, or the absence of any affect, is partly resulted from the blurred boundary between the individual and the nation state in contemporary China because of the national project of modernization. As established earlier, the train that never stops is a metaphor of the modern Chinese nation state. Passengers trapped on the train serve as a metaphor for Chinese people. No matter whether the destination is modernity or the “Chinese Dream” of “national rejuvenation,” the individuals, bound on the trains, can not choose their own “route” or “dream.” They have become mere parts of the giant machine of the nation state: “in the end, humans and the train merged together and became one symbiote” (86).

The affect of numbness can also result from over-stimulation. Through the representation of the affect of numbness, the novel also criticizes the rise of consumerism with the development of capitalism. At times, the novel directly links the mummy-like symptom of modern people to the rise of consumerism: “she is like everyone else dominated by the desires of consumerism; like all the other mummies, she is dominated by the C drink company” (168). In some places of the novel, the full name of the C drink company is revealed to be Coca Cola, which is arguably the most famous modern brand whose advertisement can be seen virtually everywhere. The description of Coca Cola is everywhere in the novel too, reflecting how exposed to and dominated by market capitalism and consumerism modern life is. For example, at the very beginning of the novel, as Lao Wang was walking towards the subway station, “the neon light of Coca Cola ads shines through from all directions...overshadowing the moon” (15); his first instinct is to raise his arms to block the lights, but he feebly gave up halfway (ibid). This description shows modern people’s over-exposure to the various products of market capitalism, which threaten to consume humans themselves. His feebleness and failure to block the lights (because he knows that even if he tries, he could not) is an early hint at the forming of the affect of numbness in modern society. Even when he went to ride the train during the day, “he still couldn’t escape the prosperous, apocalyptic coca cola ads flooding towards him” (45). The novel emphasizes the central dominance of market capitalism in modern lives: “The billboards of Coca Cola ads look down on everything like they are gods of this world” (25); “when the big bang happened, only a letter of C can be recognized” (199).

Besides the affect of numbness, another affect that dominates some characters in the novel is anxiety and an acute sense of crisis. This anxiety, which even borders on schizophrenia, is felt mainly by characters who have “woken up” from

the “mommy” state. For example, after experiencing the malfunction of the train, Lao Wang realizes that something has gone wrong; he realized that he was also a “hollow man” (17) and the endless train journey is the true face of the world (18). However, this realization has woken him up from the “coma” state, which the other passengers are all still under; what he thought and felt about afterwards reflects a deep anxiety and paranoia which borders on schizophrenia:

Does the train really travel in the universe?...Is it even really a train? He can't help but started crying. He felt embarrassed and also surprised that he can still cry. So he laughed, laughed at himself... Is it really he who is crying and laughing? Or are all the crying and laughing and the sound of the train just playbacks of what is pre-recorded? It's like a conspiracy... then, has he really existed? And who is he? (18-19)

Schizophrenia has been famously defined by Fredric Jameson in his seminal work *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) as a dominant feature of the contemporary society. He borrows the term from Lacan, who defines it as “a breakdown in the signifying chain, that is, the interlocking syntagmatic series of signifiers which constitutes an utterance or a meaning” (25). Meaning is created by the movement from signifier to signifier (similar to how each word in the dictionary is defined and explained by other words and how meaning does not exist on individual single words, but situated within a line of others); the breakdown in the signifying chain thus means the inability to make out meaning from signifiers and to use signifiers to make meaning. This also means the breakdown of the psyche, since the way we make sense of ourselves also relies on the chain of signifiers, of “unify[ing] the past, present, and future” (Jameson 25); In a word, “with the breakdown of the signifying chain, therefore, the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (26).

The malfunction of the train acts as a break in the signifying chain in the novel. It occupies a space that is not the past, the present, nor the future; it heads to a direction that is neither forward or backward; times itself has ceased to exist on this train; it seems to have been carved out from the normal continuity of space-time on earth. The impact of this “break” is strong enough that Lao Wang has been woken up from the affectless numbness, and it has set him directly into a schizophrenic episode: he does not know what is real and what is not anymore; the meaning of everything seems to be wide open now.

Lao Wang's schizophrenia is accompanied by a strong anxiety and an acute sense of crisis, that something bad is about to happen. He feels that "the train looks like it might explode any time soon" (24). This sense of crisis reflects a general anxiety about the sole focus on speed in the national project of modernization in China. Subway accidents, the main focus of the novel, act as a metaphor for the side-effect of the obsession of speed in modernization. The key event portrayed at the beginning of the novel, which acted as the waking call for Lao Wang, is itself a subway accident: something wrong happened and the train cannot stop. What is disconcerting, however, is not that an accident has happened, but that there is no news about it at all (28); people go about their lives as if nothing has happened. The main characters' endeavours to find out what really happened becomes the main story line in the novel. The subway accident becomes a metaphor for the other, hidden face of modernity, compared to the more glamorous one. This focused attention on subway accidents is strengthened at the end of the book too. The book features two appendices in the last few pages of the novel, among which is a list of the main subway accidents/disasters in the last hundred years.

Train accidents are only one source for the strong sense of anxiety and crisis that pervade *Subway*. This affect is further intensified in chapter three, where everyone starts to feel that an impending much bigger disaster is around the corner. Chapter three starts by introducing a futuristic city, called S, which is a likely insinuation of Shanghai. There are rumours among people that "a catastrophic disaster is going to befall on this city soon" (94). Many people are buying tickets to migrate to other planets by American spaceships to escape this disaster (94). Other people who cannot afford the spaceship tickets are buying subway tickets to hide underground (94-95). Xiaowu, the main character in chapter three, is trying to escape like everyone else. But he meets a girl named Kaka who is trying to figure out the truth behind a plane crash accident; she thinks that the rising accidents involving all kinds of transportations is a prelude of the incoming disaster (124). They think that maybe if they figure out why those accidents happened, they can find a third way out of this disaster, without needing to migrate to other planets or hiding underground (127-128). As can be seen, chapter three (among all five) occupies a central place in the novel: It reveals what the malfunctioned subway stands for—the harbinger of the larger malfunction of modern Chinese society.

This desire for escape, resulted from the affect of anxiety and sense of crisis, is a recurrent theme throughout the novel. In chapter two, the main character Zhou who was trapped in the malfunctioned train admits that he has been fantasizing about becoming an outlaw: "if there is a chance, he would have killed someone too,

and then he would run away, far far away” (63). On the one hand, Zhou’s fantasy crystallizes the dehumanizing effect of people on this “malfunctioned train”; on the other hand, his fantasies about becoming an outlaw might be because that is the only way to get off the “train.” This becomes apparent when he feels strongly envious about another character, Xiaoji, who has become an outlaw by breaking the window and escaping outside. When Xiaoji suggests breaking the window and getting outside of the train to take a look at what might have gone wrong with it, a policeman on the train rejects the suggestion, saying that it is against the law, because it breaks stability and public order (67). But no one else has any idea about what to do, so Xiaoji goes ahead with it anyway. As Xiaoji is trying to break the window, Zhou excitedly shouts “terrific!” silently in his head. When Xiaoji successfully breaks the window and climbs outside of the carriage, Zhou signs silently again: “such a lucky and hateful escaper,” feeling full of envy (68). When Xiaoji gets out of the carriage, thunders of the wheels attack his ears. He feels that the train is a huge factory operating at an overload, and he is finally out (68-69). Not everyone is lucky like Xiaoji to escape this malfunctioned train, this overworked factory. For those who can not escape, they are trapped forever in it, their lives burnt like engines to keep the machine roaring.

Conclusion: The one shouting in the iron carriage

In the novel, most of the main characters are obsessed with some kind of transportation accidents, for example, Lao Wang with subway malfunction and Kaka with airplane crashes. The reason for the novel’s keen interest on transportation accidents is the conscious neglect of these in the modern Chinese society as is revealed in the novel. For example, after Lao Wang experienced the malfunction of the train, he could not find any news covering of it in the media (28); he tried to report the accident to the subway company, but was received with impatience, indifference and suspicion of trying to cause social unrest (28-29). He thinks about various possibilities: “maybe the editors of newspapers got some orders from the above to not cover the incident” (28); maybe “the subway company is covering up the truth” (29). No matter what reason, there is no discussion of the incident. It is revealed later in the novel that not only subway accidents, other types of transportation accidents are also consciously brushed aside in contemporary Chinese society:

The topics (transportation accidents) that should have been widely and seriously discussed are controlled by the powerful few; the conclusions

are drawn only by them. On the ground, the general public are all silent, pretending that it's not related to them...If we do want to talk about it, we need to hide underground like this to talk secretly. (125)

This conscious effort of covering up the “cracks” in contemporary society is reflected elsewhere in the novel too. For example, in chapter three, a major subway explosion happened: “the ground under his feet exploded open... all kinds of limbs and organs are vomited out like mercury” (95). The next day, everything returned to normal like nothing happened; “the victims’ blood, meat and bones are cleaned away like papers by the robots sent by the laboratory; they are tossed into garbage incinerators and became renewable energy that keeps the city operating” (106). The novel criticizes how accidents like the subway incident have been consciously brushed aside by the authorities. With this novel, Han tries to bring these accidents to the foreground, to remind people of the dangerous cracks in the fabric of modern society.

What Han is doing with this novel is similar to what Lu Xun was trying to do with *Nahan* (*Call to Arms*). As a matter of fact, one scene in the novel is strikingly similar to the famous iron house metaphor put forward by Lu Xun in the preface of *Nahan*, where everyone is fast asleep except one. In the malfunctioned train, everyone is in a coma, without realizing that something has gone wrong. Lao Wang was the only one awake. He ran from the front to the end of the carriage, trying to wake the others up, but to no avail. Han’s allusion to Lu Xun has also been noticed by Song Mingwei, in his “In the Eyes of Everything, I see nothing.” By invoking Lu Xun’s iron house image, Han warns readers that this is a time of crisis similar to Lu Xun’s time. Like Lao Wang in the train, like Lu Xun, Han is trying to sound the alarm and wake Chinese people up to see the underlying crisis of the modern Chinese society. With this book, he tries to wake people up from the numbness of overstimulation and consumerism in the capitalist society to see that the “train” has malfunctioned. The novel also reveals the importance of looking at (not away from) and looking into these kind of “accidents”: “the accidents reveal clearly the underlying relation between each rivet; only if we enter into the core circle of the experiment [of modernization] can we understand the truth of the disasters. *This is the main subject of contemporary life*” (124). Han’s *The Subway* is a difficult but determined look at this main subject of contemporary China.

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Machine Ensemble, Mobility, and Immobility in Two Chinese Railway SF Narratives

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Abstract:

This essay offers close readings of Deng Yanlu's *A Tour of the 21st-Century Railway* and Han Song's *The High-speed Railway* in order to reveal how science fiction has captured the national fervor for development at various historical junctures. The two narratives' portrayals of railway lines, trains, passengers, and landscapes reveal shifts from openness to self-isolation, from mobility to immobility, and from utopia to dystopia. Literary representations of railways and trains have thus become a sign of these creative intellectuals' active participation in and reflection on China's development. Specifically, the two narratives reveal how the national fervor for development that was taken as a given during the early part of the post-Mao Reform Era has been viewed more critically in the twenty-first century by such contemporary Chinese sf writers as Han Song.

Keywords: railway, train, development, mobility, immobility

China's present-day technological prowess has been manifested in its extensive high-speed railway network. As of 2020, this network already extends for tens of thousands of kilometers and includes trains that can travel as fast as 400 kilometers per hour. This high-speed railway network appears to have become not only a significant component of China's self-image as a modernized nation, but also a utopian or dystopian enclave for Chinese science fiction (hereafter sf) writers to reflect on China's technological progress and economic development during the past four decades.

This essay offers close readings of Deng Yanlu's *A Tour of the 21st-Century Railway* (21 *Shiji tielu manyou ji* 21世纪铁路漫游记, 1979) and Han Song's *The*

High-speed Railway (Gaotie 高铁, 2012) in order to reveal how science fiction has captured the national fervor for development at various historical junctures. In *A Tour of the 21st- Century Railway*, the high-speed railway network is a key signpost of the country's industrial modernization, economic growth, and societal progress. In contrast, *The High-speed Railway* presents this network as having unintended consequences for contemporary China's rapid technological progress and economic development. The two narratives' portrayals of railway lines, trains, passengers, and landscapes reveal shifts from openness to self-isolation, from mobility to immobility, and from utopia to dystopia. Literary representations of railways and trains have thus become a sign of these creative intellectuals' active participation in and reflection on China's development. Specifically, they reveal how the national fervor for development that was taken as a given during the early part of the post-Mao Reform Era has been viewed more critically in the twenty-first century by such contemporary Chinese sf writers as Han Song.

Train travel along railways has long been an important motif in PRC science fiction. As early as 1957, Ding Jiang wrote a short story entitled "A Train Through the Center of the Earth" ("Dixin lieche" 地心列车). In this narrative, the young protagonist Xiaoming makes a train journey with his uncle to Argentina. This futuristic train barrels through the center of the Earth at a scorching speed of up to 1200 kilometers per hour en route from Beijing to Buenos Aires. More than four decades later, Liu Cixin revisited this motif of traveling through the center of the earth in his novella *Cannonry of Earth* (*Diqiu dapao* 地球大炮, 2003). In a similar vein, Liu Xingshi published his short story "The Train Under the Ocean" ("Lanse lieche" 蓝色列车) in 1963. The story describes how undersea railways help humans exploit the ocean's natural resources. With the aid of railways on the ocean floor, people have constructed marine pastures and mineral processing factories on the seabed. The seabed railways thereupon ship the products of these pastures and factories up to ground-based storage facilities. The motif of undersea railway appears again in Deng Yanlu's *A Tour of the 21st- Century Railway* and Han Song's *The High-speed Railway*. These sf works of various decades utilize the railway system to convey contrasting messages: from eulogizing the country's extensive modernization to seriously questioning the pitfalls of China's unchecked infrastructure development projects.

Energizing China through Constant Motion

In *A Tour of the 21st- Century Railway*, the young protagonist Mingming is a middle school student in Guangzhou. He receives a book entitled *Prospects for the*

Development of China's Railways from his grandfather, who is a railway engineer in Beijing. When Mingming opens the book to start reading, a magical series of events occurs. A time-traveling airship (*shijian feiting* 时间飞艇) suddenly appears outside his balcony, and takes Mingming on board for a futuristic tour of life in 2001. During this tour, Mingming and his sister embark upon railway journeys to Beijing, Shanghai, and Los Angeles. Over the course of these journeys, they enjoy a panoramic view of the country's landscape as it has been connected and changed by an expanding national railway network. They visit various railway stations, railway research institutes, and construction sites that have showcased the development of the country's industrialization and modern technology.

Though *A Tour of the 21st-Century Railway* was published in 1979, it conjures forth a futuristic temporal setting of 2001. The time span between 1979 and 2001 coincides with the “new development” period of the PRC railway system. Improvement of the PRC railway system got a major boost in 1978, when the top leaders of the Party-state Hua Guofeng (1921-2008) and Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) revived the long-dormant policy of the Four Modernizations of industry, agriculture, national defense, and science and technology. When Deng Xiaoping ascended as the paramount leader in December 1978 at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee, he announced his strategic decision to shift the Communist Party's main focus from the Mao Era's emphasis on class struggle to the Reform and Opening Era's pursuit of modernization and economic prosperity. This was also the year when Deng Xiaoping rode a Japanese bullet train or *shinkansen* for the first time. This high-speed train ride left a deep impression on Deng. He said: “I felt that someone was chasing me and making me run faster” (Han 367). Deng hoped that China could modernize at breakneck speed like a bullet train in order to catch up with developed nations like Japan. Deng's bullet-train journey and his comments about it were widely reported in PRC state media. The PRC railway system thereupon entered its stage of “new development” (1979-2002). Having been written in this optimistic spirit, *A Tour of the 21st-Century Railway* unsurprisingly eulogizes the country's rapid technological and economic progress by emphasizing the industrial nature of the railway system, ever-greater mobility for the populace, and the changes in landscape brought about by the evermore extensive railway network.

Machine ensemble is a term coined by Wolfgang Schivelbusch to emphasize the industrial nature of railway system. In his book *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century*, Schivelbusch explores how railroads in 19th-century Europe represented the visible presence of modern

technology, and how railway journeys have produced new experiences of self, landscape, space, and time. He utilizes the term *machine ensemble* to refer to the railway system, which “consist[s] of wheel and rail, railroad and carriage, expand[s] into a unified railway system, [and] appear[s] as one great machine covering the land” (29). He indicates “the machine character of the railroad was dual; first, the steam engine (locomotive) generated uniform mechanical motion; secondly, the motion was transformed into movement through space by the combined machinery of wheel and rail” (20). Hence, With the worldwide development of railway systems in modern times, the “machine ensemble of the railway had been brought within the ambit of what might be seen as the wider machine ensemble of urban industrialism” (Thompson 144).

The historical context of the term *machine ensemble* was the Industrial Revolution and the adoption of trains powered by steam engines, but the connotation of *machine ensemble* in *A Tour of the 21st- Century Railway* has expanded technologically, culturally, and politically. In the novel, train engines have developed far beyond the steam engine to include diesel engines, electric motors, magnetic levitation, and even atomic-powered trains. *Machine ensemble* involves not only mechanical technology, but also electronic and informational technologies. The modern technological nature of the *machine ensemble* is presented through Mingming and his sister’s experiences at various railway stations and during their train trips.

Railway stations serve the function of connecting an urban realm with the railway network. In *A Tour of the 21st- Century Railway*, the railway station expresses its dual function of connecting a dense city with the expansive landscape outside of it through its two-facedness— its reception hall faces the city while its departure platforms face in the direction of open country (Schivelbusch 173-74). The railway journey of Mingming and his sister gets underway at the Guangzhou railway station. It is a grand and magnificent architectural monument that stands in the middle of a vast square and is demarcated by the glowing golden sign of Guangzhou Station. The sign is made of special plastic that can store solar energy through photosynthesis during daylight hours, while drawing upon this stored energy to light up the city streets at night time. The roof of the station is covered by solar panels, which generate an adequate supply of electricity to power the entire building. The interior of the reception hall shines with marble flooring and decorated walls; air conditioning provides a comfortable range of temperature and humidity indoors. Plastic ID cards have replaced paper tickets. AI robots handle service functions as conductors and janitors. Gazing at these ultra-modern features

of the Guangzhou railway station, Mingming cannot help but exclaim, “This electronically advanced railway station is really amazing!” (Deng 15). In addition to the Guangzhou railway station, the novel also depicts three other railway stations. While the Guangzhou Railway Station is an above-ground building, the Beijing Railway Station contains both above-ground and underground sections. As for the railway stations in Shanghai and Los Angeles, they are both built partially under the ocean. All these four stations contain the dual installation of reception hall and departure platforms. The reception halls of the railway station showcase the country’s various modern technologies, while the departure platforms guide passengers to the trains themselves and the wider world outside of the city. The railway stations come across as palpably industrial buildings with an ensemble of high-tech materials and various advanced technologies. In this way, the modernization of transport has become perceptible to all the senses.

From the departure platform of the Guangzhou Railway Station, Mingming and his sister board a train called *Future*. This *Future* train is a magnetically levitated one made of heavy-duty fiberglass. It has double decks with two dozen compartments covered by solar-panel roofing. It can race along at speeds as high as 400 or 500 kilometers per hour. Inside the train compartment, the two of them enjoy a travel experience of safety, speed, and comfort. This is a long train with specialized separate cars for sleeping, dining, browsing books, listening to music, watching movies, and enjoying a spa or hair salon. Mingming and his sister partake in lively conversations with other passengers. One of these passengers is a scientist who escorts Mingming and his sister on a tour of the AI- controlled locomotive. During lunch time, they sample various types of genetically engineered rice and vegetables in the dining car. Over lunch, the scientist tells them about various high-tech agricultural advances such as artificial precipitation, AI management, automatic harvester combines, and genetically engineered crops. After Mingming and his sister arrive in Beijing, their grandfather takes them on a tour of the railway system’s automatic dispatch and control center, where artificial intelligence controls the orderly flow of trains all over the country. In this way, high-tech train travel has provided the young protagonist with a mobile experience of the country’s railway modernization.

In addition to showcasing the technological advances of *machine ensemble*, *A Tour of the 21st- Century Railway* also reveals that a *machine ensemble* enables mobility. Mobility is a “general principle of modernity similar to those of equality, globality, rationality, and individuality” (Canzler *et al* 3). Many 19th and 20th-century scholars have written treatises about the close connection between mobility

and modernity, such as Karl Marx's *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Charles Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life" (1872), Marshall Berman's *All that Is Solid Melts into Air* (1982), and Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* (2000). In the 21st century, scholars have continued to explore the relationship between mobility and modernity. For example, Weert Canzler, Vincent Kaufmann, and Sven Kesselring edited the volume *Tracing Mobilities: Towards a Cosmopolitan Perspective* to examine the relationship between social fluidity and spatial mobility. They define mobility as fluctuating circumstances within three dimensions: movement, network, and motility. People, objects, ideas, and information all get entangled with movement by means of transportation and telecommunication networks, including mail and the internet. "Motility is the capacity of an actor to move socially and spatially" (Canzler *et al* 3). The motility is conditioned by networks, the accessibility of the networks, and "the skills possessed to take advantage of this access" (Ibid).

A Tour of the 21st-Century Railway depicts a highly mobile society at the beginning of 21st-century China, and portrays three dimensions of mobility: movement, network, and motility. The characters in the novel embrace a variety of means for moving around within the country as well as travelling abroad. The narrative repeatedly emphasizes the extensive railway network in the country and its important role in the country's economic development. At the very beginning of the narrative, the omniscient third-person narrator tells the reader that the railways "cross over swiftly flowing rivers, and pass through rugged mountains and open fields" (Deng 1). The "spider-web-like railway network has spread all over the country ... Each day a single railway line can transport tens of thousands of passengers and tens of millions of products for sale. Therefore, railway lines are considered the country's economic arteries. Railway transport is an important component for building socialist China" (Deng 3). In addition to trains, there are other modes of transport and communication at everyone's disposal. For example, the grandpa pilots single-person aircraft or private helicopter from his home to various railway construction sites. Mingming uses a mobile phone to contact his grandpa on the train. A time-traveling airship can even transport Mingming from 1979 to 2001. By presenting such a variety of modes of transport, the narrative reveals that the rise of a complex global inter-city network is inextricably connected with multiple mobilities.

In the narrative, at Shanghai Railway Station, well-wishers gather on a station platform to celebrate the grand opening of the global undersea railway, along with the long-lasting friendship between China, Japan, and America. A banner hanging

at the entrance of the railway station reads, “Enthusiastically celebrate the opening of the China-Japan-America Undersea Global Railway” (Deng 81). As large as it is, this railway line is but one section of an even larger global railway network. The undersea train stops at Yokohama and Honolulu before eventually arriving at its final destination of Los Angeles. Mingming and his sister establish friendships with a number of foreigners on this train. “A given train compartment resounds with Japanese, English, Chinese, and Esperanto, as if tracing a melody of friendship” (Deng 97). Here the train is not merely an indicator of industrial progress and modernity, but also becomes a global site of cultural exchange.

A Tour of the 21st- Century Railway presents a positive view of the *machine ensemble*’s impact on nature and landscape. First of all, the narrative reveals how the increased speed and expansion of the railway network have changed the natural environment in various ways. The novel echoes Schivelbusch’s view on the positive effects of railways on nature and a traveler’s view of landscape through train windows. “The railroad transformed the world of lands and seas into a panorama that could be experienced. Not only did it join previously distant localities by eliminating all resistance, difference, and adventure from the journey; now that traveling had become so comfortable and common, it turned the travelers’ eyes outward and offered them the opulent nourishment of everchanging images” (Schivelbusch 62). In the narrative, the expanded railway network has opened up a lot of natural landscape to the eyes of many travelers who would not have otherwise experienced much of it. Through Mingming’s conversation with his grandpa, readers learn that the total length of PRC railways has reached 1.3 million km. The railway network has even extended to the man-made islands within the South China Sea. Though these islands are separated from the mainland by the ocean, the newly constructed undersea railway system now connects these islands with the mainland.

The expansion of the railway system resembles recent advances in road building technology. At the construction site, Mingming witnesses basic techniques of railway construction such as cuttings and embankments made by heavy-duty machinery. While riding a helicopter and noting how tunnels and viaducts helped to overcome the challenges of the hilly terrain, Grandpa sighs in admiration: “We have mastered the most advanced forms of science and technology, and will use them to benefit humankind. Nowadays, we can ride a spaceship to tour the universe or hop on an undersea train to visit the watery palace of the dragon king” (Deng 60). Even though expanded railways resulted in losses for the natural landscape, the protagonist sees railway transportation as an emancipation from the constraints of the natural world through convenient accessibility to distant regions.

Mingming and his grandfather expound on the beauty of both natural and man-made landscapes through which they traverse as railway passengers. From Mingming's vantage point, readers do not encounter examples of how railway construction has destroyed part of the picturesque landscape; instead, railroads simply provide passengers with aesthetically pleasing views of the landscape. Schivelbusch compares a fast-speed train to a projectile (54). When the train is experienced as a projectile, passengers travel on it as if "being shot through the landscape" (Schivelbusch 54). The railway system "interjected itself between the traveler and the landscape. The traveler perceived the landscape as it was filtered through the machine ensemble" (Schivelbusch 24). In addition, "the scenery that the railroad presents in rapid motion appeared as a panorama" (Schivelbusch 61). *A Tour of the 21st-Century Railway* describes a series of panoramic vistas that unfold before the passengers on the projectile-like train. For example, when Mingming takes an atomic-powered train from Shanghai to Los Angeles, the high-speed train runs through a transparent tunnel along the seabed of the Pacific Ocean. The high velocity of the undersea train becomes a stimulus for various fresh perceptions on Mingming's part. Mingming not only gazes at various aquatic creatures, but also observes various terraforming projects that have been exploiting undersea resources such as minerals, ores, coal, and petroleum. Grandpa admiringly comments, "Now that we have an undersea railway system, treasures from the ocean depths can be gathered and transported to land-based coastal facilities. Along this undersea railway, we have built factories, oil fields, and coal mines. The factories extract and purify minerals, smelt and cast them into metal bars, or manufacture them into various components of machinery. These treasures that have been buried at the bottom of the ocean for millions of years can now serve humankind" (Deng 93). Grandpa further emphasizes the role of science and technology: "Nowadays, we not only have near-sea railways, but also undersea railways that cross the ocean. Science helps people by opening up their eyes. Science allows humans to conquer nature and the world. Science is great" (Deng 84)! From the grandfather's comments, we can see that this novel portrays wild and untouched areas in nature as valuable only insofar as they can be exploited by humans for economic gain, technological advances, and industrial modernization.

The modern railway is a crystallization of extensive industrialization and advanced science and technology. From the contemporary perspective of the third decade of the 21st century, the novel's depiction reflects the PRC's railway development during the last one and half centuries since China's first interurban

railway between Wusong and Shanghai was built in 1876.¹

High-Speed Train Running on a Mobius Railway

On 1 August 2008, the first Chinese high-speed railway between Beijing and Tianjin entered into service. This train could reach speeds as high as 350 km per hour. This first high-speed train series was called “Harmony”; it replaced the older Dongfeng and Shaoshan locomotives on many railway routes. It represents “the most advanced, modern and fashionable means of transportation in contemporary China” (Han 370). Henceforth, I will use the Chinese term *gaotie* in the same sense as Schivelbusch’s *machine ensemble* to refer to the entire high-speed railway system, including railway tracks, the trains themselves, and other related facilities. The fast development of *gaotie* became the epitome of the country’s fast-paced modernization in order to catch up with the world’s most technologically advanced countries. However, in co-existence with the high-speed railway system one can still encounter dirt roads for horse carts in the countryside, highways for automobiles and buses, and medium-speed trains. The coexistence of these contrasting modes of transportation reveals the paradoxes of China’s modernization—the agricultural age co-exists with the industrial era and the information age (Han 371). Han Song indicates that these coexistences create a sense of alternate time and space. This is the reason why he wrote the novel *The High-Speed Railway*. The novel was written during the period from 2007 to 2010, which overlaps with the early development of China’s *gaotie*. By the time the novel was published in 2012, the total length of China’s high-speed railway network was 13,000 km, which ranked as longest in the world. In the novel, the high-speed train system becomes a metaphor for the Chinese nation as a whole.

The High-Speed Railway was not Han Song’s first novel about trains. In 2011, Han Song published the novel *Subway (Ditie)*. In this narrative, the passengers are trapped in a non-stop subway train running in the Beijing underground subway. Mingwei Song notes: “Han Song’s *Subway* subverts conventional ‘harmonious’ versions of the development myth... The universe of the high-speed train spins completely out of control, and while the train continues on endlessly, all life eventually dies out” (95). Therefore, the novel “suggests the disastrous

1 China’s first interurban railway between Wusong and Shanghai was built in 1876 by the famous British trading company, Jardine Matheson Holdings Limited. Soon thereafter, the Qing dynasty government claimed eminent domain over this railway and demolished it soon afterward. In 1881, the Qing government constructed a short railway line between Tangshan and Xugezhuang. From that time on, more and more railways were built in China throughout the Warlord and Republican eras.

transformation of the myth of development into a dystopian nightmare” (Song 94). *The High-Speed Railway*, published one year after *Subway*, can be read as an expansion of the earlier novel. The narrative explores a much wider range of problems brought about by the country’s fast economic development, extrapolating an even darker dystopia for the country’s future.

The High-Speed Railway contains five parts, addressing various problems of high-speed trains. These parts of the novel can be read as interlocking but discrete stories; one protagonist’s high-speed train is not necessarily identical to the high-speed train that another protagonist rides. The novel features four main protagonists: Zhou Yuan, Zhou Tiesheng, Xunge, and A Hui. A father-son relationship is prominent among these four characters, each of whom represents a different generation, and functions as the protagonist of one or two parts of the novel. The birth of a son is always accompanied by the death or disappearance of a father. Except for Zhou Yuan, all of the protagonists are born and raised within a *gaotie* milieu.

If we were to say that Deng’s *A Tour of the 21st- Century Railway* eulogizes the country’s modernization by using the railway system as a metaphor for the increasingly mobile society, Han’s *The High-Speed Railway* presents a “mobile risk society” or even immobile society in which endangered passengers are confined within a high-speed, unstoppable train. In his seminal essay “The Mobile Risk Society,” Sven Kesselring draws upon Ulrich Beck’s theory of reflexive modernization and a “risk society” to introduce the notion of the “mobile risk society” (Kesselring 77). In a modernized society, not only are there technological and ecological risks, but the “social structures also become instable and permeable” (Kesselring 77). From the vantage point of Beck’s risk society, Kesselring focuses on the ambivalence and fragility of modern spatial mobilities based on advanced transportation technologies and ubiquitous information and communication technologies” (Canzler et al 7). The huge and complex global transport systems endow people with mobility and flexibility, but also put people at risk. Kesselring argues that “The increasing mobility of the risk society leads into a social situation where the individuals are forced to navigate and decide whilst they are confronted with increasing lack of clarity, with social vagueness and obscurity” (Kesselring 78). This social situation described by Kesselring is especially explicit in Han Song’s novel. Han Song presents a literary “mobile risk society” created in large part by a highly advanced system of transportation. While modern systems of transportation expand the world in some ways, they also confine people within a prison-like closed space, and cause environmental degradation. The novel reveals

the technological, environmental, and social risks brought about by *gaotie*, which I am going to analyze respectively in the following paragraphs.

In the novel, the environmental risk is disclosed by the increasingly degraded external landscapes at which the passengers gaze through train windows. In contrast with Schivelbusch's positive view of the *machine ensemble*'s impact on the natural landscape, the narrator in the narrative argues that "[transportation] is an invention that goes against nature. It tightens space and squeezes time by means of gears, wheels, fuel, and electricity. It pollutes the environment and consumes energy. It is society's biggest consumer of natural resources. The waste products it has produced are difficult to eliminate. It has brought about a slow-paced suicide of the earth" (Han 178-179). In the narrative, passengers are being sternly prohibited from looking outside by higher-ups on the train: "Now pay attention! Don't look at what's outside! The answer can't be found outside" (Han 49). In spite of the warning, Zhou Yuan cannot help but catch a glimpse now and then of the scene outside of the train window. To his disappointment, the landscape outdoors has only two colors, white and black. It does not reveal any sign of human habitation. It looks like a huge scar upon the earth. Zhou Yuan remembers that when he first boarded the train, the world was not like this. Zhou Yuan recalls: "The magnificent railway station stands in the center of the city like a shrine to God. The world was boisterous, colorful, and crowded. However, the world has now become so strange, and "looks like a broken mask" (Han 31). His recollections about the appearance of the railway station echoes the gleaming railway stations portrayed in *A Tour of the 21st-Century Railway*. By the time when the next generation's Zhou Tiesheng absent-mindedly looks out the window, he notices that everything outside has become suffused with greyish mist. Fields, villages, towns, and roads are all shrouded by heavy fog. When the third generation of the Zhou family, Xunge, looks through the train window, he finds that not a single tree remains in the landscape, only some mosses and lichens on the ground. Dust storms sweep through bare mountains and hills, revealing the white bones of human skeletons strewn along the ground. Many cities have decayed into mere ruins. Many rubbish heaps of rubber, plastic, and metal wastes are burning or smoldering. In this apocalyptic scene, the steel-armored train seems almost the only dynamic object in this decaying and ruined landscape. At the end of the novel, the outside world has become so radioactive as to be virtually uninhabitable for humans. The deteriorating environment reveals that the *gaotie* has completely sabotaged nature's laws of motion. Even though every mechanical part within a *gaotie* locomotive has been painstakingly designed, this contrivance has been destroying the quality of air, water, and life itself. It eventually

incurs a retaliation from nature.

The technological and social risks embedded within the *gaotie* system become more and more evident to the four main characters during their railway journeys. These risks resonate with Han Song's observations and comments about the socio-political issues arising from China's rapid economic development and technological modernization from the early post-Mao Reform Era to the 2010s. Han Song makes the temporal setting explicit by utilizing the fictional character Wu Weilai as a stand-in for Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997). In the early part of the novel, Zhou Yuan is in the train's delivery room awaiting the birth of his son. There he meets a 93-year-old man named Wu Weilai (literally, "no future") who turns out to be the general designer of the *gaotie* system and the real power-holder in the train. "He is not one single person, but an incarnation of one billion people. He embodies one nation" (Han 159). There is little doubt that this is a direct reference to Deng Xiaoping. This part of the novel ends with the death of Wu Weilai and birth of Zhou Tiesheng. It symbolizes the end of the Deng era and the beginning of a new era of technocrats taking over the leadership of the party-state.

Each of the four characters, Zhou Yuan, Xiesheng, Xunge and A Hui, are unusual passengers who have sought to discover some sort of societal "truth" (*zhenxiang*) on the basis of their experiences as train passengers. The truths for which they search and the facts they discover about their train are also different. In contrast, the vast majority of passengers are unreflective simpletons who "are intoxicated, and do nothing but eat and drink" (Han 31). The contrast between these two groups of passengers reminds the reader of Lu Xun's allegory about humans inside a dangerous iron house: an awakened minority see the urgency of breaking out of the house, but the majority remain asleep, oblivious to the danger of confinement inside an iron house.

Truth-seeking is a motif in many of Han Song's novels. For example, in Han's 2012 novel *Mars over America: Random Sketches on a Journey to the West in 2066* (Huoxing zhaoyao meiguo: 2066 nian xixing manji 火星照耀美国: 2066年西行漫记), the *go* player discovers truths about the world during his journey in the US. In "The Passengers and the Creators" ("Chengke yu chuangzao zhe" 乘客与创造者, 2006), some revolutionary passengers try to find out the truth about the Boeing 7X7 universe in which they have been trapped. Both works address China's interaction with the West, specifically America. In "The Passengers and the Creators," though the passengers have been trapped in the universe of the Boeing 7X7, the revolutionary passengers eventually commandeer the plane and force it to land ahead of schedule. As they disembark, they confront armed American soldiers.

Mingwei Song's allegorical interpretation of this story is that "the Chinese live in a 'universe' produced, contained, and controlled by an American company" (91). The story is a "national allegory" – the "nation turned into a consumer society that has lost its sovereignty to foreign manipulation," hence expressing the author's "profound anxiety about China's future" (Song 91). In comparison, in *The High-Speed Railway*, the West has disappeared from view, and only becomes part of a blurry external world from which the high-speed train has been alienated. The truths that the main characters seek are entirely confined within the train.

The novel's four generations' worth of investigative railway journeys gradually reveal the true nature of the train system, including various discrepancies between the official rhetoric about the *gaotie* system and the actual reality of this railway network. The first main character, Zhou Yuan, boards a train on account of a crisis in his marriage. In the ensuing horrible train wreck, his parents die and his wife goes missing. He then makes his way to the locomotive to find out why the train wreck happened. Along the way, Zhou Yuan discovers various shocking truths. He comes across a blueprint of the train that emphasizes its large size, high speed, and profitability above all. The construction of the *gaotie* system appears to have been rife with corruption. It is a hybrid—a hodgepodge of China's own innovative technology as well as imported railway technology from Japan, Germany, Sweden, and France. These advances in science and technology have merely enabled the authorities to increase their powers to control and surveil the populace. The ubiquitous face recognition surveillance system can monitor every single passenger in the train. The real-name train ticket is linked to a passenger's ID, and thus has become one more governmental tactic for vacuuming up all the passengers' personal information. In addition, the train is not actually moving forward, but instead is quickly expanding like a balloon. It merely gives people the illusion that it is running. The size of the train expands to the extent that the signals sent out from the locomotive will take forever to reach the other end of the train. This might be one of the reasons for the wreck. Another possible reason for the wreck is that the self-diagnostics in the locomotive computer's operating system have malfunctioned and thus failed to signal any warning to the engineer. Nevertheless, "no one is interested in investigating the reason for the wreck. People are too busy enjoying life" (Han 36). The locomotive operator bore sole blame for the wreck. Zhou Yuan further discovers that "[the train] was on an escape route" (Han 46)! That is why it was hurtling along at such high speed and unable to stop safely. A lot of things have been chasing the train: petroleum-based fuel will be depleted within seven years; iron ore will be depleted within sixteen years; and natural gas will be depleted

within thirty-nine years. The economy has been in a downturn; food has been poisoned by dangerous chemicals all over the place; and environmental pollution has gotten more and more severe. The train thus has no other choice but to escape. These unsettling truths about the train mirror China's actual problems.

Similar to his father Zhou Yuan, Zhou Tiesheng also sets out to discover why his parents died and searches for his missing wife. The author contrasts official grandiose rhetoric about trains with Tiesheng's personal observations about the *gaotie* system. The official rhetoric quoted in the novel is identical with the PRC government's rhetoric. For example, the official rhetoric praises *gaotie* as the greatest technological achievement in the history of railway transport. It is lightning-fast, comfortable, safe, environmentally friendly, and punctual. It reflects all facets of the country's railway technology, including railroad construction, speed control, locomotive technology, and organizational and managerial expertise. The rapid development of the *gaotie* system boosts economic growth, fosters national rejuvenation, and makes life wonderful for the populace. However, what Tiesheng has observed is quite different: fatal accidents, environmental degradation, increases in population, food shortages, and excessive confinement of its passengers. The train system is disconnected from the outside world and is desperately trying to escape from its imagined enemies in the outside world. Its passengers have lost their sense of security and trust. "It expands and runs faster and faster ... [but] at present, the trains themselves are not compatible with the rails on which they run" (Han 232). This statement amounts to authorial commentary about the realities of contemporary PRC society: rapid economic development has not been compatible with the party-state's ideological orientation.

In the locomotive cab, Tiesheng also discovers that his father Zhou Yuan has not died. The train is actually controlled by a group of technocrats in the Jiuzhou (literally, "nine districts," an alternative label for China) Research Institute. His father, Zhou Yuan, who inherited the power from the *gaotie* designer Wu Weilai thirty years ago is now the corrupt paramount leader of the institute. This is yet another reference to the technocratic leadership of the Chinese Communist Party-state after the end of the Deng era. Zhou Tiesheng murders his father before returning to his train compartment to enjoy the company of his wife and newborn son Xunge.

Though the train seems a perfect self-sustained world, Xunge, the third generation of the truth-seeker, feels that life in the train is "twisted and morbid" (Han 257). The compartments are equipped with countless surveillance cameras. The surveillance cameras not only keep watch on the passengers, but also "record

the data of this world, which will serve as the template for creating the next *gaotie* world” (Han 304-305). This explicitly implies that China’s development strategy and model will not be reformed or changed in future. Even worse, “The train no longer has any timetable or specific route. Everything is random. The destination of the train is uncertain” (Han 283). The train has now turned into a sustainable eco-train, on which the passengers are mostly farmers. Migrant workers who had left the countryside for jobs in cities were the ones who built this train. Yet urbanites never viewed these migrants as equals, instead treating them as second-class citizens. Therefore, the rural-based migrants built their own dream train, on which no discrimination was allowed, and where people were all treated equally. They also built their own railway lines around their villages because the established railway networks controlled by the authorities did not permit this train to use existing railway tracks. This train generates its own biosphere with the aid of an on-board supercomputer. It produces grains, vegetables and fruit. Advanced bioengineering technology enables the farmers on board to collect 18 harvests each year. The train trades its agricultural products for manufactured goods produced by cities along the railway network. The outside world no longer has any farmland. If this train were not to supply urbanites with its agricultural products, the urbanites would all starve to death. The cities are ruled by financial capital, machinery, and internet. However, machinery and information technology have not brought about any advancement in the socio-political system. Frequently hungry and feeling oppressed by their moribund socio-political system, many urbanites have abandoned their cities and fled to the countryside. Their key goal is to sustain themselves by robbing food and clean water from the migrants’ train. They are called railway guerrillas, and use the military strategy of cities encircling the countryside. This episode is a hilarious parody of the CCP’s history of armed revolution and Mao’s military strategy of the countryside encircling cities.

Like his ancestors, A Hui, the representative of the youngest generation, also discovers various truths about the train. A Hui, whom we assume is Xunge’s son, is a member of the exploration team that is investigating the history of this train. Though the train is named *Future*, it is running on a “spiral railway” (盘陀路) (Han 316). In this way, the railway now resembles a Möbius strip. “This train is heading full speed into the future, but it does not know where its next stop will be, and its brakes have been removed” (Han 328). Thus, the train actually has no future. The narrator also claims that the passengers in the train are living in a new “steam and atomic era.” The implication here is that railway technology has not progressed in a linear manner, but amounts to an anachronistic amalgam of technological advances.

In addition, one generation of passengers stays in a different train compartment from a different generation of passengers. What we see here is the coexistence of anachronistic varieties of ideology based in contrasting historical eras. At the end of the novel, the author presents a bird's-eye-view of countless members of an audience in the sky who are carefully observing this train. According to the narrator, "It is difficult to discern whether the passengers or the audience members matter more" (Han 366). This concluding sentence resonates strongly with the overarching theme of the novel: the rapid development of the *gaotie* system is fake and just for show.

The novel's final revelation of the high-speed train running on a Möbius railway echoes and expands upon the hypothesis of the "mobile risk society" advanced by Kesselring. By making the high-speed train network a metaphor for the Chinese nation, the novel enhances the concept of "mobile risk society" with an added political dimension: the advanced system of transportation can make the society alienated from the outside world in a time of globalization, and bring immobility to its people and stagnation to its historical trajectory. The "mobile risk society" further declines to the condition of an immobile society confined within a Möbius-strip-style railway system. The metaphor of the Möbius strip challenges the anticipated linear progress of modernization. In doing so, the novel makes a harsh and profound critique of China's fast-paced development from 1978 to the present day.

Conclusion: A Great Leap Forward of Development

My analyses of the two railways narratives reveal how railways and trains have provided PRC sf writers a literary space in which to reflect upon the risks and benefits of China's fast technological and economic development, along with China's dynamic status within a globalized world. *A Tour of the 21st-Century Railway* presents a highly mobile society in which the populace enjoys various means of interacting and connecting with people from all over the world. The narrative adopts a stance of socialist realism to present a utopian Chinese society that receives nothing but benefits from its headlong embrace of advanced science and technology. Railways as a network of spatial movement provide the Chinese populace with the mobility to make more extensive use of the country's territory, thereby improving China's socio-economic profile. The protagonist Mingming and his fellow passengers display an uncritical attitude toward the rapid development of the PRC's railway system. They extol new railway technology without even considering the possibility that there may be some unintended or otherwise negative consequences of these advances in technology. Nor do they express any

ethical concerns about the impact of railway system expansion on the natural environment. The main characters in the narrative typically draw upon the party-state's ideological rhetoric to justify the continuous expansion of the PRC's high-speed railway system. Hence, this narrative reveals how PRC sf authors during the post-Mao cultural thaw era often uncritically embraced the national agenda of rapid expansion of the railway system and other facets of the Four Modernizations.

In sharp contrast, Han Song's *The High-Speed Railway* presents a dystopian and immobile society that arises in part from expansion of the *gaotie* system. These passengers are typically confined in a high-speed train that "has only a locomotive on rails, but lacks a signal crew and dispatchers" (Han 373). This train is not actually moving forward in a constructive direction, but instead is running on a Möbius-strip-style railway. It is isolated from the outside world. Therefore, its passengers have lost all three dimensions of mobility: movement, network, and motility. In this way, Han Song presents a highly critical view of China's rapid economic development and social progress since the outset of Deng's reforming and opening policy. The country's development over the past four decades has been little more than a self-isolating spiral repetition; at the same, there has been a general lack of socio-political progress. Han makes it explicit that the metaphorical high-speed train of China has been operating a highly advanced technological system on the basis of a stagnant and backward ideology. In the narrative, Han points out the nature of the *gaotie* system: "The *gaotie* symbolizes a great leap forward for modernization" (Han 38). The consequence of this great leap forward for modernization is that "this country has been changing so fast as to have become unrecognizable" (Han 374). In the postscript to the novel, Han Song makes the following observation: "In contrast with the views from a window in a low-speed train, the view from a window in a high-speed train seems like an explosion of a tilted galaxy on the horizon. History and reality have been torn into pieces, and the storm-like procession of these pieces passes swiftly by a viewer looking through the window: advertisements for pig feed and mobile phones, family planning slogans, factories and warehouses, highways, plastic litter, dried-out lake beds, polluted rivers, and beggars dressed in miserable rags and tatters" (Han 374). This fast-paced modernization drive has ironically led to the country's increasing alienation from the rest of the world. Han Song notes: "Even though many people claim that the Chinese populace has benefited from globalization and become citizens of the world, I feel the China has become increasingly isolated from the world. China exists in what it has defined as an isolated train system, and enjoys little in the way of meaningful interaction with the larger world on the outside" (Han 372). Han

does not worry about the PRC's apparent embrace of state capitalism. Instead, he worries that "China may be adopting a more harsh and backward feudalism" (Han 373). Han adds that he is very sad to observe how China seems to have been caught within a vicious cycle of recapitulating its historical blunders, and worries that the Chinese populace's hopes for living in a truly advanced society may yet again be dashed. These melancholy concerns have motivated him to write ceaselessly and record his observations and feelings.

The two narratives' emphasis on the high-speed railway system echoes Mingwei Song's observation of the utopian motifs of "rise of China" and "the myth of development" in Chinese science fiction. Song notes: "Development is not merely tantamount to economic growth, on which China's recent reform has focused, but also provides a cultural paradigm of modernization as a linear movement of continuous progress" (92). He also observes how Chinese "new wave" sf writers have treated the traditional utopian motifs in a critical and reflective way:

Deeply entangled with the politics of a changing China, science fiction today both strengthens and complicates the utopian vision of a new and powerful China: it mingles nationalism with utopianism/dystopianism, mixes sharp social criticism with an acute awareness of China's potential for further reform, and wraps political consciousness in scientific discourses about the powers of technology and the technology of power (87).

Specifically, "the myth of unlimited development and its disastrous effects have received self-reflexive treatment in the new wave sf in China" (Song 93). In light of Song's arguments, we can see that the utopian motif of the high-speed railway system that characterized China's Four Modernizations in *A Tour of the 21st-Century Railway* has been treated with irony and parody in *The High-Speed Railway*. In Han's novel, the *machine ensemble* has been reconsidered and reconstructed, and has become the container to reflect author's critical view on development. The advanced railway system has not only complicated the relationship between natural landscape and train travel, but has also contributed to the transformation of a "mobile risk society" into an immobile society that is resistant to socio-political progress.

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