

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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