

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

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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.

Works Cited:

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