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Articles

Leaving the Family to Save It: Posthumanism in Liu Cixin's Science Fiction

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Abstract

This paper is a study of posthumanism as envisioned by the contemporary Chinese science fiction writer Liu Cixin. From his early works like *China 2185* and *Supernova Era* to his latest works such as *The Three-Body Trilogy*, Liu Cixin's characters consistently demonstrate a tendency to distance themselves from conventional human society to explore new dimensions of time and space. The authors argue that Liu Cixin introduces a posthuman transformation through his portrayal of characters who choose to leave the family constructed by key concepts of Confucian humanism. The journey of "leaving family" begins with an exit from current Chinese society and later extends to leaving the Earth and then the solar system, implying an ultimate departure from any kind of anthropocentric humanism, wherein posthumanism emerges in Liu Cixin's works. The primary driving force for such posthumanism stems from Liu's recognition of the profound gap between the minuscule humanity and the vast universe, his admiration for the high-entropic universe, as well as his criticism of humanity's attachment to systems of "family" for comfort and security. The other force is the tension between "leaving family" and human ethical and moral values that inhibit adventures. While the journey of "leaving family" is justified by the instinct of survival in the event of cosmic catastrophes, humanist values are constantly challenged and redefined to engender a posthumanistic envisioning of home for the future of humanity.

The recent Netflix television series *3 Body Problem* has cemented Liu Cixin's reputation as the face of Chinese science fiction (SF) for a global audience, but his outsized influence on the popularity of the genre has been decades in the making in China. Liu began writing science fiction in 1989. Since then, he has published dozens of novels and many more short stories, including *Zhongguo 2185* 中国 2185 (China 2185, 1989), *Chaoxinxing jiyuan* 超新星纪元 (Supernova Era, 1989), "Xiangcun jiaoshi" 鄉村教師 (The Village Schoolteacher, 2001), *Qiuzhuang shandian* 球狀閃電 (Ball Lightning, 2005), "Liulang diqiu" 流浪地球 (The Wandering Earth, 2008), and *Santi sanbuqu* 三體三部曲 (The Three-Body Trilogy, 2006-2010). *Santi* 三體 (The Three-Body Problem, 2006), the first book of *The Three-Body Trilogy,* was translated into English by Ken Liu and won the Hugo Prize in 2015—one of the many awards that Li Cixin has received. There have been at least thirteen adaptations of Liu's work into TV series or films that are often assisted by the novelist's participation in various roles, including script writing and story consulting. The fictional world of the future that Liu Cixin has constructed for his readers has been a fascinating spectacle of technological wonders and a complex tale of human survival. This world is made vividly enthralling for us by Liu's brilliant storytelling and intricate character portrayal aided by his ingenious scientific imagination. A narrative of the future has been the trademark of SF, but Liu's unique narrative of the future is characterized by historical traumas, human impulse for self-destruction, science's uncertain promises and the ethical dilemma of sacrificing life to preserve it, which jointly point to a form of posthumanism predicting a future of humans under drastic yet uncertain reformation and reconstitution.

The current scholarly research on posthumanism mostly aligns with Western critical posthumanism, an offshoot of critical theory popular in the late twentieth century. Facing the growing competition and conflict between humans and emerging AI-aided machines, critical posthumanism scholars argue that the emergence of posthumans, which highlights the potential for humans to coevolve with machines and animals, provides a significant opportunity to challenge the humanist view of humans as autonomous, self-conscious, cohesive, and self-determining beings. Re-

search on Liu Cixin's posthumanism is usually conducted within this framework, emphasizing Liu's elaborate portrayal of science and technology, which shows a tendency to override human agency and social order. For example, Mingwei Song argues that Liu Cixin downplays the significance of human moral consciousness in favor of a utopia of science and technology, where the development of science and technology serves as the only absolute truth. The highly technologized and omnipotent perspective in Liu Cixin's works makes his portrayal of the utopia of science and technology a posthuman narrative, in which the human agency is overwhelmed by a cosmic determinism, and human moral society gives way to a universe of zero morality (Song, "Variations on Utopia" 95).

However, other scholars believe that Liu Cixin's works do not qualify as posthumanism, as they do not form a critique of anthropocentric humanism in the same way as Western critical posthumanism does. For example, while expanding on Song's argument about the utopia of science and technology, Justus Poetzsch argues that posthumanism is not "correctly" represented in Liu's novels, in which posthuman can only be described as a form of transhumanism due to the dominance of social Darwinism and technodeterminism where survival of the civilization depends solely on the levels of science and technology. Poetzsch thinks that the views expressed in the novel not only diverge from humanist principles but also run counter to the idea of sympoiesis (collectively producing systems where participants think with and become with each other) advocated by critical posthumanism (Poetzsch 182).

The problem with the argumentation by Song and Poetzsch lies in their teleological approach to studying Liu Cixin and Chinese SF. The advocacy for the sympoiesis of all sentient beings is a prominent aspect of Western critical posthumanism, but it does not cover all situations—much like Western critical posthumanism itself is just one strand of the multifaceted posthumanism. Contemporary Chinese SF is not, by default, a reenactment of Western critical posthumanism, nor is it an imperfect interpretation of it. It is more prudent to say that contemporary Chinese SF represents a new intellectual wave that emerges simultaneously with Western critical posthumanism and that it possesses its own characteristics that are continually evolving. As a significant contributor to this wave, Liu Cixin demonstrates how humans, posthumans, science and technology, and nonhuman beings can interplay in multiple ways, leading to a form of posthumanism that challenges humanism—especially Chinese humanism—and embraces a cosmos beyond the current realm of human beings and human ethics. Here, we suggest using the term *lijia* 离家 (leaving family) to characterize the unique form of posthumanism present in Liu Cixin's works.

By "leaving family," we mean an intellectual departure from Confucius's 孔子 idea of *jia* 家 (family). In Confucianism, "family" serves as a key concept in constructing a utopian social system, within which other concepts can be allocated and function. In a study of "Liyun" 禮運 of *Liji* 禮記 (The Book of Rites), Michael Puett gives an analysis of how a perfect society is constructed in terms of "a single family" in the Confucian tradition. According to Puett, Confucius configures an ideal social system of the "single family," which, as noted in "Liyun," prevailed during the era of sages. The fatherly ruler transmits the ethical values obtained from heaven to his children. Meanwhile, every individual family is a replica of the "single family." Ethical and moral values are transmitted through rituals, with the family unit as the foundation. Confucius contends that only by restoring the social system of the "single family," the chaotic and fragmented world can be reorganized after the passing of the sages. However, Puett argues that the ritual world of perfection is not real, but it is an "as-if world" constructed by Confucius to remedy the chaotic and discontinuous real world. (Puett, "Constructions of Reality" 127)

Through the term "as-if world," Puett deconstructs the Confucian humanist map, casting doubt on the order built on "family" and leading us to consider to what extent we, whose lives are still organized in one way or another by this order and its renewals, can leave "the family" to see the "chaotic yet real" world. In fact, this kind of criticism is already present in Daoism 道家 (a philosophical school originating in China), though in a prehumanist way. Both *Laozi* 老子 and *Zhuangzi* 庄子 contain negative views toward *xiao* 孝 (filial piety) because it is artificially constructed—therefore, detrimental to the natural Dao. Ikeda Tomohisa's study on filial piety showcases how Confucian morality, with filial piety at its core, was recognized as a purported remedy (Ikeda 18). In Chapter 18 of *Laozi*, it says, "When the six family relationships are not in harmony, there are filial piety and compassion." In Chapter 14 of *Zhuangzi*, it says, "Tang. . . asked Zhuangzi about benevolence . . . Zhuangzi said, 'Perfect benevolence knows no (familial) affection'" (Ikeda 13). In both works, filial piety is taken as an inadequate remedy of the Dao. Moreover, Ikeda also demonstrates that *Zhuangzi* ascribed the decline of the pristine virtue of the Dao and an even greater sense of alienation to the invention of filial piety (Ikeda 18). In arguing for a world beyond the Confucian concept of "family," the Daoist perspective leans toward a kind of prehumanism rather than the humanism of the Confucian strand.

The concept of "leaving family" we employ here may evoke *chujia* 出家 (leaving family), which typically refers to the act of leaving the secular life to enter a monastic life through ordination in the tradition of both religious Daoism 道教 (developed from Daoism as a philosophical school but distinct from it) and Buddhism.

At first glance, the practice of *chujia*, especially when it implies leaving no heir, goes against the familial values of Confucianism. In effect, both Chinese Buddhism and religious Daoism have a history of reconciling with these values rather than repudiating them. For Chinese Buddhism, this reconciliation can be traced back to *Mouzi lihuo lun* 牟子理惑論 (Mouzi on the Settling of Doubts), in which Mouzi argues that Buddhists' devoting their lives to cultivating the Way is in no way unfilial. Compared to Chinese Buddhism, religious Daoism in the early medieval period integrated more closely with Confucianism in embracing familial values. In his study, Mugitani contends that religious Daoism highlights its contribution to establishing an ideal world order bound by filial virtue. Moreover, during the Six Dynasties (220-589), loyalty and filial piety were considered even more significant than the virtue of a sage for one's promotion in the afterlife and appointment to the ranks of divine officials, as evidenced by the words of Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 (456-536), a great Daoist master of the time (Mugitani 118). From this perspective, Chinese Buddhism and religious Daoism have not shown a determination to sever ties with the Confucian values of the "family" despite the ritual of *chujia*.

Therefore, by employing the term "leaving family" to characterize Liu Cixin's SF, we do not mean a reclamation of prehumanist Daoism nor a portrayal of *chujia* with all its religious connotations in religious Daoism and Chinese Buddhism. Rather, we suggest a strong determination to leave the Confucian "family" in a posthumanist manner. Liu Cixin's omnipotent narrative perspective, which views human civilization from a universal scale, parallels Puett's argument about Confucius' as-if world of perfection in some interesting ways. For Liu Cixin, the ordered societies built by humans in different temporal spaces are essentially as-if worlds. The Confucian-constructed utopia, represented by the concept of "family," exists not only in traditional China but also in the modern world and in the future as well. Thus, in his writings, the imagination of a universe governed by the ethics of the "dark forest" can be seen as a continuation of the challenge to the as-if world of perfection, presenting a world liberated from the constraints of the humanist familial order.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that one thing is different from another not because they are the forms of different beings with distinct essences, but because they are composed and decomposed by forces, or "intensities,"[1] interacting with each other in their unique ways. In other words,

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1   Deleuze and Guattari use the term "intensity" instead of "energy" or "force" to stress its intensive attribute. The intensive is fundamentally different from the extensive: While the extensive means energy is organized and expressed to cater to the priori, the intensive emphasizes the neutrality of energy, allowing it to interact with each other in multiple ways without being organized and fixed into the universal form.

things can be seen as assemblages of intensities that interact with one another, leading to both stability and change. In the light of Deleuze and Guattari's theory, we take posthumanism in Liu Cixin's SF as a process of becoming posthuman while taking the "leaving family" journey. First, we will demonstrate that posthumanism is not merely a departure from the socialist utopia through an analysis of Liu Cixin's *China 2185* and *Supernova Era.* In fact, posthumanism directly challenges Chinese humanism centered on the Confucian concept of the "family." Then, we will provide a discussion on how Liu Cixin relocates humankind in the cosmos with an analysis of his short fiction "The Wandering Earth," ascribing the primary driving forces to his recognition of the profound gap between the minuscule humanity and the vast universe while highlighting his vision for a high-entropic (lacking order) universe. Last but not least, through a discussion of *The Three-Body Trilogy,* we contend that human ethical and moral values have also influenced Liu Cixin's portrayal of "leaving family."

Posthumanism: More Than a Departure from the Socialist Utopia

The most relevant instance of the as-if world in Liu Cixin's works is the society of the People's Republic of China (PRC), specifically the one during the period of the Cultural Revolution, which is part of the background stories in *China 2185* and in *The Three-Body Problem*. Liu Cixin's exploration of posthumanism arises from his departure from this as-if world, just as Mingwei Song argues that Liu Cixin's "hard" SF serves as a response to political appropriation of SF in modern Chinese history (Song, *Fear of Seeing* 128). Thomas Moran also argues that Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* should be understood as "a means of overcoming outmoded or unworkable forms of utopian thought." By the "outmoded or unworkable forms of utopian thought," he refers to the socialist projects of the twentieth century and the technocapitalism of the present (Moran 119). However, we believe that the connotation of "leaving family" is more than just departing from the socialist utopia; it reflects a determination to abandon more fundamental concepts, such as the Confucian concepts like "rite" and "humaneness," "marriage" and "family," which have been in constant debate in modern times. To "leave family" means to renounce the structured society that places humanity at its center. This is to say that Liu Cixin's posthumanism takes shape as he challenges humanism. In this way, a posthuman in Liu Cixin's SF is primarily manifested by the portrayal of a group of people who "leave family." Posthumans break free from traditional living models constituted by the "family" and its figural meanings in the structured human society and civilization.

From both *China 2185* and *Supernova Era,* we see the theme of "leaving family" initially emerging as a departure from the political reality of modern China. In the former, Liu Cixin sketches a future vision of China in which traditional family and marriage have become a hindrance to social development. In *2185*, the most famous and highest-ranked executive in China is a young woman whose foresight and bold decisions have led to significant progress in China, enabling it to become a prosperous and democratic nation. While being genuinely loved and supported by the youth, the executive is facing constant scrutiny and criticism from older adults. People enjoy longer lifespans due to the advancements in medicine, so multigenerational households of six or seven generations are common. However, these families are not as harmonious as expected; on the contrary, the older people create a dull and eerie atmosphere for the children at home, making them feel so stifled that they can only vent their frustration by racing flying motorcycles at night. The older adults oppose social changes, particularly proposals from their country's executive leader to abolish marriage and eliminate the traditional concept of family. Then, the brains of five older individuals are unexpectedly revived, and one of them replicates himself endlessly in the digital realm, establishing a virtue regime called Huaxia Republic. When he attempts to control the real world of China through this digital republic, the confrontation between gerontocracy and young democratic politics reaches a climax.

This plot design bears a resemblance to the political realities of China in the 1980s. As Chinese market economy reforms deepened, long-standing ideological control gradually relaxed and democratic ideas were gradually embraced by intellectuals and college students. However, the PRC government soon tightened its control, launching the successive political campaigns of Eliminating Spiritual Pollution (1983-1984) and Anti-Bourgeois Liberation (1986-1987), which slowed down the pace of the economic reform and opening. In her study of Liu Cixin's *China 2185*, Hua Li attributes the motivation of Liu Cixin's writing to this historical context. According to Hua Li,

> Liu shares with most Chinese intellectuals and university students a vision of China's political democratization in the near future. He also sees various hidden problems in China: the aging of the population, the potential conflicts between younger and older generations, and the continuing problem of gerontocracy in Chinese governance. (Li 524)

It is clear that Liu Cixin envisions the success of the young generation against

the gerontocracy in this story as an alternative resolution to China's political uncertainty at that moment. It becomes the starting point of Liu Cixin's departure from the social-political reality of China.

The impulse to "leave family" is also represented in *Supernova Era* written around the same time. In the story, the eruption of an unobserved supernova results in a catastrophic consequence for the Earth: all individuals above the age of thirteen will die, turning the planet into a world inhabited only by children. In a sense, this story can be seen as a sequel to *China 2185*. While in *China 2185*, the idea of "leaving family" is just taking shape, this story showcases an order built upon the foundation of the family disrupted by a little event that happened in the corner of the solar system of our vast and ever-changing cosmos. Humanity, in a cruel manner, is forced to step out of the family. With the story, Liu Cixin explores where humanity will go after the order is undone. When adults learn that they will die in less than a year due to radiation, they carefully teach children how to work in various fields, hoping that the children will maintain the traditional way of life. However, the new world does not operate along the old trajectory. After passing through a period of confusion, children begin to abandon societal frameworks and rules left by adults and to brainstorm ways to make the world "more playable" for them. The world is now their world alone. They activate a super AI to connect the entire nation and create a dazzling playground in the virtual network, and they plan to make it live in the real world. In their pursuit of a "more playable" world, they have created a new world beyond the imagination of their parents, unleashing immense destructive and creative power simultaneously. The narrative of "leaving family" reaches its climax when a new world war breaks out in the form of the Olympic Games. Numerous children from all over the world go to Antarctica to play the game, and many eventually die in it.

It is remarkable that in these two stories, various nonhumans emerge, like the revived men who live in the form of an electronic pulse in *China 2185* and the super AI in *Supernova Era*. These "nonhumans" may be called "transhumans" who are not yet posthumans because we reserve "posthuman" for those who step out of "family" and venture into a new world. In these two stories, those who are being transformed into posthumans include the highest executive, the young generations who support the policies of abolishing the traditional marriage system in the first story, and the children who follow their desires and leave their families in the second story. They collectively participate in the deconstruction of the "family" actualized by leaving and departing. In his article "Beyond Narcissism: What Science Fiction Can Offer Literature," Liu Cixin explains his impetus for writing SF:

I am not interested in human society, only in the genre's strange beauty and power that thrills the imagination . . . Throughout human history, every culture has used its boldest and most magnificent fantasies to construct its own creation myth, but none has ever been as majestic and thrilling as our modern cosmological understanding of the Big Bang. In the same way, any story about God or Nuwa can never compare to the twists and turns and romance of the endless process of evolution. (Liu, "Beyond Narcissism" 22-23)

From these words, we see how Liu Cixin marvels at the beauty of the power of the Big Bang and the process of evolution. He is willing to use writing to depict the beauty of cosmic forces amidst chaos, pushing the boundaries of imagination to depict the journey of humanity alongside the universe, and transitioning of human beings to posthumans in a high-entropic context. In these two stories, posthumans allow their vitality to flourish, much like the explosion of stars and the evolution on a cosmic scale. They step out of the bubble of "family" constructed by Confucius and his followers with painstaking efforts, moving toward the dark, unknown, but energetic universe. By comparison, those electronic-pulse beings can only be called transhumans. Even though their form of being changes by virtue of technology, they fundamentally remain where humans are, firmly holding onto the "family" that their ancestors had built, afraid to take a single step beyond the familiar territory.

"Leaving family" implies that becoming posthuman in Liu Cixin's SF is a nonteleological process. By "nonteleological," we mean that the act of "leaving family" cannot anticipate progress in human civilization, nor does it aim at maintaining an as-if harmony between humans and the natural world. While the young executive's decisions in *China 2185* to abolish marriage and break free from the constraints of family may lead China to a more prosperous country, it is hard to argue that the Earth governed by children becomes a better one in *Supernova Era*. After experiencing the cruel war games, the surviving children are awaiting their future after evacuating from the devastated continent of Antarctica, a future that is far from being certain and bright. Moreover, Liu Cixin does not offer a new utopia in which harmony between children and the natural world emerges. Instead, he demonstrates that only by "leaving family" can new relationships be explored, whether it means returning human-occupied cities and industrial lands to nature or transforming the pristine land of Antarctica into a battleground with nuclear pollution. Both the su-

pernova explosion at the beginning of the story and the refreezing of the Antarctic continent at the story's end convey a message that humans are no longer the center of this relationship, let alone the possibility of establishing an as-if harmonious relationship.

In contrast, utopia, whether it is a socialist one or one driven by science and technology, cannot aptly encapsulate the posthuman narrative, given that it is typically characterized by closure and homogeneity. In Thomas More's *Utopia*, the state of utopia is an isolated island. In fact, it is originally a peninsula, and a fifteen-mile-wide channel is dug by the community's founder to separate it from the mainland for the convenience of severing it from the outside world. This is what Fredric Jameson calls "the utopian enclave" (Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future* 10-21). Jameson suggests that utopia is the locus where a series of solutions to problems of the real world are proposed and tested; therefore it is an imaginary enclave set apart from the real social space. The utopia is confirmed by playing down the outside world by depreciating it as the Other. Meanwhile, the confirmation also implies the interior homogeneity of the utopia. In the article "An American Utopia," Jameson gives an analysis of utopia from the perspective of Lacanian psychological analysis, which suggests the other (within the community) is the theft of enjoyment. As far as there is the other, envy comes into play. Only when everyone identifies with each other, the utopia is transformed into a solid group (Jameson, "An American Utopia" 1-96).

Unlike utopia, the concept of "leaving family" represents an unending movement toward an unknown temporal space. It points to an exploratory process that involves continuous attempts driven by different intensities. In this process, we first relinquish the central position of humans and acknowledge the movement of intensities. Therefore, other than "leaving," the movement of intensities does not desire anything, neither the survival of humans nor the evolvement of utopia. The ever-changing intensities could result in different scenarios, including the extinction of humanity, the witnessing of a cosmic spectacle, or the emergence of various forms of existence in any corner of the cosmos. All of these scenarios—resulting from "leaving family"—develop into a temporary stable state, which we would like to call the plateau of "becoming posthuman." While posthuman indicates the complete decentralization and defamilialization of humanity, "becoming posthuman" is a process of infinite approximation to this threshold. In their transformations, humanity strikes to break free from the "family" for exploration, with the progress of science and technology being a by-product of this exploration.

Furthermore, the concept of "leaving family" also implies an intense tension

between human ethics and becoming posthuman. In *China 2185*, an older man who revives and creates the Huaxia Republic recounts his family's past. His great-grandson once had a family, but they divorced because his wife had to leave for work in Antarctica. They later each remarried. Eight years later, his ex-wife returned from Antarctica, and they once again divorced their respective spouses and remarried each other. What the older man could not bear was that all of this was planned, even to the extent that his great-grandson's second wife was introduced to him by his first wife. Later, the four of them gathered like friends, celebrating the start of their respective new lives. The older person witnessed this family chaos and died by suicide by colliding with a pillar. After listening to the older man's complaints, the young highest executive remarks that their way of life is quite normal and healthy in the present. In this story, the younger generation violates ethical and moral values at various levels. First of all, when the younger generation's open contempt for traditional marriage drives the grandfather to suicide, they violate the filial piety required by Confucianism as a base in family relationships. Even more significant is that when they disrespect the significance of the role of grandfather or father, they are breaking the social ethical system that Confucius meticulously constructed through the concept of "family"—a system claiming to correspond to the relationship between heaven, earth, and humanity. Moreover, for the younger generation, ethics and morality are no longer solely centered on expecting lifelong commitment in marriage and family. Instead, they should revolve around considerations for individuals' physical and psychological well-being. Doubtlessly, "leaving family" signifies a conflict with traditional humanistic ethics and morality.

Becoming posthuman may challenge fundamental moral values even more, such as the value of children's lives. In *China 2185,* Liu Cixin extensively elaborates on how the children illegally race flying motorcycles in the night sky, posing significant security risks to the city and to themselves. However, instead of focusing on individual life and social order, Liu Cixin emphasizes the urgency of seeking an outlet for suppressed frustrations and boredom. By the same token, Liu Cixin describes many scenes in *Supernova Era* where children die for various reasons while creating their own worlds. However, it is worth noting that many children's attitudes toward death are far more indifferent than adults are. When the old ethics are broken and new concepts of right and wrong have not yet been established, death seems to be part of their exploration of the world. With such a new ethical approach toward death as it happens in "leaving family," Liu Cixin begins to build his zero-morality dark forest that will recur in his later works, such as the story "The Wandering Earth." Due to a helium flash in the Sun, humanity is forced to leave

the solar system, wandering toward the Centaurus constellation. In this process, humanity witnesses their own insignificance in comparison with the grandeur of the cosmos, which causes them to gradually abandon their old societal norms. Even though they wander with the Earth, they undergo a process of decentralization and defamilialization, ultimately becoming posthuman in the journey.

In a similar fashion, in *Hei'an senlin* 黑暗森林 (The Dark Forest, 2007)—the second book of *The Three-Body Trilogy*, the Earth fleet is almost annihilated under the attack of the droplet-shaped spacecraft of Trisoloaris. Several escaped ships are forced to leave the solar system, heading toward the depths of the universe. The transformation for the people on the ships is almost immediate. Here is a dialogue between the captain of *Natural Selection* and a lieutenant colonel:

> "That's right. The line is severed. The essential change is not that the line has been let go, but that the hand has disappeared. The Earth is heading toward doomsday. In fact, she's already dead in our mind. Our five space-craft are not connected to any world. There is nothing around us apart from the abyss of space."
>
> "Indeed. Humanity has never faced a psychological environment like this before."
>
> "Yes. In this environment, the human spirit will be fundamentally changed. People will become—" She suddenly broke off, and the sadness in her eyes vanished, leaving only gloom, like a cloud-covered sky after the rain had stopped.
>
> "You mean that in this environment, people will become new people?"
>
> "New people? No, Lieutenant Colonel. People will become. . . non-people." (Liu, *The Dark Forest* 447)[2]

The subsequent plot explains what "leaving family" means. In order to seize others' fuel and spare parts, five spacecraft ultimately surrender their weapons to each other. As a result, all the people, except for those onboard *Blue Space,* die in the fight. No one on the spacecraft blames each other for this behavior because new ethics—the supremacy of survival—has replaced the old humanistic ethics. "The new space humans had passed through their infancy" (Liu, *The Dark Forest* 459), such is the comment by the narrator of the novel.

In some other scenarios, humans effectively distance themselves from the "fam-

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2   Translations of Liu Cixin's *The Dark Forest* are by Joel Martinsen.

ily" even though they do not physically leave the Earth. In *Ball Lightning*, as humans discover that the so-called ball lightning is, in fact, macro-atoms, they are able to catch a glimpse of the vast world. Such an experience fundamentally changes their perception of themselves and the universe, enabling them to move beyond the anthropocentric perspective. In the same vein, in the short story "Zhaowendao" 朝闻道 (Hearing the Tao in the Morning, 2002), scientists and scholars from various fields approach the altar of truth using their own life experiences to seek answers about humanity that they cannot find in their respective disciplines. On the altar, paleontologists get to know the true cause of dinosaur extinction, mathmagicians witness the final proof of the Goldbach's conjecture, and physicists see the unified model of the universe. They forsake loved ones, step out of their families and even do not fear death, gaining a brief yet supreme sense of happiness by exploring a world beyond humanity. The recurring theme of "leaving family" in those scenarios produces a complex and colorful assemblage of "becoming posthuman" in Liu Cixin's SF.

Repositioning Humanity in the Cosmos

There are many apocalyptic scenes in Liu Cixin's SF. Disasters can be caused by the movements of celestial bodies. *Supernova Era* has this grim declaration: "It is on this night that the history known to humanity has come to an end" (Liu, *Supernova Era* 16). When the high-energy radiation emitted by a supernova explosion arrives in the solar system, it triggers a catastrophe for human beings. The story of "The Wandering Earth" begins with the soliloquy of the narrator: "I have never seen the night. I have never seen the stars. I have never seen spring, fall or winter. I was born as the Braking Era ended, just as the Earth stopped turning" (Liu, "The Wandering Earth" 3). As the helium flash of the Sun—an explosion caused by helium fusion—is going to happen in four hundred years, it will destroy the Earth. In some other situations, disasters do not come from the natural world but from extraterrestrial civilizations. The short story "Ren he tunshizhe"人和吞食者 (Devourer, 2002) starts with this message sent to the Earth: "Warning! Alert! Warning! The Devourer approaches" (Liu, "Devourer" 276). The Devourer, who lives by appropriating the resources of other civilizations, eventually destroys human civilization and enslaves human beings. In a comparable way, in *The Three-Body Trilogy*, as soon as humanity exposes their position, they are swiftly attacked by the Trisolarans. The finale of the trilogy is humanity and the solar system being overwhelmed and transformed into two-dimensional entities by an advanced civilization hidden in the dark universe.

These disasters convey an unmistakable message: in comparison to the vast and high-entropy universe, humanity and its intricately constructed civilization—"the family"—are minuscule and fragile. The relationship humans have envisioned between themselves and the natural world, which is often anthropocentric, is illusive and unsustainable. In his article "Beyond Narcissism," Liu Cixin expresses this view through his admiration for Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, saying, "I had on countless occasions imagined a type of literature that would reveal the vastness and profundity of the universe to me, that would allow me to experience the shivers brought on by the countless possibilities of worlds beyond number" (Liu, "Beyond Narcissism" 24). He cannot help but complain that Chinese mainstream literature is still elaborating on minor human actions at length, without even sensing their insignificance on the cosmic scale. For him, what SF can contribute to literature is the ability to reorganize the relationships through "macro-detail" that humans can establish with the natural world. Mingwei Song also identifies the "Kantian feeling of the sublime" in Liu Cixin's narrative in his analysis of *The Three-Body Trilogy*. According to Song, Liu Cixin writes the universe as a "dark forest" so complex and profound, so far beyond human knowledge, that it inspires a keen sense of awe toward the universe. Song summarizes this spiritual experience evoked by the universe as the Kantian concept of the "sublime"—*mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (Song, *Fear of Seeing* 118).

Liu Cixin uses the term "entropy" to articulate the disparity between human civilization and the universe. "Entropy" is a scientific term used in diverse fields, commonly associated with the degree of disorder and randomness of a system. Entropy and order have a negative correlation, meaning the order of the system decreases if entropy increases in a system. In the new wave of Chinese SF, the notion of entropy captures the attention of many writers, who apply it to their interpretation of the human world and the universe. In *Sishen yongsheng* 死神永生 (Death's End, 2010)—the last part of *The Three-Body Trilogy*—Liu Cixin explains the so-called low-entropy entities. He writes from the perspective of an extraterrestrial singer:

> Entropy increased in the universe, and order decreased . . . But low-entropy entities were different. The low-entropy entities decreased their entropy and increased their order, like columns of phosphorescence rising over the inky-dark sea. This was meaning, the highest meaning, higher than enjoyment. To maintain this meaning, low-entropy entities had to continue to exist. (Liu, *Death's End* 467-68)

All low-entropy entities possessed the cleansing gene, and cleansing was an instinct. (Liu, *Death's End* 470)

These words should help with our understanding of these apocalyptic scenes. It might be inferred that in the process of humans building their "families," they avoid the chaos that exists in the universe, leaving only what humans need. Thus, a correspondence between human society and the "order" of the universe is established, from which humans obtain "meanings." However, the universe has always existed in a high-entropy manner. Liu Cixin's creative endeavors are clearly derived from exploring the vast and high-entropy cosmic reality that humans see after stepping out of a low-entropic civilization and the relationships that humans can reestablish with this high-entropic cosmos. He translates the spiritual experience of the vastness, sublimity and high-entropic state of the universe into a critique of the conventional attempt to construct anthropocentric systems of "the family," thereby crafting a narrative of departure from it.

"The Wandering Earth" epitomizes the conflict between human attachment to "the family" and the vastness of the universe. Around three hundred and eighty years ago, astrophysicists found that the Sun would undergo a helium flash, causing it to expand into a red giant star, which would ultimately engulf the Earth. During these years, humanity established the United Government and spared no effort to build over twelve thousand massive Earth engines on the continents of Asia and the Americas to propel the Earth out of the solar system and toward Proxima Centauri in the Alpha Centauri star system located 4.3 light-years away. They design a five-step escape plan. First, halting the rotation of the Earth; second, accelerating and flinging the Earth from the solar system; third, the Earth continuing to accelerate its flight toward Proxima Centauri; fourth, decelerating; fifth, entering into orbit around Proxima Centauri and becoming its satellite.

Never before has any SF work depicted such a massive plan. When disaster strikes, humanity often escapes in spaceships, never with the Earth itself. What leaves readers in awe is not only the grandeur of the plan and the advancement of technology as outlined by Liu Cixin but also the portrayal of humanity's profound attachment to the Earth. The reason provided in the novel is that the Earth, compared to a spaceship, is a larger ecosystem, which is why it can better ensure human survival while wandering in space. However, we suggest that the deeper underlying reason for this plan is probably the fear of leaving "family." Compared to the unknown depths of the universe that humanity will soon face, the challenges brought

by the Wandering Earth Project may seem mild. By conjuring the vision of the Wandering Earth, Liu Cixin presents a deeper understanding of humanity's attachment to the "family" rarely seen in other SF writers.

On the surface, Liu Cixin empathizes with humanity's attachment to the "family," offering the greatest solace to those facing the ruthless cosmos through the Wandering Earth Project. However, he also questions the meaning of "family" at a deeper level. One inevitably wonders: have the people hiding in underground cities even left the family during the journey of wandering with the Earth? First, the Earth had already undergone a drastic transformation long before it even left the solar system. The Earth's engines have made many places unbearably hot, including where the protagonist is located. In one scene, the protagonist's grandfather, perhaps to relive the old days of drizzling rain in southern China, rushes outside to cool off in the failing rain but is scalded badly by the scorching downpour. Then, when the Earth begins to accelerate around the Sun, creating tidal waves that submerge the once-mighty city of Shanghai, the grandfather cries. Even though the Earth is still there, and the Sun remains unchanged, southern China—the beloved home place of the protagonist's grandfather and many others, has become a nostalgic memory that can never be revisited. In this sense, humanity has already been expelled from the "family" when celestial movements and interactions reveal their grand and disruptive nature before the start of the Wandering Earth Project.

On the other hand, a more chaotic and energetic scene unfolds with the development of the Wandering Earth Project. Liu Cixin depicts the magnificent and bizarre beauty of those sceneries brought about by the project. For example, when the Earth passes through the asteroid belt, the human space fleet must deploy antimatter weapons to eliminate large asteroids. The text reads: "In the bloodcurdling moments that followed the flash, the antimatter shells continued to bombard the asteroid. Ruinous flashes pulsed across the pitch-black sky, as if a horde of colossal paparazzi had descended upon the planet and were frenziedly snapping away" (Liu, "The Wandering Earth" 28). Then, numerous asteroids crossing the Earth's atmosphere become countless shooting stars. The protagonist witnesses a colossal wave triggered by one of them, a twenty-ton asteroid crashing into the sea. In a formation of black walls that obscures the sky, the wave surges toward the shore, leaving everyone stationed at the entrance of the underground city stunned. At that moment, people redefine the concept of "wave." Whether it is the dazzling encounter between the human fleet and the asteroids, the waves caused by shooting stars or the Earth engines standing lofty like columns of Greek temples on the continents of Eurasia and America, these are the high-entropic scenes only witnessed by those

who venture beyond the "family." Amid the chaos and the terror, there are senses of energy and beauty that send shivers down one's spine. Through what Liu Cixin refers to as "macro-detail" (Liu, "Beyond Narcissism" 25), we see that "leaving family" is not just a forced acknowledgment of the high-entropic state of the universe but also a form of admiration and even joyous inspiration at witnessing new aspects of the universe, from which emerges a relationship between posthumans and the natural world.

Moreover, "family" is more than a dwelling; it also symbolizes an order that humanity has developed over time by observing its interaction with the Sun, the Earth, and other geo forces. Earth, as a planet in the solar system, rotates on its own axis while revolving around the Sun, thereby forming day and night and the four seasons. On this basis, cultural institutions have blossomed in human civilization: marriage, family, metropolis, law, democracy, and modern science, to name just a few. Liu Cixin writes about the vulnerability of this civilization, showing that even during the preparational phase of the Wandering Earth Project, human marriage and the family system had already been in a state of utter disarray. The following conversation between the narrator's father and his wife is an interesting example:

> He paused, suddenly remembering something. "Oh, I forgot to tell you—I've fallen in love with Stella Li. I want to move out to be with her."
>
> "Who is she?" My mother asked calmly.
>
> "My primary school teacher," I answered for him. I had started secondary school two years ago and had no idea how my father knew Ms. Stella. Maybe they had met at my graduation ceremony?
>
> "Then go," said my mother.
>
> "I'm sure I'll grow tired of her soon enough. I'll come back then. Is that okay by you?"
>
> "If you want to, certainly." Her voice was as calm and even as the frozen sea. But a moment later, she bubbled with excitement. "Oh, that one is beautiful! It must have a holographic diffractor inside!" She pointed to a firework blossoming in the night sky, genuinely moved by its beauty. (Liu, "The Wandering Earth" 17-18)[3]

Two months later, the narrator's father comes back to his family. His mother feels neither happy nor unhappy about the incident, as if nothing happened. It seems

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3   Translations of Liu Cixin's "The Wandering Earth" are by Ken Liu, Elizabeth Hanlon, Zac Haluza, Adam Lanphier, and Holger Nahm.

that the family is no longer a crucial cornerstone in society but rather something that can be discarded at any time. The explanation provided is that in this era, the threat of death and the desire to survive overwhelm everything else. The narrator says: "The hyper-focus gradually changed the essence of human psychology and spirituality. Humans paid scant attention to affairs of the heart, like a gambler taking a swig of water, unable to tear his eyes from the roulette wheel" (Liu, "The Wandering Earth" 18). We recall that the Confucian ethical system of "family" is an imitation of the cosmic order. The changes in celestial bodies serve as a wake-up call to humans: the assumed cosmic order is nothing more than a brief balance in a tiny part of the vast universe, and the delicately crafted notion of "family" is merely a bubble atop this momentary equilibrium. Realizing the vastness of the universe and the insignificance of humanity, concepts like "family" and "marriage" may be the first among those to lose their significance. Certainly, humans still live through emotions, especially in times of crisis. However, seeking emotions has turned into momentary pleasure, and maintaining love through family and marriage and developing them into part of a harmonious society is no longer valued by humankind. They must step out of this illusory ethical framework and confront the vast and indifferent universe. This may lead to the development of a new ethical framework for the posthuman era—ethics that arise from posthumans living under pressure in the cosmos.

Liu Cixin articulates well the entanglements of old ethics in the process of becoming posthuman, a process that is both compelling and eagerly embraced. On the one hand, posthumans establish the United Government and formulate a new social order with the goal of escaping the solar system and reaching Proxima Centauri. On the other hand, the establishment and maintenance of this new order, centered around "leaving family," are destined to be challenging given people's deeply ingrained attachment to the "family." The Earth is severely damaged during the process by the immense gravity of Jupiter and the rocks from the asteroid belt, and people realize that their "family" no longer exists. They turn against the United Government. Everybody suspects that the helium flash of the Sun is nothing more than a political conspiracy and rushes into the headquarters of the United Government, killing officials in sight. People fervently wish that the helium flash of the Sun is a lie, so they can still hope to return to the "family." The solar system, after all, is where their ancestor built the "family" that they believed would prosper forever.

However, the helium flash eventually exposes the fragility of the constructed "family" and makes it necessary for humans to step out of it to discover the vast universe. At the beginning of the story, the narration has highlighted the gap be-

tween humanity and the universe, stating:

> After the first helium flash, as heavy elements re-accumulated in the Sun's core, further runaway nuclear explosions would occur repeatedly for a period of time. While this period represented only a brief phase of stellar evolution, it might last thousands of times longer than all of human history. (Liu, "The Wandering Earth" 9)

Now the people who ignore the warnings are paying the price. The interactions of celestial bodies no longer sustain the "family" as claimed by sages, but they instead reveal a multifaceted and profound structure for human survival that depends not on staying but on leaving the family.

"The Wandering Earth" ends with a remarkable scene. When several thousand government officials are brought outside and executed by the rebel forces, the outdoors are so incredibly cold that the dead bodies freeze before they fall. They stand in this way, witnessing the helium flash, even though none can see it. In that moment, they are minuscule. While standing firm until the end, they seem as rational, cold, and sublime as the universe itself. This scene of the standing corpses and the stunned rebels is both desolate and haunting, but it also speaks eloquently about the state of being posthuman. Who are they? Are they the individuals, like the narrator himself, who have never experienced the alternation of day and night yet yearn for the "family" set in that time and space? Or are they those government officials who make the Wandering Earth Project and hold onto "leaving family" until the very end? Or perhaps posthumans are the descendants adrift in space, having lost any knowledge of what the solar system looks like. One can say that there has never been a clear boundary between humans and posthumans. For Liu Cixin, the transformation into posthuman is never a linear evolution; this process is filled with hesitation and negotiation, as powerfully illustrated by the concluding chaotic scene— a victorious rebellion, an erupting helium flash, a collection of posthumans unsure about themselves. They may soon perish in wandering, or they may arrive at the Centaurus constellation and establish a new "family." But what will the new "family" be like? To what extent will it encompass the high-entropy state of the universe? Liu Cixin does not provide a clear answer, but there might not be an available answer for him to give.

Ethical Restraints

"Advance, stop at nothing to advance!" This is a phrase repeatedly uttered by

Thomas Wade—the chief of PIA (PDC Strategic Intelligence Agency) in *Death's End*. With powerful, possibly illegal and immoral means, Wade first sends Yun Tianming's brain out of the solar system and then develops curvature propulsion spaceships, both of which become pivotal in offering hope to humanity for escaping the solar system and surviving the strike from the dark universe. We see this plot design as Liu Cixin's loudest expression of "leaving family" throughout a series of works that we have discussed above. However, Wade is not a positive character in the fiction in a conventional sense. He employs any means necessary to achieve his goals to the extent that he can be considered a typical representative of social Darwinism, which is a characteristic of Liu Cixin criticized by Poetzsch and a few other scholars. Now that "leaving family" encompasses more than breaking traditional constraints and exploring the high-entropy universe, it also involves the likelihood of betraying conventional human ethical and moral values in many ways. Clearly, anything, including human lives, cannot stand in the way of advancement when one reads the statement by Thomas Wade literally or figuratively. In Liu Cixin's mind, SF is an arena where the intensities of the transition to posthuman and the ethical and moral resistance can contend with each other. In "Beyond Narcissism," Liu Cixin says,

> As has been the case with other readers and authors of science fiction, something almost unimaginable occurred to me as I developed an ever-deeper attachment to the heart and soul of the genre. My moral concepts and my value system began suddenly to waver, which was a very peculiar experience indeed. At this point, my SF writing has entered its third stage, I call this my social experimentation stage. In it, I am focusing my efforts on depicting the effects of extreme situations on human behavior and social systems. (Liu, "Beyond Narcissism" 29)

As the most splendid work produced in this third stage, *The Three-Body Trilogy* exemplifies the experiment of testing the limits of how much human ethics and morality can endure in the process of "leaving family" and embracing posthumanism, or conversely. It is worth noting that Liu Cixin does not place "leaving family" and human ethics and morality at opposite extremes, despite the significant conflict and tension between them. It is not his position that humanity represents ethics and morality, and posthumans are devoid of them. Mingwei Song argues that Liu Cixin's text should be read as nonbinary, saying, "Liu Cixin enlivens romanticism and humanism as much as Social Darwinism and technologism in the apathetic dark uni-

verse of posthumanism" (Song, *Fear of Seeing* 288). Despite this fair and nuanced reading of Liu Cixin, we believe that it is precisely the tension between the impulse of "leaving family" and the power of human ethics and morals that shape the ambiguous and difficult process of becoming posthuman.

In the following text, this paper will discuss human ethics and morality as another significant intensity in Liu Cixin's posthuman assemblage by reading *The Dark Forest* and *Death's End*. First, we contend that ethical values are primarily manifested in the beauty and order of "family," as demonstrated in *The Dark Forest*. At the start of *The Dark Forest*, while the Trisolaran invading fleet is en route to the Earth, they deadlock the Earth's scientific progress using a pair of sophons—protons manipulated to exist in higher-dimension space. In this situation, the United Government comes up with the Wallfacer Project. The logic behind it lies in the acknowledgment that the presence of the sophons renders all human action and communication completely visible to the Trisolarans. Only human thoughts remain imperceptible to them. To counter the crisis, four Wallfacer candidates from around the world are selected to formulate plans within their minds. The government grants them significant authority to allocate resources, enabling them to put their plan into action. Their actions must be carried out in camouflage and in misdirection, ensuring that the true intentions remain concealed from the enemy until the very end. Luo Ji is one of the Wallfacers.

In the beginning, Luo Ji does not truly discharge his duties. Instead, he uses his privileges to find his ideal girl by the name of Zhuang Yan and leads a blissfully comfortable family life in a picturesque estate in northern Europe. During the tranquil days, not only has Luo Ji himself forgotten about the threat posed by the Trisolarans, but even the Trisolaran civilization also ceases its pursuit of Luo Ji. Zhuang Yan, an art student from an affluent background, is a beautiful woman who seems to have fulfilled the fantasy of an ideal family life that most Chinese men have dreamed of. Some readers criticize Liu Cixin for the male-centric perspective evident in this narrative segment. Such criticism might be warranted, but we believe that this narrative is more of an appropriation of the traditional Chinese concept of "family." Zhuang Yan is depicted in her role not so much because she is the perfect mate but rather because she embodies the ideal woman in traditional Chinese culture of the "family," which means, for a man at least, tranquility, order, and more importantly, the bliss of companionship of a self-sacrificing woman. By appropriating such a connotation of "family," Liu Cixin conveys the message that it is his family, with Zhuang Yan in it, that stands in the way of his assigned mission.

Here human ethical values represented by the concept of "family" become the

greatest obstacle to leaving it. On one end of the balance is Zhang Yan and their picturesque family life; on the other end are the cold-blooded plans of the other three Wallfacers, especially the one designed by Manuel Rey Diaz at the cost of the lives of all humanity. For a long period of time, Luo Ji immerses himself in family life and makes no moves against the Trisolarans. Liu Cixin's slow-paced narration about Luo Ji's storyline suggests that the ethical value of the "family" is the counteracting force to "leaving family." Humans' longing for "family" and the contradiction between this affection and leaving it behind find their greatest manifestation in the characterization of Luo Ji.

However, Zhuang Yan herself is a complex character. Her dedication is directed toward Luo Ji not only as a man but also as a Wallfacer. She comes to him as part of the Wallfacer Project, with the purpose of helping him find a way to depart from his comfort zone. She is a symbol of "the family" but also a reason for Luo Ji's departure from it. When Zhuang Yan intentionally leaves to force Luo Ji to act, Luo Ji starts to focus on the Wallfacer Project, primarily motivated by the thoughts of reuniting with her and their child. He finally becomes the only successful Wallfacer. Zhuang Yan and the family give him strength, helping him calm his mind and allowing him to glimpse the mysteries of the universe on the ice lake. With her support, he becomes a powerful Swordholder, engaging in decades of silent confrontation with the Trisolarans.

The story of Zhang Beihai sees Liu Cixin's strategic use of the father in the Chinese family to portray the tension between ethics and "leaving family." As a commander of the Earth fleet, Zhang Beihai is convinced of humanity's inevitable defeat and sees escapism as the only solution. For him, escapism is not a sign of weakness but an exploration of other parts of the universe in search of new means for the survival of humanity. This leads to careful planning of his escape. He facilitates the development of fusion drive spaceships, enters hibernation, and arrives at the end of the Crisis Era. Ultimately, he manages to steal a spaceship and embarks on a journey into space. Zhang Beihai's departure coincides with the death of his father, a high-ranking government official. At first glance, the timing seems to imply that the explorer is born at the death of the father because they cannot coexist in the same space of the family. However, Zhang Beihai's father is not portrayed as the usual figure of authority and constraint in the family. He is experienced and wise, with whom Zhang Beihai is eager to discuss current affairs. Reticent at times, he urges his son to see the path ahead and to make choices on his own. The father stands as an indispensable part of the family, as does the ideal wife. When Zhang Beihai finally escapes into space, he murmurs to himself, "Dad, I've taken the first

step" (Liu, *The Dark Forest*, 217). Here bidding a farewell to the father is being transformed into a spiritual force, propelling the journey of "leaving family."

Liu Cixin also engages in a discussion on the conflict between "leaving family" and the common human ethics and morality informed by the Confucian concept of *ren* 仁 (humaneness). In *Analects*, when one of his disciples, Fan Chi, asks about humaneness (*ren*; translated by James Legge as "benevolence"), Confucius responds: "It is to love all men." In the same chapter, when another disciple, Yan Yuan, inquiries about humaneness (*ren*; translated by James Legge as "perfect virtue"), Confucius answers: "To subdue one's self and return to propriety, is perfect virtue."[4] From the dialogue between Fan Chi and Confucius, we learn that humaneness primarily represents a quality of compassion and empathy toward others. The second dialogue, however, reveals a more intricate interpretation of humaneness in Confucianism. It showcases the inseparability of virtue and rite, both belonging to a larger realm where the Way dominates. Herbert Fingarette argues in his study of Confucianism that for men, there is only one way to follow. Other than the Way, men who pursue perfect virtues have no other choices. He writes: "Therefore the central moral issue for Confucius is not the responsibility of a man for deeds he has by his own free will chose to perform, but the factual questions of whether a man is properly taught the Way and whether he has the desire to learn diligently" (Fingarette 35). Fingarette calls it "a Way without a crossroads" (Fingarette 36). If we say that Liu Cixin's "leaving family" is a critique of the Confucian concept of "family," his general reassessment of common ethics and morality is also a critique of Confucius' the Way, specifically its uncompromising advocation of compassion and love for humanity themselves.

The tension between posthumanism and common human morality is primarily represented through the characterization of Thomas Wade and Cheng Xin in *Death's End*. If we posit that Thomas Wade represents the strongest voice of "leaving family," then Cheng Xin's presence serves as a moral exemplar in stark contrast to Wade. In many scenes, Liu Cixin places her and Wade at the two poles of morality, inviting readers to judge their actions. For example, in PIA's Staircase Program, Cheng Xin faces mostly technical challenges, and the only ethical challenge for her is sending a terminally ill person into space. In contrast, Wade not only engineers the terminal illness of one of his subordinates but also exploits Yun Tianming's love for Cheng Xin by persuading him to willingly send his own brain into space. By doing so, Wade effectively takes advantage of two vulnerable individuals to serve

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4   Translations of *Analects* are by James Legge. Cited from: https://ctext.org/analects/yan-yuan.

his own self-interest. The reader will likely take a sympathetic position toward Cheng Xin, who expresses guilt and remorse, but the same reader may feel repulsed by Wade's ruthlessness even though his decision ultimately enables the nearly impossible mission to succeed. Another example lies in their attitudes and actions regarding the development of curvature propulsion spaceships. For Wade, the only way out is to embark on the journey away from "family" by riding the curvature propulsion spaceships, so he resolutely pushes the research to its final stages. However, given the risk that operating the curvature drive spaceship could expose Earth to more advanced civilizations, Cheng Xin, standing on the moral high ground, ultimately prevents its mass production. Her decision ends the "leaving family" journey and leads to the demise of the entire humanity.

Both scenarios suggest that Cheng Xin represents the one with perfect virtue, who takes humanity and humaneness as a Way without crossroads, but Wade shows a potential for developing such a crossroads. Between following the Way or becoming an immoral man, Wade chooses to follow his own posthuman moral values. This is because human morality cannot withstand the process of "leaving family," as leaving is the beginning of posthumanism. However, we find that Liu Cixin's discourse on morality and "leaving family" as embodied by Cheng Xin is far more ambivalent and nuanced than a simple summarization. Throughout the story, the relationship between Cheng Xin and Wade is more cooperative than competitive. In both the Staircase Program and the Light-Speed Spaceship Plan, it is the cooperation between Cheng Xin and Wade that produces key advancements. Even Cheng Xin's successful election as the second Swordholder is attributed to Wade: Wade's amorality sparks Cheng Xin's moral consciousness, which shapes her decisions along the way. In a sense, the gradual implementation of "leaving family" in human society not only requires individuals like Wade who forge ahead regardless of moral constraints but also individuals like Cheng Xin who continually adapts and compromises.

During the journey of "leaving family," the influence of "family" does not completely vanish. First of all, it is Cheng Xin who eventually embarks on the journey of "leaving family" along with a few others to explore the high-entropy cosmos. Indeed, a new kind of posthuman ethics gradually emerges to replace common human morality. To be sure, Cheng Xin's unwavering commitment to the ethics of "family" persists to the last moment of the journey. When she comes out of her own miniuniverse, believing that doing so can assist the universe in resetting, returning to its initial state in higher dimensions, she takes the ethics of "family" to a new level, for this time her version of "family" not only refers to human civilization but

also to the universe as the "family" for all civilizations. Regardless of how trivial humanity is in the context of the universe and how human morality appears fragile and vulnerable against the challenges of survival, the journey of "leaving family" is already a performative act imprinted with human ethics and morality for future generations. Posthumanism that bears those imprints might just be a viable answer for them as they navigate the vast and uncertain universe of unknowns.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that the posthuman in Liu Cixin's works refers not to the physically transformed humans but to a group of people who choose to "leave family." We argue that Liu Cixin's portrayal of posthumans is primarily driven by his understanding of the profound gap between the minuscule humanity and the vast universe, his admiration of the high-entropic universe, and his criticism of humanity's eagerness to cling to systems of "family" for solace and security. This formation, combined with the constraints of human ethical and moral values, creates a distinctive assemblage of posthumanism in the new wave of Chinese SF.

By analyzing *China 2185*, *Supernova Era*, "The Wandering Earth," and *The Three-Body Trilogy*, this paper shows how Liu Cixin continuously challenges the Confucian concept of "family"—those constructed, anthropocentric orders—while pursuing the decentralized and defamilialized relationships between humanity and nature. The pursuit is bold and nonteleological and stretches the limits of imagination yet remains intricately interwoven with ethics and morality, as demonstrated in many of his works. However, in his later works, such as *The Three-Body Trilogy*, although the tension between "leaving family" and human ethics and morality becomes more pronounced, a subtle equilibrium is achieved: ethics and morality have become indispensable parts of Liu Cixin's vision of posthumanism, simultaneously complicating and facilitating the process of "leaving family."

In a sense, Liu Cixin's writing is an experiment in "leaving family" and venturing into the high-entropic universe. This experiment has a starting place but no endpoint. In the process of leaving and departure, multiple intensities—such as the allure of the high-entropic universe, as well as ethical and moral retreats and progress—have contributed to and will continue to shape the assemblage of becoming posthuman, manifesting in his narratives as critical questions to be addressed. We have good reasons to believe that Liu Cixin will continue exploring the emerging questions in his future writings, speculating on the potential destinations of posthumans in the cosmos, the specific form they might take and the extent to which a new order could be reconstructed and how it would compare to existing human

civilizations because these questions not only bear increasing relevance in our era of artificial intelligence, which fuels the decentralized and defamilialized journey of exploration but also offer insights into ecological challenges humanity faces as a whole. From this perspective, we can say that Liu Cixin's narratives of "leaving family," which bridges contemporary Chinese SF and Western critical posthumanism, is a significant contribution to the broader development of posthumanist theory.

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Promoting the Study and Writing of Chinese Literature in the UK: An Interview with Professor Frances Weightman

Frances Weightman (University of Leeds)

Jane Qian Liu (University of Warwick)

Abstract

In May 2024, Dr Jane Qian Liu interviewed Professor Frances Weightman from the University of Leeds to explore the origin and missions of the Leeds Centre for New Chinese Writing. During this interview, Professor Weightman talked about the significance of promoting contemporary Chinese literature in the UK, the benefits of small-scale in-person discussions, and the use of translation and writing competitions in cultivating linguistic and cultural exchanges. She also shared many fond memories of the Centre since its founding a decade ago. The interview ends with a discussion of the unique position of the Centre in the UK discipline of Chinese Studies.

Jane Qian Liu: First of all, thank you so much, Frances, for accepting my interview. My first question is about the Centre for New Chinese Writing. Could you tell me about the origin of this Centre?[1]

Frances Weightman: Thank you very much for suggesting the interview. The Centre started in 2014. It originated with funding from the AHRC [Arts and Humanities Research Council] for a project that was called Writing Chinese: Authors, Authorship and Authority. We were under the White Rose East Asia Centre funding. The White Rose East Asia Centre was a large project, a collaboration between Leeds and Sheffield on East Asian studies. It was funded by AHRC, covering all areas of East Asian studies. In 2014, they suddenly gave a second call for a second tranche of funding for which we needed specific projects.

I had not long come back from my second maternity leave, and I was looking for a project which I could do predominantly in the UK because of childcare and

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family responsibility, so I was looking for something new. Previously I'd worked on premodern fiction, and specifically at Pu Songling's *Liaozhai zhiyi*, looking at authorship and ideas of the author from that. I'd also started to look at prefaces and how authorship was performed in authorial prefaces, as in the *zixu* to works of fiction.

So when this call came through, which had a very short deadline and needed to involve public engagement, with both a new, original focus and yet fitting into our new research agenda, I thought, why not look at paratexts and prefaces to contemporary fiction? I didn't think much more of it than that. We put a few things together about a project, and then I had a meeting in London before the deadline with Nicky Harman, who was a former Leeds graduate. I hadn't actually met Nicky before this point, and we had a meeting in a Pizza Express near King's Cross.

It was just great. Suddenly it was the first time that I really realised how engaging with practitioners rather than just purely academics could genuinely invigorate your research because I was talking in kind of vague abstract terms about ideas of authorship or what might be meant by a preface and so on. And then I was suddenly realising, well, actually, a lot of the ideas that I've got are rather hollow and lacking in substance without an injection of what really happens. And it doesn't mean that you're doing down your research in any way. It's the opposite. It means that you're genuinely connecting and collaborating with people who are actually doing the work within the literary circuit.

So of course we came up with loads of ideas because Nicky always has loads of ideas. Then we filled out this project on authors, authorship, and authority, put it in, were awarded a modest amount of money (around £14,000), and we started off from there. We were basically looking at ideas of new or less well-known authors, thinking about, "Could we use some of the money to bring some authors over? Or if there were any authors in the UK, could they come and do talks?," and how we could think about combining that with some more academic ideas and theoretical ideas on authorship.

Through Nicky's contacts, I was aware that the author Chen Xiwo was doing a tour because Nicky had translated his book, *The Book of Sins*. He was there with his publisher, Forty-six. So we contacted them, and they were able to come to Leeds at a time when we could also launch the project, and so we started off with Chen Xiwo as our first author, and it was a really great activity. We then moved on with Yan Ge. We had a workshop with Yan Ge and Nicky, a translation workshop, and it went from there.

When the AHRC funding ran out, we then decided that we needed to have

something more than just a project. So in 2018, we put in an application to become a research centre. After we had got all the requisite permissions from the university, we then called ourselves a centre and have moved on from there. We were also awarded a follow-on funding grant for public engagement and impact for a year in 2017.

Jane Qian Liu: This journey sounds very exciting! So what is the main aim that you hope to achieve with the events in the Centre?

Frances Weightman: The Centre has got two strands. One is more the research-focused strand and one is the public engagement/impact strand. On the public engagement strand, we are kind of unashamedly wanting to help promote contemporary Chinese literature in the UK, with what constitutes "Chinese" interpreted broadly.

On the research side, we want to focus more broadly on ideas of authorship, academic studies, and understanding of Chinese literature, but very much trying to bring the theoretical and practical together. So we were really working against a system and a cultural context where the understanding of Chinese literature and translation in particular was very limited. It's very limited to either classics, which very few people read but were maybe aware of, or tropes like the Cultural Revolution memoirs and things like this.

I vividly remember a colleague of mine teaching a contemporary Chinese literature and translation course in Edinburgh. She said that one of the mature students in her class had said to her that she was at home and her daughter had found her crying, and the daughter, who was about three or four, said, "Oh, Mummy, are you reading Chinese stories again?" It is just this idea that it's all very tragic or there are certain tropes, which are always there. Of course, that's true of a lot of Chinese literature, but I felt that there was this large number of very exciting new writers that were very popular within China and had an awful lot to give and a lot of potential possibly in the market, but more importantly, just as for ideas in the West as well. So that was really where this kind of genuine desire to promote cross-cultural understanding came from, if I can say that without sounding too pretentious.

Jane Qian Liu: It really makes a lot of sense because I also genuinely believe in the meaning of promoting contemporary Chinese literature in the UK, and I think it's so valuable that you share this as well.

Frances Weightman: We can talk about politics, we can talk about international situations and all the rest of it till the cows come home. If I can sit in Leeds and read a story and laugh or cry, and somebody in Shanghai or Chengdu can sit and read the same story and laugh and cry, then we can achieve something mean-

ingful with literature—there's a level of that reader response and that kind of level of engagement and understanding and connection that I don't think you can get through many other means. And that is so important, especially at the moment with everything that is going on internationally with the rising levels of hate crimes and discrimination and all of this. Sometimes we need to forget the politicians on both sides, forget the macro picture, and I know that sounds very naive, but if we can get back to that, what makes us human, and what makes British people human, and Chinese people human, and people from Singapore human, we can begin to rethink how we live together in the world.

It sounds very naive, I know, but I've decided to just go with it and embrace it because I do think it's really important.

Jane Qian Liu: I think that reminds me of Pheng Cheah's idea of the worlding of world literature where he argues that instead of looking at globalisation, which really focuses on politics and economics, the "world" in world literature should be something, as you said, that is shared and that is higher intellectual communication, which I think is exactly what this Centre is doing that is so valuable. So my next question is, over the years that you have run the Centre, have you observed any changes in people's understanding and attitudes towards Chinese literature? It may not be that many years, but is there anything that you noticed in the past six to eight years?

Frances Weightman: There seems to be a more general understanding of China on a more superficial level. In the past, I think that the number of people who had any interest in China—I'm obviously talking about British people without Chinese background—tended to be smaller, but the people who had an interest in China tended to have a sort of a deeper understanding, if you like. Whereas I think now, because of the changing political situation, China is no longer seen as a kind of an unusual exotic thing to be interested in. But if you look at the popular media, it's often seen more as a threat or seen more as something to be slightly concerned about or scared of or not quite sure how to connect with.

Nowadays people in the UK are more likely to say they have some knowledge about China than they were a decade ago, but that doesn't necessarily mean that there's any genuine understanding, so I would say there's probably more superficial understanding for audiences.

Jane Qian Liu: Are there any memorable moments that you can recall in the past events, which reflect the audience reactions to Chinese authors and their works? You have run so many events here.

Frances Weightman: Yes, I think we're up to about 100 author events in Leeds

now. Back to the very first event, Chen Xiwo. I would say Chen Xiwo's work is very explicit and shocking and can be quite graphic, and disturbing. As I mentioned, we basically invited him to set off our Centre before we knew much about him and certainly before I'd read his book. I was then a little bit concerned, and I thought, "My goodness, is this going to be misogynistic or inappropriate?" because it was quite sexual.

When he came, he was the loveliest man, and he was just so completely different from the person in the audience's minds had they imagined who had written this book. And he was there; he just giggled. He's got a story, which is called "Wo ai wo ma," which is a really disturbing story about a paraplegic sleeping with his mother, disturbing on so many levels. But his attitude towards it was he told us this lovely story about how he lives with his family and how his elderly mother had found the book and said, "Oh, I want to read it." He grabbed it off her.

He didn't speak a word of English, he wasn't a very charismatic speaker in some ways, but he had this lovely persona about him that seemed to fit so badly, so at odds, with his writing that it made the live event a wonderful success. Because, firstly, it underlined the importance of events, and it underlined the way that actually a live event with an author gives you another level of understanding. It doesn't mean that they are correct. They don't have the sole authority, but it does add to your understanding. It's like a video of a song, and you get another level of engagement with the text.

There was a lot of laughter, which is a great thing, in terms of cross-cultural understanding as well, because if somebody from one culture can make a joke and somebody from another culture can laugh at it, you've already got a connection there where you've got so much unsaid of mutual understanding because in order to find something funny, you have to have so much unfunny, normal, standard stuff in common. So it was really great, and we had Blackwell's doing a bookstall there, and they said that they completely sold out of all his books. They said they'd never had such a successful academic event. The audience was only about forty people, so it wasn't huge, but everybody who was there was really engaged. So it was our first event, but it was very successful.

Jane Qian Liu: This sounds really interesting. It is also a fascinating example of how the author's real image in life may be at odds with the image he presents in his books, which really shows the importance of having the event. Now I'm going to move on to something a little bit different. So can you tell me about the competitions organised by the Centre?

Frances Weightman: So we started doing translation competitions. One of

the things that we decided after talking to a lot of translators was that there was a need for mentorship of new translators. We have lots of people who study language but don't necessarily have that. Even if they study translation at university, they don't necessarily have that pathway as to how to get from something done within the academy to actually being published. So we decided to launch the Bai Meigui Translation Competition, named after the White Rose East Asia Centre, which was what our Centre originated from. The term also has proved very useful because it avoids us using this very problematic Chinese/Sinophone—whatever term—and allows us to be as inclusive as we possibly want, and if people want to think it is referring to Zhang Ailing, they can, if they want to think it's referring to the English civil war, they can, or they can just imagine the flower, and not think any futher about it. And if the White Rose funding people want to think it's referring to them, that's great too. So that's why we used it. We've now done nine translation competitions, three of which have been open exclusively to school kids, secondary school kids—that can be UK school children who are learning Chinese or Chinese school children who are learning English or whatever.

Our first one was on Dorothy Tse, a fascinating and original Hong Kong writer. It was a prose piece, and the joint winner of that competition was Natascha Bruce, who has gone on to do all sorts of things. She has credited her whole career to winning Bai Meigui, which is really sweet of her. She and Dorothy have worked on various projects since then. In fact, they both came and did a joint residency with us just before COVID in 2020, for a month. The other person who was the joint winner of that was Michael Day who was one of the judging panellists in our last competition. So since then we've had competitions focused on poetry, on Taiwan writing, one on crime fiction, and on reportage. And three children's competitions, open to high school students. For these children's competitions, we choose a picture book which the kids have to translate into English and the prize for the winner is to get it published, as a bilingual picture book. Our first winner was a bilingual translation of a work by a Beijing author Meng Yanan translated by Jasmine Alexander. We have it as an English picture book, but then at the back we have the Chinese as well so that people can use it as something to help with translation. We felt that there was a real market for parents—either parents of Chinese background or parents who wanted their kids to learn Chinese—who wanted this sort of bilingual short stories and picture books.

I feel picture books are really good materials for translation and for kids because they can get so much from the pictures even if they find the Chinese characters difficult. They can look at the pictures, they can learn, think about the context,

they can be really creative in their translation. All three of our winners have had some Chinese heritage. It's interesting because in a lot of my work with schools, children with Chinese heritage in the UK, in terms of Chinese language learning, are such as a bit of a problem—maybe "problem" is too much—but it is slightly difficult because you don't know where to put them in terms of language learning. Do we make an A level in Chinese that's aimed for people who've already got Chinese as a native language or do we not? How do we deal with this issue? Whereas actually I feel like we need to be completely rethinking that. We've got people, we've got teenagers in the UK who've got this amazing resource of having two languages, maybe not completely fluent, especially perhaps not in Chinese, but they have got an understanding of both, and they are performing cross-cultural understanding and translation every day for their families. And what better people to be translating for their younger siblings than that because they've got that ability to do it. So that's been a really exciting revelation. The last two [Children's competitions] we've run it jointly with the Singapore Book Council's Asian Festival for Children's Content, and they've had an event there to launch the book and so on, which has been good and has also encouraged more young people from Singapore to enter.

Jane Qian Liu: Do you get many submissions every year?

Frances Weightman: For the main translation competitions, I think we've got eighty-eight for the first four competitions or something. It was weird. It was exactly the same number, very different people. For the children's ones, it's fewer, but I think maybe around about forty, but it was from a wide range of backgrounds as well, some from the UK. When we've run it jointly with Singapore, we tend to get about fifty-fifty from Singaporean schools, or schools in East Asia, and in the UK. So it's not masses, but the quality that we've had has been very good.

This year, for the first time, we've just launched a creative writing competition. We've never done that before. So we had an event two weeks ago, called Writing Hong Kong. We had a research discussion, presenting our research journal's special issue on Writing Hong Kong, with a keynote presentation by Prof Gregory Lee from St Andrews, along with our editor Jenny Wong and the York-based HK author Kit Fan, and Karen Cheung, who is based half in Hong Kong and half here. So alongside the research roundtable, we had author readings, and then we launched this competition, which is open to anybody who's currently based in the UK, who has Hong Kong family connections, or previously lived in Hong Kong. It's for people who haven't published a significant piece of creative writing in English about Hong Kong before. And so, Jenny and Kit and Karen are going to judge it, and it's open now. So they can write a poem or a short story or anything else that they would like

to. I have no idea how that goes. We will see.

Jane Qian Liu: That sounds very exciting!

Frances Weightman: Yeah, it is exciting. It's a whole new thing for us, but it would be quite fun, and we'll publish the winning entries on our site, and the winners get vouchers to attend Arvon creative writing workshops.

Jane Qian Liu: My next question is, in what ways do you support aspiring or emerging writers of China's literature? Obviously, the competitions you talked about already offer them significant support, don't they?

Frances Weightman: We have a monthly book club, which has a featured author each month. So if there's anybody who has a new book that's coming out in English translation or a new book in Chinese and has a short story in English translation, and it's somebody who we think is an important author or who more importantly somebody else tells us they think is an important author and persuaded us of it, then we will feature them for that month. So by featuring them, we do an overview of their work on our website, and we upload a short story or an extract of a novel in Chinese and in English for people to read with links to find out more about them. So we have that as a way of helping to promote and publicise their work.

Everything is of course down to funding, but if people are able to come over to the UK or to Europe, we'll do everything we can to have an event with them here. Occasionally we will be able to bring people over, but it does obviously always depend on whether we can get funding for people or not, as we don't actually have a budget ourselves. Another thing we do, where we do invite people over as much as possible is for our book reviewers' network. We have a book reviewers' network of about fifty or sixty people now. So that involves collaborations with publishers, where the publishers send us books, and we send the books out to the reviewers blind.

We set this network up because at our first annual symposium, one of the findings that came out from the publishers was that one of their major obstacles to promoting Chinese literature in translation was the lack of reviews and the lack of digital presence. And they said that for example they're trying to sell *Shanghai Baobei* or something like that, and the only reviews that they've got are from some old male professor in Yale—with no offence to any male professor who may be that—but it's not the target reader. It's not the target readership, so we try to make it get as broad a section as possible of people to review books. We've got 200 reviews now on our website. We send a book to somebody, and they have to send a review of about 1,000 words, within a month, and then they can keep the book.

So we have that reviewers' network, and then we've had three residential week-

ends for the book reviews so far. This is coming back to your question about what we do for authors. As well as including their books in that, for the residential weekends, we invite a maximum of ten or twelve reviewers to Leeds for the weekend, and we choose four featured books, which we ask them to read in advance. And then we try and get the authors and all the translators of the books to come as well. So we have this really nice weekend where it's set up as like book club discussions. We have small tables of four or five of the book reviewers. All the book reviewers have to prepare their discussion points and come to the weekend ready to discuss the books. But then the author will join them to talk about the books, and the authors move around the tables or the translators. We don't get all the authors, but we usually get two of the authors and two translators. Then they have to produce reviews within a month. It's a lovely opportunity for readers to really engage with the authors and has proved popular with everyone.

We had one in May on crime fiction, and we had Qiu Xiaolong from America come over. He is obviously normally used to huge events, but I think he genuinely enjoyed it and was just like, "No one normally does this"—it was that really small-scale engagement with people. Zhang Yueran was with us from Beijing as well, and the translator Jeremy Tiang, and it was lovely because you just don't normally get the opportunity to talk to people at that level. These are people who are just interested, the reviewers are just interested in reading and books, and the authors are able to engage properly with these new readers.

Of course, it's very, very small scale, but I firmly believe the most valuable things are done in a small groups because that's then what sticks with you, creates some memories, and then you go and talk about it to other people. So for me, anyway, that's what it is, but it's more difficult to persuade funding organisations that you want to apply for several thousand pounds for an event that involves fifteen people, but hopefully we're gradually making that case.

Jane Qian Liu: That sounds fascinating. I think we're running out of time. If I can ask you a final question, how do you position the Centre within the UK discipline of Chinese Studies?

Frances Weightman: When we set up as a Centre, we had to obviously make a case, and one of the things that we needed to make a case for was, were we providing something unique, or what were we doing, were we in competition with other places, and so on. We got a lovely letter of support from Michel Hockx who basically said there's nowhere else in the world that is doing something like this, and we were very happy.

We were very conscious of wanting to have something outside of London. The

London-Oxford-Cambridge triangle, obviously, when people from China come over, there's an attraction to doing London, Oxford, Cambridge. It's very difficult to persuade people to come further north. And so I would say that we started off by saying that we wanted to become the Leeds centre for Chinese literature in the north of the UK. We've since ditched the north of the UK. We just say in the UK or maybe, bigger. But I think that it is really important. So much happens in London, so many events. It's wonderful, vibrant atmosphere. But it's a different sort of atmosphere at events up in Leeds. The authors who've come here have often commented on the fact that it is a very different kind of atmosphere and that it's a different group of audience—they might be smaller but more engaged.

On an academic front, we launched a research journal two years ago, the title is *Writing Chinese: A Journal of Contemporary Sinophone Literature*. It's an open access journal by White Rose University Press. We are just about to do a second special issue on technology and literature. Our last special issue was on Hong Kong writing. We are trying to make sure that every issue we have has at least some work which is translated from Chinese. We have keynotes and, original research articles. We have a mentoring scheme for early career researchers or PhD students. Articles still have to go through a full peer-review process, but if we go through the peer-review process where the idea is, then after the peer-review process, you get paired with somebody and allocated with a mentor who can help you if needed in addressing the comments. I just feel like sometimes when you're just starting out in your career that the reviewer 2 comments can be pretty devastating, and if you've just finished your PhD, you've no longer got a supervisor to help. And you're suddenly stuck there thinking, "I've just been given this list of feedback, and where do I go?" So it was to try to address that.

Research on Chinese literature otherwise in the UK at the moment, is a bit patchy. There are some places, which do some excellent work. I don't think there's anywhere else that does the combination of the public engagement and the research that we do, or at least not on the same scale. We are getting increasing numbers of references to our Centre in academic writing, which is nice to see as well. They are not always from people we know. I came across something in a book that was published in China about our Centre being sort of a weathervane for Chinese literature in the UK. So I feel like we have managed to build up a decent reputation, which, given that we don't have any specific administrative support or even a budget, is quite pleasing. And our PhD students and community is really special and really positive. Some of them are doing brilliant work, and the way they support each other is really admirable.

Jane Qian Liu: That was fascinating, and I do believe that the Centre is a very unique and important presence in the UK field of Chinese Studies. And I think with that, we come to the end of our interview today. Thank you so much for taking the interview.

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David Damrosch. *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age.* Princeton: Princeton UP, 2020. ISBN-10: 0691134995; ISBN-13: 9780691134994. 392 pp.

Lu Linxinyu

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Ever since the publication of *What Is World Literature?* in 2003, David Damrosch has never ceased reflecting on comparative literature as well as world literature. In that book, Damrosch proposed an understanding of world literature as a mode of reading, an elliptical refraction of national literature, and a work that gains balance in translation. In his new book *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age*, Damrosch takes up a genealogical study of the discipline of comparative literature from the nineteenth century to the present with particular attention to the scholarly activists whose concerns and debates remain relevant for our present study, and responds to the crisis that this discipline faces in our time, or as Gayatri Spivak called the death of comparative literature. Meanwhile, he offers a comprehensive scrutinization of American comparative literature and world literature pedagogy based on his own teaching experience at Columbia and Harvard and his long-term engagement with the American Comparative Literature Association. In my opinion, this book is based on a rewriting of the history of comparative literature, unfolds with an inclusive and evenhanded vision that compares and learns from different comparative approaches around the world, and finally points to the future development of this discipline based on its pedagogical conditions.

In "Introduction," Damrosch presents a series of questions that the book seeks to address, three of which deserve our primary attention. Firstly, what do we really mean by "comparing the literatures" when many other subjects are also doing comparisons, thereby threatening the distinctiveness of this discipline? In other words, why are we still comparing literatures? Secondly, how should we conduct "comparison" and what tools do we need to have as we respond to the changes across literary studies and other subjects of humanities? Thirdly, what can the origins and history

of comparative literature tell us and how should we relate to our predecessors? For Damrosch, the third question seems to be the answer to the former two questions, as the book combs through the entire history of comparative literature to find answers to the questions of today. Finally, although not directly mentioned, another task of this book is suggested by the chapter arrangement, that is, to rethink "What Is World Literature?" and the relationship between world literature and comparative literature. In so doing, Damrosch demonstrates a firm belief in the discipline's capacity for rebirth. In an effort to include as comprehensively as possible the many critical angles that are working together to form the studies of comparative literature as we know it today, this book is divided into eight chapters, apart from "Introduction" and "Conclusion," respectively entitled "Origins," "Emigrations," "Politics," "Theories," "Languages," "Literatures," "Worlds," and "Comparisons."

The first chapter traces the burgeoning stage of comparative literature studies from the middle of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, citing the works of the German scholar Johann Gottfried Herder and the French scholar Madame de Staël as representatives. Chapter "Emigrations" takes on a comparative historical approach to the interwar eras between 1915 and 1950. The third chapter traces the establishment and development of comparative literature studies as a discipline in postwar America. In this way, the first three chapters not only reflect the retrospection of the history of comparative literature but also serve as the material and logical foundation of the whole book. Starting from the fourth chapter, the book is no longer strictly arranged in chronological order but paratactically discusses the core issues of comparative literature from the postwar period to the present day along the nexus of some key terms of the discipline, with each chapter building on the previous ones.

One of the most important features of this book is Damrosch's way of writing history. While making a broad historical sweep from Herder and de Staël, through overseas scholars like Hu Shih and Lin Yutang, through the wartime exilic generations of Auerbach and Spitzer to major critics of our day such as Spivak and Moretti, Damrosch breaks the linear time order, intersperses the educational background with social activities and familial condition of these earlier scholars from which readers can take a peek into the real historical condition where comparative literature came into bud and grew, reviving the original context where people made comparisons.

In reviewing the disciplinary history, Damrosch pays particular attention to the reconstruction of "beginnings." Deeply influenced by German philology himself, Damrosch claims that "the foundations of comparative literature were established

by the comparative philology that began in Renaissance Italy and spread to many parts of Enlightenment Europe" (Damrosch 2020 13). The role of German philology in the initial stage of comparative literature makes a powerful argument for the intrinsic pluralist overtones of the discipline, serving as a powerful refutation to the popular "single French origin" theory to which so many scholars have clung. Moreover, the methodological legacy that classic philology left on its apostles is also the original driving force behind the development of comparative literature as a discipline. Both Herder and de Staël's early studies on comparative philology and the attempts of Auerbach and Spitzer at comparative literature in the process of emigration or exile suggest the historical background and basic composition of American comparative literature. In other words, American comparative literature stems from the legacy of immigrants who brought with them a sense of diversity and mobility.

As an old discipline, classical philology, which always connects to ancient times, attaches great importance to the history and written materials, being a good counterpoint to "the creeping presentism in much of our work today" (9). Its pursuit somehow echoes the deconstructionist concern for language and text and therefore witnesses a return in today's century. Damrosch frequently refers to premodern texts such as *Gilgamesh* or *Kalidasa* to discuss problems like the applicability of literary theories that have a modern or even contemporary origin. Thus, another layer of the "history" in this book goes for a rediscovery and appreciation of historical materials.

The second feature of this book is its way of exploring "comparison" as both the disciplinary approach and basic standpoint. It not only means that Damrosch reconsiders the methods and materials of comparative literature but also that he literally compares literatures. While discussing why and how to compare, he consciously and regularly compares theories or literatures of scholars of a given era with that of earlier or contemporary scholars, and these comparisons are never confined to one culture or language. In short, his opinions about "comparison" are supported by his own comparisons.

In addition, Damrosch updates his ideas on the methods and materials of comparison. Referring to the "Introduction," we can regard chapters "Theories" and "Languages" as the "tools we need to have in our toolboxes today" (Damrosch 2020 6). Above all, Damrosch holds a consistent and impartial attitude toward any theories and languages. He tries his best to break up boundaries and to include materials as many as possible. However, he cautions that, as the ancient methods of our discipline, theory and foreign language learning should serve specific research questions and should not descend to a source of burden or a self-contained

academic game. In fact, both the enclosed theoretical debates within several major Euro-American forces and the ignorance of national literature have resulted in the theoretical hegemony and the loss of vitality of many theories, with the former being inextricably linked with linguistic imperialism. In response, Damrosch calls for abandoning the division based on territory and using language as the unit of comparison. The multiple languages spoken within one territory and the same language spoken in different countries enable us to do comparisons not only "at home" but also between regions or continents. The idea of using language rather than nationality as the comparative unit echoes concepts like "Sinophone Literature" (Song 91) or "la littérature d'expression (de langue) française" (Che 38) that have emerged in recent years.

Suggestions on language learning are followed by a discussion of translation. Although Damrosch does not allocate a separate chapter for translation, he puts translation in the same place as the original texts and correlates it with other methods. He points out that the primary task of translation is to better contextualize as cultural, political, and historical contexts change. Different from *What Is World Literature?* which regards "benefits by translation" (Damrosch 2003 6) as a condition for a work to become world literature, in this book, Damrosch puts more emphasis on the enriching and constructive effect of translation on national literature. Behind this updated understanding of translation, a more urgent task of this book is to dispel misconceptions in any theory or language. Pascale Casanova has cautioned in her new book *La langue mondiale* that bilingualism and translation may aggravate linguistic inequality and enhance linguistic domination since languages are socially hierarchical rather than equal: there will always be a world-wide dominant language while other languages can simply abide by the rules settled by the former. Therefore, although Damrosch is ostensibly lowering the requirements for theory or foreign language learning as he equally valorizes semifluency and basic reading ability, he is in fact giving sufficient attention and affirmation to the research that is based on one nation or one language.

The highlight of national literature and Damrosch's research on comparative literature and world literature pedagogy leads to the third feature of this book—a deep educational concern. The aristocratic de Staël and the populist Herder paved the way for cosmopolitanism and nationalism, which became the two impetuses of the development of comparative literature. Yet a latent paradox is what was once considered as national literature was not so "national," and the world literature not so "world," scilicet not so "international." Drawing from the scrutinization of American comparative literature and national literature education, Damrosch con-

cludes that although the two departments often have a cooperative relationship, the common focus of national literature departments has long been on traditions of high humanism rather than on American local literatures, and the comparative literature discipline was awkwardly immersed in a West Eurocentrism where "not only the émigrés but even American-born comparatists rarely worked on American literature" (Damrosch 2020 97). This disciplinary ecology, on the one hand, encouraged interdisciplinary communication, and on the other hand, succumbed to textuality and paid little attention to American native literatures, forming a gap between the cosmopolitanism aspiration, structural hierarchy, and the elitism of education. Consequently, theories that were imported by comparative scholars could not have the kind of "insurrectionary" quality that continental theory had when they were conceived in Europe, nor could they be localized under the influence of national consciousness based on a recognition of American literature.

It is clear that the emphasis on the study of national literature has not brought Damrosch back into the nationalist rut. On the contrary, he further demonstrates the possibility and necessity of a new world literature study by revealing the cross-cultural and international perspective inherent in the study of national literature. For a long time, the definition of world literature has been vague. It can refer to a concept, a body of texts, a pedagogical program, or a field of research. As with languages and theories, Damrosch advocates using different definitions of world literature for specific purposes. But the question before "What is world literature?" is "What is world?" In the opening page of *Worlds*, Damrosch distinguishes the worlds created by literary works and the world outside them, namely the imaginative world built up by an author and the real world where we live. This division shows Damrosch's rejection of the long-taken definition, which considers "world" only as "the outside world." Because of this univocal and unquestioned cognition of "world," world literature has always been regarded as a goal that national literature needs to achieve in some way. From this angle, the three definitions of world literature in *What Is World Literature?* serve more as a selection or classification method than a perspective or a quality. To update his definition, Damrosch raises three levels of world literature: comparatist's world literature, world writers' world literature, and world literature in the classroom. Through this renewed definition of world literature, Damrosch not only reinforces the conviction of the transformative power of literature itself but also gives equal credit to the participation of writers, comparatists, students, and teachers in the construction of world literature. Compared with *What Is World Literature?*, it seems like Damrosch does not provide a special page on "readers" as he used to. I prefer to understand this arrangement as Damrosch actually acknowledg-

ing that the reader can play either of the above roles. Moreover, thanks to this redefinition, which highlights comparatists' dedication, the connection between comparative literature and world literature has become closer than ever before. A conclusion can also be reached from the analysis above: it is "comparison" that fundamentally links national literature, comparative literature, and world literature. This linkage reaffirms the significance of "comparing the literatures" as the title displays.

It is noteworthy that Damrosch's discussion has never been divorced from the American comparative literature education and research context, and the primary addressee of his writing is also students and faculty in American comparative literature programs. Meanwhile, he has never ceased broadening his vision to a global scale, which is consistent with the turn taken by world literature of today's comparative literature research. Therefore, this book can serve not only as a textbook of disciplinary history, a terminology dictionary but also as a reservoir of new research questions. For example, apart from the Euro-American linguistic and theoretical hegemony that many want to resist and overturn, should we reconsider the intentional self-enclosure or self-isolation of some regional experts? Then, as world literature has been developed much since Goethe coined the term, should there be a world literature critic? Lastly, since Damrosch finished this book at the beginning of the global pandemic, it is worthwhile to reflect on the new political and economic conditions that comparatists have to face from now on. Maybe Damrosch's attempt at the dawn of this century's third decade can still be a valuable example.

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Megan M. Ferry. *Chinese Women Writers and Modern Print Culture.* Amherst: Cambria Press, 2018. ISBN: 9781604979381. 290 pp.

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The study of China's print media influences public understanding of its society. In early twentieth-century China, print media was not only a manifestation of cultural phenomena at specific historical stages but also a lens showing the collective narrative of Chinese modernity and the emancipation of women. It took the author of *Chinese Women Writers and Modern Print Culture*, Megan M. Ferry, twenty years and six rewrites to examine paratextual elements such as literary criticism, book covers, book advertisements, and photographs in detail, exploring modern women's identities and intellectual labour as reflected in the print media in twentieth-century China. Ferry notes that while a plethora of women's voices appeared in the print media at the time, the media drew on cultural norms to frame women's intellectual contributions through visual and linguistic differences, which "highlights a contradictory outcome of women's emancipation and gender equality" (Ferry 3).

Following the introduction, the book is divided into five chapters. In the first chapter, Ferry describes the particular experience of Ding Ling (1904-1986) in the 1930s. Chapter Two illustrates how male intellectual criticism of women writers' works influenced the social acceptance of these writers. Chapter Three analyses how the content and typography of book advertisements, book covers, and journal iconography about women writers guided people's vision and influenced their understanding. Chapter Four turns to the "extra-literary" texts—essays, letters, diaries, and autobiographies—produced by several modern women writers to discuss women's responses to the social norms of femininity and their views on literary production (Ferry 158). The final chapter again picks up the focus on Ding Ling, recounting her story after 1949 and following it to the 1990s to analyse post-1949 social discourses about gender.

Ding Ling is a representative female writer of modern China, and Ferry uses her unique historical experience as a typical example for discussing the gender issues faced by women writers. In Chapter 1, "Controlling Readings," Ferry focuses

on Ding Ling's experiences in the 1930s, showing the operation of the print media in shaping gender recognition. In 1933, Ding Ling disappeared from public view for three years following her kidnapping by the Nationalists. During this period, publishers and male intellectuals created images of Ding Ling for their readers as they imagined her. The female protagonists of Ding Ling's early works are mostly portrayed as breaking away from the old traditional life but feeling lost in their new freedom. Ferry quotes comments, articles, and memoirs by male intellectuals such as Qian Xingcun (1900-1977), Mao Dun (1896-1981), and Shen Congwen (1902-1988), recounting how they related these images to Ding Ling herself through their criticism, thus portraying Ding Ling as a Modern Girl. Ferry also mentions several publishing houses and newspapers, such as Liangyou Press and *Shenbao*, examining their portrayal of Ding Ling after her disappearance through book covers, book advertisements, and photographs. The readers at that time saw multiple images of Ding Ling: a Modern Girl, a mother, a female revolutionary, and a New Woman who "was supposed to be everything that the woman of the old society and Modern Girl was not" (Ferry 64). However, Ferry notes, "Ding Ling's physical disappearance removed her from any say in the reading and appropriation of her texts and her person" (Ferry 71).

Chapter 2, "Marking Difference," continues the discussion of critical commentary from the previous chapter. Ferry investigates the reviews of several influential male critics in the 1920s and 1930s, such as Qian Xingcun, He Yubo (1896-1982), and Cao Ye (1907-1994) , and finds some common features. She reveals that while praising specific attributes, male critics always identified flaws in women writers' works, stated that they were gender-related, and provided guidance and suggestions for improving them. And when these women writers were considered more masculine, there was a clear shift in the commentary. Ferry points out that these critiques relegated women writers into a singular category, which claimed that their works were capitalistic and sensual, as well as lacking realism and grand narrative. Rather than the works themselves, these criticisms were widely circulated in the print media, strongly influencing the public reception and opinion of women's intellectual labour.

Chapter 3, "Technologies of Sex," continues the examination of another branch of Chapter 1—visual epitexts and peritexts. Ferry depicts seventeen images of book covers and advertisements related to women writers from the 1920s to the 1930s, exemplifying the elements, typography, and representation of women in detail. She highlights the illustrators' attitudes toward women as consumers and commodities that these images represent. Ferry finds that the "modern woman" is a more West-

ern, seductive image and denotes that the modern female body receives much attention, with print media judging women's modernity by emphasising their physical appearance: "the nonconforming body to this way of seeing is either unrecognisable or deemed 'unwomanly' and 'immoral'" (Ferry 127). Women writers, despite having a large number of works and some even doing editorial work, "were subjects of the printing panopticon, not its agents" (Ferry 145). People's desire to know more about women writers became part of marketing strategies, and these writers became a means of connecting literature and commercial interests. Ferry demonstrates how print media limited and defined women writers, rather than liberating them. She argues that these women writers were still the sexualised Other in the culture and that the paratexts marked and framed them.

Chapter 4, "Literary Lives," turns to focus on the voices of women themselves. Ferry notes that public attention to women was increasingly focused on their bodies and femininity in the 1920s and 1930s. She turns to the analysis of self-expression-based texts published by women, such as prefaces, diaries, letters, and autobiographies, arguing that these nontraditional literary forms, with their immediacy and unmediated nature of expression, could provide an alternative voice to the dominant literary narratives. Ferry analyses the expressions of female identity recognition and modernity in the relevant texts of several representative women writers such as Xie Bingying (1906-2000) and Bai Wei (1894-1987). While arguing that these texts express more of the true selves of women compared to literary texts, she is also aware that these texts that privilege text over image "may come across as less influenced by the belief system of the time, yet are equally immersed in the saturated vision of modern ideology" (Ferry 159). Ferry indicates at the same time that this kind of public manifestation and definition of the female self is "an integral part of the process of identity formation" (Ferry 172).

Chapter 5, "Emancipation and Sexual Difference," again picks up Ding Ling's story. In this chapter, Ferry recounts Ding Ling's experience after 1936, following her journey from reaching a certain height as a cultural producer to her exile in 1957 and finally to her rehabilitation in 1979, arguing that despite her cultural and political status and largely emancipated self, she was still confronted with the gendered hierarchies and was unable to guarantee her liberation. From this, Ferry discusses the political dimension of women's intellectual recognition in socialism after 1949. She mentions several contemporary women writers like Mian Mian (1970-) and Muzimei (1970-) who struggle to be the makers of their own images, yet "these women's recognition focused almost exclusively on their bodily exposure" (Ferry 200). Ferry points out that gender differences have reemerged since the 1980s as

the market has evolved. When contemporary women writers and intellectuals seek dignity under policies of redistribution of wealth, the print media resumes its commercial practices. It adopts similar patterns of curiosity and interest to those of the 1920s and 1930s, emphasises and exaggerates gender differences, and the status of women is subsequently reduced. Ferry thereby argues that "regardless of fifty years of attempted gender equality under socialism, traditional readings of women writers still dominated the media" (Ferry 203).

For women, having the opportunity to create and publish articles is often seen as an improvement in their status. Instead, in this monograph, Ferry breaks with the perception of media narratives familiar to scholars, pointing out that modern Chinese print media profits from the identity of women authors, as well as restricts and frames women writers' intellectual recognition. Instead of focusing on the content of specific literary texts, Ferry pays attention to how the media market employs strategies such as visual presentation, commentary, and nontraditional literature texts to frame the image of women. This book contributes significantly to people's understanding of the complex relationship between print media and gender in twentieth-century China. At the same time, Ferry does not limit herself to historical research of a specific period but extends her analysis to contemporary society, making illuminating and meaningful discussions for the present.

The work leaves some questions that deserve further consideration. Do the voices and encounters of the women writers, who represent only a small group of female intellectuals, represent the entirety of women's emancipation in the twentieth century? Furthermore, the overall situation in China from the 1920s to the 1990s is intricate, with different regions experiencing different conditions at different periods. Focusing on the two ends of the period, irrespective of region, is to oversimplify the process of women's emancipation. In addition, this book avoids discussing literary texts. It would have been more interesting if the book had explored interactions between literary texts and the media.

Overall, *Chinese Women Writers and Modern Print Culture* succeeds in combining media studies, gender studies, and paratextual studies, provides a complex reflection on the perspectives of media and gender relations in modern China, and inspires meaningful questions for further exploration.

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The debate about the world literature turn of comparative literature has been ongoing since the twenty-first century. Among others, David Damrosch, Pascal Casanova, and Franco Moretti study world literature from distinct theoretical directions and help the theoretical growth of world literature from various levels. The theoretical revival of the ethos of world literature is bound up with the process of comparative literature de-Europeanization since the 1980s, which will inevitably initiate a fresh understanding of the concept of literary classics. Thus, the inherent idea of the Western canon will gradually disintegrate. For instance, David Damrosch and other scholars compile the world literary classics of different times in chronological order in the *Longman Anthology of World Literature* to reach a relative balance between the proportion of Eastern and Western pieces. However, as Damrosch mentioned when positioning world literature, "I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circle beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language (Virgil was long read in Latin in Europe) (Damrosch 5)". It can be seen that Western scholars, when compiling anthologies of world literature, are likely to place greater emphasis on foreign literary works that have had far-reaching impact on their own cultural system, rather than those foreign literary classics that have shaped in other cultural contexts. In that case, the selections compiled by Western scholars are of positive significance to the decentralization of literary studies, but it is still difficult to get rid of the limitations brought by specific cultural angles.

In this regard, Gayatri Spivak believes that the compilation of world literature based on English translation actually strengthens the hegemonic position of the United States in the global cultural market, and students from Taiwan, Nigeria, and Thailand will learn about world literature through the English version in the future.

Besides leading to the institutionalization of the global education market, it also impels the comparative literature disciplines in the United States and the Global South to be keen to train literature teachers in line with this institutionalized trend. However, "these gigantic translation projects, like the great dams subsidized by the World Bank, do little good (Spivak 21)". Theo D'haen rethinks how to compile anthologies of world literature in Spivak's questioning and holds that experts and scholars who use English as a second language could be invited to compile anthologies of English world literature, which benefits compilers to reexamine their own literary traditions from the means of world literature and leads to a distinctive interpretation of English literary classics (D' haen 21). In this discussion, Spivak directly denies the rationality of the anthology of world literature, which ignores the differences between the world literature curriculum as a teaching practice and the national literature research as a research subject and fails to realize that the world literature curriculum cannot achieve its teaching goal only through the source language. D'haen, on the other hand, creates a compromise mechanism between the West and the non-West, introduces the heterogeneous perspective into the compilation of the anthology of world literature, and balances the disputes between a wide range of cultural contexts on classics. This also proves that the compilation of an anthology of world literature in non-Western academic circles is of great meaning, and in this process, a benign dialogue can be formed between the East and the West on the issues of world literature theory, literary classic view, center and edge, interculture, and so on.

In the Chinese academic community, *Selected Works of World Literature*, edited by Professor Liu Hongtao, is an effective response to the above issues, acting as the very thought of Chinese academic circles on how to study world literature. Liu Hongtao proposes a concentric world literature view centered on China. Concentric circle is a mathematical concept; here it mainly refers to the practice of establishing awareness of world literature centered on China. It should be noted that this does not mean that China is regarded as the center of world literature but emphasizes the relation between world literature and Chinese literature. According to the connection between intercontinental literature and Chinese literature, Professor Liu Hongtao divides *Selected Works of World Literature* into Asian Literature Volume, European Literature Volume, American Literature Volume, African and Oceania Literature Volume and Diaspora, Ethnic and Language Literature Volume. Asian literature occupies the first circle of concentric circles, European literature the second, American literature the third, African and Oceania literature the fourth, and diaspora, ethnic, and language literature takes the outermost periphery of concen-

tric circles. In this way, *Selected Works of World Literature* goes further than the development history of world literature and embodies the interactive relationship between Chinese literature and world literature. The theoretical and practical significance of *Selected Works of World Literature* can be understood from the following aspects.

First and foremost, *Selected Works of World Literature* strives to present the world literary classics across eras, nations, and cultures, and at the same time, it also contains the inherent bond between the literary heritage of all sorts of nationalities and Chinese literary tradition, so that *Selected Works of World Literature* constitutes the history of the link between Chinese literature and foreign literary opus. Somewhere along the way, the literary heritages of all ethnic groups are no longer in a relatively isolated relationship but establish an effective tie on the basis of text circulation and comprehension in cultural exchange and interaction. Guided by this, the classicality of world literature is not only reflected in its significance as a national literary classic and its influence on Western literary tradition but also in how to view the world literary classics from the Chinese side and the relevance between Chinese literature and world literature. Consequently, reading a world literary work should take both the national culture and the foreign culture as the frame of reference, forming an "elliptical refraction of national literatures" (Damrosch 281). In the meantime, due to the differences in reception contexts and cultural environments, there must be some deviations in the recognition of world literature classics between China and the West, which provides a theoretical method for studying the classics of world literature with varied reception contexts as a frame of reference and also makes the sense of concentric world literature similar to Damrosch's contrapuntal comparison in method. Contrapuntal comparison requires researchers to interpret literary works from two theories or aspects with various cultural backgrounds, while it does not mean to admit the correctness of a single perspective but to negotiate between two particular theoretical perspectives to build up unique viewpoints. For this reason, Damrosch takes *Meghadūta* as an example and thinks that

Derrida—and indeed William Wimsatt—can help us understand dimensions of the *Meghadūta* not accounted for in *rasadhvani* theory, even as Sanskrit poetics provides a crucial check against a too direct application of contemporary theory to the dilatory drifting of a compassionate cloud. ("Contrapuntal Comparison" 64)

This indicates that comparing *Selected Works of World Literature* with that of Western world literature is helpful for researchers to form a special cognition of the attitude of world classic literature on the basis of contrapuntal comparison.

In addition, *Selected Works of World Literature* rationally organizes the literature of multiple eras in the process of compilation. For example, when compiling Asian literature volumes, it combines classical literary texts with those after the twentieth century, instead of limiting the scale of Asian literary classics to classical literature, which is not akin to the compilation style of the *Longman Anthology of World Literature*. Regarding the *Longman Anthology of World Literature*, Sabry Hafez argues that: "The occident, meaning Europe and North America which represent less than 20% of the world population and less than 10% of its languages and cultures, has 75% of the space, and the rest of the world is crammed in the remaining 25%" (31). This shows that the *Longman Anthology of World Literature* pays more attention to the classicality of non-Western classical literary writings to a certain extent when compiling and selecting, but when it comes to literary works after the twentieth century, it still continues the tradition of center and edge and is not able to treat Western and non-Western literary resources equally, which has improved in *Selected Works of World Literature* edited by Liu Hongtao.

Moreover, although *Selected Works of World Literature* is divided on the basis of intercontinentality, literary books with diverse characteristics in culture and country are divided separately to make up "Diaspora, Ethnic and Language Literature Volume", which reflects the changes in the improvement of world literature since the twentieth century. Homi K. Bhabha points out when defining world literature:

"The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of "otherness." Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees—these border and frontier conditions—maybe the terrains of world literature." (Bhabha 17)

This represents that in the era of globalization, with the intensification of population mobility, it is not feasible to differentiate writers with multiple styles in culture and ethnicity belonging to various countries, while literary works with cross-cultural elements in creation can be directly defined as world literature. Throughout the world, after the 1990s, Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul, Ferit Orhan Pamuk, Ab-

dulrazak Gurnah, and other authors have won the Nobel Prize for literature one after another due to the cross-cultural traits of their production. As a result, the compilation of *Selected Works of World Literature* echoes this trend of world literature. Even if it is divided by intercontinental boundaries, it is not completely limited to this theoretical thinking, which is another innovation of the compilation of *Selected Works of World Literature.*

Last but not least, *Selected Works of World Literature* embodies the opinion of world literature of Chinese scholars and adds to the theoretical achievements of world literature. It is a pity that despite David Damrosch, Pascal Casanova, and Franco Moretti promoting the theoretical progress of world literature, which has profoundly influenced the standpoints of comparative literature in the twenty-first century and helped more non-Western literature enter the center of the world literary stage, there still is no equal theoretical dialogue between the East and the West. A case in point, when laying out Moretti's perception of world literature, Sabry Hafez considers that Moretti's problem lies in continuing the "axial division of labor" put forward by Immanuel Wallerstein when analyzing the modern world system. Applying this model to the conceptual reconstruction of world literature, Moretti has endowed experts from the central regions with key functions such as delineating boundaries, establishing standards, evaluating and judging works, etc. In contrast, experts from peripheral regions only gain attention when they use their own local materials to validate the arguments and hypotheses put forward by central experts. Because of Moretti's long-distance reading mode of, the duty of local experts is to process and extract large amounts of texts, while Western experts can rely on the synthesis of theories to add value to the academic achievements of local experts. Simultaneously, Moretti's study of modern novels has accepted the function of innovating and popularizing mainstream culture. This analysis mode is unlike the hegemonic practice in the field of literary production and has established the dominant position of the core culture, while the culture and language that are neglected cannot receive enough attention (Hafez 16-17). The concentric circle view of world literature constructed by Liu Hongtao reveals the attempt of Chinese scholars in the construction of world literature theory. This also unveils that in the field of comparative literature, the equal dialogue between China and the West should be not only reflected at the literary level but also at the theoretical one. If not, the transcendence of Western centralism will be will remain nothing more than an idealistic fantasy in the realm of practice. From this point of view, *Selected Works of World Literature* extends the compilation of world literary works to the height of dialogue between Chinese and Western literary theories, which also eliminates Spivak's concerns

about world literary practice to a certain extent.

Admittedly, for the convenience of the teaching of world literature in China, *Selected Works of World Literature* only selects the world literary classics with Chinese translations in the compilation of literary outputs, which does have the possibility that the world literary classics cannot be treated completely and fairly. Nevertheless, *Selected Works of World Literature* does not demonstrate the rationality of Chinese translation of world literature classics but enriches Chinese translation of world literature classics in communication and dialogue and arouses students' discussion of world literature view in curriculum teaching. In a nutshell, *Selected Works of World Literature*, as an attempt by Chinese scholars in the theory of world literature, increases the theoretical fruits of world literature in aspects such as theoretical practice, classic notions, and compilation style and extends the discussion on world literature in China to the compilation practice of world literature collection. This in turn has certain significance for the theoretical construction of comparative literature in China, the construction of the Chinese language and literature system, and the teaching of world literature. Chinese research on world literature still needs a reconstructed theoretical framework. *Selected Works of World Literature* can play an exemplary role and encourage more Chinese scholars to intervene in the practice of world literature so as to reconstruct a theory of world literature with Chinese style.

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Jennifer Wenzel. *The Disposition of Nature: Environmental Crisis and World Literature.* New York: Fordham UP, 2020. ISBN: 9780823286775. 352 pp.

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In recent years, there has been a plethora of books in the humanities that focus on environmental themes, thus provoking a wide range of critiques of environmental issues in the broader humanities. These stances on a wide range of environmental phenomena are not only highly dialogical in an interdisciplinary perspective but are indeed insightful and provide strong support for our imagination, discussion, and practice of protecting the planet. However, an excessive interdisciplinary dialogue, on the other hand, may lead to unintended negative consequences. If left unattended, ambitious interdisciplinary works can easily be reduced to the products of humanities, leaving the existing disciplines without their attributed meanings or reduced to "area studies" with different methodologies. The most remarkable quality of Wenzel's second monograph, *The Disposition of Nature: Environmental Crisis and World Literature*, is that despite its obvious interdisciplinary nature—not only does it discuss texts that straddle the Indian Ocean and a wide range of genres, but it also creates an integral dialogue between postcolonial theory, world literature, and the environmental humanities—it remains highly focused on an important master question about literature. What can (reading) literature bring to us or our planet (world/globe)? It forms the very foundation of the thesis presented in *The Disposition of Nature* by Wenzel, wherein she poses the thought-provoking inquiry: How can *literature* contribute to the Earth?

Such issues are epistemological topics that traditional ecocriticism as opposed to today's environmental humanities cannot get around. As Wenzel notes, ecocritical scholars such as Richard Kerridge argue that literature serves as a response to the environmental crisis, prompting a call to action to protect the planet (16). It is challenging to find credence in such a utopian perspective, and it appears that Wenzel herself is decidedly skeptical, a sentiment she convincingly articulates through a series of compelling examples. She vividly illustrates how literature can inadvertently reinforce and normalize the workings of violent extraction regimes within

our natural environment. In essence, her emphasis on literature closely aligns with the ongoing discourse concerning the contemporary challenges faced by literary studies. Diverging from other scholars who have, over time, relinquished their commitment to the literary enterprise, her opposing perspective injects vitality into any apprehension surrounding this matter. In the current milieu, the imperative to engage in comprehensive literary reading and professional analysis, as well as literary criticism, remains more pronounced than ever. This necessity arises from the risk of transforming literary studies into a unidirectional adjunct of particular cultural agendas, such as environmental concerns, or dominant theories within the humanities, such as history and anthropology.

In insisting on a literary perspective on the environmental crisis, she focuses on how rescaling the reading of literature (and narrative works more generally), which she calls "reading for the planet," (22) can help people become fully aware of how the interconnected world of many "worlds" is uneven in terms of real resources and risks. "Reading for the planet" considers the earth (rather than the global or integrated world) as an intricate, interrelated whole, examining the layers of connections and divisions between the whole and its parts, "from near to there: between specific sites, across multiple divides, at more than one scale" (2) and examines different power dynamics. It integrates Franco Moretti's concept of "distant reading" with the practice of "close reading," combining these approaches to foster a deeper understanding of the Earth as a critical framework for interpretation. She reminds us that on the scale of "reading for the planet," "people can inhabit the same space without living in the same world" (8) or vice versa—even if they live in the same space, they may live in a different world.

To this end, she has engaged in a dialogue on world literary studies in recent years, in the same vein as Aamir Mufti, Pheng Cheah, and others, reflecting on the reading of world literature pioneered by David Damrosch, Pascale Casanova, and Franco Moretti. Although the three perspectives are not completely identical, generally "these texts are enthusiastic about taking the transnational movement of texts and genres as a framework for literary analysis" (6). She criticizes, "they often imagine a world of circulation without friction, where unresolved histories of economic. ecological, and epistemological violence are elided, naturalized, or euphemized" (8). In other words, in her view, referring only to the circulation of texts is too superficial to truly reflect and effectively criticize the imbalance in resources. From the perspective of the influence of world literature, the circulation of texts as the only reducing indicator weakens the theoretical potential and agency of world literature as a concept. The neglect of the radical power of the (world) literary imag-

ination in its cultural connections across the globe is an unimaginable loss and may even make "literature" contribute to the environmental crisis. This is shown in the following chapters through various examples.

Through a postcolonial lens, meanwhile, she considers what Rob Nixon calls "unevenly universal"—the vulnerability to environmental harm. She hopes to break down the formidable "quarantines of imagination" by focusing on imagination across social divides. However, given that "gestures toward universality or planetary community that do not grapple with this unevenness can effect a gentrification of the imagination, displacing communities and epistemologies in the name of breaking down barriers," she advocates a "world-imagining from below" scenario. (9) In other words, she places otherwise unappreciated peripheral people in the context of the postcolonial, transnational, planetary environment and materiality in order to break through the top-down blind spots that often mark transnationalism studies (for instance, policy studies).

The disposition of nature, as she calls it, is at the intersection of several of these concerns, as well as a reflection on the logic of reduction, which she continues to track in later chapters: "what kind of thing nature is understood to be, and how humans arrange, control, and distribute nonhuman nature, often as 'natural resources'" (3). In other words, she considers "assumptions about what nature is are mutually constituted with contests over how it is used" (3). With that, Chapters 1 and 2 (the first part) focus on the paradoxical relationship between "citizens and consumers," while Chapters 3 and 4 (the second part) highlight the possible cultural correlation—local and also planetary—between resource logic and risk logic at various scales around the globe.

The first chapter looks at how three commodity-specific documentaries act as "a strategy for creating change" (44) when disseminated as cultural knowledge products of environmental disasters. Wenzel argues that these films provide an opportunity for people far away, as consumers and citizens, to bring themselves into the environmental crisis on the other side of the planet and thus provide an opportunity for them to want to make a change (for instance, green consumption). But ironically, for Wenzel, this in turn provokes the desire for consumerism. The second chapter, "Hijacking the Imagination: How to Tell the Story of the Niger Delta," looks at the environmental destruction of global commodities such as crude oil in places like Nigeria and Tanzania through the analysis of documentaries such as *Sweet Crude* (2010) and *Curse of the Black Gold* (2008) and links it to the "geography of consumption" of commodities in North America and Europe. This chapter effectively illustrates her claim that "people can inhabit the same space without living in the

same world" (8). The third chapter illustrates the historical and cultural entanglements of global resource logic through a nuanced reading of the wasted and wasted lives in the short story *Dhowli* (1979) by Bengali writer and activist Mahasweta Devi. The fourth chapter delves into the cultural ramifications stemming from the tragic 1987 Union Carbide disaster, which wrought devastation upon the central Indian city of Bhopal. In a meticulously argued demonstration, this chapter strategically underscores the significance of bottom-up research and the constructive role literature can play in the realm of practical societal impact. Within this analytical framework, the author scrutinizes the manner in which international law facilitates the existence of transnational corporations in a state of simultaneous ubiquity and elusiveness, thereby affording these entities a means to evade accountability for their role in environmental degradation and the erosion of human rights. Instead, narrative texts such as *Animal's People* (2007) by Indra Sinha are like "inconvenient forum[s]" that make the responsibility of transnational corporations explicit through "narrative jurisdiction."

Both Wenzel's mastery of the materials and the way she uses them to criticize and reflect on the current topology of the combination of environmental humanities, postcolonial literary theory, and world literature seems to be well developed and logically sound. However, there is one aspect that may be worthy of scrutiny—in its attempt to avoid the logic of reduction, its understanding of "literature" itself may also fall into such a logic of reduction. In this monograph, literature seems to be equated with narrative, or rather, too much emphasis is placed on the functionality of narrative. In other words, the so-called literature can only be "read for the planet" because literature points to some "events" about the environmental crisis. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that within the realm of literature, narrative literature is but one facet, and a substantial body of nonnarrative literature also warrants consideration. Therefore, it prompts us to ponder whether these nonnarrative works also merit examination. Do they possess critical relevance to humanistic concerns such as the environmental crisis, albeit through different means or at varying levels?

In any event, I believe a fundamental criterion for assessing the quality of a monograph is its capacity to engage effectively within its disciplinary boundaries while fostering broader accessibility. Evidently, *The Disposition of Nature* epitomizes this standard. To be candid, this work is not easily digestible, given its intricate web of textual and theoretical intricacies, and readers may find themselves navigating complex terrain. However, within the realms of environmental humanities, world literature studies, and postcolonial cultural examination, this publication

emerges as an imperative and noteworthy addition to the scholarly canon of recent years.

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