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GHOSTS OR SPACESHIPS: RECLAIMING CHINESE NATIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH SCIENCE FICTION

Nicholas Stillman
Writing Studies and Global Engagement
December 2014

Faculty Adviser: Dr. Andrea Modarres

Essay completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Global Honors, University of Washington, Tacoma.

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In August of 2007, Chengdu, China played host to the largest international science fiction and fantasy convention the country had ever seen. A dozen authors from around the world met with over sixty Chinese sf and fantasy authors to host talks on the theme of “Science, Imagination and the Future,” and then sign autographs for the reported 10,000 attendees (Fang, 2007). The event, however, was more than just a celebration of the fantastic: it was a call to action.

Supported by a wing of the Ministry of Science and Technology, the goal of the conference was stated as the encouragement of “public creativity toward future scientific and technological development,” as well as the promotion of “national insight for scientific exploration” (Fang, 2007). The Chinese government communicated clearly that the conference was more than a fan gathering, it was a national push for greater exploration and innovation of science and technology by way of science fiction. The reasons for the change in outlook on what was long held in China (and the West) as a “low” or “children’s” genre of writing, were revealed in layers over the three days of the conference.

During the opening conference ceremony, Lu Tiecheng, President of Sicheuan Department of Science and Technology, gave his speech while flanked by banners printed with the message “Let Science Guide Us, Become Scientific Chinese.” His words aligned with the banners as he called for Chinese citizens to look at sf as more than a genre, but as a form of national development. What was once a genre banned for decades during the Mao regime from the late 60’s to the 90’s for, among other things, being “pseudoscientific” and “anti-spiritual” (Qian, 2013) was now being told it was writing which “shoulders so many [of China’s] responsibilities” (Fang, 2007).

The origin for the belief in sf as development strategy was outlined on day-three of the conference, when best-selling UK author Neil Gaiman told the gathered crowd to “look no further than the offices at Microsoft and Apple” to see the positive and innovative properties of sf. Gaiman echoed other speakers in his argument that imaginative writing, and sf in particular, is responsible for much of the technological innovation in the West. In order to compete in a global economy that requires more than factory production, China must become not only “Scientific Chinese,” but also more creative.

The argument is not without its anecdotal evidence, as ground-breaking American astronomer Edwin Hubble was a known fan of Jules Verne and other early sf as a child and is often cited as evidence for the importance of imaginative and science-based literature. Still, the cause-effect relationship between sf and innovative technologies remains unconnected, making China’s motivation for a promotional campaign appear more like a product of Western emulation, than a subscription to a proven strategy of development.

This argument is consistent with the reasoning behind China’s earliest Western sf translations, when “despite [the government’s] bitter feelings towards the imperialist West, they were eager to find a convenient and effective way to spread the West’s political ideas and scientific knowledge to the Chinese people” (Qian, 2013). Even the invitation extended to international authors such as Neil Gaiman and Robert J. Sawyer to support China’s “*national insight*” on technological innovation is itself a comment on a more globalized China reaching for international examples of prosperity (emphasis mine). Indeed, the ultimate conclusion packed within Gaiman’s speech is that to compete with the West, China must embrace science fiction.

Seven years after the conference, and the latest statistics on SF in China show a genre that has significantly grown its readership, and a country that has further liberalized its economy (Langfitt, 2014). With now over four different sf awards, and a record-setting 97 new sf novels published in 2013, sf in China is on the rise, and with one of the largest potential audience bases in the country, the growth of sf in China has potential to reach the largest sf reading population in the world (Song M. , 2013). But has this increased emphasis on the genre had the innovative properties it espoused?

Without being able to draw a direct correlation, the 2013 lunar landing of the Chinese Lunar Exploration Program's rover, nick-named the Jade Rabbit, certainly suggests that China's citizens are following the Chengdu banner by "Becoming Scientific Chinese." That project, however, began in 2002 – so any science-fictional inspiration could not have been from any work produced after the Chengdu conference. Still, the landing of China's Jade Rabbit's Moon Landing in 2013 encouraged Chinese news outlet Xinhua to run the article "Chinese sci-fi writer's laud moon landing," in which the interviewer reached out to Chinese sf writers such as best-selling Cixin Liu for comment on the national achievement (An, 2013).

Approval of the project is a far cry from inspiring it, as Jeffrey Wasserstrom, a Chinese cultural theorist, argues in his editorial piece, "The Year in Chinese Science-And Science Fiction;" however, the fact that Xinhua reached out to sf writers for comment "illustrates one natural way that current news out of China and the historical roots and contemporary flourishing of the country's SF tradition can be brought together" (Wasserstrom, 2013). Much like the Chengdu conference, there exists a concerted effort to bring science, sf writers, and Chinese national identity into one whole image of Chinese technological progress and development. Science fiction in China has achieved a

resurgence that, on the surface, appears to satisfy the goals of that 2007 conference. More authors are writing in the genre, and many more are reading. Evidenced by the article on the Jade Rabbit, there seems to be a greater amount of recognition of the genre in mainstream media.

What Xinhua's article on the moon landing failed to do, however, was widen its scope by interviewing more socially critical sf authors. Instead, the article focused on Cixin Liu, who is still considered a "pure" sf writer – as his work often features positive visions of exploration and technology. That they did not reach out to the writers who are sweeping up awards for short fiction and whose work is being translated into English (an example being US-based *Clarkesworld Magazine*, who in 2014 reached a crowdfunding goal to bring even more Chinese authors to Western readers), speaks to the national divide in both the type of sf being produced in the country, and the core philosophy of the genre's role. The narratives that have been trickling into Western hands are from that new generation of writers, and they have not been what the Ministry asked for. These critical sf authors include Chen Quifang, Xia Jia, and Han Song. Or, as Chen Quifan refers to sf writers born after Mao's Cultural Revolution, authors of "The Torn Generation."

When examining the narratives produced by the likes of Chen Quifan, Xia Jia, and Han Song among others, though, one sees not gleaming starships, nor a shiny, new China. There are no utopic visions of achievable technologies that will inspire the Chinese Google. The Ministry asked for innovation and development to compete with the West, and instead they got stories about the death of a cultural identity crushed under the boot of progress. They wrote stories about China's ghosts. This dichotomy, I argue, between what was asked for and what is being produced, is the result of a sort of haunting that has emerged in China's later works of sf. The new narratives represent a fear of

optimistic visions of the future, of portraying a nationalist, Western-modeled narrative of progress at the expense of cultural identity.

HISTORY

The belief shared during the Chengdu conference that Western-style sf can influence China's national technological development, was not a new one. In fact, the idea was first presented over a century ago during the late Qing period (1900-1912), when scholar and reformer Liang Qichao translated the first Western sf (*kexue xiaoshuo*) into his native Chinese. His reasoning for introducing this new genre was out of desperation to reform the primarily agricultural empire to better match the technological development witnessed in the West during the industrial revolution (Song, 2013).

Qichao saw the futuristic stories of authors like Jules Verne and H.G. Wells as “an effective vehicle of enlightenment that might ‘renovate the people of a nation,’” even as the stories were dismissed as “children’s literature” in its country of origin. This idea, that borrowing a narrative style from the West in order to match development, is not only an echo to the strategy outlined at the Chengdu conference, but reflective of the pervasive belief that producing and consuming nationalist and scientific literature carries power. As scholar Mingwei Song agrees, “from its inception Chinese sf has been characterized by a strong political investment.” Indeed, those first sf stories were “discourses of an emerging nationalism” (Song M. , 2013). But with all of this political and ideological weight placed upon it, the new genre carried the dual burden of borrowing the narrative mode from the West, and using it to promote a nationalist narrative.

As sf sputtered to life with little readership during the first decade of the twentieth-century, it became clear that authors would need to work to strike the difficult

balance between promoting both a reformed Chinese national identity, and Western models of progress (Isaacson, 2013). This tension between identity and progress is best illustrated in what is credited as China's first original work of sf, Lu Xun's 1904 story "Tales of the Moon Colony."

In the long running (but never completed) serialized story, Xun imagined a future with the West and China as equal world superpowers – effectively occupying the same colonial rung. Lu Xun presented a China that destroyed less technically advanced foreign enemies with ray guns and dropped bombs from airships, justifying the deaths below by saying the victims were less developed, "barbarian" people. The message embedded in this exchange is clear: industrialized nations get to drop bombs, while less-developed nations of barbarians are helpless as the bombs sing through the air. The equating of less-advanced technology with barbarism is precisely the sort of rhetoric the genre was intended to utilize to promote the acceptance of industrialization.

Also embedded within the narrative is a reflection of China's relationship with the West. It is telling that Xun could not, or did not want, to imagine a future in which China is hierarchically situated above the West. Instead choosing to make the superpowers equals who are both living under the colonial thumb of the mysterious and powerful colony occupying the moon. It seems even in an imagined future, China's view of the world was still one of inferiority, unable to escape their colonial past (Isaacson, 2013).

By 1919, production of sf in China rapidly declined, to the extent that a mere twenty Western titles were translated in the thirty years between 1919 and 1949 (Qian, 2013). The fall in popularity is blamed on two trends: China's intellectuals stopped reading as they found more relevance in the politically-oriented literature following the May Fourth Movement, while the populous stopped reading in favor of less intellectually

demanding “Butterfly” love stories. The failure of these early narratives to find traction among a Chinese audience highlights what has been a duality of sf and its place in Chinese cultural identity – the struggle to adapt a Western narrative while retaining and relating to a Chinese identity. As cultural theorist Isaacson agrees, China does not have a science as part of its cultural DNA. For a brief moment during the late Qing, reforms were painting the nation in a new, more Western and scientific light, opening the door for sf. When that door closed as interests shifted back to more traditional literary forms, it wouldn’t reopen until it was called upon to once again help steer the nation towards development.

GOLDEN AGE

It wasn’t until the 1950s and early 1960s that sf made its second splash in the politically tumultuous waters of China. In what is now a familiar refrain, Chairman Mao brought the genre back into relevance through a massive campaign promoting scientific education and technological renovation. During his “Great Leap Forward,” which sought rapid industrialization and collectivization of crops, the central government formed the National Long-range Program for Scientific and Technological Development (Zhu, et al) in order to, much as in 1902 and 2007, support scientific education through promotion of sf. This time, however, it was not a Western model Mao called for, it was the socialist-realist work being produced by their Cold War allies the Soviet Union (Volland, 2014).

What happened under Mao during this period was another attempt at reframing the Chinese identity to include science, nationalism, and Maoist communism. In order to promote this new vision, a new slogan was announced in 1956: “March towards Science and Technology” (Qian, 2013). The parallels between Mao’s slogan and the banners

gracing the Chengdu conference stage, “Let Science Guide Us, Become Scientific Chinese,” are striking. Both suggest a need to pursue, to develop, to enact change. Yet the specific phrasing reflects the fundamental difference between the two period’s approaches to this goal.

For example, Mao’s militant verb “March” is reminiscent of Mao’s authoritarian approach to economic and cultural reforms. The slogan implies an attitude of force. To “march towards” is an attack, a formation meant to capture.

Whereas in 2007, science is a “guide,” and therefore a more passive pursuit of a similar development strategy. In Mao’s China the people must go to the future, in 2007, Science must lead China.

By avoiding direct connotations to early PRC developmental practices, the Ministry of Science and Technology hope to peacefully reorient the Chinese National identity to one that is “scientific,” but with less of an authoritarian edge. Though they are phrased differently, both slogans call for a “narrative of technological development” designed to spark “interest and enthusiasm that will open up the future” (Volland, 2014). It is the reframing of what it means to be Chinese to include science and technology that are similar, the results of the efforts were miles apart.

The results in the early People’s Republic of China were promising for both the sf genre and the nation. Over forty works of sf were translated in the 1950’s alone, many more produced internally, and over 2,000 volumes of science books were translated from the Soviet Union (Volland, 2014) while early reports from the crop collectivization project reported excellent numbers (Qian, 2013).

The works that emerged from the late 1950s and early 1960s were largely filled with optimism of the PRC’s future, similar to the work that was being produced along the

Soviet Bloc. Resulting stories such as 1957's "The Mars Pioneers" by prolific science popularist Zheng Wenguang, featured young protagonists, a robust future Chinese space program, and Soviet Bloc countries coming together to use science and technology to overcome plot obstacles, ultimately resulting in success (Volland, 2014).

These narratives followed Soviet "training manual" styled nationalist and positivist "hard" sf, whose goal was to create a shared imagined future powered by socialist ideology and scientific discoveries. The target of this utilitarian surgical strike – children – was based on two beliefs, first that "science fiction will greatly benefit young people because it can make them more imaginative and creative" (Qian, 2013) and second that "today's children are the scientists of tomorrow, who will turn [the sf] imagination into reality (Volland, 2014).

This era of sf stories, despite a widely criticized lack of literary merit, is referred to as China's second "golden age" for the number of narratives presenting China as a forward-looking socialist republic. The shallow optimism of "golden age" sf is best represented by the PR campaign run in 1958, which featured an illustration of an impossibly fat pig from the children's story "Elephants with their Trunks Removed," a sf story written by Chi Shuchang (Song M. , 2013). The image was used to represent China's great wealth and fat future. The pig became a symbol for China's success in their efforts of collectivization and industrial progress. But only three years later, Mao's Great Leap Forward came to a disastrous end as famine swept through rural China, resulting in the deaths of some 30 million peasants between 1959 and 1962 (Smil, 1999). The image presented by the soviet-styled sf was as fictitious as the genre's contents. The fat future of the pig was more likely to be suffering from a distended stomach from starvation than overconsumption.

The effect that the regime was hoping for – more positivist, nationalist sf to realign China as a socialist country – was achieved through the use of the sf image as a marketing campaign. But even so, the realities of China’s present were far from the gleaming socialist utopia writers like Zheng and Chi imagined. Unlike in 2007, Mao was successful in inspiring, or forcing, writers to engage with positive vision of the PRC to create a new identity for China; only that presented identity was a mask hiding the harsh realities of rapid collectivization of farmland.

SF would disappear again during Mao’s Cultural Revolution starting in the late 60s as a purge of intellectuals and dissidents hampered creative output. The genre reemerged during more social reforms in the 70s, where it was asked again to promote national development and China’s plan of “Four Modernizations,” one pillar of which being the modernization of science and technology (Qian, 2013). After disappearing again in the early 80s for promoting “fake science,” the early 1990s had a more liberalized view of the genre and its conventions, and it has been gaining popularity since.

The shift in the role of sf in China followed another major shift in the Chinese identity. Since the late 90s the US has been working to make China more capitalist and more democratic. The West began to pursue China as partners in trade, as President Clinton said in 1997, “[b]y working with China and expanding areas of cooperation, dealing forthrightly with our differences, we can advance fundamental American interests and values.” The results of these attempts have been more capitalism than democracy, the effects of this gradual reorientation of the Chinese identity away from socialist ideals, while maintaining authoritarian rule, are what is informing the latest products of sf (Langfitt, 2014).

It was in the genre's resurgence in 1997, in tandem with the West's attempts to spread democracy and capitalism, that a new narrative in sf began to emerge. During the Beijing International Conference on Science Fiction, author Liu Xingshi stated that sf was not beholden to optimism, not responsible for advancing China's scientific education, and not charged with cultivation of a new Chinese identity: "[w]e must face the facts, never [be] too romantic," said Xingshi. "The bell of the new century will be ringing. Our SF must take on the sacred duty of warning the World" (Xingshi, 1997)

In the eyes of Han Song, a Chinese science fiction writer born in the 1960s, the Chinese born after 1978 belong to a "Torn Generation." This date in particular as it occupies a pivot point in China's history, out of Mao's regime, and before the Where, as he says, "[c]ontemporary China is a society in the transition stage when old illusions have collapsed but new illusions have not taken their place: this is the fundamental cause of the rips and divisions, the confusion and the chaos" (Song H. , 2013).

The stories that followed this rift, written after the latest attempt in 2007 at Chengdu to call upon the genre to once again shape Chinese identity, to inspire readers to "Become Scientific Chinese," are often thinly-veiled Marxist critiques of Western capitalism and liberalization in China, which began in 1997. The stories hold up disparate elements, juxtaposing images of a traditional Chinese identity, of cultural roots, with artificiality of a consumerist culture. In this way, the narratives are not promoting a scientific identity, instead it attempts to reclaim, or at least question the validity of, an identity that is in a constant state of change, an uncertain future spread in front, and ghosts littered behind.

CLOSE READINGS

One author addressing these issues is contemporary writer and critic Xia Jia. In her 2013 short story, “A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight,” Jia defies traditional science fictional conventions by incorporating fantasy elements and lush language to accompany a narrative whose themes explore the ghosts of China’s past and the capitalist future. The narrative asks the question of “authenticity” of what is real and what is produced for consumption, and asks if even the ancient Chinese gods can tell the difference. Underlying this narrative is a comment that the new narratives from the “torn generation” are exploring: how does Western capitalism fit in with what it means to be Chinese?

The story follows a young boy named Ning, a resident of an amusement park called Ghost Street – a street occupied by mechanical bodied people who are operated by souls trapped inside, operating them. Ning is in the midst of an identity crisis. Having long thought he was the only real person living in ghost town as an orphan, he slowly comes to the realization that he is neither real, nor ghost: he was a toy built from nothing that will never age and never leave Ghost Town.

The plot is secondary to the story of Ning, but the parade of the story’s namesake leads to the impending “Thunder Calamity,” a once in a thousand year event that purges all artificial people from China. Ning must now figure out for certain whether he is a real boy or a toy before the Thunder Calamity arrives.

The identity crisis of the development of Ning mirrors the tension in the setting of Ghost Street: the juxtaposition of traditional Chinese culture with the capitalist ideology of consumption.

Before we know that ghosts are the one’s occupying this town, we are introduced to the idyllic Lanruo Temple, which boasts a garden full of fruit trees, vegetable patches, a bamboo grove and a lotus pond. The natural beauty is offset as the first mention of

mechanical people that it is revealed that all of Ghost Street is a fake production “built to entertain tourists,” and “the ghosts are their toys.” The twists on reader expectations illustrate how easily fooled, and how fine the line, between “real” and “fake” culture can be.

Traditional culture and capitalism collide during the parade before the Thunder Calamity strikes. As Ning walks down the main street, he is invited to eat traditional Chinese dishes like sweet osmanthus cake and sugar roasted chestnuts. Ning eats and eats until he becomes sick. He is quite literally consuming the traditional culture of the ghost people to the point of sickness.

The theme of cultural consumption is reinforced when Ning buys a Rakshasa mask, Rakshasa being the demon of consumption and excess. Just like the mask, the parade was designed for tourists to come and consume culture, but as Ning looks around, “there are no tourists.” The ghosts that haunt Ghost Street are not scary or mean-spirited. The only thing that makes them ghosts is that they have been forgotten. As the narrator states, “people, real people, found more exciting, newer toys,” leaving Ghost Street to the ghosts.

But his reality is turned upside down again when thunder strikes and thousands of metal spiders descend on Ghost Street. Great care is taken to describe how the metallic spiders destroy the temple “piece by piece.” The destruction of the holy place of traditional Chinese culture is devastating to Ning: “They’ve destroyed all of Lanruo Temple...Nothing is whole.”

In this way Ning is representative of a generation in China that Xia Jia is a member: the “Torn Generation.” Questions over identity (is Ning of Ghost Street or of

the World – how would he know?) and the implications of this divide being fatal for the culture, even one that has been commoditized.

The use of the Rakshasa mask, the traditional food, the temple with a coy pond, and the existence of the old gods, is in conflict with the futuristic narrative. It is evident that Xia Jia is part of this Torn Generation – occupying an uncertain middle ground between the ghosts of the past and the liberalized future.

Xia Jia’s narrative is an example of exactly the type of sf that the Ministry of Science and Technology would *not* want. It is fantastic and futuristic, but instead of examining the great technological possibilities and leading China towards a scientific future, it uses old gods and ghosts to ask a critical question: does a traditional Chinese culture still exist in China’s present, or has it been eroded by the need to “attract tourists?”

The conclusion is dark, but the question remained unanswered as Ning is not real but appears real enough to the spiders to fool them for a while. So what is real and what is fake seems to be diminished in importance. What is more important is that the narrative asks the questions other generations of sf writers have not. The narrative is reflective of what author Han Song posits is the challenge facing sf authors of Xia Jia’s generation: “in this era, when a new breed of humanity is coming into being, China is being ripped apart at an accelerated pace. The elite and the lowly alike must face this fact. Everything, from spiritual dreams to the reality of life, is torn.” Ning is quite literally a new form of humanity, and is torn apart by the mechanized spiders, while Xia Jia represents a generation of Chinese citizens being torn spiritually.

Similar to Xia Jia, Chen Quifan’s story, “The Fish of Lijiang,” Winner of the 2012 English-Translation award, hits on the same themes of cultural extinction and

anxiety over the quickly approaching consumer-driven future. The question of what makes a culture “real,” and what it means to be Chinese in a world that is in an accelerated state of change are explored through the setting and the characters’ realizations of the truth of his world.

Set in the near future, “The Fish of Lijiang” tells the story of an unnamed “office drone” who is sent away to the city of Lijiang, an ancient city in China, for mandatory rehabilitation. That rehabilitation, however, turns out to be a process meant to reverse the effects of secret “time sense compression” – a process of using theoretical physics-inspired technology to manipulate the brain to compress hundreds of actual hours to one experienced hour. The worker was unknowingly being experimented on to produce more work and his body suffers because of it.

While he explores the city of Lijiang, he meets a nurse at the same clinic. At first he thinks they might fall in love, but learns that she, too, is a lie. She has been assigned to him to balance their respective internal clocks. She has the opposite problem, she experiences “time dilation” by being in contact with the rich CEO’s who are kept alive by time dilation and “a series of tubes and wires” in order to ensure stock prices remain high and the CEO’s stay in charge. As the narrative progresses, the more the protagonist realizes everything he has known about his life, his work, and the city he thought was real, is an illusion meant to keep him working, distracted, and spending money.

Much like “Ghost Street,” the anxiety over the future is illustrated through a juxtaposition of two dissonant states of China – achieved through the setting: the consumer-driven, liberalized China, represented by the prevalence of consumer goods, and an ancient China represented by a city filled with traditions.

Most descriptions of Lijiang speak to exactly this juxtaposition: “the ancient city at night is filled with the spirit of consumerism,” says the protagonist, walking the streets, searching for a drink. Embedded in that sentence is a culture’s identity crisis. Seen through the use of words “ancient” and “spirit,” two things commonly attributed to traditional Chinese culture, with the “consumerism” of China’s new capitalist economy. It is similar to the description of the parade in Xia Jia’s narrative, where Ning donned the mask of an ancient god of craving and devoured traditional culture until sick, literally mixing spirit and consumerism.

The setting of Lijiang, a famous historical sight in China, represents the erosion of the cultural integrity through capitalism. The traditional Naxi musicians have been replaced by robots, the sky has been manufactured to always remain blue, and even hearing a traditional Chinese story requires you to pay a fee to a robot. In the narrative, these changes are the result of local owners of business selling away their city to “Lijiang Industries” a conglomerate of several wealthy businesses. Again, the influence of capitalism has fundamentally altered the setting.

The feeling evoked from this dissonant setting, in this new China, is diagnosed in the scene between the couple bound by different states of time, the woman diagnoses the protagonist in a bar, saying:

... You are often anxious, because you hate the feeling of the seconds slipping away from you. The world is changing every day. And every day you’re getting older. But there are still so many things you haven’t done. You want to hold onto the sand. But the harder you squeeze, the quicker the sand slips from the cracks between your fingers, until nothing is left.

When examined in the wider context of the narrative, it is not only time slipping away, but China. The harder he tries to hold on, the quicker it is lost. This feeling of the world slipping through fingers, of time moving faster than one can keep up with, is at the heart of this new generation of storytellers. In Xia Jia's work it is captured by the ghosts of the past, captured for the entertainment of tourists, while in Chen's work it is time that is running faster than the protagonist can realize, his whole life sped up until everything he thought he knew has changed. These authors were born in a time of transition – between Mao-ist China and the Great Leap, into capitalist China and the Economic Miracle. For the “Torn Generation,” their world has changed so fast not even a genre that imagine.

Another Chen Quifan story that needs mentioning is “Mao's Ghost,” a story that is almost too transparent to require analysis. In the story, the ghosts of animals who died during the rapid industrialization of Mao's Great Leap Forward, occupy the bodies of the humans as vessels. Told from a child's perspective, it is ambiguous whether her father was really dying from a “spirit” or whether working his entire life in the smog of the city is what caused his health to deteriorate. Either reading of the story paints the same image – China's present, haunted by the past, and uncertain the future can keep up.

The last writer that deserves mention in this Torn Generation, is the man who coined the term himself, Han Song. In “Gloomy China” researcher Jia Liyuan examines the futures imagined by the author are stories that are of a “Gloomy China – haunted as it is by modern ghosts of the age of technology rather than by the classical ghosts of traditional supernatural stories” (Liyuan, 2013). These hauntings are seen in such stories as 2011's “Rebirth Bricks,” in which an architect constructs a buildings from the rubble of an earthquake, whose materials now contain the souls of the dead. The buildings

constructed, haunted as they are by the ghosts trapped in new construction, have become a “tourist attraction.”

The circle of writers dealing with ghosts in sf, particularly in the realm of popular short fiction in China, is striking. Their themes line up in similar, bleak, hopeless, and anxiety-ridden stories of ghosts haunting a developing China that has no economic leg-room for the traditions of the past. They are stories that show a China “forever haunted by the whispers and weeping of the dead” (Song M. , 2013).

CONCLUSION

The recent renaissance of science fiction in China demonstrates a critical response to China’s strategy of rapid technological development. Despite attempts by the Ministry of Science and Technology to steer sf into nationalist narratives that inspire technological innovation, the resulting stories stray from these nationalist themes. Instead, the recurrence of ghosts and “technology used as exploitation” in recent published short-stories illustrate a lack of trust in capitalist development strategies, and anxiety in the role technology plays in the lives of China’s citizens.

The push for more sf during that 2007 conference to inspire a future was no different than the call for sf throughout the last century. The difference in the resulting work, however, is best explained by the social and economic circumstances of when the stories were produced. As the leading theorist on sf literature Fredrick Jameson points out in *Archaeologies of the Future*, “sf does not envision the future – it can only imagine the present as past” (Jameson, 2004). The change in sf from positive to critical, is less about the projections of the future, but the climate of the present.

We can observe this evolution of China through the lens of sf by examining the transition in the work of Cixin Liu, whose career spans the last three decades (Cixin, 2013). In his essay “Beyond Narcissism: What Science Fiction can Offer China” Liu recounts the shift in his career as an sf writer. He recalls that he began his career using “macro-detail” to avoid commenting on societies or even humanity as species, a sort of de-politicized and scientific view of the world through literature. His most recent, and popular, work, he admits has shifted its focus dramatically. He is now more concerned with “depicting the effects of extreme situations on human behavior and social systems,” and less concerned with the type of science grounded and optimistic work that may have fit in better pre-Cultural Revolution.

His “Three-Body” trilogy, the first volume now released in English translation, depicts just such an extreme situation on humanity. An alien invasion of earth causes the world to reconsider how it operates within and between their national boundaries. His focus now is on “humanity’s doomsday experience” which he believes “is something that only science fiction can produce.” This shift in narratives from optimistic and broadly science-grounded, to a focus on humanity and its oncoming “doomsday” reflects a shift not in the genre, but of China.

The present in China is complex, with emerging liberalism conflicting with authoritarian policies and a past that values the spiritual over the technological. “The paradox “ as theorist Jua Liyuan says while discussing this trend of ghosts in sf in Han Song’s work, “is that the malevolent spirits of the past have not disappeared under the democracy and science of today’s society, but have, in new forms, become wedded to modern technology” (Liyuan, 2013). The paradox of current China is what has driven

these narratives that have not previously emerged during other periods of development and change in China's past.

The fact that sf has not been banned as it becomes more critical as it was during Mao, or hasn't yet, is already a step in a direction of providing more agency for sf to comment on the governing bodies, rather than working for them. While the current narratives illustrate the rising popularity of sf, the stories of this generation and the fear of a loss of cultural identity may lead to change. If not, they at least provide an avenue for cultural critique in popular Chinese culture.

Today, with the recent moon landing, a plan to further liberalize the economy and privatize banks (Gough, 2014), and a deal in place in tandem with the US to reduce countrywide emissions by 2030 (Chappell, 2014), the present looks much like the future. The next step might be to find a bridge that allows a non-scientific traditional culture to cross into the future – without creating more ghosts. As Chen Quifan says, he writes to make sure the transition into the future is smooth, he writes about the suffering of a future China because he “yearns to see it change gradually for the better.”

The question now is whether these critical works of sf can affect the future. The Chinese government has long held that it can, even in 2007 they called for it to shoulder the responsibility for changing their nation's identity. The resistance in these new narratives to that call to action, the denial of that new, optimistic and nationalist identity, is a process that has yet to slow down. At a point of transition, a segment of China's sf writers are doing their best to change the future by writing about the present as past. Chen Quifan is a believer in the power his genre wields: “I still believe that science fiction is capable of wedging open small possibilities, to mend the torn generation, to allow different visions and imagined future Chinas to coexist in peace, to listen to each other, to

reach consensus, and to proceed, together.” Only time will tell whether science fiction can lead China into a future, and whether one day the authors will trade in their ghosts for spaceships.

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