Foreign Literary Influence in Liu Cixin's

*Diqiu Wangshi*

This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Research School of Humanities and the Arts at the Australian National University

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Submitted July 2019
Declaration

This thesis is my own work and all sources used, to the best of my knowledge, have been acknowledged. Except where previously published English translations have been cited, all Chinese material used in this thesis has been translated by myself.

William John Peyton
Acknowledgments

My sincerest thanks go to Ye Zhengdao, Will Christie and Russell Smith for their essential insights and feedback as well as their continual encouragement and guidance over the course of the project. I would also like to thank my family for their sustained support from the beginning. This dissertation would likewise not have been possible without the funding provided through the Australian Government Research Training Scholarship, the Australian National University and the Center for Chinese Studies at the National Central Library in Taipei.
Abstract

This thesis examines Liu Cixin’s *Diqiu Wangshi* (The Remembrance of Earth’s Past), a Chinese science fiction trilogy whose translation is unprecedently popular in the Western world. In his interviews and critical writings, Liu Cixin often explains that he is predominantly influenced by modern and contemporary Anglophone authors, including George Orwell, Arthur C. Clarke and Aldous Huxley, among others. By considering Liu’s trilogy in view of such influences, this thesis breaks down the aesthetic and thematic components of *Diqiu Wangshi*, these being scientism, humanism, historicism and utopianism. It also considers the influence of the Chinese author Wang Meng’s youth fiction *Qingchun Wansui* and how its idealism helps to shape the aesthetic and moral character of Liu’s work. The purpose of this analysis is to account for the originality of *Diqiu Wangshi*, arguing that its ingenuity is found in its conscious engagement with translated fiction rather than in the literature of Chinese science fiction. The dissertation more generally aims at exploring how contemporary Chinese writers of the post-Mao period are clearly more influenced by western fiction, translated and untranslated, and universal thematic concerns than current critical approaches seem to suggest.
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1) Science Fiction with Chinese Characteristics?

In 2006, a Chinese engineer and author named Liu Cixin 刘慈欣 published a widely-read serialized story in the magazine Science Fiction World 科幻世界. This work, titled Three Body 三体, became very popular among its readers, leading it to be picked up by the Chongqing Publishing House for novelization. This story would be expanded into a trilogy, with two sequel volumes titled The Dark Forest 黑暗森林 (2008) and Death’s End 死神永生 (2010). Following the 2013 translation of Three Body into English, rendered by its translator Ken Liu as The Three Body Problem, the work and its two sequels have attracted enormous attention from readers and critics alike in the English-speaking world, with the combined trilogy being retrospectively titled Diqiu Wangshi 地球往事 or The Remembrance of Earth’s Past, amounting in total to around 880,000 characters.¹ The first volume notably won the Hugo Award in 2015 and the third was nominated in 2017, causing a great stir in the press as to the larger phenomenon of “Chinese science fiction.”

It is an uncommon thing that a science fiction work receives such attention from critical circles and it is even rarer that a Chinese-language work finds a popular readership outside the Chinese-speaking world. David Der-Wei Wang’s 2017 volume A New Literary History of Modern China features a timeline beginning with The Dream of the Red Chamber, published in 1792, and ends with Nobel prize wins of both Gao Xingjian 高行健 and Mo Yan 莫言, in 2000 and 2012

respectively. However, wedged in between these two last events is the publication of San Ti in 2006, which reflects how critically significant the work is considered within the wider modern Chinese literary canon.²

Liu Cixin himself hails from Shanxi province in central China. He originally pursued a career as a computer engineer in a power plant, first encountering science fiction, he recalls, at the age of eighteen, when he read the translated works of Arthur C. Clarke, 2001: A Space Odyssey and Rendezvous with Rama, considered to be seminal classics of science fiction in the West. In one interview, when asked which works he’d recommend Xi Jinping to read, he named Rama and 2001, his own works being too long for a busy president to read.³ It is these works which, to this today, he cites as his foundational influences and of which he says much of his earlier writing were mere imitations. While he has mentioned other significant influences as wide as Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four and Tolstoy’s War and Peace, Liu is a proponent of the most technical science fiction, mirroring that of the Western Golden Age, the works of which were very often written by scientists. “I write science fiction because I love science,” Liu says in an interview in the scientific periodical Nature, “and want to give the beauty of science literary expression.”⁴ He says, in another interview, “my works are all mere imitations of 2001: A Space Odyssey.”⁵

⁵ Li Fuying, “Liu Cixin cheng Kelake ran ziji chansheng xie kehuan niantou zhijin buguo shi” (Liu Cixin says that Clark inspired him to write sf and that his vision is timeless). Shenzhen Evening
Liu, in his reading of Clarke at a young age and pursuing an almost exclusive interest in non-Chinese fiction and a preference for translated western fiction, should prove an interesting case study for what scholars call “translingual practice,” as he seemingly draws from foreign literary sources rather than ones in his native Chinese tongue. It is a set of influences only made available from the early 1980s onward, as China opened to the world economy, and to which Liu is seemingly one of the earliest to have been exposed and responded. The translingual nature of influence brings to the forefront the concept of “world literature.” With regard to the Chinese language, “the concept of ‘world literature’ has been a much-debated topic within Chinese and comparative literary studies since the early 1990s.” As Paola Iovene elaborates, “rather than a canon of works, for most scholars it denotes a mode of circulation and reading mediated by translation and an approach that focuses on the dynamics of literary exchange. But despite the global scope that the term ‘world’ suggests, its theorization has largely focused on the circulation of genres and forms from and back to Euro-American literature.”

The question of cross-lingual influence in Chinese literature was brought to bear on Liu Cixin by Angie Chau who focuses on his huge popularity in the West. As she argues, “China’s efforts to make a name for itself in cultural production on the international scale has so far failed miserably in competition with Hollywood blockbuster films, K-pop music, and Japanese anime, but now literature in the form of science fiction is poised to accomplish this lofty goal.” The recent Chinese Hugo wins “have produced a timely opportunity for Chinese literature to enter world

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literature” on the condition that “this proposed shift in perception of SF … occur[s] first within China, then, aided by the process of translation, in its circulated form abroad.”\(^8\) “If all it takes for Chinese literature to enter world literature at this point is for Chinese SF to be read, critiqued, consumed, and received as literature, the reception of *Three-Body* domestically in China and globally in translation has confirmed this long-awaited step.”\(^9\) It is far too early to answer this question yet, given that the popular reception of Chinese sf is limited (almost) entirely to Liu’s trilogy.

These observations echo relatively recent comments on Chinese and world literature by Bonnie McDougall, who highlights “the neglect of the role of translation in the promotion and reception of contemporary Chinese literature around the world.”\(^10\) In general, she stresses that “world literature is translated literature, and translated literature is world literature” crucially because literary exchange is wholly dependent on translation. Overall (though one might consider Liu Cixin an exception), “the translation of contemporary Chinese literature into English over the past three or four decades, whether by Chinese or non-Chinese translators and whether published inside China or abroad, has not been a great success.”\(^11\) The problem lies in how one considers world literature: either as “elite” cultural material of a highbrow nature produced by writers, translators and publishers, or as “global culture,” which can encompass anything from popular television shows to pop songs. Perhaps the difficulty in making sense of Liu Cixin’s trilogy is that his work is a blend of these two phenomena. On the one hand, his trilogy is far too long and

\(^8\) Ibid., 112.
\(^9\) Ibid., 128.
\(^11\) Ibid., 59.
intellectually dense to be simply labelled as “low brow” or as “pop culture.” On the other, one might not consider “highbrow” literature an appropriate label for hard science fiction, in either Western or Chinese markets. Liu’s success highlights what McDougall calls “the confusions surrounding the implications of terms like literature and culture.”

Whether sf from China will become increasingly popular or whether Liu Cixin’s popularity will historically turn out to be flash in the pan (though a not insignificant one), is yet to be determined.

It is perhaps a more useful question, at this stage, to ask what specifically about this work, *Diqiu Wangshi*, itself seemed to permeate the barrier between Chinese literature and world literature in a way that prior Chinese authors have not? Here one is confronted with the problem of how to study a Chinese author writing in Mandarin, who does not draw influence primarily from Chinese authors (we must remember Liu speaks only Chinese and appears to have a limited grasp of English). One can scarcely find a mention of them in his articles or interviews (in either Chinese or English) and the very subject matter of all of his works suggest little influence from even those sf works written in Chinese. That he is a Chinese author drawn almost entirely to a variety of Western translated authors, whose translated works start appearing in China around 1980, seems to be the most elusive aspect of Liu’s style of writing and his origins as a writer. As Western critics have been contemplating how such an author emerges out of China today, so one must ponder how Liu is a product of a period of translation that has appeared in contemporary China in only the last several decades. Now that Beijing-based authors Chen Qiufan and Hao Jingfang have been translated to English and have each won Nebula and Hugo awards in the last few years,
a study of Liu Cixin seems useful for making sense of the wider emergence of current Chinese science fiction.

Observing this new creative climate, one’s intuition would be to start making sense of this notion of Chinese science fiction, asking what is “other” or “Chinese” about Chinese science fiction as opposed to its Western roots, as the Chinese sf scholar Xia Jia 夏笳 has done. In the buzz surrounding the translation of Three Body, this is the question which most of the English-language press focused on. But as Ken Liu suggests, asking what is “Chinese” about Chinese sf is somewhat like asking what is “English” about English language sf? Such a question betrays a lack of context within which to frame Liu Cixin, letting one imprint the category of “Chinese” on to his work to offer an easy answer. This point has also been picked up on by the trilogy’s French translator Gwennaël Gaffric who argues that aside “from direct political appropriation, the popular success of the trilogy and the academic interest which it has aroused each pose to the researcher a more epistemological question: that of the relevance of presenting the novels as “Chinese,” as if


14 While these articles point out the importance of Golden Age science fiction for the first volume of the trilogy, they put a lot of unsubstantiated emphasis on the supposed Chinese idiosyncrasies of the novel, particularly its featuring scenes of the Cultural Revolution. See the following: Joshua Rothman, “China’s Arthur C. Clarke.” The New Yorker, 6 March 2015, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/chinas-arthur-c-clarke. Accessed February 2016.

that qualification allowed us to see in his work an alternative to what might be a Western conception of science fiction.”

Nevertheless, in both the scholarly and literary worlds, Chinese and Western, the popularity of *Three Body* seems to prompt the question: are we seeing the emergence of a Chinese form of science fiction? The question itself implies that there is something essentially different about sf written by Chinese, rather than it being Chinese-language science fiction, with the same aspirations and concerns as its English-language counterpart. It is important to remember that these distinctions are still very unclear, even in Chinese-language discourse, as to whether this is “nationally/culturally” Chinese science fiction (*zhongguo kehuan* 中国科幻) culturally/literarily” Chinese science fiction (*zhongwen kehuan* 中文科幻) or “literarily/linguistically” Chinese science fiction (*huayu kehuan* 话语科幻). “Chinese” as signifier in English covers each of these categorical domains and it is unclear, in referring to “Chinese” science fiction, as to what is even being asked.

With any meaningful clarity, we can only speak of the last two categories, *zhongwen kehuan* or *huayu kehuan*, not just because we know that there is science fiction written in Chinese-language, but more importantly because it is difficult to determine what is Chinese about Chinese science fiction beyond the language in which it is written. Being a writer from mainland China, Liu can fit within the category of *zhongguo kehuan*, which is the most commonly used term for “Chinese science fiction.” But it has problematic implications, namely because the term places

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16 The term “zhongguo kehuan” yields over 750,000 results in a Google search, while “huayu kehuan” receives about 110,000. “zhongwen kehuan” yields less than 20,000. It should be noted that the predominance of “zhongguo kehuan” over the other two terms would only reflect the fact that most sf in Chinese language is produced in mainland China.
emphasis on China as a bounded national entity, which is only fitting for those who see Liu’s literary achievement as that of the Chinese nation more broadly rather than of an individual author within it.\(^\text{17}\) This point is what is perhaps most misguided about seeing Liu’s writing as a sort of “Science Fiction with Chinese Characteristics” (\textit{you zhongguo tese de kehuan} 有中国特色的科\^{}幻). Outside of state propaganda, the term is found in much China journalism and other academic disciplines, where a writer is trying to describe some Chinese phenomenon (such as socialism, economy, international relations theory, et al.) which cannot be clearly articulated independently of its analogy in western or non-Chinese contexts. It is generally a shorthand for explaining away the difficult-to-describe nuances of certain political social and cultural phenomena in China.

Indeed, this consideration \textit{zhongguo tese} begs a similar question: what makes English-language science fiction \textit{English} or American science fiction \textit{American}? This question is made more important by the fact that, though there is an established tradition of Chinese science fiction from the late-Qing period (namely from the 1890s to 1910s) and the Communist period (1950s to 1970s), Liu Cixin does not appear to draw influence from it.\(^\text{18}\) It is for this reason that this thesis considers Liu’s work at the level of close language analysis, leaving the questions of culture and identity surrounding his work for later speculation. Nonetheless, Liu’s trilogy is clearly identifiable as “hard science fiction” and this invites critical consideration of genre, particular differences between Chinese and Western conceptions of sf. Beatrix Busse has argued that “both literary and

\(^{17}\) Gwennaël Gaffric, in his study of the reception of Liu Cixin’s trilogy, has noted the “political appropriation” of Liu’s work and literary status in Chinese state media. Refer to the second chapter for further detail and Gaffric, “Liu Cixin’s Three Body Trilogy.”

non-literary genres change over time” as they “have the ability to create meaning because the continuum of adherence to linguistic conventions and social practices…and of creative deviation…direct readers’ meaning inferences.”\(^\text{19}\) The study of genre, she notes, invites the question of “how particular texts function in a particular social and cultural context.”\(^\text{20}\) With regard to Liu Cixin’s work, that social and cultural context is complicated by his readings of translations, namely first edition translations of English-language writers which appear from the 1980s in China. In more general terms, this context is that of contemporary Chinese literature as a whole, which falls into the period after the Cultural Revolution with China’s economic opening under Deng Xiaoping, at the end of the 1970s. It is in this context that Liu encounters science fiction as a genre, namely in specific texts he was drawn to reading, beginning in his childhood.

As mentioned, science fiction has its own story within the century-long history of modern Chinese literature. It is a rather punctuated one, beginning with Lu Xun’s 鲁迅 translation of Jules Verne’s From Earth to the Moon (De la terre à la lune, translated as Cong Diqiu dao Yueliang 从地球到月球) in 1900. It came into Chinese language as part of a larger wave of stylistic experimentation from the translation of Western literature, starting with Lin Shu’s 林纾 translation of Alexandre Dumas’s The Lady with the Camellias (La Dame aux Camélias, translated as Bali chahua nü yishi 巴黎茶花女遗事).\(^\text{21}\) As Li Tuo argues, experimentalists like Lu Xun “found no successors in the ensuing decades” and modern Chinese literary language would come

\(^{20}\) Ibid.
\(^{21}\) The major study on this subject is Michael Gibbs Hill’s Lin Shu, Inc.: Translation and the Making of Modern Chinese Culture (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
to be judged as “pale and stiff.” The stylistic innovation that came through the use of Written Vernacular Chinese (*baihuawen* 白话文) waned after the Republican period. In the intervening years under a totalitarian regime, Maoist language prevailed and would not fade away until the 1980s, when genres like “scar literature” (narrative fiction critical of the Cultural Revolution) appeared, undermining the doctrine of the Party. The Maoist cultural hegemony was met with resistance in the nineties by experimental literature, the most popular wave of which would be the “avant-garde” writers (*xianfengpai* 先锋派) which “represents the rebellion and subversion by contemporary Chinese writers against Maoist language and discourse.” In this respect, the 1980s still remains a crucially under-studied watershed in modern Chinese literature’s story.

In this transition away from Maoism, Chinese literature was transformed primarily by the wealth of translated materials which began to circulate between 1978 and 1982, before a lull created by the “Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign” (*qingchu jingshen wuran yundong* 清除精神污染运动) of 1983. Since translation production waned during the continuous political upheaval and isolationism of mainland China from the 1950s to the 1970s, readers would eventually be exposed to a decades-long backlog of material including dystopian writers, such as George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, and sf writers like Robert Heinlein and Isaac Asimov. One can get a sense of the dearth of foreign literature by referring to a compiled list of science fiction published in the twentieth century in Chinese by literary scholar Wu Dingbo. In it, no sf works are listed between

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23 Li Tuo disagrees with this view because much of scar literature still used Maoist language and its “underlying system of meanings.” See ibid., 74.
24 Ibid., 77.
1965 and 1976, being only sparsely published throughout the 1950s and 1960s. But from 1978, dozens of publications are listed for each year as production becomes cemented and consistent with the reception of foreign-language texts. It would be fair to argue that this delayed exposure to foreign language material is not entirely appreciated or understood as a crucial factor in the emergence of a historically distinct period of contemporary Chinese literature.

This reintroduction of foreign literature was noticed at the time by Bonnie McDougall who wrote in 1978 that “in sheer number of titles, the revival of Western literature far surpasses the revival of May Fourth writing…” While Republican period writers were becoming increasingly popular at the end of the 1970s, due to the circulation of their more recent work in literary magazines, she observed that western literature was becoming more popular too. While in print publications “the open embrace of the West [was] more restrained,” it appeared to be less so out in the open. While McDougall was not able to produce numerical figures of production and distribution of foreign literature, she wrote that “according to one Western reporter who happened to be in Shanghai at the time, long queues formed in front of bookshops from the night before, and brisk business was being conducted by enterprising scalpers in back alleys behind the bookshops,” reflecting the increasing interest in and consumption of foreign literature. During the early 1970s, western literature had been sparsely reintroduced but only “on a token basis.” As she notes, the Beijing Library made publicly available Shakespeare’s and Ibsen’s plays, Goethe’s Faust, as well as Tolstoy’s War and Peace, among many others. Moreover, Renmin Ribao 人民日报 began

27 Ibid., 8-9.
publishing Shakespeare’s works in print.28 This is an early indication of the coming shift in Chinese reading culture in the 1980s as society experienced dramatic transformations.

On this point, it has been suggested that, in the rapid industrial transformations undergone in major Chinese cities during the “Reform and Opening” (gaige kaifang 改革开放), the lived experiences of Chinese people were not dissimilar to those experienced by American readers in the economic post-war boom of the 1940s and 1950s, the era which produced the Golden Age of English language sf.29 The foremost scholar of Chinese science fiction, Wu Yan, has argued for a “classical” interpretation of Liu’s writing in these terms. Commenting on foreign critiques of Liu’s work as representing China’s own Golden Age in comparison to that of the Anglophone West with themes of “scientific and technological creativity and its ability to upset human affairs” with “a philosophical style,” he agrees that “Three Body certainly bears these traits.” But he also argues that “in terms of linguistic style, it has important differences with today’s popular western science fiction.” He proposes that Liu’s work embodies a style he calls New Classicism (xin gudianzhuyi 新古典主义) which is “not entirely classicism in the strictest sense.”30

Wu rather attributes Liu’s literary achievement to his being “a brilliant engineer who makes use of his engineer’s brain, compressing the many splendid ideas of humanity, science fiction and history into a set of stories based in China.” It is not clear how this attribution to

28 Ibid., 9-12.
29 The sf author Chen Qiufan views contemporary science fiction in China as an expression of the complexities of life for the younger generations that have witnessed rapid economic change. See “The Torn Generation: Chinese Science Fiction in a Culture in Transition,” in Invisible Planets, 369-375.
engineering relates to writing fiction, and Wu puzzlingly adds a caveat that “whether he used his engineering thinking to create fiction, I do not know.”\textsuperscript{31} What he does point in this so-called New Classicist style is an evocation of nostalgia (\textit{huaijiugan 怀旧感}).\textsuperscript{32} Certainly nostalgia, or the Chinese conception of this idea, is an idiosyncratically Chinese aspect of Liu’s writing, something rooted in his reading of post-Mao era youth fiction. But this accounts only for the non-science-fictional aspects of Liu’s work, and will be explored further in the sixth chapter of this dissertation.

To attribute Liu’s writing to \textit{huaijiugan} seems to be a myopic aesthetic summation of his style and the breadth of his writing which often alienates the reader more than it comforts him.

Surely the unique popularity of Liu in the West must be tied to the circumstances in which Golden Age sf was written and the historical conditions of China within which he writes today? But the reception of this work in the West, as with recent Chinese language sf, is something that might be better viewed after a larger number of contemporary authors have been studied, their works translated, for the state of contemporary literature as a whole to be put in a wider perspective. This is a position echoed by Gwennaël Gaffric. In following a “sociological approach by examining the conditions of production and reception of the work and…the attempts at political appropriation” so as “to understand the success” of the trilogy, he argued that “the narrative and poetic components of the trilogy…naturally deserve deeper discussion.”\textsuperscript{33}

But an essential part of examining the poetics is the question of influence as the works Liu has read are themselves translations. But, as has been noted, too little has been written on the Chinese translation of foreign sf texts since the 1970s. Likewise, situating Liu solely in a modern

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Gaffric, “Liu Cixin’s Three Body Trilogy,” 22.
Chinese literary tradition reduces him to a “Chinese sf author” (whatever this means), ignoring the fact that his works fit the mold of foreign sf themes and styles. The truth lies somewhere in between these two approaches, in translation, which has both historical and linguistic contexts which need first be elucidated. This invites a more fascinating question, that is, how can some comparable set of historical circumstances, in which a literary genre flourished for one linguistic and cultural context, reveal differences for the other?

Cross-lingual criticism in Chinese is complicated by the deeper differences between an alphabetic language like English and a non-alphabetic (previously ideogrammatic) language like modern Chinese. The critic Li Tuo explains that Chinese language has “a strong pictorial quality” that remains embedded even in the modern western-grammaticized language by means of its retention of the classical character system (hanzi 汉字). Not only this, he argues that “the very enterprise of writing the utmost importance is placed on the techniques of image construction” in Chinese.\(^34\) To put it plainly, the fundamental aesthetic idiosyncrasies of Chinese are paramount in considering cross-language analysis of Chinese with non-Chinese texts. But as the scholar and translator Nicky Harman noted a decade ago, on the subject of “how to translate Chinese culture for an English audience – there is almost nothing on a theoretical level.”\(^35\)

Indeed limited headway has been made into conceiving of linguistic approaches to Chinese comparative literature, the debate on which centres around the rather clichéd paradigms of “East” and “West.” David Palumbo-Liu has highlights the problematic vagaries of literary theory in helping to find a new approach to the study of either the Chinese or Western text using a

\(^{34}\) Li Tuo, “The New Vitality in Modern Chinese,” 69.

common conceptual language. He mentions the “alterity” of Chinese texts, something “which cannot be ‘disciplined’ by either [a] faith in a pure ‘science’ of the text…or a hermeneutic regimen that seeks not so much to recover meaning from across that distance as to understand the text according to new critical conceptualizations.”

He claims, too, that criticism of Chinese literature is affected by the particular discursive attitudes of sinologists who feel that Western literary criticism only results in a distortion of the Chinese text’s essential meaning. This, he feels, comes from “the specific institutional history of ‘oriental’ studies.” Palumbo-Liu accepts that “literature is not a science, nor can it interpret itself,” there being “specific disciplinary and institutional spaces” which shape how we interpret what we read.

These problems are not unique to comparative literature, rather reflecting issues in English literary criticism that have emerged over the latter twentieth century. Gary Day has very usefully traced these discursive and institutional changes in academic literary studies in which paradigmatic theory emerged as the core method of criticism. Out of “a reaction to the impressionism that dominated criticism in the late nineteenth century,” English literary studies “adapted the scientific paradigm to make the fledgling discipline more respectable” in academic settings. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was debatable whether English (and subsequently literary studies) ought to constitute an actual academic discipline in the modern university. Prior to this, the study centred on the formal structure of language, argues Day,

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37 Ibid., 43.
38 Ibid., 48.
involving the “history of the langue, its grammar, orthography, etymology and parts of speech” and its attachment to national identity.\(^{40}\) In the 1960s, still lacking an agreed-upon set of principles or method on which to base the study of literature, “criticism adopted the methods of structuralism.”\(^{41}\) From the 1970s, structuralism prevailed for a while but quickly crumbled before “the various theories that made up post-structuralism, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Derridean deconstruction” all took its place, with Marxist and feminist theories seeing literature as narrower expression of ideology.\(^{42}\) With the emergence of East Asian Studies departments across western universities in this period, humanities scholarship of modern China, including film and literature, has largely been influenced by the same trends. Literary criticism, particularly of aesthetics, is only amply represented in the fields of translation studies and traditional pre-modern sinology, leaving the modern period very neglected.

Zhang Longxi has also enumerated many of the difficulties faced in Chinese literary studies. Like Palumbo-Liu, he asserts that the literary theories we rely on arise out of the institutions of Western literary studies while “theories of Orientalism and postcolonialism represent precisely some of the latest transformations of Western literary theory in those very institutions.”\(^{43}\) He believes that “whether there will be a particular ‘Chinese school’ of comparative literature is almost an irrelevant issue, or at least not an urgent one.”\(^{44}\) Moreover, he advocates establishing a new approach “in a third area” between Sinocentric studies and Eurocentric ones.\(^{45}\)

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 279.
\(^{41}\) Ibid., 291.
\(^{42}\) Ibid., 312.
\(^{44}\) Ibid., 29.
\(^{45}\) Ibid., 35.
He does not dismiss the application of western theory to the Chinese literary context but deems transcending cultural specificity as more important. “It is this transcending quality…that makes theory singularly transferrable.”\(^46\) This does not bypass the fact that various post-war schools of literary theory themselves have proven to be problematically compartmentalized methodological approaches, as argued by Day. Zhang argues that “comparative work is always something to be redefined through a rigorous study of the basic issue, a new set of problems that can be raised and explored only in the comparison of different works, texts, and theoretical notions.”\(^47\) For Zhang, the mediation between the Western and Chinese perspectives are to be dealt with in terms of theory, even if they are “common and shared by Chinese and Western traditions in different but comparable manifestations.”\(^48\) But determining in what ways theories in different languages and cultures are “comparable” is a problematic consideration, particularly at the level of literary aesthetics.

The philosopher of Eastern art and aesthetics H Gene Blocker explains that “for at least a hundred years Chinese aestheticians have been debating how to mix Western and Chinese theories of art and beauty” as “some writers use Western methodologies and techniques to re-examine traditional Chinese aesthetics; others are more interested in Western aesthetics and simply want to join in these ongoing debates; while still others adopt a comparative approach, exploring similarities and differences between Western and Chinese attitudes towards art and beauty.”\(^49\) Blocker argues that with increasing cultural interaction, “it may be possible to bring two traditions

\(^{46}\text{Ibid., 31.}\)
\(^{47}\text{Ibid., 34.}\)
\(^{48}\text{Ibid., 34.}\)
into some common meeting point—a new international philosophy of aesthetics in which Chinese and Western writers are brought to bear on the same issues, topics and problems.”

Zhu Liyuan is more specific in determining what the differences are between the Western and Chinese notions of aesthetics. Zhu situates the differences in western and Chinese aesthetic criticism in terms of “subjective” and “objective” values and attitudes. Both Chinese and Western theories each developed a different idea of what artistic realism means. Zhu argues that “the main difference between the Chinese and Western theories of artistic realism is that the former emphasizes subjective feelings while the latter stresses objective features.” Consequently, Western aestheticians judge works by “the extent to which the artwork resembles physical and social reality.” Generally, “Chinese theorists pay more attention to the truthfulness and honesty and sincerity of the artist in expressing his feelings.” In depicting external objects, western theorists judge the representations by their similarity with the reality while Chinese theorists focus on “showing the internal spirit of objects” which are represented. These differences are hyperbolized, of course, but reveal a distinctly different view about the status of “subjective” feeling and objective representation in art. In summary, “the western concept is more philosophical and logical in nature; the Chinese concept is more aesthetical and psychological.”

In search of a solution to this problem, Blocker points to *meixue* 美学, a collocation which means the study of beauty part of the fabric of both Japanese and Chinese culture. He is concerned more with what “can reasonably be called (treated and understood) as ‘Chinese aesthetics’” in art

50 Ibid., 9.
52 Ibid., 319-320.
criticism, when it is Western philosophy which has aesthetics as “one of its branches.”\(^{53}\) He argues, moreover, that there is “no consensus among Western aestheticians on the acceptance of Chinese theories of art and beauty as belonging to ‘aesthetics,’ that is, as sufficiently resembling Western aesthetics.”\(^{54}\) Blocker does however advocate “the ‘mixed mode’ as Chinese aesthetics, at least in discussing recent and contemporary Chinese aesthetics.”\(^{55}\) It is an approach which “Chinese intellectuals interested in questions of aesthetics have been doing for over a hundred years.”\(^{56}\) Above all, it is crucial that one considers the blending of western ideas and Chinese in aesthetic study because “if we eliminate the this sort of writing as not sufficiently Chinese, we are left with the absurd conclusion that all Chinese thought (literature, philosophy, history, religion) ended a hundred years ago,” when western thought began to be widely translated into Chinese.\(^{57}\)

This recalls the efforts of the eminent Qian Zhongshu 钱钟书 who attempted to bridge this perceived aesthetic divide between Chinese and Western languages. As Zhang Longxi argues, Qian, in his 1947 *Tan Yi Lu* 谈艺录, attempted to establish a universalist approach to literary study in an allusion to the neo-Confucian thinker Lu Xiangshan’s remarks about the intellectual commonalities between thinkers from the East and Western “seas.” In this seminal work, argues Zhang, Qian Zhongshu “effectively lays down the foundation of East-West comparative studies buttressed by a traditional philosophical argument thereby demonstrating that in assimilating ideas from the West, Chinese scholars follow an intellectual genealogy of their own, rather than just

\(^{53}\) Blocker, “Introduction,” 3.  
\(^{54}\) Ibid.  
\(^{55}\) Ibid., 7.  
\(^{56}\) Ibid.  
\(^{57}\) Ibid.
acting upon a desire to emulate the West.” Thus the study of aesthetics should not necessarily be dismissed as a largely western intellectual projection on to the study of Chinese literature.

Indeed, modern Chinese intellectual history can be understood as an attempt to internalize and respond to Western thinking and language. As the Chinese-American literary scholar Lydia Liu argues, there is a deeper problem of compartmentalizing the “Chinese” and the “Western” because demarcating “a clear line between the indigenous Chinese and exogenous Western in the late twentieth century is almost an epistemological impossibility. The fact that one writes about China for an English-speaking academic audience further complicates the situation.” She points to the hypocrisy of excluding western language from Chinese language studies when the latter is filled with western neologisms. Liu questions further as to whether we can even “talk about an ‘uncontaminated’ Chinese notion of language in English? And can we do so even in Chinese in the wake of all that has happened in the past one and a half centuries?” She even goes so far as to argue that “if Chinese remains one of the most difficult languages to translate, the chances are that the difficulty lies in the growing number of hypothetical equivalents between Chinese and other languages, rather than the lack thereof.” In general, China’s contact and influence by European languages is as much a matter of “appropriation” as it is one “domination” or “resistance” from other linguistic contexts.

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60 Ibid., 17.
61 Ibid., 25.
Both the trans-cultural issues surrounding Chinese aesthetics and the trans-lingual nature of Chinese language stress the problem of linguistic equivalence. This problem is the subject of Lydia Liu’s widely cited *Translingual Practice*, perhaps the major theoretical work concerning the development of modern Chinese language. She asserts that “strictly speaking, comparative scholarship that aims to cross cultures can do nothing but translate.”62 Her study of the emergence of modern Chinese focuses on the “‘confrontations’ (that) occur between China, Japan, and the West at the site of translation or wherever the languages happen to meet, for this is where the irreducible differences between the host language and the guest language are fought out” where we encounter “a meaning-making history that cuts across different national languages and histories.”63 Liu Cixin’s “encounter” with western sf texts is one such example, though one that is well outside the temporal scope of Lydia Liu’s study.

Indeed, Liu’s trilogy does not exist solely within the context of contemporary Chinese literature, but in that of the science fiction genre in Chinese. This is complicated by a still underdeveloped understanding of what this genre means in this language in this period. As the Chinese sf scholar, Nathaniel Isaacson writes, “[science fiction] works in China are often sandwiched in the children’s section, and this is reflected in the ages of those browsing the shelves” and it “rarely finds its way onto ‘literature’ (wenxue) shelves.” There is an emphasis, moreover, on translated science fiction which betrays the “perceived exoticism of the genre and of the market forces that push many of forms of contemporary fiction off bookshelves and onto the Internet.”64

62 Ibid., 1.
63 Ibid., 32.
As an originally western genre, the debate in western literary circles as to the essential
definition centres around Darko Suvin’s coining the terms ‘cognitive estrangement’ and ‘novum’
as the basic defining techniques of science fiction. Suvin argued that science fiction fundamentally
varied from other genres in the use of the device of the “novum” which produced the effect of
“cognitive estrangement.” This device is “a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from
the author’s and implied reader’s norm of reality."65 This technique has its roots in older western
literary forms, namely “the classical and medieval ‘fortunate island’ story, the ‘fabulous voyage’
story from antiquity on, the Renaissance and Baroque ‘utopia’ and ‘planetary novel,’ the
Enlightenment ‘state [political] novel,’ the modern ‘anticipation’ and ‘anti-utopia.’”66 Science
fiction, for Suvin, was “the literature of cognitive estrangement,” being distinct from these prior
genres because it was rooted in a "cognitive view” of the world, which was made necessary by the
predominance of scientific thought in the nineteenth century.67

The estrangement effect, derived from the Russian formalists and Viktor Schkovsky’s
theory, occurs when the reader, in processing the text, is prompted to consider his historical place
as the reader. When encountering a “novum” in the text, he is made aware that the literary world
he is experiencing is not the one he also conceptually inhabits as a person. While the sense of
estrangement is conceived of as a classic feature of “myth,” science fiction “sees the mythical
static identity as illusion, usually as fraud, at best only as a temporary realization of potentially
limitless contingencies. It does not ask about The Man or The World, but which man: in which

65 Darko Suvin, Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: the poetics and history of a literary genre
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 64.
66 Ibid., 3.
67 Ibid., 4.
kind of world?: and why such a man in such a kind of world?”  

68 Literature which deals instead with metaphysical agency, he argues, is not sf but rather fantasy, or the literature of the supernatural. 69 This type of fiction can rely limitlessly on metaphysical imaginings or “magical” thinking. However, what makes science fiction distinct from fantasy in its producing estrangement for the reader, is its rootedness in the physical limitations and boundaries of scientific inquiry. It is within these conceptual confines that science fiction encourages us to consider “the political, psychological, and anthropological use and effect of knowledge, of philosophy of science, and the becoming of failure of new realities as result of it.”

But Suvin’s clarification of cognitive estrangement could not counter the academic disinterest in the genre, a question which was tackled by Joanna Russ. In a 1975 edition of Science Fiction Studies, Russ asked why “academic critics find themselves imprisoned by habitual (and unreflecting) condescension in dealing with this particular genre.”

67 She felt that “quite often their critical tools, however finely-honed, are simply not applicable to a body of work that – despite its superficial resemblance to realistic or naturalistic twentieth-century fiction – is fundamentally a drastically different form of literary art.”

72 The problem lay in the propositional content that science fiction was trying to describe, namely scientific ideas, which she argued “must include disciplines ranging from mathematics (which is formally empty) through the ‘hard’ sciences (physics, astronomy, chemistry) through the ‘soft’ sciences (ethnology, psychology, sociology) all

68 Ibid., 7.
69 Ibid., 66.
70 Ibid., 15.
71 Joanna Russ, “Towards an Aesthetic of Science Fiction,” Vol. 6, No. 2 (1975), 112.
72 Ibid.
the way to disciplines which as yet exist only in the descriptive or speculative stage (history, for example, or political theory)."  

Brian Aldiss, the popular scholar of science fiction in the West, sums up rather well the kind of conditions under which sf thrived and became a popular form of literature in the mid-twentieth century. It was in the 1950s when sf “began to talk about the fullness of love as well as the emptiness of space,” when the genre “became part of the ordinary publishing scene.”  

Through authors like Isaac Asimov, sf heralded the Space Age, significantly, through what Aldiss calls the “Dehumanisation in the Face of the Stars theme.”  

Liu’s work can be easily in this vein rather than that of other traditions, reflected in a character’s observation in his trilogy that “Life reached an evolutionary milestone when it climbed onto land from the ocean, but those first fish that climbed onto land ceased to be fish…Similarly, when humans truly enter space and are freed from the Earth, they cease to be human.”  

There is a fundamentally didactic aspect to the genre, she argues, that science fiction writers, in their narratives, take pleasure “in explaining physics, thirtieth-century jurisprudence, the mechanics of teleportation, patent law, four-dimensional geometry, or whatever happens to be on the tapis” that is not at the same time an “adventure story with science-fiction frills.”  

Russ points to some hypocrisies in the criticism of science fiction – namely in critics’ failure to incorporate an “appreciation of the ‘theology’ of science fiction – that is, science…”  

73 Ibid.  
74 Brian W. Aldiss, Billion Year Spree: The True History of Science Fiction (Garden City: Doubleday, 1973), 265.  
75 Ibid., 289-290.  
77 Russ, “Towards an Aesthetic of Science Fiction,” 113.  
78 Ibid., 114.
argues: “If the critic believes that scientific truth is unreal, or irrelevant to his (the critic’s) business, then science fiction becomes only a series of very odd metaphors for ‘‘the human condition’ (which is taken to be different from or unconnected to any scientific truths about the universe).” One must then ask: “Why should an artist draw metaphors from such a peculiar and totally extra-literary source?” 79

Russ, moreover, is critical of the tendency of critics to lean upon “their knowledge of the recurrent and important themes of Western culture to misperceive what is actually in a science fiction story. For example, recognizable themes or patterns of imagery can be insisted on far beyond their actual importance in the work simply because they are familiar to the critic.” 80 However in the case of Liu’s western-influenced trilogy, these sorts of features of the text bear much more importance. In fact one might argue that the prevailing emphasis on the Chinese-ness of *Diqiu Wangshi* might be committing a similar sin for the study of Chinese sf as Russ has described of the study of western sf. As Russ has described from the western context, it would seem equally shallow to frame Liu’s works under the umbrella of a term like “Sino-SF.” 81 To emphasize his Chinese-ness would naturally be to ignore the scientific themes of his text, which sit in a conceptually separate realm to the themes of Chinese literature and perhaps even Chinese science fiction literature of the past. The fact that Liu also draws from the same well of ideas as mid-century Anglo-American authors suggests that we apply the same standard to Liu as Russ has suggested for western sf.

79 Ibid., 116.
80 Ibid., 114.
81 Shippey, “Sino Sci-Fi.”
In understanding the genre in Chinese language, which falls into three distinct waves, some headway has been made. The principal scholar of the first wave of Chinese science fiction is Nathaniel Isaacson, whose book *Celestial Empire* is the only academic English-language work thus far on the genre, discussing its relationship with colonialism and modernity in China. Isaacson argues that this first wave was borne out of the fiction revolution sparked by the intellectual Liang Qichao, who was principally concerned with importing ideas from the West so that China could strengthen itself in the face of the crises brought by modernization. The very translation of “science fiction” from Japanese in this time, Isaacson argues, gave birth to the term *kexue xiaoshuo* 科学小说, bridging the terms for “science” 科学 and “novel” 小说. On the one hand, science fiction was one among a number of fiction genres which helped to make sense of China’s political, social and economic change. On the other, it was unique in that it would “disseminate smatterings of scientific knowledge” and use it to “satirize Chinese society and suggest a future direction for a country mired in sadness and anger.”

Likewise, D.E. Pollard has studied the particularly strong influence of Jules Verne in this period. Pollard traces the proliferation of science by the intellectual Liang Qichao 梁启超, whom he calls “the leading propagandist for the educational purposes of fiction.” Liang felt that the notion of *xiaoshuo* (fiction) should be didactic and that science fiction, at the time *kexue xiaoshuo*, was just one variant of a range of didactic genre writing. Chinese writing in this period featured the introduction of many science fictional devices across fiction periodicals. As Isaacson notes,

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Liang’s seminal translation of *From Earth to the Moon* exemplifies the concept of *translingual practice*, in the way that the “novel was translated from the French original into English, made its way to Japan (most likely) via an American translation, where it was then translated into Japanese by Inoue Tsutomu (1850-1928) as *Getsukai ryokō*, and was later rendered into Chinese by Lu Xun as *Yuejie lüxing* (1903).”

It demonstrates, from its inception in Chinese literature, that science fiction was inspired by an engagement with the foreign. But observing other works, like Zhou Guisheng’s “The New World of London” (*lundun xin shijie* 伦敦新世界), there is “no attempt to raise serious issues in the stories.” Science fiction, in its beginnings in China, should not be considered serious literary work, but rather a means of finding a language to engage with western scientific ideas. It was also, as Isaacson argues, a means of experimenting with literary style in a period of enormous technological, political, cultural and social change. There is limited scholarship on the history of the genre after the republic period to the present. But these prior studies crucially reveal how the genre in Chinese is dependent and invigorated by translation of non-Chinese materials. Indeed Liu Cixin, though writing in the twenty-first century, follows a longer line of modern Chinese writers who looked explicitly to foreign literary traditions for inspiration.

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84 Isaacson, *Celestial Empire*, 51.
86 This is the fundamental thesis of Isaacson’s *Celestial Empire*.
87 As Liu himself observes, at the end of the Qing dynasty, “Chinese intellectuals were entranced by and curious about Western science and technology, and thought of such knowledge as the only hope for saving the nation from poverty, weakness, and general backwardness,” noting that science fiction arose in this context in China. In Liu Cixin, “The Worst of All Possible Universes and the Best of All Possible Earths: *Three-Body* and Chinese Science Fiction,” in *Invisible Planets*, 363.
In tracing the origins of modern Chinese literary forms back to the late nineteenth century, Lydia Liu seeks to explain how modern Chinese literature is very much a product of translation, initially of Japanese, but then of English, French, German and Russian works, which, over one hundred years, shaped the evolution of written Chinese from a scholarly vernacular to a colloquial one. These stylistic conventions included “aspects of novelistic realism, narrative remapping of the inner world, the first-person voice, free indirect style, deixis, gendered textual strategies, and so on.”\(^8^8\) Liu’s study is seminal for the reason that it traces the stylistic innovations in the most canonical modern classics to identifiable origins in foreign literature. Beginning with David Hawkes translation of Cao Xueqin’s 18\(^{th}\)-century classic *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hongloumeng 红楼梦*), Liu notes the adoption of free indirect style, a modern English literary convention, in his translation of a classical Chinese text. Here, “Hawkes’s stylistic transformation of *The Story of the Stone* in modern English can be taken to symbolize what has happened to the stylistics of Chinese fiction in the early twentieth century” as “one confronts translingual modes of representation between literary conventions of very different novelistic traditions.”\(^8^9\) In the early twentieth century, “Chinese writers began to deploy imported (translated) narrative modes in their own works and to write as if they were speaking a Chinese version of Hawkes’ *ouhua* or Europeanised Chinese.”\(^9^0\) This introduction of free indirect style signalled an influx of changes over the next several decades.

Lydia Liu argues that this enormous effort to import style from European languages was undertaken “in the hope that these borrowings would reinvigorate their own language and invent

\(^8^8\) Liu, *Translingual practice*, 103.
\(^8^9\) Ibid., 105
\(^9^0\) Ibid.
a new vernacular Chinese suitable for serious purposes in place of the classical language.” As she argues, a major literary figure “Lao She [老舍] repeatedly mentioned that he had learned his novelistic craft through reading English and European novels,” reading “the English Bible, Shakespeare, Dickens, Swift, Conrad, and Defoe” during his time in London. This translingual influence was not just linguistic in character, Liu notes, also reflecting the changing relationship between narrative and psychology that arose with the novel. She points, for example, to Lu Xun’s Madman’s Diary 狂人日记 as introducing “an intensely schizophrenic introspective voice into Chinese literature via the Russian writer Gogol.” This was part of the “objectification” of the inner conscious world that was the focus of novelistic narrative, of which writers like Lao She and the New Sensationist Shi Zhecun 施蛰存 were emblematic. These literary shifts, of course, were contextualized by the republican period in general and the May Fourth era in particular where the spread of Freudian thinking through translation, Liu argues, led to the internalization of western narrative modes – namely in reconstituting the subjective mind as an analysable object. 

Likewise, Bonnie McDougall produced a volume in the 1970s on the influence of Western literary thought upon May Fourth Era writers. In the 1920s, for Chinese writers, “Western literature became almost as familiar as their own,” largely because, as far as such material is concerned “whatever was wanted, was available.” “On the whole,” she argues, “modern commentators on twentieth-century Chinese literature admit the importance of Western influences

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91 Ibid., 106.
92 Ibid., 116.
93 Ibid., 129.
94 Ibid., 132.
but maintain that there is basically a continuity of the native tradition.” This view contrasts with earlier scholars like C.T. Hsia and A.R. Davis who felt that modern Chinese literature had become itself either westernized or internationalized in the literary revolution of republican period.6 This trend halted by the 1940s when “the recently acquired internationalism was in the end overwhelmed by the resurgence of nationalism…”7 Thus, there is already a solid foundation for the understanding beginnings of modern Chinese style, and offers little context for the continued changes that come in other historical contexts in the twentieth century and after.

In this respect, Edward Gunn’s 1991 study, *Rewriting Chinese*, is a most useful contribution to the field. Gunn gives a broad picture of those stylistics features which emerged through translation and those which were ultimately rejected in the vernacularisation of written Chinese. Gunn’s history, however, treats this process as one negotiated by China’s elites throughout the twentieth century. Different from Liu’s *Translingual Practice*, Gunn uses the republican period as a starting point from which to cover later trends in Chinese literary style, not confined to the discursive idiosyncrasies of the 1920s and 30s. Despite this breadth, his study traverses no further than the eighties. It was in this decade, he suggests, that “the reformist state proved too weak or indifferent to defend many of the most talented writers, journalists, and intellectuals who have supported it.” For Chinese literary figures, “the exercise of authority, if continued without a persuasive ideal or promise of opportunity, seems likely to provoke a reaction eventually and thus to create a style that will be distinctive.”8 With reference to Li Tuo’s views, we might say that the avant-garde clique represent such a reaction. But Gunn’s work does not

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6 Ibid., 265-266.
7 Ibid., 268.
extend far into the contemporary period. Ending in the 1980s, he notes that “the restoration of a measure of autonomy for the educated elite in the PRC has been taken as a major feature of social change in the years following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976.” These historical changes “and other trends have to do with prose style deserves fuller consideration in the future.”

So not only is there a lacking scholarly context on contemporary Chinese literature within which to situate Liu Cixin, he hardly fits the model of “elite.” Liu moved to Yangquan in Shaanxi province as a small child at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution when his father was sent to do labour in the mines. After school, he studied engineering in Zhengzhou in Henan province before taking a job as a computer engineer which would allow him to write fiction on the side. Liu was not brought up in a socially privileged position nor attracted popularity through paperback publication, instead garnering a readership online. If we were to briefly remove Liu from his immediate context and observe consider his thematic and literary concerns, we would observe a similarity with the earlier modern innovators of Chinese fiction in a desire to look outside of China for alternatives in terms of style, story and setting. With such a wealth of foreign fiction available from the early eighties, Liu certainly represents a new generation of contemporary writers with a renewed interest in alternatives to Chinese usual literary themes and it is precisely the themes on which he writes which separate him from the usual Chinese author who, in some way, will place his country or native place as the centre of his story.

99 Ibid., 174.
This relates crucially to the observation of the critic C.T. Hsia 夏志清, who argued that Chinese writers try to depict the corruption and vice in their culture without addressing it as basic ills of civilization and modernity in and of themselves. The western writer, he believes, “automatically identifies the sick state of his country with the state of man in the modern world, the Chinese writer sees the conditions of China as peculiarly Chinese and not applicable elsewhere.”\(^{101}\) This theme has been more recently echoed by Angie Chau, writing that “the main deterrent for non-Chinese readers in reading Chinese literature is precisely this obsessive belief that one must understand Chinese culture and history to understand its literature, but this has not significantly affected the global reception of *Three-Body*.\(^{102}\) Indeed, China is not the central setting of Liu’s trilogy, but rather is de-centred, closed-off and oblivious to the workings of the world outside, or at least in the first volume where, in Cultural Revolution-era China, the scene is laid. But the events of the novel are soon drawn away from China and even the Earth.

In the first volume, the elderly character Ye Wenjie 叶文洁 is interrogated by authorities about her attempt to make contact with the alien Trisolaran race. She replies to her interrogators that “if they can cross the distance between the stars to come to our world, their science must have developed to a very advanced stage. A society with such advanced science must also have more advanced moral standards.”\(^ {103}\) While this line ironically shows Ye’s wilful naivete and the dire consequences that follow an ignorance of the dangers of an encounter with foreign peoples, her remark indicates a deeper idea. Her actions alluded to here, which spark the tumultuous events of


\(^{102}\) Chau, “From Nobel to Hugo,” 122.

the trilogy, betray a non-Sinocentric, a non-geocentric, and even non-heliocentric, worldview. This character’s desperate attempt to contact an alien world for salvation itself transcends the ideological myopia of conflict on Earth, depicted in the first-volume’s violent scenes of Maoist China. Ye can only hope that a civilization with a deeper grasp of science might have the capacity to enlighten her kind, a moral choice which shifts the narrative from an individual’s struggle within the isolated China of the Cultural Revolution to one of humanity in the open cosmos. In this sense, the trilogy might be seen as an exception to the rule about Chinese literature established by C.T. Hsia. Reminding ourselves again that he is predominantly of a non-Chinese influenced background, one must question how much Liu should be read as a writer of Chinese literature so much as a Chinese writer in world literature. To grasp how Liu Cixin is significant, not as a figure in Chinese letters but in world literature, one needs to approach his work as translingual practice.

Lydia Liu’s methodology is less concerned with “the technical aspects of translation, although one could benefit from excursions into the one or the other,” rather being “an investigation of the conditions of translation and of discursive practices that ensue from initial interlingual contacts between languages.” Liu hopes that the concepts embedded in European languages are not taken as “a point of departure,” rather hoping to see that the meaning of these concepts are mediate in other cultural and linguistic contexts. Looking at Liu Cixin’s Chinese works and the Chinese translations of western fiction he draws from, this dissertation places more emphasis on the host language for these concepts than the guest language which provides them, elucidating the ways in which the host might “usurp the authority of the guest language in the

104 Liu, Translingual practice, 26.
105 Ibid.
process of translation as well as be transformed by it or be in complicity with it.\textsuperscript{106} Liu Cixin, one can only assume, in embracing western science fiction, is much more in complicity with the guest language than an “usurper” of it, molding the Chinese style to fit originally English patterns and conventions which are embedded in the Chinese versions of Clarke, Orwell and so on.

As Lydia Liu admits, this “stylistic approach cannot but depart from the narrowly defined methodology known as ‘parallel comparison’…taking two or more texts from each literature and pinpointing similarities and differences.\textsuperscript{107} This is perhaps one of the conceptual weaknesses of such an approach but is an effective way of identifying influence, especially in Liu Cixin’s case, where those influences are explicitly stated or referred to in his interviews and criticism. As she posits, “meanings…are not so much ‘transformed’ when concepts pass from the guest language to the host language as invented within the local environment of the latter.”\textsuperscript{108} For Liu Cixin’s work, this question of “invention within a local environment” (that is, in Chinese) will be the key question of this thesis. Lydia Liu hopes that “the notion of translingual practice will eventually lead to a theoretical vocabulary that helps account for the process of adaptation, translation, introduction, and domestication of words, categories, discourses, and modes of representation from one language to another and, furthermore, helps explain the modes of transmission, manipulation, deployment, and domination within the power structure of the host language.\textsuperscript{109} Diqiu Wangshi should provide fruitful material for exploring such dynamics.

As Edward Gunn asserts, style “is a set of formal features with no inherent unity, any more than the ‘organs of speech’ in the human body, that happens to perform collectively a

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 104.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 26-27.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.
coordinated function in producing speech.” It is problematic in that “in its cognitive and social
determinants, [style] is a ‘collectivist phenomenon,’ in which the separate elements, however
conceived and analysed, do not predictably add up to style.”110 The grammatical shifts that have
occurred in Chinese are “largely by borrowing, based on a principle of analogy to the language
providing the loan. This seems to account for virtually all of the changes in twentieth-century
Chinese writing, taking into account the varieties of regional speech forms as well as foreign
languages available as sources for borrowing.”111 These identified linguistic shifts should provide
the reductive lens through which to select and study translingual aesthetic influences.

He does point out that it is not easy to determine distinctions between conventions in
different languages, for example, between metonymy or metaphor because “no unified framework,
let alone theory, currently exists for all of these features and their multiple determinants.”112
Stylistic analysis relies on “historical conventions or cognitive theories” neither of which have
firm structuralist founding. 113 The “Europeanization” of Chinese, he notes, “did not displace
existing linguistic structures but only added to them.” He does, however, argue that there were
cognitive limits to the alterations occurring in Chinese, as “by the late 1920’s Europeanization had
actually reached the linguistic limits of its possible expansion in Chinese, short of generating
reanalysis in the grammar of the language itself.” 114 Observing these boundaries to the
foreignization of Chinese language, “Europeanization came to signify merely new means to
achieve old ends, not new means to new ends.”115 Nonetheless, the continued story of these

110 Gunn, Rewriting Chinese, 4.
111 Ibid., 5.
112 Ibid., 13.
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid., 41.
115 Ibid., 42.
changes and the adoption of further literary forms, beyond the immediate grammatical features of language, has not been studied.

In this sense, this dissertation does not restrict itself to Gunn’s work but embraces the approach espoused by Lydia Liu, as well. Her *Translingual Practice*, unlike Gunn’s story of stylistics, “examines the process by which new words, meanings, discourses, and modes of representation arise, circulate, and acquire legitimacy within the host language due to, or in spite of, the latter’s contact/collision with the guest language.”\(^{116}\) It invites consideration of what style means beyond the study of stylistics, in Chinese translation studies and intellectual history. Gunn still insists that one must “read ‘through’ style, making inferences and creating associations, to evoke contexts and images that have not been verbalized and to assemble meanings from them” to come to an interpretation of a text.\(^{117}\) While Lydia Liu encounters limitations in her employment of the concepts of host and guest languages, so Gunn’s approach is limited by “psychological” constraints” in that “it determines certain inherent constituents of style and show[s] how these constituents may be manipulated to produce stylistic effects.”\(^{118}\)

A solution, however, might be found in the area of genre. Peter Stockwell, one of the major figures of cognitive poetics or literary linguistics, has wrestled with the stylistic roots of the sf genre. His poetic study deals with “the linguistic and cognitive organisation of the genre” and “how science fiction works as a reading experience.”\(^{119}\) This thesis adopts Stockwell’s approach as it is the only study of the sf genre which deals which deals with its formal linguistic features, looking more specifically at how stylistic devices are used for the purposes of constructing a

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\(^{118}\) Ibid., v.

science fiction narrative and building a science fictional world convincingely. Unlike prior studies of science fiction. Stockwell’s set of linguistic techniques offers a common conceptual vocabulary for dealing with the genre in a non-English language, which is a necessity for a study that attempts to mediate between aesthetically distinct languages. One would hope that this might offer some contribution to Blocker’s idea of a “mixed mode” of aesthetics.

With regard to Chinese language in particular, some headway has been made by the scholar Shen Dan. Stylistics, she explains, “started developing in China in the 1980s after China opened its door to the outside world” when “the end of the 1970s and the early 1980s saw the sudden rush into China of various schools of western linguistics, stylistics and literary theory.”\(^{120}\) Prior to this, “‘stylistics’ for many scholars in the Chinese department has a meaning quite different from ‘stylistics’ in the West, a difference that rests with the different senses of ‘style’ and ‘wenti’ (style).” Rather the “Chinese term ‘fengge’ that sounds different (‘style’ is usually translated as ‘wenti’, not ‘fengge’), but actually come closer to the western ‘style’ since,” has come to the fore.\(^{121}\) It has some differences with “western” stylistics, she argues, as “the Chinese investigation of fengge is often concerned with the general artistic quality of a literary work based on impressions, and the artistic quality of the text tends to be taken as representative of that of the author’s literary creation in general…”\(^{122}\) Cognitive poetics, closer to that developed by Stockwell, has only recently been introduced into China since 2008 and has only begun to grow.\(^{123}\) In general, there is more to be done in developing the study linguistic style in the Chinese language. But for


\(^{121}\) Ibid., 94.

\(^{122}\) Ibid., 95.

\(^{123}\) Ibid., 97.
twenty years or more, it seems very little of this kind of work has been pursued. Perusing through lists of studies of modern Chinese literature, many contemporary Chinese authors are rather neglected, despite there being now forty years’ worth of what can be called contemporary Chinese literary production. This point is simply to highlight how little attention is being paid to the contemporary literary period and the ways in which it is shaped by and is relevant to world literature.124

Considering that Arthur C. Clarke is the most fundamental inspiration for Liu’s writing, namely Rendezvous with Rama (Yu lama xianghui 与拉玛相会) and 2001: A Space Odyssey (2001: taikong tanxian 2001:太空探险), a study of aesthetic influence must begin with these, with other works regarded as more peripherally important. The various novels from which Liu draws will be considered in terms of stylistic and thematic relevance, whether through Liu Cixin’s description of them or observable similarities between their Chinese translations and Liu’s works. When Liu Cixin talks of the influences of Clarke or Orwell, he refers specifically to those one or two works which he has read by each author, rather than the author’s general oeuvre (for example, he speaks of the influence of Nineteen Eighty-Four rather than of Orwell’s writing as whole). It is usually unclear in which language Liu has read these works. Liu, no doubt, read War & Peace in Chinese translation rather than Russian, as this was a widely consumed text in Communist-era China. But, for the English-language writers he notes, it is uncertain to what materials he had access.

124 This is evidenced in both of the two major English-language anthologies of modern Chinese fiction, David Wang’s A New Literary History of Modern China and The Columbia Companion to Modern Chinese Literature, edited by Kirk Denton (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). These very extensive and useful compilations, when covering the 1980s onwards, tend to focus on the avant-garde authors and the Nobel prize winners, Mo Yan and Gao Xingjian.
More important is the issue of Liu’s English ability. In a recent *New Yorker* interview, he claims, for example, that he cannot understand speeches by American presidents, though he can manage grasping the more simplistic language of Donald Trump. In his hometown of Niangziguan, writes Jiayang Fan, “he had plenty of time to hone his writing and to absorb all the sci-fi he could get his hands on, sometimes pouring over a dictionary to get through untranslated works by Vonnegut, Bradbury, Pynchon, and Orwell.” And in late 2018, he gave a speech in English at the Arthur C Clarke Foundation, though it appears to have been more of a phonetic reading of a talk translated from the Chinese (The audience were given English transcripts to read from as he spoke).125 While Liu does not seem to demonstrate any conversational ability with English, his translator Ken Liu says that he is able to assist him with the appropriate translations of certain terminology into English, suggesting some semantic grasp, perhaps of scientific English.126 Liu’s linguistic comprehension has to be addressed because of the ambiguity surrounding the particular language in which he read these foreign texts. From media appearances, we can gather that he certainly read Clarke’s two novels in Chinese translation when they were published.127 As for the rest of his influences, Wouk, Zamyatin, Orwell, Huxley, the matter is less clear. What must be stressed here, however, is that the works of these authors which Liu’s mentions begin appearing in Chinese translation between 1978 and 1989 and were readily available. Why would Liu have


126 Goldkorn, “Ken Liu on Chinese Science Fiction.”

read *Winds of War* in English, for example, when the People’s Publishing Press (*Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe* 人民文学出版社) had released a widely accessible Chinese version as far back as 1978, when he was only fifteen years of age? The concluding chapter of this thesis shall delve more deeply into these questions.

How does one methodologically handle the ambiguity of weighing the English source text and/or Chinese translation? On the one hand, one can see how Liu, reading it in English, would then “sinicize” a received idea in writing his novel in Chinese. On the other hand, one can observe how Liu, reading a Chinese translation, was influenced by an idea already transmuted by English-to-Chinese translation. What must be stressed is that reading Liu means accounting for this ambiguity. One nevertheless has the impression that he has at least read these works in Chinese in addition to a reading in English, if only for the observations just made above. I shall therefore treat these foreign texts as though they were read in both languages, English original and Chinese translation, though one would assume he leant very heavily on the Chinese form, if he read the English at all. Ultimately, because *Diqiu Wangshi* is a Chinese text, when making comparisons with the foreign textual influences, the Chinese translations of the foreign material must be paired against excerpts from Liu’s work. Of course, substantial reference will be given to the English originals (not to mention the English translation of *Diqiu Wangshi* by Ken Liu and Joel Martinsen) to give added clarity to the analyses.

As an example, by dealing with the structural flow of a passage from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and comparing its correlation with a similar passage in *Diqiu Wangshi*, I use the Chinese translation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* while also referring to the English original text. Such excerpt comparisons will be made throughout Chapters Five and Six. These aesthetic analyses of these texts identify conventions, cross referencing the larger cognitive techniques of Stockwell’s sf study
and other relevant contributions from Chinese literary scholars, while considering their original English form, through the Chinese translation, to the parallels in Liu Cixin’s own work. The point of such an analysis should be to determine essential similarities and differences between them. Fundamentally, it asks in what ways Liu’s work is original and is a unique piece of world literature. In view of Lydia Liu’s ideas, it draws conclusions on what concepts get carried across from one language to the other and which are manipulated to portray a universal narrative of humanity in the stars. Simply, how do these ideas get changed and what remains consistent?

The first half of my study will follow with a discussion of the political context of Liu’s trilogy as well as an exegesis of the work – trying to simplify its structure, characters and themes for the reader. The third and fourth chapters will follow with a wider exegesis of the trilogy (as currently one cannot find a sufficient summary of the story), giving a plot synopsis through the dual perspectives of scientism and humanism. The latter section of the dissertation, Chapters Five to Six, will then deal sequentially with different authors, sometimes grouped by theme, namely dystopian historicism and utopian technologism. The chapter on technologism shall deal with different aspects of Arthur C. Clarke’s work, namely narratorial strategies by the author and the particulars of depicting the Space Age in fiction, particularly the portrayal of technological advancement.

Following this, I will look at the structural features of Tolstoy’s War and Peace (zhangzheng yu heping 战争与和平) and Henry Wouk’s Winds of War (zhanzheng fengyun 战争风云), focusing on the larger narrative structure of Diqiu Wangshi, rather than on detailed elements in the text. Much like the dystopian authors, Liu tends to bunch these two together where he mentions them. Lastly, I will together analyze the translations of Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four (Yi jiu ba si 一九八四), Huxley’s Brave New World (meili xin shijie 美丽新世界) and Zamyatin’s
We (Women 我们) as social commentaries from which Liu draws inspiration, but also because these three works were published as a single “Dystopia” trilogy in the mid-eighties and can be viewed in relation to each other in the Chinese literary context. This analysis of utopianism will conclude with a consideration of Wang Meng’s Long Live Youth (Qingchun Wansui 青春万岁), which Liu cites as an “idealistic” influence on his writings and appears to be the only native Chinese work which Liu gives common reference to. It is important to include this work as it is a piece of youth fiction, rather than science fiction, and bears upon Wu Yan’s critique of Liu’s writing.

Thus, for each section of the aesthetic analysis, the thesis must compare texts translingually (between Chinese and English texts) and intra-lingually (between Chinese texts) in their respective scope of inquiry, looking at a specific set of authors (Clarke, Orwell et al.) translated into Chinese, who then have influenced a Chinese author, Liu Cixin and his Chinese-language work, Diqiu Wangshi. It is the relationship or progression one must attempt to make sense of. The major form of inquiry for the thesis should be one of aesthetic and thematic analysis, that is looking at the stylistic and poetic aspects of the language, to gain a translingual understanding of the ways in which Liu has been influenced conceptually as a writer. It is in this sense that the empirical fact of translated textual influence has been established to give some stricter parameters to what might be read as authorial intent, relying on formal language structure as the basis of interpretation. Neither approach would be independently adequate for a single author study. This dissertation

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draws heavily from Liu Cixin’s personal literary criticism in science fiction and related subjects, published as *Liu Cixin tan kehuan* 刘慈欣谈科幻 (Liu Cixin on Science Fiction) in 2013. This volume contains over thirty-five untranslated essays and interviews by Liu, from numerous sources, and provides a crucial intellectual context for his fiction work. In view of these discussions, I shall at last suggest why it is Liu’s particular literary work that stands out as the only popular Chinese text in English translated form. The aim of such an analysis should be to determine fundamental similarities and differences; essentially, in what ways Liu’s work is original and proposes unique questions for world literature.
2) Politicism

That Liu himself has a preoccupation with foreign literature is evidenced in his trilogy, where literary references are almost always western in origin. In the second volume *The Dark Forest*, the protagonist Luo Ji speaks to a character in a dream, an imaginary lover, who scorns the decline of creativity in modern literary fiction. She says that “today's practitioners of literature have lost that creativity. Their minds give birth only to shattered fragments and freaks, whose brief lives are nothing but cryptic spasms devoid of reason.” They throw these very fragments, she says, “into a bag they peddle under the label ‘postmodern’ or ‘deconstructionist’ or ‘symbolism’ or ‘irrational.’”¹ This brief conversation betrays an awareness of the western literary thought and perhaps Liu’s concern with being viewed in relation to it.

His path into writing literature, as he states, does not extend out of a native Chinese tradition, but rather from the influences of western sf authors, namely Arthur C. Clarke, and others.² What perhaps stands out as more significant is that Liu’s work is transnational and transcultural, even trans-civilizational in its exploration of “macro-details.” He stresses that the value of science fiction is found in its capacity to cultivate these macro-details, which others might refer to as “world-building.” “Science fiction that focuses on macro-details,” he argues, “first builds a world according to its self-dictated laws” and “then goes on to enrich and define that

world.” This is different to “mainstream literature” where “the superstructure is already built, situating its description outside the purview of literature.” Such a feature as “world-building” is an unnecessary detail for mainstream literary genres, he argues, but constitutes the essential building blocks of sf storytelling. Such freedom leads the reader to more widely question his own moral and ethical standpoint, in a manner similar to Suvin’s concept of cognitive estrangement.

This leads to his basic problem with mainstream literature as a whole (that is, as he defines it, literature outside of sf and fantasy). Within this wider literary world, he argues “little has changed; its world remains pre-Newtonian, perhaps, even pre-Copernican or pre-Ptolemaic.” As stated earlier, in the mental world of literature, the Earth is still the center of the universe.” While Liu is perhaps misguided in asserting that literature, only with the Renaissance, became “the study of people and their systems,” the implicit proposition he makes is more important: that literature, primarily steeped in the concerns of human relationships and struggles, is necessarily a self-limiting conception of the literary form. By reducing his conceptions to more fundamental problems in nature and reality, he feels free to explore concerns which transcend, but are in no way unrelated to, the human condition. To Liu, exploring human relationships in a world he has built is more interesting than exploring human relationships in a world already premised on the one in which we live. More importantly, though large parts of Diqiu Wangshi are set in China, incidentally depicting aspects of China’s culture, society or politics, they do not implicitly or explicitly constitute the subject matter of the work.

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3 Ibid., 26.
4 Liu employs the term “world building” as a basic feature of these genres. Ibid., 29.
5 Ibid., 30.
6 Ibid., 27.
One must ask how this intellectual stance can be further elaborated upon through Liu’s literary style. It is a question, moreover, that bears upon the problem of authorial intent, particularly for a thematic and aesthetic study. As Dan McIntyre has summarized, “stylistics acknowledges the skills of the writer by assuming that every decision made in the production of a text is deliberate, despite whether these decisions were made consciously or unconsciously.” This itself is a response to the problem of the intentional fallacy, proposed by William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, that a literary work should not primarily be understood as a reflection upon its author’s intent, a view held by romantic intentionalists. As Violeta Sotirova points out: “the main quarrel of Wimsatt and Beardsley with romantic intentionalism has to do with ‘the use of biographical evidence’, which if used wisely may ‘be evidence of the meaning of [an author’s] words’, but if misused may detract from the meaning of the work and result in ‘danger of confusing personal and poetic studies’ and in ‘writing the personal as if it were poetic’.” Instead Wimsatt and Beardsley argued for a language-based interpretative criticism. The true poetic approach to reading a literary work is to treat it as a self-contained whole and to analyse its language as the primary evidence of its meaning, in line with an “insistence on the centrality of language in literary interpretation” following from the Formalist criticism of Viktor Schklovsky.

Wimsatt and Beardsley defined intention as the “design or plan in the author’s mind”, essentially that because it was unknowable what the intention of an author was in relation to the text the author produced – it was therefore a corrupt practice to make reference to the author’s

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9 Ibid.
views of what he wrote, why he wrote or what he was intending to have written. A literary work ought to be analyzed, as purely as possible, at the level of language. They argued that “poetic analysis and exegesis” is “the true and objective way of criticism” and added that it is tempting to go “the way of biographical inquiry” to clarify the meaning of the text – or inconsistencies within it – but conclude nonetheless that “critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle.” But there is little suggestion in Wimsatt and Beardsley’s proposal as to how the contribution of an author’s opinion on his own work is less correct or less pure than the reader’s – it simply considered to be invalid. The denial of authorial intent could be seen simply as a way of avoiding those limitations placed on the critic which biographical information is meant to impose. In this sense, one is tempted to view the intentional fallacy as some kind of post-literary biography manifesto – a claim to do away with what was perhaps an entrenched assumption in literary criticism up until that time. For the purposes of this thesis, where there is next to no scholarly or critical context limiting an analysis of Liu Cixin’s writing, biographical considerations are very welcome. By simply making an allusion to a real-world scientific problem in his story or creating an historical allusion, which he does all too often, there is an invitation in the text to consider things outside of the text itself. It is difficult then to follow the thesis that the text is self-contained with an authorship made irrelevant. But if the critic were to follow the intentional fallacy in critiquing Liu’s work, he would have to accept that such references and allusions were simply made in a contextual vacuum.

Nora Hämäläinen, who discusses the relationship between literary fiction and moral philosophy argues that there two ways of approaching authorial intent. “One is to discuss it as a

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11 Ibid., 486-487.
more or less intentionally philosophical work, where the writer pursues an ethical subject and lays out an argument which is brought to life through the actions and thoughts of characters.” The task here is to treat the work as an explicitly philosophical one, which might require reference to critical essays by the author. On the other hand, one could read the text while “disregarding the presence or absence of moral or moral philosophical intentions. In this case the interest for moral philosophy may lie in the ethical nature and development of characters, a certain point of view on the world, the possible conflicts arising from human life, etc.”12 In either case, these approaches “insist that the very form of the text matters for its moral significance.”13 But this is simply to emphasize the value of authorial intent is determined in however one defines the purpose of one’s critique. What can be inferred about contemporary Chinese literary studies and literature as whole, it remains inaccessible because Chinese authors of this period as a whole are little understood. What makes Liu Cixin so interesting is that he is an apparently novel figure recent in the history of fiction writing and translation in Chinese and in English. This, at the very least, makes his intent an essential thing to consider.

In this respect, it is necessary to elucidate the significance of science fiction literature within the republic of Chinese letters. The importance of historical context in understanding both Chinese sf and Liu Cixin’s writing has been stressed most strongly by Li Guangyi. As he argues, “the uniqueness of Liu Cixin’s science fiction and its historical significance are not given their due if they are understood only in terms of the development of the twenty-first-century literary field.” However, “looking backward through the lens of characteristic features of Liu Cixin’s sf to the developmental history of Chinese literature from the early twentieth century onward engages a

13 Ibid., 19.
new historical perspective on areas…ignored or given short shrift by previous literary histories.”¹⁴

It is certainly true that it is difficult to separate the literary history of Chinese sf from the political history of modern China within which the genre emerged. In the broadest sense, science fiction in China has moved from Saint-Simonian or Marxist concerns to Asimovian ones, mirroring China’s rapid transition from industrial capitalism to the space age, made only from the 1970s to the 2000s, a transition which took place over two centuries in the West. While sf of the late Qing and Communist periods was concerned with social criticism and the state of China’s development, a theme still prevalent in current sf, it no longer appears to be the primary purpose for sf writing today.

Scholars have generally defined three periods for the genre’s development, those being the late Qing, the Communist and contemporary (post-Mao). But what is not acknowledged is that, apart from the sf genre, these three areas are themselves separate epochs in modern Chinese literary history. Science fiction is not an isolated genre with its own separate historical trajectory, but rather ought to be viewed as a part of modern Chinese literary history, shaped by the same forces which produced other forms of fiction in the twentieth century. Consequently, the question as to what extent sf is a political genre in China must be rephrased. Rather, the extent to which Chinese sf is political is itself determined by the extent to which literary fiction of all genres was influenced by political or social commentary in these separate periods. What makes Liu’s work difficult to contextualize, as discussed in the prior chapter, is that he falls within the post-Mao period, or the third wave of science fiction, which constitutes a new literary epoch in China. Here the role of fiction in relation to political commentary is far more ambivalent.

Indeed, as Nathaniel Isaacson has explained, science fiction writing was an explicitly political enterprise when it first came to China. He argues that “Chinese SF is as enmeshed in dealing with the country’s own indigenous tradition as it is in the confrontation with foreign powers or alien invaders” at the end of the Qing dynasty.\(^{15}\) Isaacson frames the emergence of SF in China in terms of its encounter with imperial foreign powers and semi-colonial condition because the emergence of the genre “cannot be adequately understood without coming to terms with the degree to which late Qing authors framed their predicament in exactly those terms.”\(^{16}\) In this complex relationship with the foreign, he argues “that in the case of Chinese SF, the other that must be silenced is as often China’s own indigenous tradition as it is an alien invader.”\(^{17}\) The genre was a manifestation of a political dialectic between the native tradition and the foreign scientific worldview, through which authors resolved ways for Chinese society to adapt to historical change. Likewise, Li Guangyi argues that Chinese SF emerges in the Republican period in the context of an inward-turning focus in Chinese literary thought. The political disruptions of warlordism and the intellectual class’s cynicism regarding the state of Chinese politics and culture sparked the New Culture Movement (xin wenhua yundong 新文化运动) of the 1910s and 1920s, “which advocated social, political, and literary reform in the name of democracy and scientific modernization.” This climate produced “self-critical writings [which] trended toward examinations of the national life and spirit. Whether writing of the countryside or the self, May Fourth Chinese Literature was universally introspective.”\(^{18}\)

\(^{15}\) Isaacson, *Celestial Empire*, 45.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 41.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) Li, “China Turns Outward,” 3.
Science fiction writings place in Chinese extends, of course, to the Communist period as well. It is important to remember that the Cultural Revolution, the most “dystopian” period of China’s history, features prominently in the first book of the trilogy. For many readers, it was more interesting that the Cultural Revolution appeared through flashbacks of the character Ye Wenjie in the Chinese original, while in the English translation, it appeared as the opening of the book. Rather than some attempt to grab the attention of foreign readers through outlandish scenes of struggles sessions, this was actually how Liu had originally intended the Chinese original version to open. However, Liu and his publisher agreed that, considering that the book was to be published in 2006, on the anniversary of the Cultural Revolution’s beginning, it was best to avoid any untoward political attention that might follow. The foreign translations abroad, however, offered the opportunity for translators to present its original, more chronological, form setting the scene in the Cultural Revolution before the narrative moved to the present day. For some observers, this might bring into question the extent to which *Diqiu Wangshi* is a “politically sensitive” text and to consider in what precise sense it is political, or to what extent it is responding to the immediate political context of China and its place in the world.

As the literary scholar and French translator of *Diqiu Wangshi* Gwennaël Gaffric has argued, the political nature of the trilogy is very difficult to pin down. His study “aims to understand the success (popular, critical and political) of the Liu Cixin’s *Three Body* trilogy in light of China’s socio-historical and literary context from the second half of the twentieth century to the present.” Adopting “a more sociological approach,” he focuses on the “attempts at political appropriation to which [science fiction] has been subjected” in China. Focusing on the

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19 Goldkorn, “Ken Liu on Chinese Science Fiction.”
Communist and post-Mao periods (for our purposes, the second and third waves of sf), he argues that, while these earlier periods of sf were easier to understand as political literature, it is more problematic to frame an author like Liu Cixin in such terms today. As he argues, the conception of literature as having an explicitly didactic or political role is not new in China, having its roots in “the Neo-Confucian saying that ‘the purpose of literature is to convey the Dao’ [wen yi zai dao 文以载道],” from the Song period. This can be seen in the consistency of certain sf themes in China across different periods, such as “‘regeneration/renewal/rebirth of the nation’; ‘scientific progress’; [and China] ‘finding its place on the world stage.’” If there is something political to be found in the present wave of Chinese sf, he suggests, it is found in “the renewed interest in the genre since the launch of ‘Chinese dream’ propaganda” under Xi Jinping’s government.

As Li, Gaffric and Isaacson each make clear, Chinese science fiction in these early periods was political insofar as the writing of fiction in China was generally a political practice, influenced by the uncertain state of China’s historical trajectory. Gaffric does argue that “science fiction in China has always been subject to political imperatives.” But the extent to which this holds for the contemporary period is unclear, as the literary scene, in both domestic production and foreign translation, has changed so drastically. It is unclear whether implicit or explicit socio-political criticism of the state of China is an inherent feature of the genre today. One may perhaps argue that in the third wave, or twenty-first century, Chinese science fiction has been liberated from this requirement and is no longer required to justify itself politically as a literary enterprise. Likewise, this chapter seeks to show that Chinese sf has become far more ambiguous in its motives,

21 Ibid., 23.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 22.
suggesting that to read an author like Liu as a product of Chinese culture would be similar to treating Clarke or Asimov’s writings narrowly as products of mid-century Anglo-American worldviews (referring to Ken Liu’s earlier remarks).

The second sf wave emerged between 1949-1955, when a considerable amount of literature was being translated from English as well as from Russian. Following the founding of New China (*xin Zhongguo* 新中国), foreign literary translation did not entirely decline. Rather it became restricted to a small reading elite, with a larger emphasis on Russian or Soviet writing. As Paola Iovene discusses, translation centered around the journal *Yiwen* (译文), later known as *World Literature* (*shijie wenxue* 世界文学), which was “devoted to foreign literature from the early 1950s to the late 1970s.” Initially under the leadership of Mao Dun 茅盾, “the journal reached a print run of 60,000 copies” and its “readers found a literary atlas that stretched from Cuba to France and from India to the Congo” with its pages “divided by genres, including fiction, poetry, literary theory, reviews of recent translations,” among others.25 Its emphasis was less and less on Soviet fiction, however, and its “translations between 1956 and 1959 introduced a wide range of progressive writers from all over the world.” Including Miyamoto Yuriko, Mayakovsky and Walter Lowenfels.”26 Iovene argues that “internationalism and the effort to introduce Chinese readers to progressive writers of the world [were] the main editorial criteria” that emerged in this period.”27

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25 Iovene, *Tales of Futures Past*, 57.
26 Ibid., 59.
27 Ibid., 61.
Western texts rather than taking them as models or yardsticks for measuring Chinese writing and lamenting its inadequacies, as was the case in the previous years and once again in the 1980s.”

During the Communist period, “science fiction, in image and on paper, thus had the duty of imagining a true communist society realized through technological progress while also serving as material for teaching science and promoting Maoist ideology.” Texts of the early Communist period attempted to demonstrate that “the imagination of a futuristic China with a sufficient mastery of science and technology to transform the land into a nutritionally self-sufficient utopia in line with the ambitions of the Great Leap Forward.” Gaffric cites works such as *The Secret of Swimmer No. 3* (*Sanhao youyong xuanshou de mimi* 3号游泳选手的秘密), “The Elephants with their Trunks Removed” (*Gediao bizi de daxiang* 剁掉鼻子的大象) and “Whale Farm” (*Dajing muchang* 大鲸牧场). This all fell under the banner of Mao Zedong’s call for a “March toward Science” (*xiang kexue jinjun* 向科学进军), the objective of which was to “legitimise the Great Leap Forward (*dayuejin* 大跃进), a political and economic development at the end of the 1950s aimed at boosting the country’s agricultural and industrial production in record time…”

For Li Guangyi, however, the second wave period is teleologically similar to the first wave in that, with the Communist era’s “attendant optimism that science and technology would result in great benefits for humanity, the sense of a human collective that had persisted since the late Qing saw a resurgence in the writings of Zheng Wenguang [郑文光], and works of the imagination were challenged to address the contradictions between socialism and capitalism.”

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28 Ibid., 70.
30 Ibid.
31 Li, “China Turns Outward,” 5.
Scholars Wu Yan, Qian Jiang and others see sf of the Communist period as emblematic of the ideological influences of national reconstruction in the Maoist period. It was naturally defined by themes in Soviet-period science fiction which not only sought to enliven the imagination of younger readers but also to “describe the future of the communist society, free from class struggle.”

There was of course, through Russian influence, the birth of hard science fiction in Chinese as a means of depicting technological modernity and its relationship with China’s development.

As Rudolph Wagner argues, science fiction went through growing pains throughout its revival under the communist government. The genre lacked a neat definition, not just in China, but abroad as well. But it was with the opening of China and Deng Xiaoping’s explication of the Four Modernizations (si ge xiandaihua 四个现代化), in the fields of agriculture, national defence, science and technology as well as industry, that science fiction was given a political purpose. Up until the 1980s, science fiction had been “linked with the policies that seem appropriate in today’s light – pursuit of science, praise of scientists, and modern scientific education; with the proper names, Gorki, Il’in, Lu Xun, and Gao Shiqi; and the proper times, 1956-1957, 1962-1963, and following 1978.”

Almost all writers in this area “come from the same background; all of them

have been writing science popularization and all of them have background in the sciences or are working full time as scientists.”\textsuperscript{36}

The second wave could be considered as having come to end with the death of Mao, through literary production declined well before this during the Cultural Revolution \textit{(wenhua dageming 文化大革命)} of 1966-1976. “As it did for all types of literature, however, the period of the Cultural Revolution…marked a sudden end to the production of science fiction. All scientific disciplines that did not live up to the harsh Maoist agenda were considered reactionary and intellectuals who taught them were equated with counter-revolutionary elements.”\textsuperscript{37} As Gaffric argues, “Chinese science fiction was gradually reborn from the ashes” following “the rehabilitation of political, intellectual and artistic figures who had been persecuted for a decade during the Cultural Revolution…”\textsuperscript{38} The opening of China’s economy under Deng Xiaoping and the weakening of Maoist ideology would lead to an increase in artistic freedom and the translation of more foreign material into Chinese. In this political climate, Gaffric explains, “the works of Chinese authors…proliferated and there was an explosion of western sf in translation, not simply Soviet sf as had been the case until this time.”\textsuperscript{39}

Prior to the death of end of the Cultural Revolution, literary publications deemed unfit for publication in translation journals “might well have circulated in periodicals or books that were intended for ‘internal/restricted distribution’ \textit{(neibu faxing)}” which “aimed at keeping high party cadres, noted-writers, critics, and scholars abreast of recent cultural and social developments

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{37} Gaffric, “Liu Cixin’s Three Body Trilogy,” 23.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 24
worldwide…” But “the publication of yellow books ceased in the late 1970s” and “from the mid-1970s onward, many new journals of literary translation were issued, and translations of all major Western writers were published, several of which were barely revised versions of the volumes that had been first issued for internal distribution.” Works read by Liu Cixin, such as Arthur C. Clarke and Orwell, were among such translations, either newly translated in China or translated for distribution to a wider reading public.

Moreover, the Chinese government declared a “Scientific Spring” (kexue de chuntian 科学的春天) at the National Scientific Congress of 1978 which called for an advancement in technological development and the introduction of foreign technology. This ideological call was echoed in the literary world, with the founding of Scientific Literature 科学文艺 in 1979 which would form the foundation of Chinese science fiction publishing thereon, undertaking the work of translating previously untranslated foreign sf among the many other journals discussed by Iovene.

This is not to say that science fiction became a de-politicized genre in this period. In the immediate years following Mao’s death, Gaffric adds, sf works were still expected to maintain a tone of “optimism for progress and the future of the country.” He argues that such a tone is espoused in works like Ye Yonglie’s (叶永烈) children’s book LittleSmarty Travels to the Future (Xiao Lingtong manyou weilai 小灵通漫游未来), which called for its young readers to actively participate in bringing about an advanced future China, depicting a utopian city free from...
poverty.\textsuperscript{44} On the other hand, Tong Enzheng’s (童恩正) \textit{Death Ray on Coral Island (Shanhudao shang de siguang 珊瑚岛上的死光)}, the first sf story to be published in the prestigious \textit{People’s Literature (Renmin Wenxue 人民文学)}, advocates a sort of scientific patriotism in its narrative. It tells the story of a Chinese-invented superweapon that had fallen into the hands of a dangerous foreign power. This patriotism “inevitably leads Chinese scientists to China, the only place where discoveries and inventions can be put to positive use.”\textsuperscript{45}

These two writers, Ye and Tong, were the major figures of sf writing at this transitional time for sf, as the genre was struggling to redefine itself between two other related literary categories: \textit{kexue wenyi (科学文艺)} and \textit{kepu wenxue (科普文学)}, respectively meaning “Scientific Literature” and “Science Popularization Literature.” For Iovene, the notion of \textit{kexue wenyi} appeared in post-Mao China as a wave of literary optimism in contrast that of “Scar literature” \textit{(shanghen wenxue 伤痕文学)}, which criticized the excesses and the suffering of the Cultural Revolution.\textsuperscript{46} The famous sf writer Tong Enzheng, in a 1979 essay, argued that there were some clear distinctions between these two blurred subgenres. Scientific Literature, which he argues encompasses “science horror fiction, science prose, science fairy tales, science poetry, science theatre” and more, aimed to “propagate the author’s ideas; a philosophy, a fact-seeking attitude and a truth-seeking spirit” rather than specific scientific ideas in and of themselves. “To sum it up, it is to propagate a scientific outlook on life.” He cites his own \textit{Death Ray on Coral Island} as an example of \textit{kexue wenyi} where scientific content is used as a kind of “trick” which serves to “develop the needs of characters and of plot and serves as a backdrop” to the story. For him, \textit{kepu}

\textsuperscript{44} Iovene, \textit{Tales of Futures Past}, 24-27.
\textsuperscript{46} Iovene, \textit{Tales of Futures Past}, 30-31.
wenxue, or science popularization, served only to offer specific scientific knowledge to the audience, adopting literary qualities simply for illustrative purposes.\(^47\)

Other differences concerned accuracy. Tong argued that Scientific Literature could bend the factual nature of scientific content while Science Popularization had to be accurate by necessity. Consequently, Science Popularization cannot digress from the scientific subject matter while Scientific Literature was completely unconfined, able to create universes and shape characters within them to develop plots. “Science Fantasy Fiction” (\textit{kexue huanxiang xiaoshuo} 科学幻想小说 – interchangeable with “Science Fiction”) was taken by Tong as a subgenre of Scientific Literature and was most representative of this type of writing. We can observe the clear fluidity, even this late in Chinese sf’s development, of the terminology of science fiction in Chinese and that it was understood less in relation to other literary genres than as a literary genre within broader scientific discourse of this period.\(^48\) For Iovene, these changes reflected “substantial disagreements on how to juggle scientific knowledge and imaginative writing...”\(^49\)

The other notable manifesto on sf came from Ye Yonglie, an author uncertain of his own literary status as science fiction writer and science popularizer in this period. Like Tong, he noticed that, among critics of sf, “one side argues that science fiction should place fiction first, principally its literary characteristics, science being like the MSG added to soup, because science fiction is aimed mainly to inspire the reader, not to impart scientific knowledge.” He argued that “if one writes out the scientific content of a thirty-thousand-word sf novel, one would only need a few

\(^{47}\) Tong Enzheng, “Tantan wo dui kexue wenyi de renshi” (My Views on Scientific Literature), \textit{Renmin Wenxue} (People’s Literature), No. 6 (1979): 110.

\(^{48}\) Ibid.

\(^{49}\) Iovene, \textit{Tales of Futures Past}, 31.
hundred words. So, science fiction is mainly composed of the literary, not the scientific.” Opposing critics argued “that science fiction ought to put science first, especially its scientific ideas, and ought to include more scientific knowledge.” These different views were espoused by different publications, the former view being held by *People’s Literature* and the latter by *Science Pictorial* 科学画报. Ye nonetheless argued that “these two perspectives and desires can comfortably coexist, that is, the view that sf must put the literary first and the view that puts science first.” While he argued that he conformed more to “the view that puts the literary about the scientific because this type of work contains more fictional characteristics and more literary colour, more able to charm the reader,” he still validated the role of content-focused sf.\(^5^0\)

But his personal emphasis on the purely fictional elements of sf were not aesthetically pure, tinged by a teleological attitude toward fiction. He paid particular attention to the semantic connotations of science fiction in Chinese, that is being literally *science-fantasy fiction*, and the role of imagination in conveying scientific ideas. “Fantasy,” he argued, “is an extremely valuable quality” being “precisely the soul of science fiction.” While Fantasy Fiction (*huanxiang xiaoshuo* 幻想小说) was very separate to sf in that it “it still lacks science and so cannot be considered science fiction,” the “fantastic” elements were important in *how* they conveyed scientific knowledge. Science fiction, for Ye, was “mainly for children.” He leant somewhat on the rhetorical view that the youth of China had to play a principal role in the development of the nation, arguing the purpose of sf was found in “describing the prospects of a bright future with their enthusiastic readers’ strong desire for fantasy to become reality, teaching the youth to study hard, bravely climbing towards the summit and marching towards the Four Modernizations.” As he summarizes,

“the science fiction author dips his pen in the rich black ink of fantasy” as a means of encouraging others to achieve social and national aims.\textsuperscript{51}

In this way, Wagner asserts, writers focused more on the literary and fantastical aspects of sf, as their writing moved from the children’s book to the literary periodical, something which put them in “a categorical no man’s land.”\textsuperscript{52} In this space, Iovene observes, “the boundary between popular science and creative writing – or ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ – was fuzzy, but so was the notion of science, which in this context mostly served as a pretext for...promoting forward-oriented dispositions” among readers.\textsuperscript{53} Consequently, the genre’s “model works were looking backward, reminding viewers of the hardships that had already been overcome; written from the perspective of an achieved future...”\textsuperscript{54} Nevertheless Iovene, like Isaacson, argues that Chinese science fiction has struggled to wrestle itself away from the status of children’s literature. “In published literary histories,” she writes, “‘science literature and arts’ [Science Literature/\textit{kexue wenyi}] are generally discussed together with children’s literature.”\textsuperscript{55}

But Iovene rather frames this \textit{kexue wenyi} as “futuristic” literature which came, in the post-Mao period, to be concerned with “the kind of labor deemed necessary to achieve” the successful construction of a future society.\textsuperscript{56} As she argues, not just science fiction, but “forgotten materials depicting the technological futures of humanity, including popular science magazines, children’s stories…and drama” each “mediated ideas of useful labor and valuable knowledge at

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{52} Wagner, “Lobby Literature,” 41.
\textsuperscript{53} Iovene, \textit{Tales of Futures Past}, 31.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 34
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 20.
times in which imminent technological change was at the center of political and cultural discourse.”
It is notable, too, that the older term for science fiction kexue xiaoshuo 科学小说 (literally “science fiction”) had been abandoned by this stage. As discussed, it was in this second wave period that the Chinese term for science fiction kehuan xiaoshuo, more closely translated as “science fantasy fiction,” was introduced from the Russian term nauchnaya fantastika (научная фантастика). And we see in Tong’s and Ye’s essays that it was already established as the standard term for science fiction in Chinese by 1979, the time by which the Communist period and the second wave of Chinese sf had already ended. It perhaps reflects the fact that sf was never entirely divorced from the idea of youth fiction.

The third and most recent wave came about during China’s economic opening in the 1980s when a mass of Western science fiction was translated. This era saw the largest introduction of English language science fiction and an attempt to expand the genre from its pragmatist focus. Writing at the time, Bruce Doar argued that authors began to move away from science popularization to social criticism in the genre. But Wagner, writing several years later, argued that sf instead “operates as a lobby literature for the scientific community,” implicitly addressing political authorities. In Chinese sf works, “the scientific community defines itself as capable of handling its social life, security problems, and research decisions quite independently of the ‘others,’ without in any way questioning the legitimacy of these ‘other’ endeavours,” while demanding “complete autonomy in setting its work goals, promising international prestige and

57 Ibid.
military modernization as a spin-off for the government.” 61 Essentially, it functioned as a way to appeal, in a technocratic sense to the logic of the regime.

There was a significant interruption to the progress of these three years when in September 1983, the government commenced its Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign (qingchu jingshen wuran yundong 清除精神污染运动), an attempt to crack down on the proliferation of foreign ideas and material among the Chinese public. The view of imagination being more important than scientific content, as espoused by writers like Ye Yonglie, was particularly criticized because of its association with superstition (mixin 迷信) and the genre was subsequently considered “anti-scientific” in character. 62 As Gaffric notes, “in 1981 alone there were more than three hundred sf novels (Chinese and foreign) published in China (a record), while the journal Scientific Literature was doing print runs of two-hundred-thousand copies.” This intense level of publication and production represented, in his view, a “‘brief ‘golden age’ of Chinese science fiction” ended by the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign. 63 While the campaign did not last very long, ending in January 1984, “science fiction struggled to recover and the tense political climate that peaked during the repression of the democracy movement in Tiananmen Square in 1989 did not help.” 64 In that same year, Wu Dingbo wrote that, despite these major shifts in the genre’s status, “Chinese science fiction has not yet reached its maturity.” 65 It would be some time before authors who were respected as science fiction authors intellectually, and as having some literary clout, would emerge.

61 Ibid., 55.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., 25.
Sf authors such as Wei Yahua (魏雅华) argued in 1986 that *kehuan xiaoshuo* may disappear as a literary genre, which Iovene argues, a threat that was attributed to the emergence of other popular genres in the middle of that decade.\(^66\) Moreover, “journals that had published *kehuan* stories in the late 1970s, such as *Beijing Literature*, were no longer interested in them” leaving the genre to become “somewhat regionalized,” with the major outlet for sf *Science Fiction World* being based in the more remote southwestern city of Chengdu.\(^67\) Wu wrote that sf was in trouble with critics, readers and writers in large disagreement with each other. He argued, that the time, that “writers sometimes complain about the readers for their skin-deep knowledge of science and technology and their lack of imagination, whereas readers blame the writers for their limited understanding of science and their poor writing skills.”\(^68\) The critics, in particular, placed blame on “the erroneous guiding principle in Chinese science fiction writing, which states that science fiction stories must deal with and popularize existing science and technology. For over thirty years this restrictive principle has strictly limited imaginative flexibility, and thus hindered the development of Chinese science fiction” while also pointing out “the rare appearance of high-quality stories in China. The critics believe that once high-quality stories reach the reading public, the situation will improve accordingly.”\(^69\)

Liu Cixin himself is aware of the shifting perceptions and the changing role of science fiction in this period. “Like most genres of literary expression,” he observes, “science fiction in China was subject to instrumentalist impulses and had to serve practical goals.”\(^70\) Initially “a tool

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\(^{66}\) Iovene, *Tales of Futures Past*, 46-47.

\(^{67}\) Ibid., 47.

\(^{68}\) Wu, “Looking Backward”, xxxiv.

\(^{69}\) Ibid., xxxiv.

\(^{70}\) Liu Cixin, “The World of All Possible Universes,” 363.
of propaganda for the Chinese who dreamed of a strong China free of colonial depredations,” it imagined a China “strong, prosperous, and advanced” which was free from foreign subversion. Only in the 1980s, he writes, was science fiction “able to escape the fate of being a mere tool to serve the goal of popularizing science and could develop in new directions.” The principal difficulty in dealing with Liu Cixin’s writings, is that science fiction would become, during the 1990s, a genre that was very difficult to pigeonhole, whether in its thematic concerns or its political and social functions. This is precisely what makes a study of the present third wave of sf quite difficult to undertake.

Looking back at the third wave in the twenty-first century, Jia Liyuan and Song Mingwei rather suggest that this wave represents a real divergence in the themes and artistic standard of sf. The latter, in particular, has underscored the difference in directions that authors have taken. Liu Cixin, he argues, “appears to be the least influenced by Chinese politics,” being an advocate of hard science fiction and basing his ideas on fundamental scientific principles rather than social or political themes. This approach stands in contrast to that of Han Song who is renowned for his use of scientific ideas as a basis for social critique. This also signifies sf’s shift away from the tendency towards the “science popularisation” (kexue puji) of the communist period. Qian Jiang defines the period as an attempt to “liberate the genre from confines of children’s literature and popular fiction” where, as observed in Ye’s and Tong’s essays, style, literary form and structure became a central preoccupation for writers. Qian stresses that this period was in

71 Ibid.,
72 Ibid., 364.
74 Qian, “Translation and the Development of Science Fiction in Twentieth-Century China,” 125.
many ways defined by the influences of western science fiction, because without the context of mass translation of western works, “it would have been impossible for Chinese sf to escape the narrow traditions of the past.”

In general, science fiction never appeared to achieve literary status in China, making perhaps one exception for Lao She’s 老舍 satirical *Cat Country* (*maochengji* 猫城记), published in 1937. The most consistent element in Chinese-language science fiction since the late-Qing through to the end of the Communist era is that it had an explicitly didactic roles. Interestingly, it would appear that Liu Cixin, next perhaps to Hao Jingfang and Chen Qiufan, is the first Chinese sf author to be discussed in terms of his literary status. Observing these several contemporary authors, the themes of Chinese-language science fiction are as ambivalent and as varied as any other genre. What is noticeable is that science fiction is that it appears to be seen as a literary enterprise rather than as a platform for political parables.

This shift rather follows the translation and proliferation of foreign language reading material in China in the early to late eighties and after. Wu Dingbo, writing in 1989, observed these trends and how dramatically the reading culture was changing in China during that decade. What perhaps contributed most to Chinese-language sf’s potential literary status was the emergence of science fiction *criticism*, where “to accompany the rapid production of new science fiction stories in the 1980s, criticism and guidebooks were quickly developed.” Speaking only of the 1979 to 1982 period, he mentions that “in 1980 Beijing Popular Science Press published Ye

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75 Ibid., 126.
76 Isaacson describes this work as an “allegory for Chinese society set on a Martian landscape” and “an allegorical presentation of China’s tradition and attempts to come to terms with Western epistemology.” See Isaacson, *Celestial Empire*, 25.
Yonglie’s [aforementioned] *Lun kexue wenyi* (On Scientific Literature and Art), Beijing’s Geology Press published the anthology *Kepu zuojia tan chuangzuo* [科普作家谈创作] (Popular Science Writers on Writing), and Nanjing’s Jiangsu Science and Technology Press published *Zuojia lun kexue wenyi* [作家论科学文艺] (Writers on Scientific Literature and Art). The following year Huang Yi edited *Lun kexue huanxiang xiaoshuo* [论科学幻想小说] (On Science Fiction) for Beijing’s Popular Science Press. And in 1983 Rao Zhonghua compiled *Zhongguo kehuan xiaoshuo Daquan* [中国科幻小说大全] (Compendium of Science Fiction).”

In addition, “science fiction entered the classroom for the first time in China in 1979” when “Dr. Philip Smith, from the University of Pittsburgh…went to China that year and offered the first science fiction course in the English Department of the Shanghai Foreign Languages Institute.”

Likewise Chinese sf writers began to make contact with writers abroad when, “on behalf of Brian Aldiss, Dr. Smith invited Ye Yonglie to join World SF, the international science fiction association of professionals. Ye Yonglie not only accepted the invitation but also introduced Zheng Wenguang, Tong Enzheng, Xiao Jianheng, and Liu Xinshi to World SF” to form the Chinese branch of the association.

What this reflected, in particular, was the growing translation of sf material and its dissemination to a (young) reading public. Indeed, the catalogue of new US, British, Russian and Japanese science fiction material to be translated between 1979 and 1982 is too long to mention here.

But, as Wu writes, this “influx helped Chinese readers and writers become well acquainted with the development of science fiction abroad” which encouraged

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78 Ibid., xxi-xxvi.
79 Ibid., xxvi.
80 Ibid., xxx.
81 Wu Dingbo gives a two-page list of such works in ibid, xxvi-xxvii.
science fiction writing at home and “the subsequent rapid growth of Chinese science fiction in this period drew the attention of both scientific and literary circles.” This attention, from both circles, like Golden Age sf, was critical to its eventual success. By the nineties, science fiction, in the form of periodicals, had emerged as a major form of literary consumption, with an academic chair set up at Beijing Normal University where the first sf courses would be taught. This was aided, moreover, by the proliferation of sf publishing online in the new century.

Gaffric also attributes the rise of science fiction in the 1990s to the journal Scientific Literature, whose editor Yang Xiao hosted an international conference in Chengdu in 1991. Scientific Literature would be renamed Science Fiction World (kehuan shijie 科幻世界), to which Liu Cixin would himself begin submitting short stories in 1999 with his The Whale’s Song (jing ge 鲸歌). As Gaffric argues, “the journal also played a role in the emergence of the major contemporary authors of “new wave” sf, including Liu Cixin, Han Song, and Wang Jinkang []; they helped to re-found the genre and to color it with a much darker tone than that of the naïve and optimistic writing of the 1970s.” This is not say, as he continues, that science fiction was viewed as an entirely non-political genre in China, citing Han Song’s assertion “in 1997 that the country needed science fiction for both political and economic reasons…despite his writing being, to say the least, subversive…”

Unsurprisingly, the popularity of Liu Cixin’s work abroad was met with much nationalistic fervor, particularly on the part of the Chinese state. As Gaffric has shown in his

82 Ibid., xxix.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
analysis of the response in Chinese media to the reception of Liu’s trilogy overseas, such attention made the work “vulnerable to political appropriation by the regime.” Only “a few days after Liu received the Hugo award – Li Yuanchao [李源潮], the Vice-President of the People’s Republic of China, met with a delegation of sf writers in Beijing, Liu Cixin among them.” Li revived earlier politicized rhetoric in calling “sf writers ‘to fuel the faith of the youth in realizing the fulfillment of the Chinese dream.’” This “Chinese Dream” (Zhongguo meng 中国梦) “is the signature political slogan of Xi Jinping” which “replaces the idea of the ‘Harmonious Society’ of his predecessor Hu Jintao.” This rhetoric attempts to engender the idea of a “return to a fondly-remembered golden age when China was still a great world power.” For Gaffric, “this episode is part of a larger picture in which science fiction…is [again] placed at the forefront of a nationalist project both inside and outside China.” As of 2016, through the China Association for Science and Technology (Zhongguo kexue jishu xiehui 中国科学技术协会), Li Yuanchao aims to fund further science fiction writing. “This project,” Gaffric argues, “is part of a larger goal to use the cultural and economic potential of science fiction for the purposes of soft power policy…”

It recalls the late 1970s and 1980s when sf was likewise framed in similar political terminology. As Tong Enzheng wrote in his 1979 essay: “In order to greatly elevate the heights of science and culture in the Chinese nation, in order to realize the grand plan of the Four Modernizations, we must raise the banner of science held by the pioneers of the May Fourth

\[86\] Ibid., 22.  
\[87\] Ibid.  
\[88\] Ibid.  
\[89\] Ibid., 29.  
\[90\] Ibid., 22.  
\[91\] Ibid., 29-30.  

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Movement, replacing the producers’ backward worldview with the proletarian scientific worldview, replacing conservatism with proactive enterprise and ignorance and superstition with objective truths.”92 “The use of fighting capacity of Scientific Literature,” he insisted, “cannot be neglected, hoping “that Scientific Literature can receive even wider attention” so “that the flower of Scientific Literature can stay strong and blossom in the garden of socialist literature.”93

The official appropriation of notable Chinese authors in the twenty-first century has a similar rhetorical ring to it, though there is less a socialist but rather a nationalist tinge to it. Before *Diqiu Wangshi* garnered attention in the mid-2010s, Mo Yan was praised by the government with his 2012 Nobel Prize win. “Just as the reception of Mo Yan’s Nobel was hailed in official media as a belated but welcome recognition of Chinese literary excellence, the success of Liu Cixin’s novel was immediately presented as the triumph of a nation (China) rather than that of an author.”94 This was in stark contrast to the other major win for a Chinese author in 2000, by the French-naturalized Gao Xingjian, known for his absurdist prose as well as public disagreements with the Chinese government. But Gaffric’s analysis also shows numerous responses to Liu Cixin’s Hugo victory where Chinese commentators argued that “this event undoubtedly puts an end to discriminating attitudes towards Chinese science fiction,” something later attributed to the supposed “classical” roots of the genre in Chinese language, Liu’s work “bear[ing] the imprint of traditional Chinese thought.”95 Wu Yan, who argues that Liu’s writing is emblematic of both

92 Tong, “Tantan wo dui kexue wenyi de renshi,” 110.
93 Ibid.
Golden Age sf and a neoclassical style, joined the chorus, arguing that science fiction could be a means by which to promote Chinese culture and the Chinese Dream abroad.96

Though he is the object of it, it is unclear in what sense Liu Cixin could be seen as part of this larger nationalistic appropriation. Liu has somewhat gained the reputation of a public intellectual in China, a reputation which he overtly shuns, science fiction writing being fundamentally different to scientific research.97 But he also appears to avoid associating himself with political framings. As the China Daily notes, “when a Xinhua News Agency reporter asked him about his ideas for the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-15), he said China should prepare for the unexpected arrival of aliens, which became somewhat of a standing joke.” Liu later stressed that it was not a joke and that “aliens may arrive at any time. When it happens, everything, social and economic reform, educational problems, international conflicts or poverty, will become much less important, compared with the alien crisis.”98 He was concerned, in particular, with the fact that a multilateral institution like the United Nations was not at the forefront of this work since, in his trilogy, the capacity of humanity to respond to an interstellar threat rests entirely on the surprising collective efficiency of the world’s nations to cooperate – something Ken Liu considered to be a surprising kind of “optimism about the potential for humanity to put aside their differences and

96 Quoted in ibid., 29.
actually try to cooperate.”

As Gaffric asks, “does the Three-Body trilogy lend itself to being interpreted as a reflection on today’s China or as a very Chinese idea of the future, as many journalists have suggested? Or might this orientalist outlook, which conveys China’s irreducible cultural differences in literary works, ultimately play into the hands of Chinese soft power propagandists?”

He mentions Liu’s rather blunt reply to NPR correspondent Anthony Kuhn on this very question where he expressed his hope “that one day American readers will buy and read Chinese science fiction because it’s science fiction, not because it’s Chinese.” Indeed, as Liu points out elsewhere, “the China of the present is a bit like America during science fiction’s Golden Age, when science and technology filled the future with wonder, presenting both great crises and grand opportunities.” But recent Chinese science fiction of the contemporary period, he argues, is “becoming more similar to world science fiction” and is more distanced from that of the past, much of which he argues was aimed at finding scientific alternatives to Western modernity.

This suggestion is crucial to understanding Liu as reader as well as writer, growing up in this period of translation. His reading of western science fiction coincides precisely with the

99 Goldkorn, “Ken Liu on Chinese Science Fiction.”
100 Ruan Fan, “Hugo Award winner Liu Cixin.”
104 Ibid., 364.
proliferation and translation of this material within China. Chinese readers of foreign literature were not reading new writers simultaneously with western ones, but were rather catching up on several decades of material which had, prior to the late 1970s, only found its way to a reading public via translators in Hong Kong and Taiwan or through the avenues of “internal distribution” in the mainland. One might argue that Liu Cixin, particularly in the warm reception of his translated fiction, represents the point at which Chinese-language science fiction achieved a literary status in a manner not dissimilar to many Anglophone Golden Age authors in the mid-twentieth century in the West. One must then ask in what sense Liu’s work relates to the immediate political context around it, if at all? Could Liu be viewed as making implicit social or political critiques in his sf as writers of the first, second and third sf waves have?

For Gaffric, “a good part of Liu Cixin’s works, whose first novel China 2185 (Zhongguo 2185 中国 2185), written just a few months before the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, shows the political distance between Liu and the state’s ideology.” This work “imagines a future China in which a hacker manages to extract Mao Zedong’s brain from his Beijing Mausoleum and replicate a version of the ‘Great Helmsman’ that takes over a parallel virtual republic, posing a challenge to the Chinese republic in the physical world.” 105 Li Hua has tackled the problematic character of this novel. Noting that Liu’s is ultimately concerned with “the effects of cosmic events on human behaviour and social systems,” he neglects to mention “a group of his works set in the future but haunted by the swirl of recent events in Chinese politics,” namely the political turmoil of the 1980s. 106 Li notes that Liu Cixin perhaps wants to downplay the political relevance of works like

China 2185 lest the government take issue with the rest of his writing. In another work, exploring an alternate history of the voyages of the Ming Dynasty admiral Zheng He 郑和 (1371-1433/1435), “Liu envisions the possible consequences of China’s ‘peaceful rise’ and reminds readers to be cautious about heated outpourings of nationalism,” an attitude balanced by “his concern about recent Western cultural pre-eminence and he relative decline in the standing of Chinese culture.”

The work “opens up a literary space for a type of advanced socio-political existence that has not yet been achieved in mainland China” while also bringing “us down to earth to perceive the serious limitations of present-day post-socialist China.” Rather what Liu achieved in China 2185 and in his earlier writing was in finding a way to writing broad-scale narratives within which he can weave microcosmic socio-political critiques.

Such questions are regarding the relationship between Liu and regime ideology are far from unfounded. The political interpretation has been followed principally by Song Mingwei who focuses on the theme of utopia in Liu’s works. Song, who considers the political themes of Chinese sf of the first and third wave (but less the second wave in between), argues that China’s place as “a superpower has been a central motif of Chinese sf since the genre’s appearance…motivated in part by the sweeping sense of crisis among late Qing intellectuals on the even of the empire’s collapse,” a theme later explored by Isaacson. But “nearly a century later,” Song argues, “the utopian vision of China’s rise is again a prominent theme, recapitulated as well as parodied in much contemporary Chinese sf.”

109 Song, “Variations on Utopia,” 86.
110 Ibid., 87.
the major Chinese sf authors, argues that the “new wave of sf writers” (by this, he means, the current third wave), “has reintroduced the utopian narrative of China’s rise and their work is more sophisticated in both literary technique and political consciousness.”\textsuperscript{111} This means that “science fiction today both strengthens and complicates the utopian vision of a new and powerful China: it mingles nationalism with utopianism/dystopianism” and “wraps political consciousness in scientific discourses about the powers of technology and the technologies of power.”\textsuperscript{112}

The utopian/dystopian interpretation of science fiction should not be ignored as much of the promising sf being written today deals with political, social and economic imbalance. Chen Qiufan, author of acclaimed stories like \textit{The Mao Ghost} (\textit{Mao de linghun} 貓的靈魂) and \textit{The Fish of Lijiang} (\textit{Lijiang de yu ermen} 丽江的魚兒們), argues that science fiction is a literary language through which the young Chinese can make sense of the rapid social and economic change occurring around them. For many contemporary Chinese, “faced with the absurd reality of contemporary China, the writers cannot fully explore or express the possibilities of extreme beauty and extreme ugliness without resorting to science fiction,” the idea which Iovene’s \textit{Tales of Futures Past} also examines.\textsuperscript{113} Chen believes that Chinese sf can be useful “to mend the torn generation, to allow different visions and imagined future Chinas to coexist in peace, ….”\textsuperscript{114}

But Song Mingwei’s insistence on interpreting Chinese sf of the third wave in terms of its immediate political circumstances, particularly in relation nationalism, is perhaps an expedient one, partly because it too easily mirrors the interpretations made by non-China literate western

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 87.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 375.
media, mentioned in the prior chapter. While Iovene and Isaacson have treated sf as a response to China’s historical circumstances with the second and first waves respectively, it is unclear whether such an approach is appropriate for the current third wave. One might refer to Jeffrey Kinkley’s important study on the “New Historical Novel,” which focuses on dystopian fiction across multiple literary genres in contemporary Chinese fiction. Kinkley defines the “new historical novel” as “full-length historical novels…that deny and defy previous national historical narratives, typically with a political edge that bears heavy implications for the present and future, and that also reflect familiarity with…magical realism, surrealism, fantasy, allegory” and many other post 1980 genres.”¹¹⁵ These types of fiction “continue the meta-critique of Chinese culture characteristic of the 1980s, even as they construct new grand narratives of history…”¹¹⁶ Kinkley resolves that “Chinese science fiction…lies outside the scope of this book” as do “dystopian narratives with premises very directly derived from Huxley and Orwell, like Chan Koonchung’s best seller, The Fat Years.”¹¹⁷ This is owed to the fact that the relationship between Chinese science fiction and the concepts of utopia and dystopia, especially its relationship to the historical narrative, is difficult to define (Both of these subjects will be explored in the fifth and sixth chapters).

Regarding Liu’s avoidance of opening his trilogy with the Cultural Revolution, it may be wrong to read too much into such a narrative choice. In this line of thinking, Gaffric explains, one might go so far as to argue that “the trilogy imagines how the renunciation of Maoism could plausibly result in the destruction of humanity” which is “an idea [that] does not sit comfortably with official ideology and historiography, although the Cultural Revolution is not the most taboo

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¹¹⁶ Ibid.
¹¹⁷ Ibid., xi.
subject in recent Chinese history.”

Not only is the Cultural Revolution depicted very negatively in the first volume, “contemporary China (or that of the near future) is not really attacked…and is presented as a political power like any other.” Indeed, Gaffric suggests a more politically “neutral” appreciation of the text, in the sense that one should not impose their inductive interpretation of contemporary political particulars on to the trilogy. As he surmises, “it seems shallow to project some sort of political commitment regarding the regime onto it, precisely because of the multiplicity of political systems in the novel that change according to the evolution of humanity itself.”

He draws upon a number of themes that seem to betray particular political stances but which ultimately reveal none, quoting for example “a critique of deep ecology and praise for technoscience” contradicting the “almost pastoral conclusion of the trilogy,” alongside “a regressive sexism” which contradicts the fact the “two protagonists of the first and third volumes…are hardly representative of female stereotypes.” As he concludes, “what seems rather to interest Liu Cixin is fathoming the limits of morality and ideology in an immoral universe, pulling apart the paradoxes peculiar to every political system when it finds itself on the brink of inevitable collapse, and exploring the ways in which humans react…to extreme situations.” This idea relates back to C.T. Hsia’s appraisal of modern Chinese literature as confined to its a recursive critique of its historical circumstances. Liu does not seem concerned with this traditional literary

119 Ibid., 31.
120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
pragmatism, preferring to draw on a more foundational view of humanity and its place in the cosmos.

This wider consideration of the themes of Liu’s works starkly contrasts with the prevailing tendency to treat Liu as a product of his political environment. Here, Song Mingwei seems to contradict himself in his political appraisal of Liu. At first, he argues that “in Liu Cixin’s fictional worlds, human society is often presented as a minor problem against the extravagant and grandiose backdrop of a universe measured in light years.” Moreover, he does “not mean to suggest that Liu Cixin’s space saga is underwritten by the politics of the Cultural Revolution, nor do[es he] do justice here to the complexities of [Liu’s] plotlines through an oversimplified synopsis ….however, it certainly seems that the moral crisis manifested during Mao’s revolutionary campaign finds its parallel in this cosmic vision of zero morality.” He bases this view on the assumption that “this vision is no doubt deeply rooted in memories of China’s recent past.”123 But this judgment of the trilogy is unsupported by an adequate exegesis of the text. This leads him to make a rather inaccurate judgment about the trilogy: “Ultimately, Liu Cixin’s answer to the trilogy’s central question – can humanity survive in an amoral universe? – is ‘no.’”124

This sort of interpretation precisely presents the problem in observing Liu as a purely Chinese writer, rather than as, at least in aspiration, a world literary figure. It is echoed in Sun Mengtian’s exegesis of Diqiu Wangshi, who argues that it is “China’s unique experience of modernity and an uneasy relation with a foreign/Western modernity [that] define[s] the ‘Chinese-
ness’ of Chinese sf.” 125 This leads her to consider the influence of Arthur C. Clarke in terms of “Britain and China’s different experience of the colonial history [sic].” 126 Aside from the limitations of viewing Clarke as a cultural product of a British Empire in the process of decolonization (“more of a ‘disciple’ of colonial ideologies than he himself realizes”), we are then encouraged to view Liu’s trilogy as an unconscious attempt to respond to a history of Western aggression against China. 127 As Sun argues of an alien character in the trilogy, “it could not be a coincidence that Zhizi [智子] (intelligent proton), the representative of the Trisolarans on earth, appears as a female Japanese woman ‘in battle fatigues,’ overlooking the fact that zhizi is the Japanese kanji for the female name Tomoko. 128 Hence, the choice of traditional Japanese imagery seems rather to be a coincidence of which Liu took stylistic advantage. We have no reason to correlate this character’s kimono and katana with ideas derived from historiography. Acknowledging that Liu Cixin has himself “denied on several occasions that the Trisolarans are intended as symbolic representations of Japanese imperialists,” Sun suggests that the imbalanced power relationship between Earth and Trisolaris could only be applied to Sino-Japanese relations, rather than to any number of imbalanced political conflicts that could be pulled form a history textbook (And Liu is hardly shy in conjuring numerous historical parallels for Earth’s dilemma, as the fifth chapter of this thesis shall discuss). 129

126 Ibid., 613.
127 Ibid., 616.
128 Ibid 618
129 Ibid., 621.
The issue with such an interpretation is that it confuses the implicit moral dismay Liu Cixin embeds in his imaginary interstellar conflicts with an unconscious condemnation of foreign imperialism. Why do we not, as Liu has so often stressed, see the cruelty of his political universe in his insistence on a normative Darwinian morality? Sun’s discussion even probes into such hints toward Darwin, of humanity’s being equated with *chongzi*, but rather views this as “the colonial subjects’ experience of drastic disorientation and animalization,” passing over the opportunity to delve more properly into the matter.\textsuperscript{130} Ultimately, the achievement of the trilogy is not to found in its grappling with universal moral themes but rather in that it “transcends the anti-American, anti-Japanese nationalism prevalent at the time it was written” and “stands above the perspective of both the self/humans/the Chinese and the other/alien/the West and Japan.”\textsuperscript{131} One feels that the value of the work, seen this way, is much diminished. It perhaps implies that Liu’s success in the West is rather due to the fact that non-Chinese peoples are unconsciously in agreement with the CCP’s historiographical program (which many a Zhongnanhai apparatchik would like to think). But such an avenue of interpretation is opened up only by exposing Liu’s writing to politically charged discourses to the periphery of contemporary Chinese sf.

A study of the trilogy should show that this is at best a myopic treatment of the work on an insistence upon the relevance of recent Chinese political history and Liu’s positions on it or in it. However, Liu does tentatively clarify the relationship between the political particulars of his life in China and the universalism of his novels. “As a child,” Liu explains, “I witnessed a great deal of violence and persecution as well as social unrest during the Cultural Revolution” which has made me understand the complexity of human nature and society – I’ve realized that the future

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 632.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 640.
of human civilization is also full of danger and uncertainty. Such danger is manifested in my science fiction…”

As Liu explains, “my novels do not mirror the temperament of their writer at all. If you tried to deduce what kind of man I am from my novels then you would be entirely mistaken.” Rather, he argues, that his characters “are full of superhuman qualities and dedication; they are extreme idealists” unlike his very “normal” self. Of course, this self-description should not be taken at face value. He rather bluntly generalized, in a 2019 interview with The New Yorker, that individual liberties and freedom of governance are “not what Chinese people care about,” and with regard to criticisms of the CCP’s assimilationist policies in Xinjiang since 2017, expressed that “human must adjust their habits to accommodate changing circumstances.” But whether his more abstract and flexible definition of political ethics is borne of an attempt to toe the line with CCP policy or is a cold and distanced attitude refined by a reading of one too many a sf novel, is difficult to discern. In general, he describes himself as a politically moderate person, who does “not advocate revolution but not avoid reform” and is “neither left nor right,” he “abide[s] by the rules of the game.”

In this sense, Gafric’s appraisal of the trilogy seems more useful, where he argues that “in short, attempts politically to appropriate the author and his trilogy are certainly due less to his supposed deference to the regime than to his success with readers and in the international literary

133 Jiayang Fan, “Liu Cixin’s War of the Worlds.”
field.”¹³⁵ This is crucially why, as he states, “the narrative and poetic components of the trilogy…naturally deserve deeper discussion.”¹³⁶ Crucially, Li Hua’s discussion of earlier political fiction, put in full view of Liu’s other intellectual motivations, helps to delineate the boundary between criticism of immediate political issues in China, of larger questions about China’s place in the world, and ultimately of humanity’s place in the universe. The difficult task of tackling 《地球万岁》, which has pushed far past the thematic boundaries of his earlier work, is that it seems to fall precisely in this last category. Returning to Li Guangyi’s interpretation, Liu’s view of science fiction’s purpose “is not rooted in mere attention to genre or the pursuit of form; it has a deeper intellectual motivation.”¹³⁷ However, this motivation, even when framed within the context of Chinese sf’s history, remains unclear. By pursuing an exegesis of the themes of the trilogy, putting to the side the excesses of politicism, the relationship between political thought and poetics in 《地球万岁》 can be more clearly understood.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 22.
¹³⁷ Li, “China Turns Outward,” 11.
3) Scientism

In one of the earlier in-depth pieces of journalism on Liu Cixin (before the trilogy’s translation was published), journalist Kun Kun describes one popular view of Liu’s work in the Chinese world. Contrary to what western journalists would soon propose, Liu Cixin, she explains, “is not particularly concerned with issues of political or public interest.” Instead, “Liu Cixin treats mankind as a unified whole; the task of saving the world falls to the Chinese people, a group of elites that do not stand against the people.” The “trilogy stands for a high level of universal values, while also satisfying China’s fantasy of being a ‘rising power,’” a reading which she does, however, view as “a little over-interpreted.” Instead, she argues that “Liu Cixin is not interested in philosophy” because “his greatest inspiration comes from the uncertain things [such as] do ‘universal things’ really exist?”1 This view is useful in one sense and perhaps misguided in another. While Liu, as I have argued, is not interested in the immediately political, to say that he is not interested in philosophy, is not borne out from a reading of his own literary criticism. There is, moreover, a seeming contradiction in Kun Kun’s view that Liu is, on the one hand, disinterested in the philosophical but, on the other, is still concerned with probing the principle of “universal things.”2

If “philosophy” implies the exploration of the relationship between human ethics and the fundamental physical nature of the cosmos, then he is highly philosophical in his intellectual

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1 Kun Kun, “But Some of Us Are Looking at the Stars.”
2 Ibid.
concerns – particularly on the nature of moral action. To sum up his attitude, he rewords a passage from Immanuel Kant, more commonly phrased in English as: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within.” As Liu Wenke has pointed out, Liu Cixin derives this phrase from Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*, pointing out that the Chinese translation of this quote and Liu’s own Chinese phrasing are different. Rather than repeat Kant, Liu Cixin paraphrases (or perhaps replies to) Kant thus: “Be in awe of the starry sky above, but object to the morality within the heart (jingwei touding de xingkong, dan dui xinzhong de daode faze 敬畏头顶的星空，但对心中的道德不以为然).” Liu’s phrasing, unlike the closer Chinese translation of Kant, reads more like an imperative – a moral dictum rather than an intellectual temperament.

As Joanna Russ puts it, “science fiction is not derived from the traditional Western literary culture and critics of traditional Western literature have good reason to regard science fiction as a changeling in the literary cradle,” in large part because the genre explores “drastic change in the conditions of human life” itself. To be useful as a critic of sf, Russ argued, one has to “employ an aesthetic in which the elegance, rigorousness, and systematic coherence of explicit ideas is of great importance” and must seemingly “stray into all sorts of extra-literary fields, metaphysics, politics,

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4 Liu Wenke, “Liu Cixin de xingkong yu dadi” (Liu Cixin’s Heaven and Earth). *China Digital Times*. 23 May 2011. https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/2011/05/%E5%88%98%E6%85%88%E6%AC%A3%E7%9A%84%E6%98%9F%E7%A9%BA%E4%B8%8E%E5%A4%A7%E5%9C%B0/. Accessed August 2018.


6 Joanna Russ, “Towards an Aesthetic of Science Fiction,” Vol. 6, No. 2 (1975), 117.
philosophy, physics, biology, psychology, topology, mathematics, history, and so on.”\(^7\) But in these intellectual domains, “the culture from which [sf] comes – the experiences, attitudes, knowledge, and learning which one must bring to it – are not at all what we are used to as proper to literature.”\(^8\) This idea bears a striking resemblance to Liu’s own appraisal of the science fiction genre as an historically considered aesthetic form. “Most literature,” he argues, “has been about the relationship between humans and the natural world, not between individuals.” Rather it was the Renaissance, in his view, that resulted in literature that is “the study of people and their systems,” which “has always given [him] the impression of being very narcissistic.” This implicitly justifies an ethical role for science fiction in culture, for reintroducing “humanity’s relationship with nature” as the principal concern of literature, which he argues was always the case prior to the gradual emergence of individualism.\(^9\) Though Liu considers these problems for sf from an authorial point-of-view, while Russ does so from that of a critic, the common concern here is the non-literary breadth of inquiry one must bring to bear in approaching the sf genre.

Liu’s argument, moreover, that literature’s principal problem lies in its supposed “narcissism” is itself a sweeping generalization, particularly in its conflation of pre-scientific conceptions of nature with those of the modern scientific era. The way that ancient Greek myths construed natural phenomena as metaphor for divine action cannot be regarded analogically with the way science fiction construes scientific nature as a force for man to contend with (though perhaps there is a moral parallel). This conflation, in fact, betrays an implicitly scientistic attitude in his work, inviting us to consider the ways in which Liu draws connections \textit{ipso facto} between

\(^7\) Ibid., 118.  
\(^8\) Ibid.  
\(^9\) Liu, “Beyond Narcissism,” 27.
differently levels of empirical reality as a means of representing the limits of human morality and capacity for moral deliberation. Liu ultimately construes the vast world of human value within the very strict confines of his own scientism – one that conflates the harsh realities of the cosmos with the ethical nature of being.

The term “Scientism”, argues Hua Shiping. “is often viewed as a matter of putting too high a value on science in comparison with other branches of learning or culture.” It implies a number of assumptions: “1) science is unified; 2) there are no limits to science; 3) science has been enormously successful at prediction, explanation, and control; 4) the methods of science confer objectivity on scientific results; and 5) science has been beneficial for human beings.” While Hua considers this definition within Chinese intellectual history, the term strictly speaking applies to the first two criteria. While originating in French intellectual thought in the nineteenth century, it came into the English language in the early twentieth century, accompanying the rise of sociological sciences in the United States, a trend which was principally criticized by the philosopher and economist Frederich von Hayek. Perhaps the most useful description comes from the philosopher Thomas Nagel who considers the idea, writing in the 1980s, to be by that stage “a broader tendency of contemporary intellectual life:.” He defines it as “a special form of idealism” which “puts one type of human understanding in charge of the universe and what can be said about it.” In this value system, one will hold “the assumption that [scientific] methods already in existence will solve problems for which they were not designed.” It is, in essence, the belief that

“we, at this point in history, are in possession of the basic forms of understanding needed to comprehend absolutely anything.”\(^{11}\)

The necessity for creating an ideological term (by affixing “-ism” to “science”) was that the *objectivity* of the scientific worldview, if overvalued and overutilized, came at the expense of the humanistic worldview, which concerns *subjective* value. The distinction between such worldviews was made by the Cambridge novelist and chemist Charles Percy Snow in his famous *Two Cultures* lecture in 1959, where he defined “literary intellectuals” and “physical scientists” as embodying two camps between which lay “a gulf of mutual incomprehension” and a “lack of understanding.”\(^{12}\) The difference lies not specifically in the distance between their worldviews so much as the irreconcilability of such worldviews. This particular point had been picked upon by a contemporary of Snow’s, the physicist Erwin Schrödinger, who dabbled most adeptly in matters of the philosophies of religion, mind and science. He argued that the picture of the world that is illuminated by the scientific method “has only been reached at the high price of taking ourselves out of the picture.” Specifically, he insisted that “the material world has only been constructed at the price of taking the self, that is, the mind, out of it, removing it.”\(^{13}\) It is in this sense that scientism then can be understand as an exclusion of humanism from philosophical inquiry.

Perhaps the most notable contemporary critic of scientism is the British philosopher, literary critic and neuroscientist, Raymond Tallis, who defines it as “the mistaken belief that the natural sciences (physics, chemistry, biology and their derivatives) can or will give a complete

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description and even explanation of everything, including human life.”14 In this definition, he critiques scientism’s gross oversimplification of human nature. Frederich Hayek, in his explanation of scientism’s roots in the emergence of the social sciences, highlighted the problem of objectifying social and political phenomena as external phenomena. The fatal flaw of social scientists’ practice was their “attempts to treat their object [of study] after the fashion of the natural sciences.”15 Scientism, in fact, has nothing to do with the general spirit of disinterested inquiry but [rather] with slavish imitation of the method and language of Science…”16 A scientistic worldview is distinguished from a scientific one principally by “a very prejudiced approach which, before it has considered its subject, claims to know what is the most appropriate way of investigating it.”17

While C.P. Snow considered scientism “by and large…a problem of the entire West,” the phenomenon was also applied to the Chinese context in a 1965 book by Daniel Kwok. His work considers scientism from the collapse of the Qing dynasty through to the rise of the Communist regime. Over this half-century period, China’s major thinkers debated the uses and applications of scientific thinking and the role of empiricism in an emerging modern Chinese culture. “The aroused spirit of science,” Kwok argues, “looked, during the impatient and chaotic ‘30s and ‘40s, not to the gradual and pluralistic ways of empirical thought but to the dogmatic conclusions of materialist scientism.”18 This unhesitant embrace of scientific thought was seen in the discussions of materialist thinkers Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 and Wu Zhihui 吳稚暉 who “continued to talk about

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16 Ibid., 15.
17 Ibid., 16.
the blessings of science without true understanding of the theories of science or appreciation for the popular implication of their scientism.”¹⁹ This led to a triumph for scientism in China, “a materialist monism which claims cosmic significance and scientific quality by funding the key to all causal relations.”²⁰ The significant shortcomings of scientific debate in the Republican period (1912-1949) “helped to initiate the next era, a monolithic intellectual supersystem,” in which materialist and sociological analysis flourished under the banner of Marxist thought.²¹

In contrast to the first half of the twentieth century, the subject has received little attention for the contemporary Chinese period, with the exception of one volume by Hua Shiping. Writing on the subject in the 1990s, Hua notes that “Chinese intellectuals have struggled to fill an intellectual vacuum created by the failure of the Cultural Revolution, the subsequent gradual loss of influence of Marxism as a whole, and to re-vision a polity for China.” A perhaps unanticipated consequence of this vacuum is that “science as a political symbol has failed to remold the Chinese political culture…and it is unclear what else can the Chinese use [sic] to do so in the future.”²² In general, he argues, “the Chinese have approved of science almost unanimously in the last century,” an obsession which “was disrupted only twice in the last century” during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution.”²³ Moreover, “during the post-Mao period, critical humanism has not been as influential as scientism, partly because it does not even try to appeal to the general

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¹⁹ Ibid., 191.
²⁰ Ibid.
²¹ Ibid., 200.
²² Hua Shiping, Scientism and humanism, 155.
²³ Ibid., 145.
population.” What scientism has succeeded at doing is “trying to fill in the intellectual vacuum left by the Cultural Revolution.”

Because Hua’s work is not able to adequately separate scientism from other political influences, it is not clear how this ideological stance plays out in twenty-first China. In the early 2000s, Eriberto Lozada argued that the introduction of the internet into China in the 1990s chiefly recharacterized the nature of scientism. It reshaped Chinese people’s view of themselves and their relationship with society. “It is in this symbolic identification with cyborg subjectivity…that scientism becomes a shared cultural ideology, both promoted by the post-socialist Chinese state and accepted by wider Chinese society.” The eminent social theorist Wang Hui argues that “Hayek’s ideas have had a significant influence on contemporary Chinese intellectual thought.” However, “the discourse on ‘scientism’ in China is clearly no match for the intellectual depth of Hayek’s theory, and thus it would be inappropriate to equate it with Hayekian discourse.” Rather, this approach to the discussion of scientism, one that is entwined with a critique of “socialism, totalitarianism, and planned economy” (a “Hayekian liberalism”), is utilized “to provide an explanation for intellectual and social developments in Chinese history.” Therefore, it is unclear whether in elite intellectual circles, or in broader popular culture, just what the character of scientism is in contemporary China. That the destruction of so much tradition under Mao, and the arrival of so much technological change and foreign ideas after him, would inculcate a broader

24 Ibid., 148.
25 Ibid., 143.
over-valuation of Science itself – is not unthinkable, and perhaps observable – but is an understudied phenomenon in today’s China.

When reading Liu’s own literary criticism, one has the impression that he is not immune to this broader cultural attitude. His literacy of the concept seems somewhat scant. In one discussion, in which the interviewer brings up the term “scientism” (kexuezhuyi 科学主义) more than ten times, Liu does not respond to the term’s usage in a way that suggests a distinction with “scientific.” 28 This unwillingness to distinguish between “scientific” and “scientistic” is emblematic of current scientism as a concept more generally. The most notable recent example of this is Steven Pinker’s rather notorious contribution in The New Republic in which he addresses humanities scholars’ apprehensions towards scientistic scholarship as a misrepresentation of science (an argument that was somewhat controversial, partly in its failure to distinguish religious and humanistic attitudes and in its dismissal of valid criticisms of scientific reductionism). In fact, the conclusion to the piece sounds like something Liu would have written: “Surely our conceptions of politics, culture, and morality have much to learn from our best understanding of the physical universe and of our makeup as a species.” 29

Returning to Liu’s conflation of pre and post Scientific Revolution literary representations of Nature, it is important to note that it is not a strictly simplistic one. As mentioned earlier, his problem is that “in mainstream literature…little has changed” since the Scientific Revolution where “its world remains pre-Newtonian, perhaps even pre-Copernican or pre-Ptolemaic” in its

28 Liu, Liu Cixin tan kehuan, 34-42.
concerns. In “the mental world of literature, the Earth is still the center of the universe.”

His concern is that, unlike science fiction, literary genres in general fail to consider the moral and existential quandaries that result from the briefest consideration of the empirically unintuitive character of scientific world (Liu perhaps forgetting that this might not necessarily be their task). It might be more appropriate to say that, Liu sees other forms of fiction, following the Scientific Revolution, as secondary in importance to science fiction. That Science itself is the most important form of knowledge in the modern world reflects that fact that science fiction is (or should be) the most important form of literature. It is a deeper indication of the underpinning values of scientism in his thinking. The question lies in determining the assumptions from which Liu constructs his world in *Diqiu Wangshi*, from the foundational physical world to the emergent human ethics.

There is a starkly reductive quality to Liu’s consideration of ethical problems, particularly in how he weighs of the survival of the whole of humanity through binary, individualistic moral choices. He tends to portray uncompromising scenarios in which the survival of humanity is considered in zero-sum terms. In one interview, he considers whether it is necessary to abandon individualistic morality if it would allow the human species as whole to survive. “We can simplify our picture of the world,” Liu asks, “with a simple thought experiment. If the world is left with only the three of us, then it is the three of us that carry the entirety of civilization.” To survive, one of the three of them has to be eaten. When the interviewer denies the choice to eat his companion, Liu retorts “but the civilizations of the universe are entirely in our hands. Shakespeare, Einstein, Goethe…If you do not eat, these civilizations will be completely destroyed by your reckless actions.” Liu argues that such “rationality is reasonable.” What the interviewer “chose is humanity and what I chose is survival,” he determines. And in this bind, between retaining humanity and

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dying, or surviving and losing humanity, he declares: “Since I started writing science fiction, I think about this one question: which of these two choices is more rational?”\textsuperscript{31} Liu then reflects that “one must know that the universe is very cold.”\textsuperscript{32} In his little thought experiment, Liu argues that he “showed a cold but calm rationality” and through this type of rationality, existence no matter the personal price, is more ethically correct. But he acknowledges that “when we use science fictional thinking to talk about these problems, we become colder.”\textsuperscript{33}

Such cold rationalistic pragmatism is displayed by the three different scientist protagonists for each volume of the trilogy, Wang Miao 汪淼, Luo Ji 罗辑 and Cheng Xin 程心, who play different roles in responding to the coming invasion of Trisolaris.\textsuperscript{34} The first novel follows Wang Miao, who on learning of the discovery of this civilization, is brought into the Earth-Trisolaris Movement (\textit{Diqiu Santi Zuzhi 地球三体组织}) or ETO, an organization co-founded by Ye Wenjie to bring this alien civilization to Earth to solve humanity’s political problems. At the beginning of the first novel, Wang Miao is brought into a meeting of military figures discussing the increasing prevalence of unexplained deaths and suicides within the scientific community. The cause is later revealed to be a plot by Trisolarans to block physical humans’ observation of lower levels of reality and advance scientific research. Unbeknownst to physicists and nanotechnologists have increasingly been hitting empirical barriers in their research, unable to make clear observations or derive findings from their work. But the unknowing scientific community attributes these to the fact that, at a certain level of reality, theoretical principles can no longer be

\begin{footnotes}
\item[31] Liu, \textit{Liu Cixin tan kehuan}, 38.
\item[32] Ibid., 41.
\item[33] Ibid., 42.
\item[34] One might make an exception, of course, for Cheng Xin, who was criticized by Chinese readers for her actions as Swordholder in the third volume.
\end{footnotes}
derived and ultimately no theoretical understandings can be drawn from them. In appearance, there is no scientific truth and this brings those scientists to deep despair.

It appears, to many in the scientific world, that there is no true possibility to form fundamental laws in science nor can there be a grand theory of nature— a view which can be taken to mean that nothing is real or that nothing really exists. In fact, the Trisolarans manage to manipulate fundamental physics on Earth, which, causing particle accelerators on Earth to give conflicting experimental results and inhibit scientific progress on the world that they are hoping to colonize several centuries into the future. It is this manipulation that causes scientists to conclude that if there are no consistent results and thus universal laws, then physics cannot truly exist. This is discussed in a conversation, during a game of billiards between Ding Yi and Wang Miao, at the end of which Wang remarks that “it means the laws of physics that could be applied anywhere in the universe do not exist, which means that physics…also does not exist.”

He treats this epistemological problem necessarily as an ethical one, asking: “Can the fundamental nature of matter really be lawlessness? Can the stability and order of the world be but a temporary dynamic equilibrium achieved in a corner of the universe, a short-lived eddy in a chaotic current?”

Amidst these events, Wang Miao comes across a virtual reality game, the eponymous *Three Body Problem*. Through this, he is led further into the ETO, meeting an elderly member, a philosopher, who elaborates on the mystery of the game and the reasons which drew him into playing it. The game seemed to reveal some truths beneath reality that led him to play it, elaborating, “I was attracted to it. I find it strange, terrible, but also beautiful. So much information

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36 Ibid., 76.
is hidden beneath a simple representation.\textsuperscript{37} The game itself is a representation of the Trisolaran world, a planet in a tri-solar system – where the movement of its three suns cannot be predicted causing frequent and unpredictable devastation to the world (This unpredictability problem is known as the n-body problem in astronomy). The game is designed to attract the most intellectually competent and knowledgeable who, by playing the game, solve the answer the question that the Trisolarans face, that the n-body problem in physics has no solution, and that this civilization has to come to Earth – the purpose of the ETO.

The plot device allows the characters to catch an indirect glimpse of what the Trisolaran world is like, the narrative having very little direct description of it. For Liu, on the one hand, we have the “familiar modern world, gray and always bustling with activity. The other is the refined world of science fiction, existing far away, a place we can never reach.” It is “the contact and collision of these two worlds and their stark contrast [which] form the main structure of the story.”\textsuperscript{38} The five chapters in which Wang Miao puts on the virtual reality headset and immerses himself in the artificial world of \textit{San Ti} comprise the centre of the first book’s narrative, drawing Wang deeper into a world he was not originally aware of. The game is a grand fictional puzzle which follows the historical development of politics and science on Earth, playing out on the surface of the Trisolaran world. Politics progresses very slowly, while leaps in scientific thinking jump millennia ahead, the goal being to advance through scientific revolutions before the movement of the suns destroys civilization. The first of these that Wang witnesses is number 137, which only reaches the Warring States period of history before being destroyed by atmospheric changes in its solar system. King Wen of the Shang dynasty (1152-1056 BCE) appears, suggesting

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 246.
\textsuperscript{38} Liu, “Beyond Narcissism,” 28.
that this is a complex civilization which has reached a technological and scientific threshold, as the Shang period did. Still, it has yet to accurately grasp the cosmos beyond the skies.

The second civilization, number 141, is burnt to ashes in the unpredictable movement of the planet among the suns. Here, the ancient philosopher Mozi 墨子 is introduced, known for the advent of proto-science and proto-logic in his works. It is here that the world advances to the Eastern Han period. He gazes at, and remarks on, the skeleton of Confucius, perhaps a comment on the progress beyond, or alternative thinking to, the ritualism and anthropocentrism which Confucius espoused in his teachings. Mozi, while logical in his approach, proposes a model of the universe which does not reflect physical reality but alludes to reinterpreting the shape of the cosmos. Confucius, he argued, “believed that everything had to fit li, the Confucian conception of order and propriety, and nothing in the universe could be exempt from it. He created a system of rites and hopes to predict the motion of the sun with it.” But this system was bunk. Mozi had “a mission: observing the precise movements of the sun. Those shams, metaphysicians, and Daoists are all useless.” The prior theories were devised by men who know nothing practical. They have no ability to do experiments, and they’re immersed in their mysticism all day long.” Mozi was different because his ideas “have theories, too, but they’re not mystical. They’re derived from a large number of observations.” His progression, rather, from old theories was that universe was a

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39 Mozi (c.470 – c. 391 BC), whose original name was Modi 墨翟, lived during the Spring and Autumn period (771 to 476 BC). The school of thought which extended from his teachings, Mohism 墨家, represents the earliest attempts by the Chinese to gradually develop a philosophy based on logic and rational thought. While “the earliest Mohists were interested in ethics, social life and religion…the later Mohists dealt rather with scientific logic, science and military technology.” See Joseph Needham, “The Mo Chia (Mohists) and the Mind Chia (Logicians),” in Science and Civilisation in China, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 166.

40 Liu, The Three Body Problem, 151.
“machine.” More specifically, “the universe is a hollow sphere floating in the middle of a sea of fire” with “numerous tiny holes in the surface of the sphere, as well as a large one.” In this sphere, “the light from the sea of flames shines through these holes. The tiny ones are stars, and the large one is the sun.” The sun is actually “the result of the large hole in the outer sphere being projected onto the inner one. …”

The third civilization, number 183, which reaches the Middle Ages (the world becoming a blend of Chinese and Western history), is burnt to the ground. In this stage, Isaac Newton and Von Neumann appear, introducing computational architecture and nonrelativistic mechanics. Here Science, in the sense of an explicit scientific discourse, has emerged. The guesswork of Mozi is superseded by more mechanistic ones. Galileo appears, dismissing Mozi as “nothing more than a mystic dressed as a scientist” who “ever took his own observation data seriously, and he constructed his model based on subjective speculation.” Instead, Galileo would “make strict, logical deductions to build a model of the universe. Then we go back to experimentation and observation to test it.”

It is here that Wang is at last able to contribute his modern knowledge of the solar system to these debates. He defines the “n-body problem” which describes the unpredictable motion of Trisolaris, in which the planet experiences stable and chaotic eras. He explains that “when our planet revolves around one of the suns in a stable orbit, that’s a Stable Era. When one more of the other suns move within a certain distance, their gravitational pull will snatch the planet away from the sun it’s orbiting, causing it to wander unstably through the gravitational...

\[41\] Ibid., 151-153.
\[42\] Ibid., 194-195.
fields of the three suns.” The whole scenario is “a football game at the scale of the universe. The players are the three suns, and our planet is the football.”

This foreshadows the scientific revolution that comes during the fourth civilization, number 184, having reached the industrial age. Politically speaking, the civilization has only advanced as far as the Emperor Qin (Qin Shihuang 秦始皇) (259 BCE to 210 BCE), who helps the mathematicians John Von Neumann and Isaac Newton to calculate the mechanics of the n-body problem, using the arrangements of vast numbers of his soldiers to do the arithmetic, as a sort of a human calculator. It merges the beginning of China as a nation, a thoroughly authoritarian one under Qin, with the birth of the scientific method, the logical condition for technological progress. Political order and scientific progress fall together under one neat banner, a circumstance which history, as it played out on Earth, rarely permitted. The last civilization, 192, reaches the information and atomic ages, learning that the n-body problem is unsolvable and that Trisolarans have to find a home in the stars if they are to avoid being inevitably swallowed by their suns. This progression through a fictional shared history between Trisolarans and terrestrials alludes to the dangers of myopic political conflicts which interfere with the ability of a civilization to master science.

These developments occur in the Common Era (gongyuan jiyuan 公元纪元). The contact with a civilization, presumably of such catastrophic social impact, ends humanity’s common era, propelling it through different fictional eras dubbed The Crisis Era (weiji jiyuan 危机纪元), the Deterrence Era (weishe jiyuan 威慑纪元), the Post-Deterrence Era (weishe hou 威慑后), the Broadcast Era (guangbo jiyuan 广播纪元), the Bunker Era (yanti jiyuan 掩体纪元) and the Milky

43 Ibid., 194-195.
Way Era (yinhe jiyuan 银河纪元) – all marking different shifts in humanity’s existential position in stars, between 2010 CE up to 2400 CE. The latter two novels move further into the realm of scientific speculation, in which the laws of physics are more and more explicitly juxtaposed against the choices which humanity, as moral agents, have to make in line with the exponential advancements of technology.

Not only are these scenes playing an expositional role, they are bringing into clearer view the way in which the development of astronomy and of our sharpened understanding of the cosmos re-oriented our understanding of ethics. This relationship, between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge, is echoed in Wang Miao’s conversations with Shi Qiang 史强 (Da Shi) throughout Three Body. Da Shi, the police detective investigating the deaths in the scientific community, is indifferent to the theoretical implications of knowledge, unlike his nanotechnologist companion. “Da Shi,” Wang asks, “have you ever…considered certain ultimate philosophical questions? For example, where does Man come from? Where does Man go? Where does the universe come from? Where does the universe go?” to which he replies “Never.” He is indifferent to philosophical or extra-terrestrial concerns: “I never look at the sky at night.” Despite this, Da Shi is concerned with the practical consequences of theories. At the beginning of the novel, when Wang Miao first introduces himself to Da Shi and elaborates on his work as a nanomaterial specialist, Da Shi alludes to the failure to comprehend the danger of technologies that are not understood: “Heh. I heard that a strand of that stuff could be used to lift up a truck. If criminals steal some and make it into a knife, can’t they slice a car in half with one stroke?”

44 Ibid., 141-142.
Their conversations then stray to a larger and more important question, proposed in the metaphor of the “Shooter and the Farmer,” two ways of understanding the laws of the Universe, an idea which might be understood as a reworking of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. In the Shooter version, Wang proposes that if a higher being were to lay out black holes every ten centimetres on a two-dimensional plane of space, observers within that space, if they observed these holes, would draw an incorrect conclusion. They would see this phenomenon, not as “the result of the marksman’s momentary whim,” but rather as “an unalterable law of the universe.”\textsuperscript{45} The Farmer version, on the other hand, brings this epistemological problem into view of an ethical one. It proposes that we as observers are incapable of knowing the deeper meaning of the laws of nature, because the laws themselves appear as shadows of higher forms. “Every morning on a turkey farm, the farmer comes to feed the turkeys. A scientist turkey, having observed this pattern to hold without change for almost a year, makes the following discovery: ‘Every morning at eleven, food arrives.’ On the morning of Thanksgiving, the scientist announces this law to the other turkeys. But that morning at eleven, food doesn’t arrive; instead, the farmer comes and kills the entire flock.”\textsuperscript{46} In the apparently natural physical systems that exist around us, we might simply have been positioned as turkeys for the slaughter.

Liu complicates the relationship between scientific knowledge and morality throughout Ye Wenjie’s backstory during the Cultural Revolution. She is a witness to a violent Struggle Session (\textit{pidou dahui} 批斗大会) against her father, deemed to be a reactionary because of his study of Einstein’s theories. Red Guards make the accusation that “Einstein is a reactionary academic authority” who “would serve any master who dangled money in front of him. He even went to the

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 76.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 77.
American Imperialists and helped them build the atom bomb!” It was better “to develop a revolutionary science” and “overthrow the black banner of capitalism represented by the theory of relativity!” Ye’s father, in his defence, challenges the assumption that any particularly dominant ideology, let alone Maoism, should be considered relevant to scientific truths. He retorts “Should philosophy guide experiments, or should experiments guide philosophy?” When a Red Guard shouts that Marxism is the proper guide, he replies that such an idea is “the equivalent to saying that the correct philosophy falls out of the sky. This is against the idea that the truth emerges from experience.”

The scene stresses the absurdity of putting political ideology before empiricism. Yet in the Shooter and Farmer allegory, it is suggested that empirical observations could be guised political traps. On the one hand, the familiar tragedy of the Struggle Sessions gives the moral high ground to scientific values by contrasting them with political dogma while, on the other, Wang’s story suggests a suspicion of empiricism itself. This juxtaposition is an ironic foreshadowing of things to come, where moral differences are placed against the cold reasoning of science, Liu’s tone of “coldness,” lengku 冷酷, as different stages of humanity construe ways to survive in a cosmos which is paradoxically arranged such that it would destroy it. There is further irony in Ye’s father saying that “the correct philosophy falls out of the sky” as humanity’s moral conduct is, for the rest of the trilogy, determined by the coming of aliens and by the inherent constraints of the cosmos itself. Ye Wenjie had earlier concluded that “it was impossible to expect a moral awakening from humankind itself, just like it was impossible to expect humans to lift off the earth

48 Ibid., 13.
49 Liu, Liu Cixin tan kehuan, 42.
by pulling up their own hair. To achieve moral awakening required a force outside the human race.” Later in the story, when reflecting on Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, she feels that humanity is not able overcome its own evils. This “moral awakening” would be the colonization of Earth by Trisolaris. The leap of logic made by Ye is that a civilization with superior knowledge of science would also be more morally enlightened as well. Ethical judgments on the parts of the characters can be confused moralistic rationalizations.

It is Ye who passes on her ideas about cosmic civilization to the character Luo Ji, who elaborates upon the theory to form Cosmic Sociology (*yuzhou shehuixue* 宇宙社会学). The protagonist of the second book, Luo Ji, converses with Ye Wenjie, many years later as an elderly woman who contemplates the consequences of her decision to contact Trisolaris. Luo Ji explains to her that he had given a shot at astronomy but ultimately felt sociology was more suitable to him. “I just felt astronomy was an undrillable chunk of iron” while “sociology is a plank of wood” on which “there’s bound to be some place thin enough to punch through.” Ye Wenjie supposes that his two separate pursuits could be reconciled and that astronomy is not perhaps as impenetrable as he might suppose, thinking that sociology and astronomy can be theoretically “linked together.” She proposes “cosmic sociology” as a new discipline which he should develop on the following propositions: “Suppose a vast number of civilizations are distributed throughout the universe, on the order of the number of detectable stars…Those civilizations make up the body of a cosmic society.” This new type of astronomical social science would explore “the nature of this supersociety.” Ye stresses that because no truly empirical experiments could be conducted in Cosmic Sociology (as with any social science), it would thus be a purely theoretical one, but one that would nonetheless bear many useful ethical conclusions. But it would be more rigorous than

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50 Ibid., 24.
other social sciences because “the mathematical structure of cosmic sociology is far clearer than that of human sociology.”

The fact the randomness and complexity of interactions between civilizations was unmeasurable was mitigated, Ye argued, but the fact that there was stable and measurable distance between stars and a limit (that of light and causality) to how much they could interact. “Like Euclidean geometry,” she argues, “you’ll set up a few simple axioms at first, then derive an overall theoretic system using those axioms as your foundation.” Those very axioms would be: “First: Survival is the primary need of civilization. Second: Civilizations continuously grows and expands, but the total matter in the universe remains constant.” From this Euclidean reasoning, all sociological and, by extension, ethical, principles could be derived on how the “supersociety” of the universe actually functions.\(^5^1\) From these two principles, one can expound the actions of any civilization: that they remain concealed to avoid destruction or actively aim to destroy others in order to remain concealed, recalling Wang Miao’s idea of the shooter on the turkey farm. The “Dark Forest” is not the product of emergent and unpredictable socio-political phenomena but rather a foundational reality produced by the physical form of spacetime itself. Rather conflicts such as the one between Earth and Trisolaris are the emergent phenomena. In Liu’s moral world, the universe is *inherently* violent.

This bears on an important piece of biographical information of Liu. As Kun Kun notes in her earlier interview with him, he was “one of China’s first generation of computer engineers” and consequently “respects rules and has an exceptionally strong ability to summarize systems.” Liu set about using such skills to theorize the sociology of civilizations, specifically their behaviour

\(^{51}\) Liu, *The Dark Forest*, 4-6.
towards each other, within the universe. In the 1990s, he “wrote a software program in which each intelligent civilization in the universe was simplified into a single point. At its height, he programmed 350,000 civilizations within a radius of 100,000 light years and made his 286 computer [sic] work for hours to calculate the evolution of these civilizations.” It was through this system that he “formed the basis and shape of his world view.” One can clearly see whence this axiomatic thinking was developed for *Diqiu Wangshi*. As he explains, “the most basic task of science fiction is world-building – that is, establishing the fundamental framework, laws, and rules of a story’s imaginary world.” The role of axiomatic ideas is to establish the premises on which that world functions. “In mainstream literature,” he argues, “there is no need for world-building: the world it describes already exists.” What he means here is that one does not need to establish axiomatically how the world works in realist fiction, as it need only rely on the already established intuitions of the reader.

Liu himself views Euclidean axiomatic thinking as an empirical means of deriving ethical principles as he explains on one interview, “it is not the focus of my fiction to reflect reality or politics. I think the political implications of my novels are very much like that of non-Euclidean geometry. In a non-planar space, the Euclidean axiom that ‘the shortest distance between two points is a straight line’ is not true. A straight line between two points is certainly not the shortest. This non-Euclidean geometry started out as a sort of mental gymnastics though it was later discovered that it was not, the facts being just that. The same is true for politics in my novels. In our current mainstream values, we take it for granted that many things are correct. Whether so-called universal, mainstream or moral values, we all take them for granted. But the fascinating

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52 Kun, “But Some of Us Are Looking at the Stars.”
thing about science fiction is that it can set up an alternative, non-Euclidean space in which your seemingly correct morals and values are in fact absurd or very improper.” This relativity of moral reasoning “is the way in which politics principally relates to my science fiction works.”

While Liu might aim to illuminate the unintuitive and non-Euclidean character of ethics, he ironically starts from an entirely Euclidean premise. However unpredictably the plot unfolds and however random the characters choices are in aggregate, Liu stresses the inherent limitations of time and space as a permanent condition of, and often even a function of, these restrictions. This bears on an interesting observation made by Hayek. “In a sense,” he argues, “some problems of theoretical astronomy are more similar to those of the social sciences than those of any of the experimental sciences. Yet there remain important differences. While the astronomer aims at knowing all the elements of which his universe is composed, the student of social phenomena cannot hope to know more than the types of elements from which his universe is made up. He will scarcely ever know even of all the elements of which it consists and he will certainly never know all the relevant properties of each of them.” The moral view of Liu Cixin is premised on closing the gap between physical conditions and ethical conditions and viewing the latter as a function of the former. Through Cosmic Sociology and the Three Body game, the first volume finds many ways of in which the physical nature of reality, and humanity’s changing conceptions of it, directly alter their ethical conduct. But as Hayek explains, to close this ontological gap constitutes a form of scientism. The premise of Liu’s fictional universe should be understood as a scientistic one. The trilogy does not determine that the course of events is in any sense predictable. The scientism of

the work is found in this attempt to determine a foundational moral proposition – one directly conditioned by the physical from of nature. In every circumstance, we are led back to the question proposed in Liu’s cannibalistic thought experiment on retaining the species or retaining humanity, “which of these two choices is more rational?” As Hayek notes, in explaining any human or societal behaviour, “the distinction between an explanation merely of the principle on which a phenomenon is produced and an explanation which enables us to predict the precise result is of great importance for the understanding of the theoretical methods of the social sciences.” While one might be able to define the cause in human affairs, one can never predictably manage to conjure the precise result.55

This intellectual attitude – the need to explain “the principle on which a phenomenon is produced” – is unlikely formed by some reading of social scientific literature. In fact, it appears to come from his reading of early utopian fiction by Thomas More and Tommaso Campanella. As Li Hua has pointed both More’s Utopia and Campanella’s City of the Sun “emphasized order and social control under the premise that such control would be imposed on humanity in its own best interest,” more outdated depictions of the ideal society.56 For Liu, both Utopia and City of the Sun “can only be regarded as political works as it is difficult to classify them among science fiction. It is also very difficult to find Western science fiction classics which describe bright futures.”57 He points out that, while some Soviet sf depicts optimist visions of the future, little of this work actually ventures into the literary description and form of such paradises. In his description of

55 Hayek, The counter-revolution of science, 42-43.
57 Liu, Liu Cixin tan kehuan, 70-71.
utopian fiction, therefore, we can hear the suggestion that fiction which attempts to describe the moral of a society, should give explicit description to that very moral form.\textsuperscript{58}

With this reference to More and Campanella’s utopias, the prescriptive ethical character of Liu’s work could be said to derive from the axiomatic character of such works. It should also be mentioned that the concept of utopia has its parallels in Chinese intellectual history. Zhang Longxi points to Tao Yuanming, of the Six Dynasties period, and Wang Anshi, of the Song Dynasty, whose two versions of \textit{Peace Blossom Spring} which has “a humanist and secular character” to it. What they describe “it is an imaginary community of human beings, not a fairyland of immortals.”\textsuperscript{59} The genre however, did not manifest as an explicit categorization in literary and political thought in China as in Europe with the rough contemporaneity of More, Campanella and Francis Bacon’s \textit{New Atlantis}, among others.

Indeed, early modern European thought was influenced by the resurgence of Euclid’s \textit{Geometry}, the layout of which centred on self-evident axioms. Newton’s and Galileo’s works were each explicitly set out in this form. As Hardy Grant argues, “the ‘geometrical’ manner of presenting a subject, stemming from Euclid’s \textit{Elements} and adopted by Galileo and Newton alike – the step-by-step deduction of results from explicit definitions and axioms – gave a model to those who would organize and expound their own realms to best advantage (Spinoza’s \textit{Ethics} is perhaps the most striking example).” One of the clearest examples of this axiomatic approach to non-mathematical subjects was Thomas Hobbes’s \textit{Leviathan}.\textsuperscript{60} Just as astronomy “had matured only

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\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
with Copernicus, biology with William Harvey (the discoverer of the circulation of the blood), physics with Galileo, political science” would mature with himself, Hobbes intended. “For just as the axioms of Euclid’s *Elements* were, to Greeks, not mere assumptions but self-evident statements of physical fact, so for Hobbes all reasoning is anchored ultimately in the sure testimony of the senses. Right reasoning is, precisely, that which proceeds ‘from principles that are found indubitable by experience.’” In particular, Grant points to Hobbes comparison of morality, the “doctrine of Right and Wrong,” with that of “Lines, and Figures” as denoting his view that ethics could be geometrically ordered. The obvious inadequacy of this view was that “the complexities and perversities of human beings may make them less scrutable than points and lines.”  

As Ralph Keen argues, Thomas More, a century earlier than Hobbes, was very influenced by Euclidian thought. “Thomas More’s interest in geometry began as a humanistic pursuit and represented a sincere desire for truth. Geometry provided a source of certainty; its truths were indisputable and its method of presentation was indisputably attractive to a mind like More’s,” drawn to it because of “its importance within the Platonic intellectual system and in the attitude that ‘God geometrizes’ …”62 As someone writing “within the Catholic axiomatic system in these texts,” he knew that “like the axioms of Euclidean geometry, the text of scripture is a set of truths that must be accepted absolutely. And like proofs of additional theorems which are based on Euclidean axioms, the ‘proofs’ which are based on these truths preclude opposite interpretive approaches.”63

61 Ibid., 149.
63 Ibid., 158-159.
More’s *Utopia* relies on “the discourse of Raphael Hythloday” who describes his travels to the island of Utopians which manifests in “the best state of a commonwealth.” 64 This description begins with an illustration of the geography of the place. It then moves through a description of the economic arrangements of its peoples and their professions, as well as the political order of the society and the manner in which officials are elected to posts. The literary mode of the text is one of functional description. Relying on the supposed descriptions of “Raphael,” the presentation of the Utopian way of life can be portrayed as “matter of fact.” The reader is not to take the relaying of Raphael’s travels as that of More, as More is only the messenger. What comes across is a seemingly “non-literary” description of a place is itself the literary character of the text. “If any prince,” More elaborates, “takes up arms and prepares to invade their land, they immediately send a powerful force to encounter him outside their own borders. For they don’t like to wage war on their own soil…” 65 In this, More sees an ideal way of managing inevitable conflicts between principalities in Europe. However, the ideal is not presented as one. It is embedded in an aesthetic of *facts presented as such* – an anachronistic form of reportage. In this sense, utopia could be seen as presenting a *speculative ethics* (the hypothetical morals of a hypothetical society) in the form a *descriptive ethics* (the moral workings of a real society). In other words, the genre details “the empirically observed morals of a hypothetical society.” The literary function of the text is to present the hypothetical as truly real.

This is also the function of other utopian fiction like Campanella’s *City of the Sun*, which Liu cites as another influence. Liu’s descriptions of an imaginary civilization’s observations of

65 Ibid., 217.
celestial bodies reads very much like Campanella’s *City of the Sun*. This is particularly true of the descriptions of their scientific debates. Interestingly, Campanella’s work, which is also a functionalist description of a hypothetical society, ends with a discussion of its cosmic thought and their view of astronomy’s relationship with their metaphysical and ethical view of the world. As students of Ptolemy and Copernicus, the inhabitants of the City of the Sun understand how the faculties of men are influenced by the movements of celestial bodies.66 They study “the symbolic relation between things of earth and things out there” and examine “the apsides of planets, about eccentricities, solstices, equinoxes, obliquities, shifted poles, and confused figures out in the immensity of space.”67

What we see in More and Campanella, and this will be useful later, is that they are conducting a speculative ethics in ontology, but in aesthetic form, it comes across as descriptive ethics. Those aspects of science fiction that are derived from utopian fiction, mainly dystopian works, follows this formulation. They are aesthetic narratives describing a non-reality, thereby making their ontological form descriptive. The form is one of *speculative ethics as descriptive ethics*. This tricks the reader into perceiving the imagined as real and thereby more easily intuit hypothetical ethical principles in practice (This point will be followed up in the chapter on dystopian fiction in particular, whereby this technique is linguistically centred on the use of deixis). Liu argues that “traditional moral judgment cannot make sense of human beings as wholly integrated entities. Since I’m always thinking in science fictional terms, I see traditional moral

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67 Ibid., 126.
bottom lines as very dubious. I cannot say that they are outright wrong but at the very least there is danger in them.”

The relationship between aesthetics and ethics in art has been neglected in the humanities, the question for a long time problematized by Immanuel Kant’s strict separation of the two domains. It was more recently reintroduced into the study of literature with the moral philosopher Martha Nussbaum’s *Love’s Knowledge*, who argues for the traditional Aristotelian view of aesthetics and ethics as inter-related categories of thought. As Isaiah Smithson argues, “unlike Kant and later thinkers who overtly discriminate sharply between aesthetic and moral judgments, Aristotle conceives no such separation. Instead, consistent with the view stated in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that ‘Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good,’ Aristotle investigates in the *Poetics* the particular good at which tragedy aims.” Regarding a genre like tragedy, for example, “experiencing the imitation of a good action causes both the arrogant and despairing to grasp that their extreme positions do not remove them from the moral context of life.” For Nussbaum there is an “absence, from literary theory, of the organizing questions of moral philosophy, and of moral philosophy’s sense of urgency about these questions.” She calls, not for literary criticism that treats the fiction work as an ethical “set of propositional claims,” but rather “an investigation of that which is expressed and ‘claimed’ by the

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shape of the sentences themselves, by images and cadences and pauses themselves, by the forms of the traditional genres, by narrativity, themselves.”

In Nussbaum’s revival of the discussion of Aristotelian ethics, little has been said of science fiction. The sf genre does not deal with ethics or morality in the sense that realist fiction does because it presupposes circumstances which exist only in speculative or theoretical terms. Only in this sense, the speculative and the theoretical, does science fiction aesthetically represent ethical issues. Indeed, the understanding of ethics can be classified in three domains, the descriptive, normative and speculative. The first describes ethical norms as they are, the second describes ethics as they should be, and the third speculates as to what sort of ethical norms can potentially arise in different circumstances. This reflects a deeper problem in the wider field of ethics, particularly applied ethics. As Rebecca Roache argues, contemplating ethics regarding speculative scenarios is a questionable practice, to some. The problem lies principally in speculative ethics having no factual grounding, as with normative and descriptive ethical discussions. Particularly in the discipline of bioethics, an area of applied philosophy. Speculative ethics is problematic in that it leads moral theorists away from immediate circumstances and proposes highly unlikely scenarios, in which the ethical speculations are less grounded in reality. Roache argues that speculative ethics proves to be a useful activity when it is “reflecting on where our most important values lie, and how we might work maximise them” because “one of the most effective ways of discovering deeply-held values involves speculating about incredible scenarios.” The utility of such ethical speculation, is that it allows one to more accurately discern the form that ethical principles take, more so than if one relied purely on the factual, of what norms

71 Ibid., 207.
exist and how they should be. While speculative ethics might progress too far into the realm of fiction for the philosopher, it brings the science fiction author comfortably into the realm of moral purpose.

In Liu’s story, his scientistic morality is complicated further by the first axiom of Cosmic Sociology, namely “Survival is the primary need of civilization.” While a seemingly self-evident proposition to some, the idea is nested within wider concerns about biology and ethics. It rests principally on Darwinian assumptions and Liu is an avid fan of Dawkins’s and Singer’s major works, respectively *The Selfish Gene* and *Animal Liberation*, non-fiction works he considers to be “very much ‘Science Fiction.’” The former, he argues, is defined by its “coldness, colder than that of a dispassionate calm, quietly revealing life's inherent nature.” It suggests that “life and the ultimate purpose of world civilization is something we perhaps cannot quiet conceive of.” On the other hand, Singer's *Animal Liberation* allows us to examine equality and love outside of humanity, from a height never before seen.”

His admiration for Singer is telling in that Singer’s reading of “Western attitudes” towards animals in the modern era reads extraordinarily closely to Liu’s views of modern Western literature. It would seem Liu’s idea of “anthropocentric narcissism” was derived from Singer’s teleology of speciesism in the West. Just as Liu attributes human-centred narcissism to the Renaissance, so Singer argues that “the central feature of Renaissance humanism is its insistence on the value and dignity of human beings, and on man’s central place in the universe.” Because “the Renaissance humanists emphasized man’s uniqueness, his free will, his potential, and his dignity; and they

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contrasted all this with the limited nature of the ‘lower animals’” which “left nonhumans as far below as they had ever been.” In this fashion, “Renaissance writers wrote self-indulgent essays in which they…described man as ‘the center of nature, the middle of the universe, the chain of the world.’”\(^7\) Later, with Darwin’s publication of the *Descent of Man* establishing evolutionary lineage between man and animals, Singer argues, there “began a revolution in human understanding of the relationship between ourselves and the nonhuman animals…or did it?”\(^75\) This problematized understanding of man in relation to nature is echoed in Liu’s words: “…the very notion of human nature is vague. Do you really believe that there is a constant "humanity" from primitive times to the present? What is the unchanging characteristic of human nature? I have not found it.”\(^76\)

In fact, Chinese thought was revolutionized through the translation, and reconceptualization of Darwin’s ideas on evolution. The Late Qing scholar Yan Fu 严复, who lived in Britain during the late 1870s, would translate Darwinian thought through Thomas Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics*, published between 1896-1898. Over the next decade he would introduce many prominent political scholars such as John Stuart Mill and Adam Smith to Chinese readers, trying to understand the primacy of the West, not as the result of a material technological prowess, but as a result of the ideas on which its societies were based. Importantly, his study of Darwinian thought was filtered through the lens of Herbert Spencer, in his 1903 translation of *The Study of Sociology* (*qunxue yiyan 群学肄言*).

\(^75\) Ibid., 224.
\(^76\) Liu, *Liu Cixin tan kehuan*, 38.
As Benjamin Schwartz notes in his seminal study of Yan Fu’s thought, Darwinian thought was consequently rendered in Social Darwinian terms in China. As he notes, “Evolution and Ethics provides Yen Fu with a point of departure for presenting his own interpretation of Spencer’s evolutionary philosophy. Huxley provides, as it were, a foil for the master.”77 Already in his “brief preliminary exposition which Yen Fu presents of the main tenets of Darwinism, the language is already that of social Darwinism….”78 For Yan Fu, the question was rendered in politically pragmatic terms. Less concerned with the epistemological nature of Darwinian biological laws, he focussed his analytic energies on explaining why, in a universe defined by “survival of the fittest,” the West had come out on top, rather than China. Spencer, more than Huxley, was important in contextualizing Darwinism in that “it was Spencer who (in his view) made the all-important application of these truths to human affairs.”79 In “Yen Fu’s rapturous embrace of Spencer,” he saw, “at the ‘deep’ metaphysical cosmological level that Spencer’s image of the universe seems most congenial to certain inveterate Chinese modes of thought.”80 But in doing so, Yan Fu missed the point of Huxley’s Evolution and Ethics. “Nothing could have been further from Huxley’s pathos at this point than Yen Fu’s ardent desire to find in the Darwinian cosmos prescriptions for human behavior. Nothing – it need hardly be added – was more remote from Huxley’s concerns than Yen Fu’s preoccupation with the wealth and power of the state.”81 In Huxley’s defence of

78 Ibid., 45.
79 Ibid., 46.
80 Ibid., 52.
81 Ibid., 101.
Darwinism, and repudiation of social Darwinism, his “overwhelming preoccupation [was] that of protecting human ethical values against the efforts to create an ‘evolutionary ethic.’”

These ideas persisted through Mao’s reign. Darwinism “and the Thought of Mao Tsetung fit perfectly” because “it championed the oppressed, told them that history was on their side; and that they had a way if they had a will. It provided an international enemy responsible for all China’s troubles, thereby absolving the Chinese ‘people’ from all guilt for China’s weaknesses….” For James Pusey, “the Chinese have not escaped it, and so of the least fortunate ‘Darwinian’ myths to live on, it seems to me, in China today, the most important of which are the myths of the omnipotence of science, historical inevitability, ‘futurism,’ ‘perfectionism,’ ‘prescientism’ and ‘it’s-them-or-us-ism.’”

Though it is difficult to say what Darwinism (like scientism) means in China beyond the 1980s, Liu’s articulation of it perhaps reveals that has come to be formulated and illustrated in more multifaceted ways, as the country has progressed technologically. But most interestingly, the fact that his work and his view of societal and human behaviour is somewhat Social Darwinist shows perhaps that the spectre of Yan Fu, and of Spencer, lives on in some mutable form.

Having considered how it was that Darwinian thought was chiefly subordinated to political ideology in modern Chinese history, one has to consider Liu’s own reading of it. We can find brief intimations towards his views on bioethics and moral urgency in *The Three Body Problem*. We can see his consideration of how the harsh realities of physical nature influence biological evolution and consequently the ethical considerations of species. Through the window

82 Ibid., 100.
84 Ibid., 453.
into the Trisolarans’ gruelling existence given in the virtual reality game of San Ti, Wang Miao observes the aliens scurry to survive when the unpredictable orbit of planets causes the surface of Trisolaris to be burnt to a crisp. They have evolved the ability to “dehydrate” their bodies into a natural form of suspended animation that allows them to wait out the “chaotic eras” and reanimate for the next “stable” one. On learning of the approach of a fiery sun, they cry “dehydrate” as though no other moral priority exists. Their very evolutionary makeup and consequently, their morality, is moulded to fit arbitrary and unrelenting cosmic patterns.

It is also interesting that the bioethical and Darwinist ideas are intimated towards in Diqiu Wangshi in the Maoist-era scenes in particular. The first volume details Ye Wenjie’s encounter during the Cultural Revolution with an American environmentalist and speciesist, Mike Evans, the son of a wealthy industrialist, who has come to help with the repopulation of local swallows after large deforestation under Mao. After seeing a copy of Singer’s Animal Liberation in his hut, Evans expresses his anger that the salvation of non-human animals is considered heroic, asking: “Why is saving other species considered insignificant? Who gave humans such high honors? No, humans do not need saving. They’re already living much better than they deserve.” Through Evans, she learns the basic ethic of each and every species: “These are the rules of the game of civilization: The first priority is to guarantee the existence of the human race and their comfortable

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86 Liu, The Three Body Problem, 332.
life. Everything else is secondary.”\textsuperscript{87} It is Ye’s discovery of speciesism that puts her on a more cynical path on which she would deal with the “problem” of humanity.

Returning to Ye’s reflections on \textit{Silent Spring}, “the perspective taken by Carson shook Ye to the core. The use of pesticides seemed to Ye just a normal, proper – or, at least, neutral – act, but Carson’s book allowed Ye to see that, from Nature’s perspective, their use was indistinguishable from the Cultural Revolution, and equally destructive to our world.” If this distinction were not possible, “then how many other acts of humankind that had seemed normal or even righteous were in reality, evil?” The thought leads to a darker conclusion: “Is it possible that the relationship between humanity and evil is similar to the relationship between the ocean and an iceberg floating on its surface? Both the ocean and the iceberg are made of the same material. That the iceberg seems separate is only because it is in a different form. In reality, it is but a part of the vast ocean…”\textsuperscript{88} But as Gaffric has remarked, these aspects of the text should be regarded more thematically than as specific indications of Liu’s personal attitudes on the subject of bioethics and speciesism. As he notes, “though the first volume suggests a critique of deep ecology and praise for technoscience, the almost pastoral conclusion of the trilogy seems to refute this.”\textsuperscript{89}

But we must remind ourselves that Liu’s view of Darwinian nature is informed by a reading of Dawkins’s \textit{Selfish Gene}, whose “purpose is to examine the biology of selfishness and altruism.”\textsuperscript{90} In particular he wanted to challenge “the erroneous assumption that the important thing in evolution is the good of the \textit{species} (or the group) rather than the good of the individual

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 334-335.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{89} Gaffric, “Liu Cixin’s Three Body Trilogy,” 31.
In his emphasis on the survival of genes themselves, he was “concerned only with whether the effect of an act is to lower or raise the survival prospects of the presumed altruist and the survival prospects of the presumed beneficiary.” This attitude came under heavy critique at the time, particularly by philosophers of science and ethics, such as Mary Midgley, who argued that Dawkins’s emphasis on gene selection in biological behaviour “is taken to establish egoism, to prove that existing forms of altruism, though present, are not what they seem, and are really only forms of self-interest.” In human ethics, therefore, Dawkins’s reductive approach constrained discussions of altruism, our capacity for free will and conscious moral reflection.

This has been retorted principally by Tallis, arguing that “people say that we are our brains; our brains are evolved organs designed like other organs in all other living creatures to promote survival; the theory of evolution should therefore have the last word on human nature.” Part of this perhaps emerged as “an over-correction to the discredited view that man was different from all the other animals in virtue of having a special relationship to the author of the universe” in pre-scientific times, where man was considered to be made in God’s image. “The land-fill devised to obliterate the great ditch between animals who merely live and human who lead their lives actively and self-consciously and whose entire way of being is subject to unlimited elaboration and transformation, was invented by Dawkins in 1976 in The Selfish Gene…” The problem which we are faced with, argues Tallis, is that “it is difficult…to see how living creatures emerged

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91 Ibid., 2.
92 Ibid., 5.
95 Ibid., 148.
96 Ibid., 163.
out of the operation of the laws of physics on lifeless matter, it is even less clear how consciousness emerged or why it should be of benefit to those creatures that have it.  

The gap has increasingly been filled, since Dawkins’s *Selfish Gene* with “neuro-evolutionary ideas” which “are now woven into the very language in which we are invited to think about ourselves.”  

This scientistic language fails to explain our own “distinctively human ends. It is this that underlies the differences between the biological opinion and the cultural destination; between the organism *H. sapiens* and the human person,” encouraging us to see little difference between “life in the office and life in the jungle.”  

What lies at the other end of scientism, which was critiqued by Hayek, was how we place limits on the explanation of social phenomena and of political complexity by the scientific language of objectivism. Much of this lays at the hands of the influence of Darwin’s evolutionary theories. The rise of Darwinian ideas in social sciences, for Hayek, did not constitute any original scientific revolutionary thinking but “appear[ed] in fact as little more than revival of the ideas which German historicism had developed under the influence of Hegel and Comte.”

Social phenomena, he stressed, “cannot be perceived at all apart from a mental scheme that shows the connection between some of the many individual facts which we can observe.” The problem lies in the fact that “social wholes are not given to us as what we may call ‘natural units’ which we recognize as similar with our senses, as we do with flowers or butterflies, minerals or light-rays, or even forests or ant-heaps.” Often what we class as distinct phenomena “do not stand for definite things or classes of things (if we understand the term ‘thing’ in any material or concrete sense) but

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97 Ibid., 179.
98 Ibid., 182.
99 Ibid., 155.
100 Hayek, *The counter-revolution of science*, 206.
for a pattern or order in which different things may be related to each other – an order which is not a spatial or temporal order but can be defined only in terms of relations which are intelligible human attitudes.”

It is more difficult to determine what Liu makes of these ethical nuances, though he acknowledges that Dawkins’s theory has its flaws. But it is Dawkins’s moral resolution that, for Liu, leaves room for consideration of human rationality and choice. Dawkins explicates that he is “not advocating a morality based on evolution. I am saying how things have evolved. I am not saying how we humans morally ought to behave.” He stresses “that if you wish, as I do, to build a society in which individuals cooperate generously and unselfishly towards a common good, you can expect little help from biological nature. Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish.” The controversial simplification that “we are born selfish” is perhaps a moral constraint observed in the protagonists of Liu’s trilogy and how they deliberate on their choices. As Dawkins surmises, “it may just be more difficult to learn altruism than it would be if we were genetically programmed to be altruistic.” The characters of Diqiu Wangshi, with competing priorities for the survival of the human species, struggle according to this condition, set out in the first axiom of Cosmic Sociology.

This is seen in Luo Ji’s later elaboration on the tenets of Cosmic Sociology, particularly of the notions of “benevolence” and “malice” among civilizations. Since “these words themselves aren’t very rigorous in a scientific context,” Luo Ji explains, he has “to restrict their meaning.” Benevolence, in his sociological thought, strictly pertains to “not taking the initiative to attack and

101 Ibid., 55.
103 Ibid.
eradicate other civilizations.” Malice means precisely to take the initiative to do these very things. Ultimately, because it is impossible to truly determine whether a discovered civilization is indeed benevolent, the assumption should be that that civilization is malicious and that hiding from it, or trying to eradicate it are the only two courses of action.\footnote{Liu, The Dark Forest, 517-518.} The moral worldview is a strictly binary one, leaving little room for grey areas. Rather, in this limited moral system, Liu’s story searches for nuance in the attempts in species attempts to strategize for survival. His work does not espouse a view of inter-species interaction which considers how more advanced, and hopefully, more morally enlightened beings, might be able to transcend these Darwinian dimensions. His characters are trapped in a confined ethical framework. It was Peter Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid*, which critiqued this specific aspect of Social Darwinism, instead emphasizing cooperation between species. In this respect, one must not forget that Anarchism (wuzhengfuzhuyi 无政府主义) is embedded in the political culture of China, starting among many domestic and overseas Chinese intellectuals during the late Qing and early Republican periods.\footnote{A useful overview of Anarchism’s role in modern Chinese thought is given in Peter Zarrow, *Anarchism and Chinese Political Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).} Thus it does make the clear Darwinian morality of Liu’s universe all the more striking.

While he started his theory from Euclidean premises, that of the geometric relationship between stars as the basis for interaction between civilizations, the actual ethical character of this interaction is implicitly Darwinian. Luo Ji’s theory wants us to assume that from the limited knowledge species can have of each other (and subsequently of their behaviour), civilizations in the cosmos will naturally respond aggressively to the knowledge of each other’s existence. In the logic of the Hunter-Shooter metaphor, the knowledge of a civilization’s whereabouts is thus
equivalent to exposure to harm. Yet there is no deeper justification for this type of ethics outside of the metaphor itself. Rather the metaphor is meant to fill in the gap between the Euclidean premise and the ethical assumptions that follow from it. It is not self-evident that the limited knowledge of another species would necessarily lead to the sort of interaction that Earth and Trisolaris have. The capacity for wilful peaceful cooperation between cosmic beings is discarded as a moral impossibility.

In this sense, civilizations in space are conceived of the way species are in nature. While Cosmic Sociology’s first ethical axiom is principally scientistic in that a biologically reductionist attitude equals the idea that survival is the prime aim of civilization, this reductive view nonetheless leaves room for individual humanistic consideration, even if Liu views literature as too narrowly considered with the value-centric concerns of humanity. It shows why a tone and outlook of lengku is necessitated by the conditions which science tells us. His aim is to bring humanism back to a consideration of scientific principles, to an immediate consideration of how the objective world of biological conditioning, the geometrical layout of space and fundamental principles as a way of reimagining humanity’s place and role in the universe. It should not be dismissed as a rejection of the humanistic outlook but rather a contextualization, or maybe even a deflation, of it. It is, in this sense, that Liu’s critique of humanistic “narcissism” should be understood. It underpins his own framing of moral action within such scientific confines. The question is how this confined moral action is aesthetically represented.

Liu’s concern with the wildly speculative moral dilemma (as with his thought experiment on cannibalism) suggests we should treat him as aiming at some speculative ethics. If speculative ethics is Liu’s concern, then how ought it relate to his work as fiction? The difference with science fiction is in the form. Science fiction narratives can be rather implicit speculative ethics presented
in the form of descriptive ethics. Particularly Liu Cixin’s trilogy, which presents a vast array of varied situations, past and future, what is described is fundamentally speculative in character. It treats as real what is simply presupposed. This acknowledges some level of comparison with the concerns of ethicists. But to return to Nussbaum, the literary critics concern is how form itself relates to the ethical content – the relationship between descriptive form and speculative proposition.

But these moral questions are guided by Liu’s fundamental scientism, that technology is the principal ethical device by which humanity can survive. Liu claims that he has “not gone through any ideological shift in the last few years. I am a fanatical technologist (技 术主义者) and I personally believe that technology can solve every problem.”106 Insofar as we take space to be Euclidean, it manifests subjectively as dystopia for its inhabitants – the objective role for them being to render this space, boats against the current, as utopia – an impossible to realize ideal – but this very striving is what characterizes moral being. It is clear here that we need to detail how Liu construes that proper moral manner of being, taking us from a wider ethical perspective to a narrower subjective moral one.

The three works of the trilogy ultimately move through three moral questions. In appealing to Trisolaris to save humanity from itself, Three Body asks whether humanity ought to exist. In construing the vast theory of Cosmic Sociology, The Dark Forest extrapolates under what conditions civilizations interact. Lastly, in the use of Hamlet’s “To Be or Not to Be,” Death’s End shows that the struggle is justified by its own existence. Liu presents us with a moral question, a foundational moral principle and lastly an ultimate moral rule to say that, at the very least,

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106 Liu, Liu Cixin tan kehuan, 35.
existence is right. In other words, Something is more moral than Nothing, however much immorality it might produce. However, viewing these ideas purely through the lens of Liu’s scientistic thinking is not sufficient.

While the last chapter dealt with the major themes established in the first volume, a wider exegetical treatment of the last two (much longer) volumes, poses a challenge. As Gaffric has written, “the length and density of the trilogy are such that it would be difficult to tell the story in a few sentences.” Though he notes that, broadly speaking, “the second and third volumes present in detail the range of responses conceived of by humanity” to the new threats posed by Trisolaris.107 In general, “the fundamental question posed by Liu Cixin in the trilogy (and which is found in all of his work) is as follows: How can humanity reinvent itself, both collectively and individually, with the knowledge of its future destruction.” It is a tale of every type of ethical scenario that humanity could conceivably experience within the scientistic confines of his cosmos, involving “the emergence of new religions, new military and political forces, new geopolitical alliances, new international institutions, or the impacts of economic, diplomatic or military crises triggered by Earth’s dismal future.”108

108 Ibid.
4) Humanism

In his own exegesis of the trilogy, David Wang, while not framing it in terms of scientism or humanism, implicitly points towards the problem of framing the ethics of *Diqiu Wangshi*. This “Dark Forest,” he explains, “is a world without morals. So, in this world, how do we preserve this treasured relic of the ethical thinking of humanity? Here, there is no solution.”¹ While it tempting to follow this line of thought, Liu’s trilogy does not suggest that there are no morals in the universe. Rather, as the last chapter has discussed, what appears as amorality is in fact a scientistic morality. Wang’s exegesis is nonetheless one of the more useful produced thus far because it indicates that humanistic thought, that “treasured relic of the ethical thinking of humanity,” is at odds with the scientistic cosmos described by Liu.

The ethical deliberation and action of the trilogy’s protagonists, he suggests, “is emphasizing a so-called heroism, the grand Kantian struggle between man and the infinite.”² Here, one is reminded of Liu’s Kantian preoccupation, that of “the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.” As Wang asks more generally, “how can we hold on to our civilization when everything is doomed? And over this juncture between the cosmos and history, what decision shall one or two capable protagonists come to? Should we at last conspire like the Trisolarans,

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² Ibid.
with sheer cold reason, to redeem the fate of mankind? Should we still maintain our belief in civilization as civilized, to continue bearing the weight of our inevitable tragedy?” For him, Liu’s work is the container for “a multitude of enormous moral considerations” as “apart from embellishing the spectacle of the cosmos, the deeper one is Liu’s contemplation of “what makes humans human.” It is this particular question that he suggests “we can place emphasis on.”

Julia Lovell has discussed this deep tension in Chinese literary culture following China’s reopening under Deng Xiaoping after 1978. “Writers made an impressive comeback in the 1980s,” she argues, “dominating public life with a ‘culture’ fever.” The introduction of the internet to China in the late nineties “completed the merger between literature, entertainment and profit that began in the early 1990s, providing a direct platform for publicizing books through adverts, interviews, author blogs and videos.” But the increased production of literature in China, and the proliferation of avenues through which to publish it has not diminished that preoccupation of Chinese authors with recognition in the West. The acknowledgment of authors abroad is, of course, dependent upon the translation of their works into foreign languages.

As C.T. Hsia writes, modern Western literature shares the same aspirations of modernization but seems more cynical than Chinese literature as a whole. With reference to the American critic Lionel Trilling, Hsia argues that he “has not dwelt upon the further point, but he would certainly agree that it is precisely the impersonal environment of modern man that has made

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3 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 11.
6 Ibid., 15.
possible the modern literature of nihilism and irrationality.” As mentioned earlier, Hsia argues that Western writers, unlike Chinese, “automatically identifies the sick state of his country with the state of man in the modern world, the Chinese writer sees the conditions of China as peculiarly Chinese and not applicable elsewhere.” If the Chinese writer had equated his country’s condition with the state of modern man more generally, then that writer would have entered “the mainstream of modern literature” by now.

For Hsia, the meaning of this “modern phase of Chinese literature alike from the traditional and Communist phases is rather its burden of moral contemplation: its obsessive concern with China as a nation afflicted with a spiritual disease and therefore unable to strengthen itself or change its set ways of inhumanity.” He follows his own particular characterization of Chinese literary contemplation on society as a self-conscious reflection on inhumanity that besets modern China after the nineteenth century defeats by the Western empires. The seminal Chinese author, Lu Xun, made his mark by depicting Chinese society as essentially rotten, something for which the educated and illiterate share in responsibility. In his writings, “the Chinese imagination was finally released from its obligation of self-flattery to enter upon a phase of relentless and ruthless self-examination.” No theme has more essentially defined Chinese literature in the twentieth century.

In Wang Miao’s first meeting with the Earth-Trisolaris Movement, there is an author, who with a cynical tone, elaborates on her own reasons: “The human race is hideous. I’ve spent

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8 Ibid., 536.
10 Ibid., 543.
the first half of my life unveiling this ugliness with the scalpel of literature, but now I’m even sick of the work of dissection. I yearn for Trisolaran civilization to bring real beauty to this world.”¹¹

One cannot help but feel Liu Cixin’s personal voice coming through this character’s words. Hopeless as to anything else literature can do for humanity but dissect its problems, the author wishes some apocalyptic resolution to humanity’s woes.

In the military meeting at the beginning of Three Body, a British colonel remarks out loud “To be or not to be.” That Liu begins his novel with reference to Shakespeare (though his literary stature in China is very prominent) should be representative of Liu’s attempt to reach outside of the Chinese literary context.¹² Referencing the most well-known line in the Western canon, in relation to the broader problem of non-universality, Liu Cixin alludes to a world in which the existence of humanity, within the grander cosmological scheme, diminishes the arbitrary margins of terrestrial cultural boundaries. The philosopher Li Zehou 李泽厚 has compared the meaning of Hamlet’s proposition with the writings of the poet Qu Yuan 屈原 (340–278 BC). In the poem “The Fisherman” (yufu 渔父) from the Songs of Chu (chuci 楚辞), Qu Yuan, Li argues, “indicates “his preference for death over life,” wanting to “jump into the River Xiang, And be buried in the belly of a fish, Than allow my pure whiteness, To be sullied by the world’s dust.” Here, he argues, “with Hamlet’s line, ‘To be or not to be,’ Shakespeare can be said to have given expression to an element of European character brought out by the Renaissance.” But in the “ancient Chinese context two

¹¹ Liu, The Three Body Problem, 249.
thousand years earlier, Qu Yuan was probably the first poetic philosopher to have so keenly asked this ‘question of the first importance.’”

The context surrounding Shakespeare’s quote is the discussion between the western and Chinese military leaders as to how they should respond to the deaths of scientists occurring all over the world. In the original Chinese text, the quote appears in plain English characters. But when Wang Miao later discusses the deaths in private with his physicist friend Ding Yi, they appear, in his own internal stream of thought in the Chinese characters. At the moment in which he learns that these suicides have been spurred by physicists’ realizations that “the laws of physics are not invariant across time and space” (and are therefore meaningless) he “knew that he was finishing what the British colonel had begun to say: To be or not to be: that is the question (shengcun haishi siwang: zhe shi ge wenti 生存还是死亡，这是个问题). Unknowing, at this stage, as to the cause of this seemingly inexplicable problem, Ding Yi tells Wang: “But that is the question.”

In its translated Chinese form, shengcun haishi siwang is actually more closely rendered in English as “To live/exist or to die”. Hamlet’s questioning of the value of being, in making sense of his need to avenge his father, contemplates death and his purpose in life, a problem which parallels the new plight of scientists and their own shaken sense of purpose. The use of this quote underscores the nature of this scientific conundrum in existentially binary terms. Firstly, it suggests that the lack of no ultimate meaning in scientific theory should make life meaning-less. Secondly,

it a contemplation on the nature of such an existence for the individual life within it. One pertains to individual human choice in the world. The other regards the character of such a world. The narrative of *The Remembrance of Earth’s Past* characterizes this contestation between the objective character of the cosmological “dark forest” and the subjective nature of navigating existence within it.

One has to ask of Li Guangyi’s interpretation of Liu which situates his work in the modern Chinese historical theme of “looking outward.” “At one end,” he writes, “Liu Cixin’s fiction is rooted in early modern Chinese history, and at the other end it is tied to the future of humanity. In between are the contemporary Chinese people, or more precisely the perplexity and hope of Chinese people in the everyday world. His works embody the great literary burden of an author who models himself on Tolstoy and Balzac.”\(^\text{15}\) It is interesting that Li points out Liu’s Western influences but argues that he should still be situated in the Chinese context. I have already discussed the shared scientism underpinning *Diqiu Wangshi* and it will also be shown in the deeper problems of Western moral philosophy – a not-coincidental concern demonstrated in Liu’s reading of western works. In Li’s interpretation of Liu’s work, one gets the impression that the trajectory of influence – that Liu’s works are following a modern Chinese intellectual continuum rather than a cross-cultural and cross-lingual boundary. As will be shown, Liu’s utopian ideas seem more rooted in the early modern European world than the early modern Chinese world.

Another so-far-undiscussed influence on Liu is a non-fiction work by the natural philosopher Paul Davies, *The Last Three Minutes of the Universe*, which deals with different theories about the future, and the end of, the universe. He describes *The Last Three Minutes* as the

\(^{15}\) Li, “China Turns Outward,” 15.
“most science fictional” of the nonfiction literature he lists.\textsuperscript{16} Perhaps more than Dawkins and Singer, this science popularization work on the existential consequences of modern physics, seems to have shaped the “worldview” of Liu’s characters.\textsuperscript{17} Their views demonstrate one striking parallel – that of the “physical nature as existential threat” perspective. Davies opens his work with a science fictional description of the coming of the Swift-Tuttle comet in the year 2126 which some have postulated could destroy Earth. “There are certainly lots of nasty things that could happen to Earth,” he explains, “A puny object in a universe pervaded by violent forces, yet our planet has remained hospitable to life for at least three and a half billion years.” He argues that “the secret of our success on planet Earth is space” and adds that “our solar system is a tiny island of activity in an ocean of emptiness…”\textsuperscript{18} The ethical question which frames his exploration of cosmological theory is as follows: “Can humanity, in principle, survive forever? Possibly. But we shall see that immortality does not come easily and may yet prove to be impossible.” This is because “the Universe itself is subject to physical laws that impose upon its life cycle of its own: birth, evolution, and – perhaps – death. Our own fate is entangled inextricably with the fate of the stars.”\textsuperscript{19}

This idea of an “entangled fate” between the cosmos’s and humanity’s destinies – seen in direct view of each other has, as discussed last chapter, framed Liu’s view of ethics, particular as a function of scientific (and consequently scientistic) thought. In Davies’s wording, we can see from where Liu derives such an ethical and ontological attitude. The most pressing question for Liu, as a fiction writer, is how human choice and human deliberation largely features as a reaction

\textsuperscript{16} Liu, “Liu Cixin’s secret bookshelf.”
\textsuperscript{17} Liu, Liu Cixin tan kehuan, 26.
\textsuperscript{18} Paul Davies, The last three minutes: conjectures about the ultimate fate of the universe (New York: Basic Books), 4.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 7.
to this unrelenting and unpredictable cosmos. While characters are constrained by its very nature, they are also able to act in relation to it its constrictions. In the use of “To be or not to be,” we can see that a humanistic temperament also colours Liu’s work. While Liu has construed the “Dark Forest,” a reality of physical nature rather than a product of actors within it, the drama of the Dìqìu Wangshì trilogy centres around how humanity’s destiny within these physical constraints is still shaped by human action, which later shall be shown to be a Tolstoian idea.

Indeed, as Ye Wenjie’s postulation of Cosmic Sociology provides a theory of intercivilizational action and reaction, it does little to inform the unpredicted consequences of humanity’s quest for survival throughout the second and third volumes. While Ye attempts to effect an alien invasion, Trisolaran civilization never reaches Earth. The Darwinian “Dark Forest” gives birth to a variety of “creatures,” from civilizations so advanced in their ability to destroy foes without detection that it becomes an aesthetic art form, all the way to civilizations that are so adept at hiding that they have evolved to higher and lower dimensions to survive. It shows that, to some degree, Liu’s rebuttal of literary “narcissism” and his urge for the description of objective nature does not entirely inform the universe of his trilogy. Rather the choices of the characters within it are the central concern and this is fully realized at the very end of the trilogy – where the last remaining protagonist Cheng Xin, through a grand thought experiment, is able to decide the final fate of the universe. In this sense, the work can be understood as one of “Scientism with Humanist Characteristics,” rather than one of “Science Fiction with Chinese Characteristics.”

But there is a fundamental common value which determines human action and that is of the “technologism” of which Liu is a strong adherent. All the central protagonists are scientists and they each conceive of ways for humanity to escape destruction by means of the technologies they can develop. As he explains, “the characters in my novels have little to do with my own life…I
rarely put myself into them. They are more like some kind of signs or symbols [sic] and their character development is mainly dictated by the need of the story.”

In the first book, the Trisolarans are shown to have the capacity to put themselves into a form of natural suspended animation, which allows them to ride out long periods of uninhabitable climates in order to resume life under stable climatic conditions. This “dehydration” is somewhat analogous to the artificial form that humans develop, used by various protagonists throughout the second and third volumes, to travel into the future. What is a Darwinian and evolutionary need for the Trisolarans can be analogized with the artificial form of cryosleep which humanity has developed for its more talented minds to continue their scientific work in more advantageous technological conditions. Moreover, suspended animation is a plot device which lets the same single protagonist to be a direct witness to different periods of history, which allows Liu to avoid having to address the convoluted problem of inventing new characters for each historical epoch. Each jump to a different stage in Earth’s history is made through characters’ entering hibernation and waking up in a new era and subjectively viewing novel historical scenes through the same pair of eyes. They can therefore subjectively weigh the long-term consequences and unintended changes that occur over centuries of technological change.

The protagonist that embodies this central point of the narrative is Luo Ji, the founder of the theory of Cosmic Sociology (As one character points out, Luo Ji 罗辑 sounds like luoji 逻辑, the Chinese loanword for “logic”). His story begins with him as an alienated cynic in the present day. With the knowledge of the coming Trisolaran invasion, Luo argues that bearing no children

20 K.E. Lanning, "In the Author's Universe."
21 Liu Cixin, Hei’an senlin (The Dark Forest) (Chongqing: Chongqing Publishing House, 2008), 90.
is the morally responsible choice, giving into the pessimistic acceptance of humanity’s inevitable demise. When a game show host on television asks, “one hundred and twenty years before the doomsday, your thirteenth generation will be alive. True or false?” Luo Ji’s only response is that “it’s not going to be any generation of mine” because “my grand family line will die out with me.” This attitude is perfectly justifiable because of the “sort of lives their descendants will be living.” He hypothesizes that “they’ll be spending their days slaving away in the shipyards – the spaceship yards – and then they’ll line up at the canteen, bellies rumbling as they hold out their lunch pails waiting for the ladle of porridge” only “to find glory in the army” afterwards. He finishes that “still, even that future’s not going to come to pass” due to “how stubborn the people of Earth are.” Cynically, he remarks that “the real mystery is how they’ll eventually die.”

But this younger Luo Ji is not a reflection of the person he will become over the centuries. As the central character of the narrative, he becomes the most important historical figure in humanity’s attempts to devise deterrence strategies against Trisolaris. He is elected by the United Nations to become one of four “Wallfacers,” elected special persons who are given any resources they desire with which to develop counter-measures against Trisolaran subversion. The plan he eventually devises is to broadcast the coordinates of a nearby star, 187J3X1, hoping to prove the predictions of his Cosmic Sociology and that the star would eventually be destroyed by an unknown interstellar entity. This plan would then function as a threat to Trisolaris, for they could expose their world by broadcasting its location as well. Being in danger from assassination by the ETO, he escapes into hibernation for two hundred years, after which he will see through the rest of his plans.

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22 Liu, The Dark Forest, 52-53.
As the very first volume of the trilogy establishes, scientific observation and experimentation in the present day is prevented by the Trisolarans’ “lockdown” of deeper levels of physical reality, the phenomenon which causes scientists to believe that no physical truths and laws could be derived from observation. At the end of the *Three Body Problem*, we learn that this is possible because of Trisolaris’s harnessing of the quantum phenomenon of “action-at-a-distance,” the concept that objects which are not in contact with each other in physical space can still interact and manipulate each other instantaneously. The theoretical particles they invent to manipulate this phenomenon action are called “sophons.” Having harnessed this fundamental force, Trisolaris is able to anonymously monitor anti-Trisolaris activity on Earth while also supporting the ETO. In this way it is difficult for terrestrial governments to devise any means of thwarting Trisolaran subversion.

On re-awakening, Luo Ji finds that humanity has reached a sort of material utopia where scientific research has reached its peak, unable to break through the barriers imposed by Trisolaris’s lockdown on fundamental research. Consequently, humanity has reached a level of comfort and complacency on Earth, with a fleet of spaceships above awaiting those of Trisolaris. As Luo Ji awakes in the futuristic hospital, “what impressed him most about the people he saw was that everyone – doctors, nurses, and nonstaff alike – appeared clean and elegant, and smiled warmly at him or waved when they approached.” Leaving the hospital, he “was won over by their expressions, because he knew that the eyes of ordinary people were the best reflection of the level of civilization in a time and place.” Repeating this, “what impressed him most was the confidence in their expressions. The sunny confidence that filled every pair of eyes had evidently become the spiritual backdrop for the people of this new era.”\(^23\) He then stares out over the city, “the streams

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 329.
of flying cars like schools of fish navigating endlessly among the plants on the ocean floor. The rising sun shone onto the city and was cut into shafts of light by the trees, coating the traffic with a layer of gold.” As he watches, “tears streamed down Luo Ji’s face at the sight of this brave new world...”

Luo Ji eventually meets Da Shi, who had also entered hibernation. Da Shi explains that they are in fact in Beijing, though an unrecognizable one. The city was moved underground, abandoning the surface, living in colossal tree-like structures. Da Shi will have similar conversations with Luo Ji as he had with his now long-dead friend Wang Miao on the nature of morality and the universe. Luo Ji elaborates his theory of Cosmic Sociology further. From Da Shi, and also his son, Shi Xiaoming, he learns about humanity’s two centuries long response to its eventual fate, that “originally, the countries of the world had planned to live in peace and push the Trisolar Crisis onto the back burner,” which led to spectacular social and economic progress, with the exception of a period of depression dubbed the “Great Ravine.” After this period, humanity returned its attention to the coming invasion and “a global state of war was again declared, and construction was begun on a space fleet.”

While finding humanity had come to a comfortable historical standstill, he notices one change, stemming from his work back in the twenty-first century as a Wallfacer. The star 187J3X1, as predicted, had been eliminated. Luo could, at last, implement his proposed deterrence strategy. This will eventually unfold into the Swordholder strategy which mirrored a crucial component of the Mutually Assured Destruction doctrine of the Cold War. The Swordholder plan would be based

24 Ibid., 340.
25 Ibid., 338.
26 Ibid., 394-95.
on the Soviet Union’s supposed Perimeter System, a dead man’s switch which, in the event of nuclear annihilation, would launch a computer-initiated strike against the Western allies. This guarantee of inevitable destruction would hypothetically deter any attack from the United States. The Swordholder System, however, was not automated, because artificial intelligence could not be trusted with such a fatal choice. Luo Ji is endowed with a sword-like device which enables him to broadcast Trisolaris’s whereabouts, and consequently Earth’s.27

This leads Earth from the “Crisis Era” to the “Deterrence Era.” With the news of this threat, Trisolaris agrees to end its use of sophons, instead using the technology to develop an AI avatar composed of these particles, eponymously named Sophon, who can act as an instantaneous messenger for Trisolaris on Earth. As discussed earlier, the Chinese characters for Sophon 智子 are the same of the female Japanese name Tomoko in the kanji, so she appears as a female human in traditional Japanese dress, concealing her hidden motives and forcing Trisolaris’s will when necessary. Sophon’s image is a deceptively idealistic one, such that a character later forgets “that she was an alien invader, that she was controlled by a powerful world four light-years away. All she saw was a lovely woman, distinguished by her overwhelming feminity, like a concentrated pigment pellet that could turn a whole lake pink.”28 But it is Sophon who will play a crucial in the final fate of the universe,

Returning again to the present day, as the Trisolarans set off at sublight speed, the doctrine of Escapism emerges on Earth, an idea which is quickly outlawed. Rather, all of humanity’s resources must be put toward its defence against the threats of the distant future. As the United Nations Assembly moves to pass anti-escapist legislation, the Chinese delegate proclaims: “We

27 Liu, Death’s End, 144-145.
28 Ibid., 154-155.
must cherish the unity and solidarity of the international community in this time of crisis and uphold the principle, recognized by the international community, that all humanity has an equal right to survival. The Earth is the common home of its people, and we must not abandon her.” The reasoning was such that, even if some select few were able to escape, leaving behind the rest of humanity, “it means the collapse of humanity’s fundamental value system and ethical bottom line” because it would produce an “inequality of survival” which “is the worst sort of inequality.” This situation would only result in “increasingly extreme confrontations between the two sides [those who escape and those who remain] until there’s world chaos, and then no one goes!”29 This ethical distinction, between escaping the solar system and defending it, lays the foundation for the exact moral dilemma humans will face in the future.

As a witness to this authoritarian move by the UN, Zhang Beihai 章北海, an officer in the Chinese Navy, foresees that this anti-escapist doctrine will invariably lead to humanity’s destruction. With all humans on one planet, the specie’s eggs are in one basket. In response, Zhang aims to implement a plan in which an alternative seed of humanity can be planted beyond the Solar System in interstellar space. As a military officer, he goes into hibernation under the pretension that he will continue his duties in the construction of Earth’s future space fleet, publicly insisting on a “faith in victory” to replace a faith in reason and science and argues that “a sense of responsibility to the human race and to Earth civilization can encourage the same faith.”30 After awakening, it is through Zhang’s story that the reader can see how Earth’s space capabilities have developed. He stares out across battle plans for humanity’s new space fleet readying itself for the Trisolaran attack.

29 Liu, The Dark Forest, 55-56.
30 Ibid., 130.
Eventually an unmanned Trisolaran probe reaches the Solar System and the fleet comes to meet it and examine its purpose. The probe, which is shaped like a “droplet” comes to a standstill. Once a crew arrives to observe it, it activates and rapidly destroys each of Earth’s ships one by one at a speed which makes it impossible to target. It is in this moment that Zhang makes his long-awaited move. Given command of the ship **Natural Selection**, he speeds away from the battle and from the Solar System. Three other ships, however, manage to make this escape, *Bronze Age*, *Quantum* and *Blue Space*, each heading on a lengthy voyage to the nearest galaxy. Unable to guess each other’s intentions, these ships fire upon each other to protect themselves and Zhang Beihai is obliterated. Without any terrestrial or stellar reference point in the vacuum of space, the skirmish is titled the Battle of Darkness, at the end of which only two ships remain, *Bronze Age*, which will return to the Solar System, and *Blue Space*, which will continue its journey to another system, succeeding in fulfilling the aims of the Escapist doctrine and fulfilling Zhang Beihai’s plan.

The last protagonist, Cheng Xin, is also introduced in the present day and shall undergo her own journey into the distant future. Her story arc begins with her friend, Yun Tianming 云天明, who is terminally ill. In an idealistic frame of mind, he purchases a star for the object of his love, Cheng Xin. The United Nations’ granting the purchasing of stars was devised as a means of acquiring funding from wealthy corporations, governments and individuals to develop its defences for the Solar System. The scheme is called the Stars Our Destination Project.³¹ Yun Tianming, having received a large sum of money, chooses the one star that he is able to afford, DX3906.³²

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³¹ Liu, *Death’s End*, 43-44.
³² Ibid., 50.
Unbeknownst to him, Cheng Xin, a scientist, is working on a secret UN project called the Staircase Program which aims to send a single human into space to make contact with the Trisolaran Fleet. Their theory is that Trisolaris is advanced enough to take a human corpse and genetically reconstruct the remains into a living person. With the launch payload being too heavy for a whole human body, their only option is to send the brain on its own, Yun Tianming, already choosing to undergo euthanasia, decides to donate his body to Cheng Xin’s cause instead. Cheng Xin herself enters hibernation in order to follow through with the completion of the Staircase Program in the future. Two hundred and sixty-four years later, the UN wants to reclaim DX3906, but this cannot be done legally unless the owner agreed to transfer the title. Thus, Cheng Xin is awakened from her slumber. She comes to learn that the Staircase Program had been a failure and contact had been lost with the space probe containing Yun Tianming’s remains. From here, she would be accompanied by an astronomer AA, who had been studying her star system.33

Through a turn of events, Cheng Xin will be elected as Swordholder, taking over Luo Ji. As a much older man, retiring his position, he “stood tall and straight. He looked at the white wall, which he had stared at for more than half a century, for a few more seconds. Then he bowed slightly … paying respects to his enemy.” He had “stared at each other across an abyss of four light-years for half a century [which] had bonded them by a link of destiny.”34 Luo Ji remains an old man, who “had changed from a carefree, irresponsible man into a true Wallfacer, who faced his wall for more than half a century; the protector of Earth civilization who, for five decades, was ready to deal the fatal blow at a moment’s notice.”35 It is at this juncture, when the sword is passed

33 Ibid., 131-132
34 Ibid., 196.
35 Ibid., 195.
from Luo Ji to Cheng Xin, that the Trisolarans choose to strike, noticing her indecisive demeanour. They know that she will not, in her heart, have the ability to broadcast Trisolaris’s location and expose the world to obliteration.

Cheng Xin is faced immediately with the choice which Luo Ji never had to make. Her rationalization comes in starkly Darwinian terms. “Four billion years were layered on top of Cheng Xin, suffocating her.” Her thought process continues, “in her subconscious, the surface was teeming with life, the most prominent form being the giant reptiles, including dinosaurs. Densely, they packed the ground, all the way to the horizon.” Beneath them, “under and between countless pairs of feet, were surging black currents of water: innumerable trilobites and ants….In the sky, hundreds of billions of birds formed a dark, swirling vortex that blotted out the firmament, and giant pterodactyls could be seen among them from time to time…. This dark Darwinian description shifts to a humanistic perspective when she imagines “the humans alone possessed one hundred billion pairs of eyes, equal to the number of stars in the Milky Way. Among them were the eyes of ordinary men and women, and the eyes of Da Vinci, Shakespeare, and Einstein.” She knew that “pressing the switch would end the progress of 3.5 billion years” and is ultimately unable to authorize the strike, leaving Earth’s deterrence defences open to attack. This schizophrenic thought process “wasn’t a decision born of thought, but buried deep in her genes. These genes could be traced to four billion years ago, when the decision was first made. The subsequent billions of years only strengthened it. Right or wrong, she knew she had no other choice.”

It is difficult to argue its being right or wrong in superlative terms, though many Chinese readers frame her

36 Ibid., 204-205.
decision as such.\textsuperscript{37} Rather this decision “to be” (rather than cast destruction upon Trisolaris), foreshadows her much grander choice at the end of the story. It is an example of the non-Euclidean character of morality that Liu describes.

Using the same droplet probes that destroyed Earth’s fleet, Trisolaris wipes out Earth’s broadcasting stations, taking away their means of signalling Trisolaris’s location. Thus the Deterrence Era ends, bringing with it the Post-Deterrence Era. Here, humanity is forced to obey Trisolaris’s demands, lacking the ability to make a counter-attack. Following Sophon’s demands, Earth’s governments have to move the entire human population to the smallest continental land mass, leaving the majority of space for future Trisolaran settlers. Crammed on to Australia, human civilization is rendered into a large refugee camp, under the control of Trisolaris’s human loyalists. In retaliation, \textit{Blue Space}, speeding through the interstellar vacuum, decides to retaliate on Earth’s behalf and broadcasts Trisolaris’s location, a choice which has two major consequences. On the one hand, the Trisolaran system is destroyed. On the other, Earth’s relative location is now known and open to being destroyed too. While Trisolaris’s travelling fleet at last abandons its long-held plans to colonize Earth, this victory comes at the expense of Earth’s inevitable destruction by an unknown superior civilization.

In the intervening time, it is discovered that Yun Tianming, initially thought to be lost in space, has in fact survived and has been successfully reanimated by Trisolarans. He sends messages to Earth, coded as stories, which metaphorically carry the information with which to research the technology of curvature propulsion. His hope is that these messages will lead to the development of lightspeed travel and the “black domain” technology, the former giving humanity

the ability to escape, the other the ability to conceal itself indefinitely from detection by other alien civilizations. That Yun is able to encase his message in poetical form, and that he has been able to slip this information past his Trisolaran captors, is itself an allusion to an earlier novella by Liu, *Poetry Cloud*, (*Shiyun 诗云*). In the story, aliens have taken over Earth and gain an understanding of every aspect of human social life, with the sole exception of poetry, which they are unable to decipher. Without a clear grasp of its function or its purpose, they try to study in spatial terms. As David Wang recounts, they display “all the literary resources across a nebula several hundred trillion meters long but are nonetheless unable to grasp how to write a good poem.” It is humanity which can “still identify what constituted a poem and of the quadrillion computer-generated texts, could also say what did not constitute poetry.” In this manner, he argues, “regarding the different degrees of hope and aspiration for humanity, the very last of them are placed upon literature.”

While this advanced civilization tries to render an aesthetic object in as Euclidean a form as possible, it is shown that it can reveal nothing about the subjective nature of human thought. In this sense, a scientistic take on the humanistic can reveal nothing.

It is this shortcoming on the part of the aliens that Yun Tianming takes advantage of. In a similar way, Yun Tianming’s stories elevate the status of humanistic thought above that of the scientific, in that the poetic form is what ultimately accommodates the safe transmission of new technological ideas. Simply put, it is the poetic form which provides humanity’s potential salvation. Fan Yilun argues that *Poetry Cloud* should be understood within the context of the 1990s debates about scientism and humanism. Generally, “the paradoxical attitude of Li Bai toward technology and poetry epitomizes Liu’s continuous vacillation between his standing as a technological elite
and as a fiction writer,” citing his remark “that technology can solve every problem.”

In the story, the God-like creature... Li Bai finally becomes ‘human’ through his effort to understand poetry.” Fan argues that, “by deliberately placing an understanding of classical Chinese poetry above that of the scientific understanding and technological development,” Liu “counters prevailing scientism and technological determinism.” While it may look as though “Liu just weighs Chinese poetry against technology,” the two concepts represent the tensions between value rationality and instrumental rationality, borrowing Max Weber’s terminology. Poetry, representing value, clashes with technology, representing instrumental action. Those following the instrumental or technological line of thinking believe that “the essence of technology reveals only the utility of natural things” and “therefore deprives nature of its beauty.” But “those who follow value rationality” realize that grasping “the beauty of nature is beyond the revealing power” of technology. The story shows that, “in Liu’s view, poetic imagination and technology are both methods for revealing the beauty of nature but work in different ways and, in order to reveal the truth, they need to rely on each other.” This reconciling of concepts is what Yun Tianming’s metaphorical ploy embodies.

With scientists working at developing these new technologies, Cheng Xin again enters hibernation to await yet another fate. Here, humanity will enter its next epoch: the Bunker Era, in which humanity moves off Earth into space stations behind Jupiter, hoping its large mass will

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39 Ibid., 423.
40 Ibid., 430.
41 Ibid., 432.
42 Ibid., 433.
shield these new habitats from interstellar attacks which would ignite the Sun. Research begins on a new technology that, by slowing the speed of light around the Solar System, would then be able to shroud the Solar System in a “Black Domain,” rendering themselves invisible to observers. Amidst this dramatic shift, we are given a window into the vast and incomprehensible political scheme of the cosmos. Liu depicts an unnamed alien, “Singer” (gezhe 歌者), of a distant and far more advanced civilization in an observation station who detects the distant conflict between Earth and Trisolaris.

In “the Orion Arm of the Milky Way,” we observe him “examining the data” and learn that “the sincerity of the coordinates was Singer’s joy.” He “understood that what he did wasn’t important – it just filled in the pieces. But it had to be done, and the task was enjoyable.” His conceptual language is different, noting that “more than ten thousand grains of time had passed” since he left his home world. We getting a glimpse of the strange world he is from with “columns of phosphorescence rising over the inky-dark sea.” For the Singer, between entropy and order, it was order that “was meaning, the highest meaning, higher than enjoyment” and “any meaning higher than that, it was pointless to think about.” It is here that he notices Earth and Trisolaris’s signals, and decides to send an unexplained technology, a type of “foil,” in their direction to destroy them. This alien is an observer whose task is to wipe out civilizations it discovers. It is the unnerving embodiment of the conclusions of Cosmic Sociological theory and of the dangers of the Dark Forest. It moreover provides “proof” of the conclusion of Luo Ji’s sociological thought that “the real universe is just that black,” always containing the “eternal threat that any life that exposes its own existence will be swiftly wiped out. This is the picture of cosmic civilization.”

The passage itself bears upon one found earlier in the trilogy: “If I destroy you, what business is it of yours?” This quote is found in the second volume, in the moments before the Trisolaran Droplet destroys Earth’s fleet. Two scientists, Ding Yi (Wang Miao’s old friend from the present) and Xizi 西子, who are to inspect the probe, make conversation. “In the old days,” Xizi says, “lots of girls must have been in love with you.” Ding Yi remarks “I wouldn’t usually bother the girls I liked. I believe in what Goethe said: ‘If I love you, what business is it of yours?’" (wo ai ni, yu ni you he xianggan? 我爱你，与你有何相干?) The quote is found in a passage of Goethe’s bildungsroman, The Apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meister, in which the eponymous protagonist thanks his friend Philine for her help, expressing his inability to repay her. To this, she gives her curious response, “If I love you, what business is it of yours?” (“und wenn ich dich lieb habe, was geht's dich an?”), to stress that her reasons for helping Wilhelm are her own. This quote is interestingly inverted as the chapter progresses. On inspecting the probe, wherein Ding Yi realizes that this device is in fact a weapon, he remarks “If I destroy you, what business is it of yours?” (huimie ni, yu ni you he xianggan? 毁灭你，与你有何相干?). The line is repeated once by the disembodied narrator once the fleet’s destruction is complete.

The idea expressed Philine is that love is no one’s business except its expresser’s because the feeling is itself wholly subjective and is independent of its object’s reciprocity to the feeling. That the same can be said of the destruction of another person makes the analogy more curious.

44 Ibid., 441.
Liu, Hei’an Senlin. 376.
45 Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre (William Meister’s Apprenticeship) (Basel: Verlag Birkhäuser, 1944), 212.
46 Liu, The Dark Forest. 446.
Liu, Hei’an Senlin. 381.
47 Liu, The Dark Forest, 464.
Much like the Trisolaran probe, the Singer’s decision to destroy the Solar System is independent of humanity because humanity has no grander cosmological worth, in the subjective view of the Singer. It brings to mind the expression at the end of the first volume when the Trisolarans give their ultimate reply to Earth before invading that they are “bugs” and nothing more. When Trisolaris replies to Earth that “You’re bugs,” anticipating hostility from them, the intended effect is to belie humanity’s relative insignificance. For an intelligent being to destroy an insect is hardly the business of the insect because it has no sense of its existential insignificance, something the higher intelligent being is able to grasp. Its destruction is none of its business.

The Singer’s civilization is so seemingly advanced in this activity that it has reduced it to an aesthetic practice of “cleansing” other civilizations as though swatting flies were akin to a form of art like playing an instrument. We will later learn that this foil device he sends is used to collapse star systems from three dimensions to two, the fate that awaits humanity. While the scene is intentionally placed here out of context to displace the reader and give a sense of the unknowability of the cosmos, it lays out a *deus ex machina* to resolve the conflict of the story at the end of the trilogy. It may be tempting to refer to it as *daemonium ex machina* in that this Singer and his civilization appear as the perfect embodiment of Goethe’s Mephistopheles. By all appearances, the civilization’s only purpose, its only sense of meaning (particularly in the self-described aesthetic character of its activities) is to minimize the extent of conscious life in the galaxy by exterminating what it detects. This species is the embodiment of Mephistopheles’s expression: “I am the spirit that negates. And rightly so, for all that comes to be deserves to perish wretchedly…”48 This is an idea which grows in importance at the end of the story. Humanity’s efforts are in vain as the Singer’s foil eventually reaches the Solar System and rapidly destroys

everything in its path. At the last moment, Luo Ji, now a very old man camped out on a base on Pluto, tells Cheng Xin that lightspeed travel has secretly been developed and there is one ship available with which they can escape the Solar System. She decides to head to Yun Tianming’s star system, DX3906, and blasts off at lightspeed with her companion 艾 AA. Luo Ji is left on the surface of Pluto, surrounding by cultural relics brought from Earth, witnessing the foil collapsing the Solar System’s matter into two dimensions.

“At the end of the novel,” David Wang explains, “everything is indeed destroyed. All that remains is a memorial of humanity on Pluto. The Earth is gone. Nothing is left.” And so “it is inevitable that we become lost in such reveries because we wish for the rise of great powers and, with them, the imagining of a splendid utopia.” In spite of this, “Liu Cixin’s vision is far broader, allowing us to recognize that we, as individuals in an infinite universe, still know so little about so many things and can still continue to explore.” 49 Indeed, the remaining story takes an idealistic turn as Cheng Xin and 艾 AA learn of the fate of the humans that set off on Blue Space. Their descendants have managed to survive by developing the black domain technology. Here they are called “light curtains,” a play on the Chinese term for curtain mu 幕, which also sounds like “tomb.” 50 The meaning implies that behind these curtains, artificial black holes, nothing can escape and those humans who enter find a safe, and eternal, resting place – a sort of afterlife. Once inside these tombs, “it was impossible for any message from that world to reach the outside.” 51

It opens to a wider view of the Milky Way and how it is that humans manage to survive in it. It is much vaster view in which Liu reminds the reader that an understanding of the universe’s

49 Wang, “Wutuobang Etuobang Yituobang.”
50 See translator’s note. Liu, Death’s End, 663.
51 Ibid., 663.
inordinate complexity is infinitely unattainable and even the scientific postulates of Cosmic Sociology are too limited an explanation. Cheng Xin meets one of the crew of *Blue Space*, Guan Yifan 关一帆. Guan tells them that “the reality of the universe is not something to envy.” While the “the dark forest state is all-important…it’s just a detail of the cosmos.” He adds, “You have not seen what a true interstellar war is like.” Cheng Xin learns that it is the laws of physics themselves which are the weapons used to wage interstellar war, of which the Singer’s two-dimensional foil was just one sort.\(^{52}\) This theme brings the reader back to Wang Miao and Da Shi’s discussion back in the present day, in the first volume, in the Shooter and Farmer hypothesis which questioned whether physical laws of the cosmos were fashioned by higher beings or existed *a priori*. Cheng Xin understands in pragmatist terms what Wang could only hypothesize centuries earlier. The drama ends with the remaining protagonists, Cheng Xin and Guan Yifan living in a private “bubble” universe, named “Universe 647,” cut off from the original universe. They know that “as long as the tiny sun inside the sphere continued to give off light, this miniature ecological system would persist. As long as it remained here, Universe 647 would not be a lifeless, dark world.”\(^{53}\)

This final thought experiment is seemingly inspired by Liu’s reading of science popularization literature on theoretical physics. As Davies recounts, since the theory of the second law of thermodynamics was established in 1862, “all the evidence points….to a universe that has a limited life span. It came into existence at some finite time in the past, it is currently vibrant with activity, but it is inevitably degenerating toward a heat death at some stage in the future,” a prospect that gives rise to unsettling conclusion that existence ultimately diminishes into a permanent

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 664-665.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 720.
nothingness. \footnote{Davies, \textit{The last three minutes}, 18.} He continues that currently physicists have proposed “two very different scenarios for the end of the universe,” one being “a big crunch” and the other the heat-death, the former being the collapse of all matter to a singularity wherein a big bang occurs and the universe begins a new, the latter being the inevitable dispersal of all matter into nothing. “The prospect of the cosmos obliterating itself entirely in a big crunch is alarming, however far in the future this event may lie. On the other hand, however, a universe that lasts for an infinite time in a state of bleak emptiness after a finite duration of glorious activity is profoundly depressing.” \footnote{Ibid., 141-142.} In view of this ethical conundrum, “the appeal of the cyclic model is that it evades the scenario of total annihilation, without replacing it by eternal degeneration and decay. To avoid the futility of endless repetition, the cycles should be somehow different from each other.” \footnote{Ibid., 136.}

Davies’s work also explores the wider postulations about multiverses, particularly the far-fetched theory that man may one day be able to create its own alternative universes. He discusses a set of speculations in which it may be possible to physically detach from the space of our universe into a separate one. “One way to envisage this peculiar state of affairs is by analogy with a rubber sheet that blisters up in one place and balloons out. The balloon forms a sort of baby universe connected to the mother universe by an umbilical cord, or ‘wormhole.’” Eventually, the “wormhole is pinched off, and the baby universe, now disconnected from the mother universe, becomes a new and independent universe in its own right.” This idea “carries the obvious implication that our own universe may have originated in this way – as the progeny of another universe.” \footnote{Ibid., 142.} Even though “the idea remains highly conjectural and is based entirely on
mathematical theorizing.” Davies explains, it is plausible given one can harness sufficient amounts of energy. In the same way as Cheng Xin, “when our own universe is becoming uninhabitable or approaching a big crunch, our descendants may decide to get out for good by initiating the budding process and then scrambling through the umbilical wormhole into the universe next door before it pinches off.…”

The concept is crucially important in the way it is used to frame the end of the trilogy. In fact, the concept is alluded to in the final volume’s Chinese title, *Sishen Yongsheng*, literally meaning “immortal death.” As Davies discusses, “the very possibility of baby universes opens up the prospect of genuine immortality.” As he explains, “rather than thinking about the life and death of the universe, we ought instead to think about a family of universes multiplying ad infinitum, each giving birth to new successive generations of universes.” This “metaverse…might have no beginning or end. Each individual universe would have a birth, evolution, and death…but the collective would exist eternally.” Davies has considered this state of affairs from the moral standpoint of those beings how would produce and inhabit such a metaverse. “If there is a purpose to the universe, and it achieves that purpose,” he argues,” then the universe must end, for its continued existence would be gratuitous and pointless. Conversely, if the universe endures forever, it is hard to imagine that there is any ultimate purpose to the universe at all. So cosmic death may be the price that has to be paid for cosmic success.”

58 Ibid., 138.
59 The English translation by Ken Liu is titled *Death’s End*. The French translation is titled *La Mort immortelle*, closer in meaning to *sishen yongsheng*.
60 Davies, *The last three minutes*, 138.
61 Ibid., 155.
The speculative concept of bubble universes, the moral conundrum concluded by Davies, is deployed by Liu at the end of his work as a way of ultimately trying to resolve the problem of humanity’s infinite expansion into space. In the final scene, Cheng and Guan are approached by Sophon who warns them that there is potentially not enough mass in the original universe for it to collapse in upon itself, caused by many other beings likewise escaping into their own bubble universes. The two are left with the choice of deciding between two models for the universe, the final collapse of all matter in a big crunch followed by a subsequent Big Bang, or an unending existence in a big freeze where all matter and energy dies out. Guan worries that “the great universe really would fail to collapse because it lacked a single atom’s mass. The precision Nature can sometimes exceed the imagination.” They understand they have an obligation to return to the original universe.62

The resolution is that it is better the cycle of the universe should continue and that they return to their original universe, knowing that it will collapse into a singularity. Rather than have no evidence of their existence, they decide to leave a small ecological habitat behind. “The message in a bottle and the ecological sphere were the only things left in the mini-universe” and “faded into the darkness so, in this one-cubic-kilometer universe, only the little sun inside the ecological sphere gave off any light. The final image of the story describes “a blade of grass on one of the miniature continents, a drop of dew took off from the tip of the grass blade, rose spiralling into the air, and refracted a clear ray of sunlight into space.”63 Thus the trilogy is left with a memento mori, or rather a memento mundi (to which the trilogy’s title Diqiu Wangshi refers). In terms of Davies’s discussion, the end of the universe is necessary because it would avoid the

62 Liu, Death’s End, 721.
63 Ibid.
“gratuitous and pointless” existence faced by eternal inhabitants but allows for the potential for other realities and possibilities to emerge.

Most importantly, the fate of the physical universe is ultimately determined by human volition. As David Wang asks, “when humanity reaches its final fate, how can we maintain a modicum of dignity?” The ability for human will to decide the very physical state of the universe might be understood as an expression of this idea. Perhaps the ecological memento left behind by Cheng Xin is a metaphor for this choice, the sphere itself being its own “modicum of dignity.” In this ending, what Gaffric describes as an “almost pastoral conclusion,” Liu attempts a reconciliation of will and fate, by construing a circumstance in which the continued existence of the cosmos itself depends on human volition – on the decision of its inhabitants for it “to be” at the expense of their “not being.”

In this idealist ending passage we see a humanity that has transcended the “slings and arrows” of its scientistic conditions, of physics and Darwinism, in that it turns away from the Mephistophelean attitude of the Singer’s civilization, that “spirit that negates all.” The inverse of this attitude is the last humans’ choice to create the universe again, to be “the spirit that creates all” in a sense (if we are to think back to how Liu inverts Goethe’s thoughts), by creating the conditions for another Big Bang. While heliocentric humans are ultimately eliminated, the last word is had by the remaining interstellar humans, Cheng Xin and Guan Yifan in that they become the instigators for the recreation of the cosmos.

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64 Wang, “Wutuobang Etuobang Yituobang.”
One is tempted to search for religious undertones when reading the trilogy, something Liu argues is absent from the rest of Chinese sf. When discussing this lack of “religious sentiment” (zongjiao ganqing 宗教感情), he declares himself a “firm atheist.” He does not get into the complicated relationship between religion and the birth of science in the West, only talking about this type of “feeling” in sf, something that is not related to God, but is rather atheistic (noting that this perspective is a simplification of Spinoza). His description is perhaps an elaboration on Kant’s quote, that the estrangement one feels in the face of the macroscopic grandeur of the cosmos inculcates a religious outlook, of a sense of the sublime. In a strangely Christian turn of phrase, he imagines that science fiction’s jiaoyi 教义, its creed or doctrine, would be worded along the following lines:

感受主的大，感受主的深，把这感觉写出来，给那些忙碌的人看，让他们和你有同样的感受，让他们也感受到主的大和深，那样的话，你、那些忙碌的人、中国科幻，都有福了。67

The poem or prayer reads: “Sense the Lord’s greatness, Sense His depth, And put these to words, To show to the busied people, That they may sense the same as You, The Grandeur and the Depth of the Lord, So that You, the busied people, Chinese science fiction, Are each Blessed.” In this particular exegesis, one might argue that humanism has the last word in a scientistically ordered world. Liu, David Wang argues, “is always reminding us that there are so many dimensions to the universe. The dimension in which we find ourselves is just one among many other possible ones…” However, “this whole projection of life and of time is not some logical

66 Liu, Liu Cixin tan kehuan, 86.
67 Ibid., 89.
treatise which takes us from an introduction to a conclusion.” In fact, “as a science enthusiast and as a researcher, he feels that he has the ability to expound to us the possibilities of infinite expansion (into the universe).” This ultimate privileging of humanism is perhaps what Liu means when he reflects that he “wrote about the worst of all possible universes in *Three-Body* in the hope that we can strive for the best of all possible Earths.”

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68 Wang, “*Wutuobang Etuobang Yituobang*.”
5) Historicism

In *War and Peace*, a work produced during a golden age of scientific inquiry, Tolstoy draws an analogy that exudes the sort of tension between scientistic and humanistic thinking evident in Liu’s own work. Tolstoy discusses the interaction between electricity, heat and atoms, stating that such physical laws have to be so, because they are otherwise unthinkable if they are not treated as laws.

电生热，热又生电。原子相吸而又相斥。

在谈到热和电的相互作用以及说到原子时，我们说不出为什么发生这种情况，便说事情就是这样，因为不可能是另一种的样子，因为应该这样，这是规律。历史现象也是如此。

...

假如史学只研究外部现象，那么只要提出这个简单明了的规律就行了，我们的议论也可到此结束了。但是历史的规律与人有关。物质的微粒不可能告诉我们，说它根本感觉不到相吸和相斥的需要，说这不是真实的；而作为史学研究对象的人却直截了当地说：我是自由的，因此不服从规律。1

Regarding the interaction of matter and energy, Tolstoy argues that “it is the same with respect to historical phenomena” (*lishi xianxiang ye shi ruci* 历史现象也是如此) because history is simply a matter of “external phenomena.” On the other hand, man “who is the subject of history,

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1 Leo Tolstoy, *Zhanzheng yu heping* (War and Peace), translated by Zhang Jie (Nanjing: Yilin, 2015), 1339.
[and] says outright: I am free and therefore not subject to the law.” It would be enough to explain men merely as products of their historical context if it were not for the fact that men view history as a product of their agency and actions. He writes that “a particle of matter cannot tell us that it feels no need at all to attract or repel and that it is not true; but man, who is the subject of history, says outright: I am free and therefore not subject to the law” (wo shi ziyou de, yinci bu fu cong guilü 我是自由的，因此不服从规律). As Joe Barnhart summarizes, Tolstoy argued that we understand history “not by first defining freedom and inevitability in themselves, but by drawing a conception of freedom and inevitability from the immense quantity of relevant human phenomena that appears on the surface at least to depend on both free will and necessity.” Historical figures, in other words, are better understand in terms of the constraints placed upon them rather than as free agents. Regarding this Tolstoian brand of historicism, one thinks of Cosmic Sociology.

The sentiment is aptly echoed in Liu’s view that “every era puts invisible shackles on those who have lived through it, and I can only dance in my chains.” Man’s claim “to be” is ultimately a gesture in such chains. As discussed, Liu’s illustration of the “worst of all possible universes” and the “best of all possible Earths” depends upon the enumeration of a wide variety of situations – vignettes across an explicit historical timeline. While Liu might attempt to show an exceptionally diverse set of social and political norms across this historical timeline, in Earths of many different periods, these vignettes are strewn across a normative scientistic backdrop. Liu consistently relies on historical analogy (both fictionalized and real) to allude to such normativity, as well as to indicate further to us, the boundaries (or lack thereof) of ethical norms. These

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intentions, moreover, are hinted in Liu’s use of temporal and spatial deixis, that is the way in which he situates each of his historical vignettes in time and in space. This can be observed in the following passage:

“In the near future, Zhang Beihai witnesses new future technologies and we see Chang Weisi exclaiming: “Who would have thought we’d one day be facing a battle map like this,” regarding “a one-to-one-trillion-scale chart of the Solar System displayed on a monitor large enough to be a movie screen” (Chang Weisi mianduizhe yi bi yi qian de taiyangxi kongjian tu gankai dao. Xianshi kongjian tu de chaoda pingmu, mianji xiangdang yu yige dianying kuan yinmu 常伟思面对着一比一千亿的太阳系空间图感慨道。显示空间图的超大屏幕, 面积相当于一个电影宽银幕). In a blending of both temporal and spatial deixis, Liu’s contrasts the unfamiliar future technology with a present-day “movie screen,” an image easily recognizable to the reader.

5 Liu, Hei’an Senlin. 169.
With an established framed of reference, the outlandishness of the spectacle is emphasized further, the chart being described as “almost entirely dark, except for the tiny spot of yellow in the center that was the sun” (dan pingmu shang jihu shi yipian qihei, zhi zai zhengzhong you yi ge xiaoxiao de huangse liang ban, na shi taiyang 但屏幕上几乎是一片漆黑，只在正中有一个小小的黄色亮斑，那是太阳). The spatial deixis is emphasized further, Jupiter appearing only as a faint speck: “It was just an indistinct, tiny bright spot, but from this distance the other seven major planets were invisible” (dan zhi shi yi ge shi wu de weixiao liangdian, zai zhege juli shang, qi ta da xingxing junk an bujian 但只是一个似有似无的微小亮点, 在这个距离上, 其他七大行星均看不见). 6 The passage continues:

“首长，不知你注意到同志们面对这幅图时的眼神没有?”章北海问。

“当然注意到了，可以理解, 他们在会前肯定把空间图想成科普画那样，几个台球大小的彩色行星围着太阳的大火球转动……

见到按真实比例绘制的空间图，才感受到了太阳系的广阔。

不管是空军还是海军, 他们能够航行或飞行的最远距离在这张屏幕上连一个像素的大小都不到。7

As Zhang Beihai asks Chang “if [he] noticed the eyes of our comrades when they saw this map,” Liu Cixin grounds the reader’s supposed incredulity towards the high-tech spectacle in the similar responses of the fictional characters, who are taking in the scene in a supposedly similar way. The captain replies that their expectations would be of “a couple of colored billiard balls rotating around a fireball” (ji ge taiqiu daxiao de caise hang xing weizhe taiyang de da huoqiu

6 Liu, The Dark Forest, 199.
7 Liu, Hei’an Senlin. 169.
zhuandong 几个台球大小的彩色行星围着太阳的火球转动). To put in perspective “an appreciation of the vastness of the Solar System,” he points out that “the furthest [distance] their air and water craft can go doesn’t even amount to one pixel on the big screen” (tamen nenggou hangxiang huo feixing de zui yuan juli zai zhe zhang pingmu shang lian yi ge xiangsu de daxiao dou bu dao 他们能够航行或飞行的最远距离在这张屏幕上连一个像素的大小都不到). The achievement of this narrative style is an expositional one which allows the reader, who has the same frame of reference as Zhang Beihai, to make sense of unfamiliar technological spectacle. The emphasis on spatial deixis, and of observer’s expectations, of this giant map ironically helps the reader to map, in a specific way, humanity’s progress in space exploration and military development, in both objective and subjective terms.

Spatial deixis, as a narrative technique, is an essential crux for constructing convincing sf environments and was a favoured tool of Arthur C. Clarke. As Stockwell explains, regarding 2001: A Space Odyssey, “all the usual features of spatial deixis are found routinely within the reported speech of characters in science fiction, specifying their local position, in relation to points which have already been set up by the surrounding narrator.” In science fiction, moreover, “all narrators use deictic expressions” as a way of consistently orienting the story within the reader’s frame of reference. An important feature, he notes, “is how closely tied spatial deixis is to temporal deixis, as two aspects of the locating function of narrative deixis generally.” It manages the difficult task of orienting oneself in “science fictional space [which] is measured in light years…”

In Diqiu Wangshi, as humanity’s story stretches further across centuries, so does its position in outer space. In contrast to spatial deixis, the temporal form is important because

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8 Liu, The Dark Forest, 199.
9 Stockwell, The Poetics of Science Fiction, 32-34.
“science fiction prototypically deals with events in the future, and the notion of time travel is closely associated with science fictional narratives. Locating the narrative temporally is obviously, then, an important feature for the genre. On the one hand, Liu must rely on temporal deixis, to keep our senses anchored in a consistent historical continuum as we move further and further into an unfamiliar future. On the other, it helps revert to the reader’s present-day moral frame of reference as we likewise transition into the relativistic world of outer space. Fundamentally, sf can extrapolate futures in two forms: in either “serial” and “parallel” versions of a speculative future, the former being “set along the future time line of our real world,” the latter being “futures in alternative universes.” As we would expect, Clarke’s 2001 “is a serial vision of the future, with the detail of the world presented in as extrapolative a ‘realistic’ way as possible.” This “realism” is developed through emphasizing the supposed historicity of the narrative in the reader’s implied knowledge of the real world’s past, and extrapolating this knowledge to a hypothesized future which extends from that same past. In this way, fictional sf scenarios do not come across simply as conjured fantasies from the author’s imagination, but rather as possible alternative occurrences along a factual historical trajectory. We see such techniques used explicitly in the introduction to the AI system HAL in 2001: A Space Odyssey:

哈尔。。。是第三次计算机突破的杰作。这些突破似乎二十年就要发生一次，下次突破已经迫近的想法使许多人都感到忧虑。

第一次是在上世纪四十年代，用那些早就过时的电子管装出了ENIAC等笨拙的、高速低能计算机。到了六十年代，固体微电子学占了上风。随着

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10 Ibid., 34.
11 Ibid., 17.
The sort of historical exposition here is more distant, HAL being described as “a masterwork of the third computer breakthrough. These seemed to occur at intervals of twenty years” (shì di sān cì jì bi jì tū pō di jiè zuò. Zhè xiè tū pō sì hū èr shí niān jù yào fā shēng yī cì 是第三次计算机突破的杰作。这些突破似乎二十年就要发生一次). The context is further elaborated over the passage in brackets of time: “The first had been in the 1940s” (dì yī ci shì zài shāng shì jì sì hū niándài 第一次是在上世纪四十年代), “then, in the 1960s” (dào le lǐ shí niándài 到了六十年代), “in the 1980s,” (zài bā shí niándài 在八十年代). This signposting is detailed with technical description, first of technology familiar to the reader, “the long obsolete vacuum tube” (diàn zǐ guān zhōu 电子管装) and “solid-state microelectronics” (gǔ tì wèi diàn zǐ xué 固体微电子学). It then moves on to the hypothetical “artificial brains” (rèngōng nǎo 人工脑). Thus, while the passage starts in the cognitive frame of reference of the 1970s audience, it is able to shift the reader steadily to a scene which is “too complex for human understanding” (qì fù zì xìng yè kě néng cháo chū rén

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This gradual transition of temporal and terminological language from the familiar to the unfamiliar provides an emblematic example of the way in which Clarke effortlessly blended fictional history and fake future into a singular aesthetic. Clarke, for example, commonly analogizes voyages of astronauts through space in the distant future with the voyages of sailors across the oceans in the late modern period. In *Rendezvous with Rama*, Captain Norton reflects on his coming expedition into the Raman spaceship:

诺顿从未感到过他同古埃及学者有这么亲密的关系。他觉得有点像豪华。
卡特（二十世纪考古学家）第一次窥视图坦坎曼的古墓时那样的感觉。虽然这样比较是可笑的荒谬。
图坦坎曼是四千年前被埋葬的，但这在目前的情况下，似乎只是昨天的事
一样—拉玛可能比人类还要古老。而且他将进入的这个空间至少也要比那个墓达一百万倍。至于里面可能有的财富—更是想象以外的事了。14

Here, he compares his coming journey inside an alien vessel with Howard Carter’s 1922 discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun, a “comparison [that] was almost laughably ludicrous.” In many parts throughout the novel, Norton feels much the way past sailors did on their long voyages at sea. However, there are slight differences in the Chinese and English expressions of this sentiment. For example, the original English states that “never before had Norton felt so strongly his kinship with that long dead Egyptologist.” However, the Chinese translation 古埃及学者 guaiji xuezhe omits “long dead.”15 The phrase “Tutankhamun had been buried only yesterday” is

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expressed as 似乎只是昨天的事一样 sihu zhishi zuotian de shi yiyang, closer in meaning to: “it seems Tutankhamun’s burial was only yesterday.” In different ways, the Chinese and English give different forms of emphasis to the passage of time. Such style is echoed in a later passage:

他当了好几个月努力号船长之后才能发现它是用历史上一艘最著名的船来命名的。那是 1768 年至 1771 年由皇家海军詹姆斯•库克船长驾驶着环绕世界的一艘 370 吨的帆船 16

Here, Norton reflects that “he had been captain of *Endeavour* for several months before he realised that it was named after one of the most famous ships in history,” Captain Cook’s *Endeavour*. The passage then extrapolates the increasing expanse of human voyage from the sea to space, explaining that “during the last four hundred years there had been a dozen *Endeavours* of sea and two of space, but the ancestor of them was the 370-ton Whitby collier that Captain James Cook, RN, had sailed around the world between 1768 and 1771.” 17 Chinese naturally being less nuanced than English in its expression of tense, carries less of the sense of the explicitness of time and in essence periodicity is diminished. One can therefore see how the attention to dates and analogies come across more starkly in Chinese, altering the sense of subjectivity in these Clarkean historical analogies:

他下班后有六小时随他高兴干什么都行。有时他会继续学习，后者听音乐后者看电影。大部分时间他会在飞船的不会枯竭的电子图书馆里漫游。对过去探索使他最为神往，在这样的环境里，这是很容易理解的；有时他会随着派锡厄斯在海格立斯的大圆柱子徘徊，沿着刚刚脱离石器时代的欧洲海岸，几乎闯入极地的冰冷的白雾。或者在两千年后，他与安森同乘马呢拉大帆船，与库克一起迎着大地礁的暗藏的危险张开风帆，与麦哲伦一起

16 Clarke, *Yu lama xianghui*, 89.
17 Clarke, *Rendezvous With Rama*, 82.
The passage from *2001: A Space Odyssey* describes Dave Bowman, much like Commander Norton, imagining other places in history. Reading the “*Odyssey*, which of all books spoke to him most vividly across the gulfs of time,” he reflects on the many places he would study in his leisure. In his ship, “he would wander at will through the ship’s inexhaustible electronic library” (他会在飞船的不会枯竭的电子图书馆里漫游). At other times, “he would cruise with Pytheas out through the Pillars of Hercules” (他会随着派锡厄斯在海格立斯的大圆柱子徘徊). Later in the passage, the past habitual tense (indicated before in 会) is removed, the Chinese translation thus lacking the implication that Bowman’s journeys into the past are solely intellectual but are rather physical. Clarke writes that “two thousand years later, he would pursue the Manila galleons with Anson, sail with Cook along the unknown hazards of the Great Barrier Reef” (在两千年后, 他与安森同乘马呢拉大帆船,与库克一起迎着大地礁的暗藏的危险张开风帆). In this version, where the past habitual tense is absent, the translator implies that Bowman sails “together” with both Anson and Cook, as though he were blending multiple times, places and people into one scene in his mind.

Simply for the fact that Liu places Clarke as his primary influence, and the Chinese translation of such historical sf imagery is so vivid and interconnected, one would be tempted to

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deconstruct *Diqiu Wangshi* more comprehensively in such terms. But reading elsewhere, one finds that Liu is rather emphatic about influence of the historical fiction genre to his sf writing. On Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* and Herman Wouk’s *Winds of War* he points out their common style of a “bird’s eye view” of historical events (of the Napoleonic Wars and Second World War respectively). These “panoramic novels describing human warfare” make the individuals experience to the large historical story more relatable. Such a thing is “exactly the perspective of science fiction.”

As Janice Liedl has argued, science fiction can itself be understood as historical fiction and that it “operates as a historical genre even when only concerned with the future or alien alterity.” She suggests that there are three elements to the historicity of the genre, involving firstly those past events that that constitute historical content. Secondly, there is “an interpretative framework driving the historian’s analysis of the past, however much some practitioners may deny employing the same.” Lastly, there are “implications or application” of those interpretations to both the present and the future. “All three of these elements and the form in which they are presented combine to create our understanding of the past as opposed to simply the content of that history.”

The prior passage on HAL’s development is a good example of this.

Liu Cixin points to the fact that both Wouk and Tolstoy wrote independent historical descriptions of events in their books. In describing Napoleon’s invasion of Russia, in which the harsh Winter reduced 600,000 French soldiers to just 30,000, he writes that such expositional details were “isolated from the body of the novel and were placed in independent chapters.” What their respective descriptions show is one commonality: “these two writers, separated by a century,

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20 Liu, “Liu Cixin’s secret bookshelf.”
are telling their readers that these things are history and are not organic parts of their work or their literary creations.”

23 Such structural techniques were used by Liu in the third volume of Diqiu Wangshi in Cheng Xin’s “A Past Outside of Time” (shijian zhi wai de wangshi 时间之外的往事). In Winds of War, similarly, a fictional German general Armin von Roon’s “World Empire Lost,” translated by the protagonist Victor Henry, is woven into the narrative where dense historical detail of events is necessitated for plot progression. While Armin von Roon’s and Cheng Xin’s reflections are there to simplify the complicated historical context surrounding the protagonists, they are not placed there solely to provide an air of “objectivity.” Rather they are tied deeply to the subjective views of these respective characters. For Cheng Xin, it is her personal “remembrance of Earth’s past” from the perspective of the end of the Universe, while for Victor Henry, it is “to defend the honor of the German soldier” that was stained by Nazi rule. 24

On the one hand, Diqiu Wangshi is a fictional account of Earth’s evolution through a wide variety of speculative scenarios. On the other, the description of such scenarios is described, very often, with heavy reference to events in the real world. As Liu himself writes, “in science fiction…macro-portrayals of history can be the focus of an entire work. Unlike mainstream novels, such works can still remain fiction,” since the historical content stems from “the author’s imagination.” 25 The sentiment is echoed by Stockwell, who explains how depictions of the future can be given historical colour. Depictions of future societies, for example, can be “specified with a conventional date (1984, 2001); sometimes the date is presented in a futuristic style (A.F. 632 – six centuries ‘After Ford’ in Brave New World…); and sometimes the future is unspecified or more

23 Liu, Liu Cixin tan kehuan, 45.
Such works “seem to become retrospective extrapolations, overtaken by history, and by other, newly-conceived science fictional futures.”

What Liu has described might be called Tolstoian exposition, a narrative style in which a grander historical story is described through smaller subjective stories of characters. Tolstoy was concerned with questions two assumptions which obfuscated the understanding of history: that “(1) peoples are guided by individual men, and (2) there exists a certain goal towards which peoples and mankind move.” Only through the following the microscopic stories of many characters can the wider macro-history which unites them be brought into full view. In addition to this, the narrative is interspersed with distanced historical commentaries of the events in which characters are caught up, bring together a giant narrative web. Tolstoy’s work has many characters situated in many places witnessing many separate events to constructing a big picture such that we are able witness events from the Battle of Schöngraben in 1805 to the burning of Moscow in 1812 via multiple angles. Wouk, on the other hand, only portrays a few protagonists, the Henrys, who “become a family of tumbleweeds,” dispersed across Europe and America, through the events of the late 1930s. In a somewhat far-fetched sequence of events, his main protagonist Victor Henry is able to travel to many places (London during the Blitz, the Russian side of the Eastern Front, the Philippines and pre-War Berlin) – a story through which he can construct a global narrative of the events of the early war period. This mapping of one or more characters across many places, then, is a form of spatial deixis, and one which sf can conveniently adopt.

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26 Stockwell, *The Poetics of Science Fiction*, 12.
In *Diqiu Wangshi*, Liu demands of the reader a similar suspension of disbelief. Liu’s story is more similar to Wouk’s than Tolstoy’s in that he portrays only several protagonists, as outlined in the prior chapters. While there are numerous characters on the side (such as Ding Yi or Yun Tianming) to flesh out many sub-narratives, the story principally follows Ye Wenjie, Wang Miao, Zhang Beihai, Luo Ji and Cheng Xin. It is the latter three characters whose stories span several centuries. This detail, of course, is the principal difference between Liu’s sf epoch and Wouk’s historical tale, which spans only several years. Thus, if Wouk requires that the reader suspend their disbelief in imagining Victor Henry being able to traverse a tempestuous geopolitical map with considerable ease, Liu requires also disbelief in imagining characters who, rather conveniently, manage to survive multiple stints in suspended animation, often across century-long leaps, to traverse a tumultuous historical timeline. In other words, what Liu tries to achieve through temporal deixis, both Wouk and Tolstoy try to achieve through spatial deixis.

This strict adherence to first-person observation, of one single character’s being witness to many times and places, demonstrates just how adherent Liu Cixin is to Tolstoy’s and Wouk’s “bird’s-eye view” of history. Thus, we must pay attention to subjectivity of individual characters, specifically, of their deictic function within the historical progression of the wider narrative. This idea is evidenced most clearly in one passage in which Luo Ji awakens in year 205 of the Crisis Era:

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他们的衣服也都映出绚美的图案, 每个人的风格都不同, 有的写实有的抽象。罗辑被他们的目光所慑服, 他知道, 普通人的目光, 是他们所在地区和时代的文明程度的最好反映。他曾经看到过一组由欧洲摄影师拍摄的清末年的照片，最深的印象就是照片上的人呆滞的目光，在那些照片上，不论是官员还是百姓，眼睛中所透出的只有麻木和愚钝，看不到一点生气。现在, 这个新时代的人看到罗辑的眼睛时, 可能也是那种感觉了。在与罗辑
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相视的目光中，充满着睿智的生机，以及他在自己的时代很少感受到的真诚、理解和爱意。但从心灵的最深处打动罗辑的，是人们目光中的自信，这种阳光般的自信充满了每一双眼睛，显然已经成为新时代人们的精神背景。29

The use of analogy is most striking, emphasizing the perceptual distance between the future and his own time. He thinks of the “photos taken by European photographers in the late Qing Dynasty” in which he saw “the dull expressions of the people in the photographs” (ren daizhi de muguang 人呆滞的目光). Those peasants’ display of “only numbness and stupidity, lacking the slightest shred of vitality” (yanjing zhong suo chu de zhiyou mamu he yudun 眼睛中所透出的只有麻木和愚钝) is reflected upon himself, now that he is too a relic of the distant past. Here, the use of temporal deixis achieves a feeling of estrangement, as Luo Ji is now as disconnected from the present as he is from the past. He sees that “the gazes that crossed his own were full of a vigorous wisdom, and a sincerity, understanding, and love that he had rarely perceived in his own age” (ta zai ziji de shidai hen shao ganshou dao de zhencheng, lijie he ai yi 他在自己的时代很少感受到的真诚、理解和爱意). “But what impressed him most,” he thinks, “was the confidence in their expressions,” and this very confidence constitutes “the spiritual backdrop for the people of this new era” (xin shidai renmen de jingshen beijing 新时代人们的精神背景). The surest proof of a genuine utopia is framed in an explicitly deictic way: “the best reflection of the level of civilization in a time and place,” the late Qing period being an example of the antithesis.30

One can see here that the employment of temporal deixis has to appeal to the reader’s assumed historical literacy of the reader. When studying Luo Ji’s, Cheng Xin’s and Zhang Beihai’s

29 Liu, Hei’an Senlin, 279
30 Liu, The Dark Forest, 329.
leaps across historical time into an unfamiliar future scenario, such scenes are framed precisely around their subjectivity, focusing on their perceptions of their newly found circumstances. What Liu stresses, regardless of these characters’ motivations or perceptions, is their unfamiliarity with the situations in which they awaken and, in these situations, the reader is as unfamiliar with the new world as the protagonists experiencing it. This condition naturally accommodates the heavy use of exposition in which the protagonist is simply and explicitly informed of the technological, political or social changes that have occurred. A good example of this sort of cognitive estrangement, in which dialogue helps to flesh out more detail historical detail about the future, is shown here:

舰队司令：可是现在，未来史学派的理论已被证明是错误的。

章北海：首长，您低估了他们。他们不但预言了大低谷，也预言了第二次启蒙运动和第二次文艺复兴，他们所预言的今天的强盛时代，几乎与现实别无二致，最后，他们也预言了末日之战中人类的彻底失败和灭绝。舰队司令

...

章北海：成吉思汗的骑兵，攻击速度与二十世纪的装甲部队相当；北宋的床弩，射程达一千五百米，与二十世纪的狙击步枪差不多；但这些仍不过是古代的骑兵与弓弩而已，不可能与现代力量抗衡。基础理论决定一切，未来史学派清楚地看到了这一点。而你们，却被回光返照的低级技术蒙住了眼睛。你们躺在现代文明的温床中安于享乐，对即将到来的决定人类命运的终极决战完全没有精神上的准备。31

31 Liu, *Hei’an Senlin*, 354.
This rather wordy dialogue between Zhang Beihai and his commander on Earth’s Trisolaris strategy in Year 205 of the Crisis Era, manages to update the reader on the military and intellectual evolution of Earth, attempting to situate the epistemological standpoint of these historically divided characters. The terminologically laden argument mentions “the theories of Future History” (weilai shixuepai de lilun 未来史学派的理论) – a new intellectual discipline which tries to formulate determinist predictions of future events. To outwit Zhang, the Commander raises all the history that Zhang would not be familiar with, the “Great Ravine” (da digu 大低谷), the “Second Enlightenment” (er ci qimeng yundong 二次启蒙运动) and the “Second Renaissance” (di er ci wenyi fuxing 第二次文艺复兴).

Zhang, however, feels that his new contemporaries are more complacent than the people of his own time. To prove that the commanders “are luxuriating in the nursery of modern civilization, without any mental preparation whatsoever for the coming ultimate battle,” he refers to his own historical knowledge.³² Zhang draws analogies between the military technologies of Chinggis Khan (Chengjisihan de qibing, gongji sudu yu ershi de zhuangjia bu dui xiangdang 成吉思汗的骑兵, 攻击速度与二十世纪的装甲部队相当) and the Northern Song Dynasty (Beisong de chuang nu, shecheng da Yiqian wubaimi, yu ershi shiji de juji buqiang chabudo 北宋的床弩, 射程达一千五百米, 与二十世纪的狙击步枪差不多) to prove that humanity’s technological leaps are never quite as far ahead or as one thinks, showing that humans can easily be outwitted by more primitive tools. The relativity of military tactics brings to mind Nikolai Bolkonsky’s remark to his son, in War and Peace, of “this new science…known as strategy.”³³ Such a passage assumes

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³² Liu, The Dark Forest, 415.
³³ Tolstoy, War and Peace, 100.
an amount of prior knowledge on behalf of the reader to interpret the relevance of such historical detail, all of which is to emphasize the reality of the futuristic worlds depicted – that they exist in the same continuum. It trusts that the reader can distinguish “real past events” that are made up and ones that are not made up. The fictional and the non-fictional are intentionally enmeshed to be read as equally factual.

Both of Zhang Beihai’s scenes, which each exude this form of technical and analogic temporal deixis, are reminiscent of similar passages in *Winds of War*. Being an account of the early Second World War, this work incorporates scenes showing the development of new military technologies, particularly as a form of narratorial exposition. As an example, the story shows Victor Henry’s witnessing the early implementation of radar technology during the Battle of Britain:

> "科学家点点头，两眼几乎紧闭着，脸上尽量不露任何表情。帕格想，他也是个愉快的人。"

> "呃，那可是个问题，是吧？" 他嘟哝着。 "不过他们一定会找到答案的。这跟真空管设计、整机电路等等都有关系。我们的腔体磁控管在这方面起了非常良好的作用，我们对它相当满意。"

> "腔体磁控管？"

> "对啦。腔体磁控管。您知道，我们在真空管里不需要栅极。我们用外磁场来控制电流。这样就能使更大的脉冲波通过。这需要动点儿脑筋设计，你们那里的的人在适当的阶段会解决得很好的。"

> ..."
The passage begins by explaining that “the RAF could measure the range and bearing of a ship down to a hundred yards or less, and read the result off a scope at sight.” The passage then shifts away from the distant historical narrator to Victor Henry’s viewpoint, acquainting himself with the technology. Here, the dialogue adopts technical jargon comparing the British research on radar with that done at the MIT. When he asks what a cavity magnetron is (the technology underpinning early radar systems), the dialogue functions to frame the technology in terms of its value: “It’s a question of tube design, circuitry and so forth. Our cavity magnetron does a pretty good job” (women de qiangti cikongguan zai zhe fangmian qile feichang lianghao de zuoyong, women dui ta xiangdang manyi 我们的腔体磁控管在这方面起了非常良好的作用，我们对它相当满意). The scientist then attempts to explain how such devices work: “One gets rid of the grid in a vacuum tube, you see, and one controls current flow with an external magnetic field. That allows for the more powerful pulses.” (dui la. qiangti cikongguan. nin zhidao, women zai zhengkongguan li bu xuyao zha ji. women yong wai cichang lai kongzhi dianliu. zheyang jiu neng shi geng da de maichong bo tongguo 对啦。腔体磁控管。您知道，我们在真空管里不需要栅极。我们用外磁场来控制电流。这样就能使更大的脉冲波通过).

The dense description of the technology ends instead with a value judgment: “Strange isn’t it, that warfare has come down to fencing with complicated toys that only a few seedy scholars can make or understand” (zhen guai, ke bushi ma? zhanzheng yijing fazhan dao shiyi feichang xiaoliang youde shizhu xuezhe caineng zao chulai, caineng dongde de fuza wanyi(r) lai jinxing fangyu le 真怪，可不是吗？战争已经发展到使用一些只有少数穷学者才能造出来、才能懂得的复杂玩艺儿来进行防御了). While elaborating the design behind radar devices, the purpose of the scene is not so much to convey how radars work, but rather that they are unfamiliar devices
and, but seem to be “pretty useful toys.”³⁵ This type of technological exposition in Wouk’s work places an emphasis on the functionalism – on the purpose and value of new technologies. The relevance of this to Liu’s writing will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter. Using Victor Henry’s perspective, that of a layman, the scene centres itself as much around the character’s unfamiliarity with the technology as it does on explain the pragmatic purpose of it.

Such scenes are representations of technological paradigm shifts and thus serve to frame the narrative in an historical perspective. They play upon historical descriptions of new technologies in the same sense that science fiction does through estrangement (the prior passage on HAL in 2001 is an example). To convey such estrangement, however, necessitates rather clunky expositional dialogue, a shown above. More striking is another passage in which Henry sits at a meeting in which the development of the nuclear bomb is discussed:

Here, Victor Henry is watching the scientists, unfamiliar with the technical details, discussing the project’s feasibility of the bomb: “could he manufacture these giant electric magnets, and if so, what would be the probably costs and production time?” (他能不能制造这种巨型的电磁铁，如果能，大约要多少钱多少时间). The passage follows on with one scientist’s “Lawrence’s ideas…to produce uranium 235 by separating a stream of ionized molecules of uranium in a magnetic field” (可以把铀的一条电离子流在磁场中进行分离，以产生铀一 235).

For the purposes of these characters, however, the development of such uranium-splitting technology was technically-speaking science fiction (at that time), a fact stressed by the many hypotheticals raised in their discussion. The ramifications of this technology, which contrasts with the rather innocuous tone of the interlocutors, is overlooked. Unlike Zhang Beihai’s scene, the commentary here is implicit, assuming the reader’s understanding of the subsequent effects of the atomic bomb. Thus, layered beneath Wouk’s deployment of temporal deixis is moral

36 Wouk, Zhanzheng Fengyun, 894-895.
37 Wouk, The Winds of War, 775-776.
deixis. By placing the reader at the middle of a technological and historical juncture, he is likewise situated at a moral one. The layering of moral deixis beneath temporal deixis is, of course, not solely the province of historical fiction but rather something shared with dystopian fiction. Crucially, it is the latter, dystopian fiction, which weaves together moral and temporal deixis with greater nuance.

This can be observed in the way that dystopian fiction writers mix fictional and factual historical events in exposition. Zamyatin’s We, for example, mentions “the Great Two Hundred Years’ War between city and village” (wo zhi de shi chengshi he xiangcun jian jinxing de erbai nian zhangzheng de shi 我指的是城市和乡村间进行的二百年战争的事).38 In Brave New World, “the Nine Years’ War [which] began in A.F. 141,” is mentioned a number of times (jiu nian zhanzheng kaishi yu guyuan yibai sishiyi nian 九年战争开始于福元一百四十年). Much like Liu’s “Great Ravine,” we see “the great Economic Collapse” (jiu nian zhanzheng, da guimo de jingji bengkui 九年战争，大规模的经济崩溃). The period represented a changed in the ethical norms of the world as the Controller says to the Savage, “there used to be something called God – before the Nine Years’ War.” (ceng you ge dongxi Jiaozuo shen de – zai jiu nian zhanzheng zhiqian 曾有个东西叫做神的——在九年战争之前). It was this Nine Years’ War “that made them change their tune all right. What’s the point of truth or beauty or knowledge when anthrax bombs are popping all around you? That was when science first began to be controlled – after the Nine

38 Yevgeny Zamyatin, We, translated by Bernard Guilbert Guerney (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 36.
This version of We is the particular English edition from which the Huacheng Press Chinese translation was produced. Hence, it is the version being referred to for the purposes of English transliteration. For more detail, refer to the appendix of the Chinese translation of We, listed in the next footnote.
Zamyatin, Women (We), translated by Yudan Aliang (Guangzhou: Huacheng Press, 1989), 23.
Years’ War,” after which people were ready to submit themselves to the hedonistic World State’s control.”

This mingling of fake and real history in dystopian fiction, while similar in style to historical fiction, produces a far more explicit form of moral deixis. The attribution of historical changes simply to specific events and dates is less subtle, but indicates to the reader when society changed and how. Where Liu Cixin employs this narrative style, it seems to mix both the historical and dystopian fictional forms:

如果说面壁计划是人类历史上首次出现的怪物，那黑暗森林威慑和执剑人在历史上却有过先例。公元 20 世纪华约和北约两大军事集团的冷战就是一个准终极威慑。冷战中的 1974 年，苏联启动 Perimeter 计划，建立了一个后来被称为末日系统的预警系统，其目的是在北约核突袭中，当政权决策层和军队高级指挥层被消灭、国家已失去大脑的情况下，仍具备启动核反击的能力。它利用核爆监测系统监控苏联境内的核爆迹象，所有的数据会汇整到中央计算机，经过罗辑判断决定是否要启动核反击。这个系统的中心是一个绝密的位于地层深处的控制室，当系统做出反击的判断时，将由控制室内的一名值班人员启动核反击。公元 2009 年，一位曾参加过 Perimeter 战略值班的军官对记者披露，他当时竟然只是一名刚从伏龙芝军事学院毕业的二十五岁的少尉！当系统做出反击判断时，他是毁灭的最后一道屏障。这时，苏联全境和东欧已在火海之中，他在地面的亲人和朋友都已经死亡，如果他按下启动反击的按钮，北美大陆在半个小时后也将同样成为生命的地狱，随之而来的辐射尘和核冬天将是整个人类的末日。那一时刻，人类文明的命运就掌握在他手中。后来，人们问他最多的话就是：如果那一时刻真的到来，你会按下按钮吗？

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这位历史上最早的执剑人说：我不知道。

人们现在的希望就是：黑暗森林威慑能够出现像20世纪的核威慑那样美好的结局。\(^{40}\)

This description of the Swordholder (Luo Ji’s post) is imbued with much historical intertextuality. Noting that “the Swordholder had precursors,” namely the Soviet Union’s Perimeter System, it moves to an anecdote from the year 2009 because it is something Luo Ji would himself have remembered. The anecdote recalls a Soviet officer who was alerted by the system to launch nuclear missiles at the West, imagining his thought process, that “all of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe would likely be a sea of flames, and all of his loved ones above ground almost certainly dead” (苏联全境和东欧已在火海之中，他在地面的亲人和朋友都已经死亡). Likewise, “North America would also turn into hell on Earth in half an hour, and the following nuclear winter would doom all of humanity” (北美大陆在半个小时后也将同样成为生命的地狱，随之而来的覆盖全球的辐射尘和核冬天将是整个人类的末日). The point of the analogy is to stress that “humanity hoped that dark forest deterrence would have a happy ending, like the mutually assured destruction of the twentieth century.” (能够出现像20世纪的核威慑那样美好的结局). The abstract analogy is given force by the

emotional vividness of the scene, summarized in the expression: “He would hold the fate of human civilization in his hand” (na yi shike, renlei wenming de mingyun jiu zhangwo zai ta shouzhong 那一时刻，人类文明的命运就掌握在他手中), which carries subjective weight. The tone is also strikingly similar to Clarke’s use of imagery of the past – particularly its sense of immediacy – where we feel Luo Ji occupying Soviet officer’s grim position, but that officer’s imagining an apocalypse.

Differing from Zhang Beihai’s conversation with his commander or Victory Henry’s discussions with the uranium committee. For the author to embrace an aesthetic which weaves fake events together with the real necessarily leads one to the problem of ethics (we are reminded here of Nussbaum on the interrelation between aesthetics and ethics). The weaving of the two types essentially makes a moral distinction because it points to alternatives in an historical trajectory – such alternatives by definition raise the problem of right or wrong trajectories in history and the very explication of the event itself forms a commentary. Dystopian fiction likewise contains explicit illustrations of moral deixis in characters’ overt moral commentaries. One example is found in We, where D-503 decries the fictional regime of the One State within which he is trapped, but such criticism is laden with references to our world – indicating that the One State originates from the reader’s point of origin:

我曾有机会读过，也听人说过，关于古代人怎样在一个自由——也就是无组织、野蛮——的状态下生活的神种难以置信的事情。但最令我觉得不可信的是：统治当局（不管其组织怎样松散）怎能让人们在没有我们那种“每小时应守戒律总览”指引的状态下生活，没有规定的散步活动，没有规定的吃饭时间——那时的统治当局怎能容许他们什么时候高兴就什么时候

41 Liu, Death’s End, 144-145.
he talks about the period before the One State, “those times when people were still living in a free – i.e. an unorganized, savage – state,” and asks himself: “How could the governing power (let us say even a rudimentary one) allow the people to live without anything resembling our Tables of Hourly Commandments” (mei xiaoshi ying shou jieliu zonglan 每小时应守戒律总览). He criticizes the ability of a society to function “without obligatory walks” (guiding de sanbu huodong 规定的散步活动) and “without exact regulation of mealtimes (guiding de chifan shijian 规定的吃饭时间).”

He is astounded that history writings show that “the streets were lit all through the night – that, all through the night, people walked and drove through the streets!” (youxie lishixuejia zhi qiangdiao shuo, dangshi jie shang de deng shi tongxiao liangze di na jiushi shuo zhengge wanshang renmen dou keyi zai jie shang zoulaizouqu, huo quche lailai wangwang! 有些历史学家

42 Zamyatin, Women, 13-14.
D-503 points out the hypocrisy of states forbidding the murder of a single person while failing to outlaw the murder of millions. He asserts that “any ten-year-old number among us can solve this mathematically moral problem,” and then deplores that “all of their Kants taken together couldn’t do it. -inasmuch as not a one of their Kants struck on the notion of constructing a system of scientific ethics...” (dan gudai ren jishi ba quanbu Kangde jihe wilai ye ban bu dao – tamen zhi zhong meiyou yi ge zhhexue jia neng xiang dao jianli yi tao kexue de lunlixue 但古代人即使把全部康德集合起来也办不到——他们之中没有一个哲学家能想到建立一套科学的伦理学…). One can see the clear irony in D-503 criticizing the failure of prior civilizations to conceive of a normative moral system, particularly one based on scientific ethics.

Here, the role that dystopian fiction plays in ethical commentary is more explicit than historical fiction, exploring and conveying moral deixis. The genre indulges layered moral commentary of socio-political norms – both explicitly and implicitly. While the “dystopia trilogy” (*Nineteen Eighty-Four, Brave New World* and *We*) sits only at “the edge of science fiction” for Liu, its value lies in its ability to “intervene” in reality in a way that traditional realist literature is unable to – a reason why he cites these works as making such a large impression on him. If the purpose of employing temporal deixis is indeed to convey “moral deixis” across history, Liu Cixin tends to employ it at extremes to describe utopias and dystopias. Such descriptions can function as commentaries on just how ideal or terrible a society is capable of becoming. As Stockwell argues,

44 Liu, “Liu Cixin’s secret bookshelf.”
sf fiction is not necessarily about the depiction of the future, but rather serves as an exploration of relative perspective and temporality, in pasts, presents, and (most commonly) futures. As he points out, “people still read Orwell’s 1984 and Wells’s The First Men in the Moon even though Big Brother and Ingsoc didn’t materialize and Neil Armstrong didn’t travel on a rocket powered by cavorite.” This relativistic or deictic aspect of sf writing, as shown in the prior chapter, extends to the representation of ethical norms. The discussion of moral deixis, however, cannot end with historical fiction writing. Rather Liu’s development of a deictic view of morality ought to be more explicitly framed in terms of his portrayal of differing forms of utopia and dystopia (a discussion which shall branch into the next chapter of the thesis).

When examining the moral conundrums of dystopian fiction, Liu is concerned less with representing or discreetly indicating what should or should not come to be. Rather he is dispassionately illustrating what could possibly be in as numerous forms as can be depicted. As Gaffric puts it, in “exploring the ways in which humans react, both individually and collectively, to extreme situations,” Liu is thereby “fathoming the limits of morality and ideology in an immoral universe” and in “pulling apart the paradoxes peculiar to every political system…” So it should be said that he is more interested in exploring a multitude of ethical norms across different times and different places, rather than gesture towards a specific ethical norm in one particular time and place. In this respect, Liu’s work should be considered an architext, that is “any science fictional narrative which configures a fully worked-out, rich world, and also provides stylistic cues that encourage a mapping of the whole textual universe with the reader’s reality.” While science fiction

45 Stockwell, *The Poetics of Science Fiction*, 18.
can potentially fulfil the criteria of an architext, it is really genres such as utopian and dystopian fiction which sufficiently fit such criteria.\textsuperscript{47}

In an essay on the subject of utopianism, Liu writes that “when looking at the idealist science fiction both at home and abroad…the deepest feeling (perhaps, the only feeling) I have toward it is one word: Dull.” He writes of the protagonists that “of course, these people have jobs. They even have some struggles. But these struggles only make such happiness and tranquillity more remarkable. In a word, dull. When you see this sort of fiction, you find yourself only wanting to imagine a far less ideal future.”\textsuperscript{48} He reflects on the failures of the Communist utopia, saying more generally that “human beings have lacked imagination when it comes to the ideal society.” He relates such ideas to the Marxist principle, “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs,” remarking that “an existence in that sort of society is a far less happy one than you would think and one thing about it is certain: in such a society, you would beginning have dreams of a whole new ideal society.”

While the sentiment reminds one of Dostoevsky’s \textit{Notes from the Underground}, this last remark brings to mind the Savage’s words to the Controller in \textit{Brave New World} (an appropriate passage in that it draws on Hamlet’s soliloquy):

\begin{quote}
对，你们正是这样的人。把所有讨厌的事物赶尽杀绝，而不学着去容忍它们。‘究竟要忍受暴虐命运的掷石和箭矢，还是拿起武器对抗浩瀚如海的恨事拼命相斗，才是英雄气概呢？……’ 可是你两者都不做。既不承苦也不抵御。你们只是废除了弹弓和箭矢。那太轻易了。\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{47} Stockwell, \textit{The Poetics of Science Fiction}, 204.
\textsuperscript{48} Liu, \textit{Liu Cixin tan kehuan}, 71-72.
\textsuperscript{49} Huxley, \textit{Meili xin shijie}, 210-211.
Here, he rebukes the Controller’s belief in “getting rid of everything unpleasant instead of learning to put with it.” To show that suffering provides a context for meaning, he quotes Hamlet, a banned text he was able to read on the Reservation: “Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them…But you don’t do either. Neither suffer nor oppose. You just abolish the slings and arrows. It’s too easy.”

As the Chinese translator of *Brave New World* Li Li 李黎 writes, the work was written “only half a century into the birth of a new technological civilization” before the emergence of “environmental pollution, ecological crises, the computer, astronomical sciences and even more unheard-of things. Yet Huxley foresaw that, when humanistic consciousness was weak and administrative control was strong, adding to this a superior technological civilization would only hail a great human nightmare. Li’s conclusion has the familiarity of a Western reading of dystopian fiction, that from “the twenty-year long experiment of utopianism, Humanity has yet to find a positive utopia. But we do have many more examples of negative utopias. We know now just what type of utopia is not going to work out.” It is interesting here that Li Li does not view utopianism in and of itself as invariably futile – that it is the pursuit of perfectible political systems that directly produce the worst examples of dystopias. The remaining faith in the possibility of utopia, from the Chinese reading, stands out here.

For Liu Cixin, the principle of an ideal society is difficult to discern because it “is like a bundle of fresh grass dangling before the face of a donkey. If you move it further away from his

52 Ibid., 253.
face, he will simply follow it.” Rather, he argues, “across humanity’s long journey into the future, different forms of the ideal society will emerge like beacons lit across the Three Gorges Dam at night, and each of these new societies will place higher and higher demands on material nature.” Nevertheless, “qualitative changes will occur with the quantitative as, in this time, the ideal society yearns for the spiritual over the material. Such a qualitative change is likely to occur when a society reaches that very stage of ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.”’

Liu lends his aesthetic judgment to such “brave new worlds” in one passage, where Luo Ji wakes up from a two hundred year slumber, in the Crisis Era, during a utopian era of uninterrupted technological and social progress. Observing the hospital staff, the people on the street and the futuristic metropolis, he is filled with a perplexed awe:

…但最引人注目的还是飞行的车流，像海底植物间川流不息的鱼群。朝阳照进了城市，被巨树分隔成一缕缕光柱，给空中的车流镀上了一层金辉。

面对这美丽的新世界，罗辑泪流满面，新生的感觉渗透了他的每一个细胞，过去真的是一场梦了。

The scene is marked by a calming tone, describing “the streams of flying cars like schools of fish navigating endlessly among the plants on the ocean floor. The rising sun shone onto the city and was cut into shafts of light by the trees, coating the traffic with a layer of gold.” As he watches, “tears streamed down [his] face at the sight of this brave new world, and the sensation of newborn life permeated his every cell. The past really was a dream.” The analogies to the natural world, for what is ultimately a very unnatural scene, are most prominent. The explicit choice of “brave

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54 Liu, *Hei’an Senlin*, 289.
new world” and the tears which stream down Luo Ji’s face should indicate an ambivalence toward the type of world into which he has stepped.

This world is unlike the final utopia we are presented with in the final pages: the artificial world, Universe 647. Throughout the third volume, we are given hints at the existence of this world in passages titled “A Past Outside of Time” (shijian zhiwai de wangshi 时间之外的往事), the context only being revealed at the end. These reflective scenes are puzzling throughout the novel, not only because the reader is provided with no explanation for them until we reach the end of the story, but also because they are tonally very different. Unlike the terrestrial dystopias, the final scenes in Universe 647 are, in a sense, utopian yet Cheng Xin and Guan Yifan do not seem to “have dreams of a whole new ideal society” or have fantasies of “wanting to imagine a far less ideal future.” It is curious that in Liu’s appropriately cynical attitude towards the idea of utopia, one that would be expected from a nuanced reading of western dystopian fiction, we are left with a seemingly naïve depiction of its at the end of the trilogy. The irony embedded in this scene, of course, is that a happy utopia is something that can only truly exist outside of space and time, i.e. something that is not truly part of reality.

Therefore, given these seemingly contradictory conceptions of utopia and dystopia, it is important here to get a deeper sense of Liu’s own reading of the dystopian genre. Indeed, as Andrew Milner argues, such “‘literary’ SF is best understood as that fraction of the SF field currently incorporated into contemporary versions of the literary canon.” He includes We, 1984 and Brave New World here and ascribes this inclusion to the value attributed to them as literary by educational and publishing institutions.56 In a similar vein, these works are read together in Chinese, having

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been published as one series as the “dystopia trilogy” (fanmianwutubang sanbuqu 反面乌托邦三部曲). To the reader of “classic” dystopian fiction, therefore, Liu’s writing lacks the critical crosshair usually aimed at certain ideologies or discourses, considered typical of the genre in canonical Western terms. Instead, while Liu draws upon the classic dystopian fictions of Orwell, Zamyatin and Huxley, he does not seemingly articulate moral boundaries, of human limitation under tyranny, the threat of mass surveillance, or the moral necessity of individualism over collectivism to which these authors respectively directed their writings.

As he asks, “does whether or not technology is evil, and whether or not it is evil in human society, ultimately depend on the goals of that society?” In contrast to the moral views of these dystopian works, Liu argues that under some conditions the control of human thought can in fact be a moral action, insofar as it is employed to the right ends under the right conditions. As he imagines, it might be necessary to implement policies and technologies of thought control in order that a more cohesive human species survive existential crises. In such a circumstance, that otherwise immoral action of thought control cannot be skewed as “evil” anymore. These views, either his “cold” rationalizations or more nuanced illustrations of ethical thought experiments, betray a hyper-pragmatist preference: the utility of any given moral action being defined in terms of the ends it achieves (which, in his scientistic-cum-humanistic philosophy, means the preservation of the species). The intention behind Liu’s vignettes of future human societies is to probe how far social ethics can conceivably be stretched and political schemes be justified in the pursuit of humanity’s survival. This ambition contrasts with the more typical aims of dystopian and utopian fiction in the West which seem rather to construct implicit commentaries on how

57 Liu, Liu Cixin tan kehuan, 37-38.
certain socio-political systems (or forms of them) are, to the present-day reader, more or less preferable, usually reflecting the author’s intuitions about such systems in the real world (here, we think of Orwell as a critic of Stalinism and Zamyatin as a critic of late industrialism).

Chinese readers of dystopian fiction are not oblivious to this latter function of dystopian fiction as a genre of direct socio-political criticism. As one commentator, Bi Junzhi 薛君智, writes in the postscript of We, “Zamyatin said very clearly that the utopia which he opposed was a totalitarian autocracy caused by rapid technological development and concentration of power within the state.”

It differed from Brave New World in the sense that what Huxley “criticized is invention and production in the domain of scientific technologies” because “he was worried by the dangers of technological advancement.” But “the utopia which We satirizes is one that simultaneously symbolizes the totalitarianism of both economy (“Machinery”) and politics (“State”).” Zamyatin’s dystopia is one of shipbuilders, engineers and technocrats. Huxley’s is one of biologists and bureaucrats. He draws an additional distinction with Orwell, noting that he read Zamyatin in French, stating that Nineteen Eighty-Four shares in common with We only “its satirizing of ‘state’ totalitarianism.”

Likewise, the translator of Nineteen Eighty-Four Dong Leshan emphasized that the work was intended as warning to audiences of the dangers of all-encompassing political bureaucracies, irrespective of their supposed ideologies, because the very people trapped within them “shall lose their willpower.”

This observation then makes Liu Cixin’s personal preference for painting vast abstractions of socio-political morality all the more peculiar. This preference for ethical variation and

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58 Zamyatin, Women, 2.
59 Ibid., 6.
60 George Orwell, Yi jiu ba si (Nineteen Eighty-Four), translated by Dong Leshan (Guangzhou: Huacheng Press, 1988), 4.
exploration could potentially be rooted in modern Chinese literary themes. As David Wang argues, “the Chinese, who have undergone innumerable calamities over the past half-century, have felt no shortage of grotesquerie and disruption in their everyday lives. Reality is already more eerie and unthinkable than any fiction could conjure.” For Wang, the grotesque, fantastic and depraved in contemporary Chinese fiction ultimately have their roots in the late Qing period, which saw the absurdity of the collapse of the Chinese empire and traditional worldview. Now, “writing in an era of ‘post-History,’ contemporary Chinese writers have tried to make sense of history by evoking its fantastic other. Through science fantasies, they revisit the past and prefigure the future.” In this sense, readers are taken “full circle to a point almost one century before, when the forerunners of modern Chinese fiction imagined a new China by means of utopian constructs, fantastic adventures, and futuristic encounters.” Contemporary Chinese fiction, however, diverges in this multiplicity of ideas, where “contemporary writers are learning to diversify the future of the new China by conjuring up various political and scientific possibilities.”

In a similar vein, Jeffrey Kinkley has coined the term “new historical novel” to characterize a certain type of contemporary fiction that has emerged. To what extent could *Diqiu Wangshi* be viewed as a new historical novel? Liu Cixin, not as widely known in the West at the time of Kinkley’s work, fell under his radar in the examination of tropes across turn-of-the-century Chinese dystopian fiction. As he notes, “unlike the cold anonymities of *We, Nineteen Eighty-Four, Brave New World* – the new historical novels’ tales situate all humankind, not just a nation, within an abstract utopian/dystopian literary figuration in world literature and historical thinking.”

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62 Ibid., 341.
63 Kinkley, *Visions of dystopia*, 17.
Kinkley’s interpretation, aspects of this genre remind one of Liu Cixin. Questioning whether such fiction is “‘simply’ dystopian…most of the works are obsessed with endemic evils of human nature and its seeming penchant for quasi-Darwinist struggle for dominance.” He then argues, that the notion of “utopian” in Chinese was naturally entangled in the criticism of Maoism – the term is inseparable in the Chinese context from his vision of the Marxist-Leninist ideal society. New historical fiction, then, brings into question whether notions of utopia or dystopia are rendered in particularly Chinese terms. In much the same way that Liu’s trilogy begins with the particular utopia/dystopia of Mao-era Beijing, so its narrative progresses into more universal and abstract views of globe-spanning dystopias, such as an Australian continent turned to terrestrial refugee camp.

The terrestrial dystopia into which Liu’s Earth evolves is more subtly indicated through the depiction of specific settings and events, rather than through the subjective, stream-of-consciousness contemplation of single protagonists like Winston Smith, Bernard Marx or D-503 in the novels of the “dystopia trilogy.” Liu’s particular style is shown in The Dark Forest when, after the invasion of Trisolaris is made public, the United Nations decides to ban “escapism,” in order that humanity’s full efforts are devoted to the resistance and prevention of the invasion, lest crucial resources are spent on a tiny few who might successfully abandon Earth for other worlds. This decision is the first of many others that will gradually encourage totalitarian tendencies in future governments. One character reads the proclamation: “We must cherish the unity and solidarity of the international community in this time of crisis and uphold the principle…that all humanity has an equal right to survival. The Earth is the common home of its people, and we must not abandon her.” Questioning this decision, he is then enlightened about the deeper implications.

64 Ibid., 5.
behind this announcement. Knowing that an “escape into the cosmos was never going to work,” he is told that the debate is rather about “who gets to leave, and who has to stay.” If some people are allowed to escape and evade the Trisolaran threat, it will cause “the collapse of humanity’s fundamental value system and ethical bottom line.”65 The authoritarian laws against Escapism, she argues are to prevent “inequality of survival” among humans, which will only pit groups against each other, detracting from the proper aim of defence and deterrence.

In the Chinese delegate’s comments on escapism, and in the explication of those comments’ real meaning, we are made to observe the distance between what explicit political statement and implicit political intention, allowing for the reconstruction of language to fit political aims. As Stockwell discusses, “language constraining thought is evident in Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World, in which genetically engineered babies are environmentally conditioned through language. Their social roles and rules are mentally conditioned through language.” Through this, we see that “it is language which structures the reality that they see, and Huxley shows how the different orders or classes of society, from Alphas to Epsilons, regard that reality differently.” But it is Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four, he argues, that is “perhaps the most famous science fictional treatment of the issue of language and reality. The future totalitarian state is engaged in establishing and promoting the language of ‘Newspeak’, an extrapolated caricature of what Orwell saw as the linguistic degeneracy of his own 1940s,” quoting Syme’s revelation: “Don’t you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible because there will be no words in which to express it.”66

65 Liu, The Dark Forest, 55-56.
66 Stockwell, The Poetics of Science Fiction, 54.
The manipulation of thought through the manipulation of language itself is exemplified in another scene in *The Dark Forest*. In 2020s New York, Liu depicts a replica of the Statue of Liberty, not as the endowed Franco-American symbol of liberty, but rather as one of indoctrination for the youth of Earth to enlist in the military in preparation for the invasion of Trisolaris. Young recruits who sign up to this program will be brainwashed through a newly invented “Mental Seal” which eliminates thoughts of defeatism. Liu describes the famous epigraph found at the Statue, Emma Lazarus’s *New Colossus*, though this one has been altered. The observer who established the centre, Bill Hines, is witnessing the scene for the first time. Even with the prior knowledge of the purpose of the centre, the reader is unfamiliar with the general scene and why the idea of “Liberty” has been reappropriated to the ends of military enlistment and indoctrination. Given the reconfiguring of certain emotional terms highlighted in the paragraph, particularly if we know the original poem, the reader is given hints that this poem is being used for propaganda.

信念中心的大门前立着一座缩小比例精确复制的自由女神像, 谁也说不清其用意, 也许是想用 “自由” 冲淡 “控制” 的色彩, 但最引人注意的是女神像基座上那首被篡改了的诗:

把你们绝望的人, 你们迷茫的人, 把你们渴望看到胜利之光的畏惧徘徊的人都给我, 把那些精神失落、灵魂在流浪的人都送来: 在这金色的信念旁,我要为他们把灯举起。67

In this depiction we see the *xinnian zhongxin* 信念中心, the “Faith Center,” a strange title for a military recruitment centre. The term *xinnian* in fact carries the connotation of “belief” or “conviction,” lest the reader of the English translation take “faith” to have more of a religious meaning. The point of the term is to indicate that military recruitment, which we will find out is

for the creation of kamikaze units, reflects how morally distant humanity’s determent effort have become in the two decades since the Trisolaran crisis began. Also interesting is the bei cuangaile de shi 被篡改了的诗, or the “altered poem.” Rather than have the reader infer that Lazarus’s poem is changed, partly because the Chinese reader would have difficulty understanding the (for non-Westerners) obscure reference, Liu slips in the term “altered” (cuangai). This implies that our observer, Bill Hines (who is a Westerner), knows the reference. This is then followed by commentary about the unfamiliar replica’s purpose: “perhaps it was an attempt to use ‘liberty’ to dilute the feeling of ‘control.’” (yexu shi xiang yong ziyou chongdian kongzhi” de secai 也许是想用 “自由” 冲淡 “控制” 的色彩).68

The underlined poem here reads: “Give me your hopeless souls, Your fearful crowds that thirst for victory, The dazed refuse of your treacherous shoals. Send these, the downcast, and wand’ring one to me, For lo, my lamp of golden faith consoles….”69 By contrast, the original version of Lazarus poem in fact reads as: "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”70 The Chinese translation of the original poem and the altered poem in the story still share the same style:

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68 Liu, *The Dark Forest*, 292.
69 Ibid., 291.
Thus, in his English translation, Joel Martinsen cleverly renders Liu Cixin’s altered New Colossus in a style that reflects the original English version while still implying the conveyed meaning of the altered poem. The difference between the standard Chinese translation of the poem, and the altered Chinese translation, featured in Liu’s text, can hardly convey the antiquated tone of Lazarus’s English style – it does not use more “modern” or “contemporary” Chinese language as the original Lazarus. Naturally, the English translation leaves it up to the reader to infer what the meaning of this poem is. However, the Chinese original contains a footnote for the Chinese reader, explaining whence this re-written poem is derived.

When comparing Liu’s Chinese altered poem and the Chinese translation of the actual historical poem, we can infer an authoritarian mentality in the former. In the English, we can sense a tangible shift in socio-political ideology because “yearning to breathe free” (kewang ziyou hu xi渴望自由呼吸) is replaced by “thirst for victory” (kewang kan dao shengli zhi guang渴望看到胜利之光), while “hopeless souls” (nimen juewang de ren你们绝望的人) replaces “your tired, your poor” (naxie pifale de he pinkun de那些疲乏了的和贫困的). This is a society in which militarist meaning offers guidance to a nihilistic populace which is wrestling with the fact of an inevitable invasion. But what cannot be conveyed as easily is the “disposal” tone (similar to the passive voice in English) conveyed through the ba 把 construction. It is used only once in the Chinese historical translation (ba zhexie wujia kejiu de…gei wo 把这些无家可归的…给我 or “Send these, the

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71 The Chinese translation of Lazarus’s poem is most often quoted in this particular phrasing, though it is difficult to trace the specific source of it.
homeless, tempest-tost to me”) to express that the homeless will be sheltered. In the Chinese altered version, *ba* features five times. The Chinese translation of the historical poem, moreover, opens with *huanying ni* 欢迎你, literally: “we welcome you” to express “Give me your hopeless souls”. It implies warmth. The altered Chinese simply reads *ba nimen juewang re ren…gei wo* (把你们绝望的人…给我), literally “Give me your hopeless souls.” The uses of *ba* are lists of commands of people who shall sign up:

把你们绝望的人，你们迷茫的人，把你们渴望看到胜利之光的畏惧徘徊的人都给我把那些精神失落、灵魂在流浪的人都送来：在这金色的信念旁，我要为他们把灯举起。

In essence, the disposal particle instills a sense of acquiescence in its reader. The use of *ba* conveys control and manipulation from the speaker to the reader, being firstly a command to come join the Faith Center, while drawing emphasis to the direct objects (i.e. manipulation objects) in the sentences – you/your or *nimen* 你们 – in this case the recruits lining up to be converted. Such imposed propagandistic resignation brings to mind Orwell’s famous use of public imagery and slogans to convey a Britain turned to totalitarianism in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Liu’s Statue of Liberty replica is reminiscent of the opening pages of it where the logic of Ingsoc’s ideology is conveyed through an epigraph outside the ministry of truth. The effect is to unnerve the reader – to remind them that they are not just historically in a different setting, but morally as well.

真理部 — 用新话来说叫真部 — 同视野里的任何其他东西都有令人吃惊的不同。这是一个庞大的金字塔式的建筑，白色的水泥晶晶发亮，一层接着一层上升，一直升到高空三百米。从温斯顿站着的地方，正好可以看到党的三句口号，这是用很漂亮的字体写在白色的墙面上的：

战争即和平
自由即奴役
无知即力量

Both passages open with the name of strange government institutions; in Liu, the “Faith Center,” and in Orwell, the “Ministry of Truth,” in Chinese, *zhenlibu* 真理部. The ring of *zhenlibu* in Chinese, as in English, is of an initially awkward collocation, and then of a disturbing concept. This is because *bu* (for government ministries) and *zhenli* (for absolute truth) are not, we feel, to be collocated, simply for the implication that an institution can manage such a thing is “truth.” In the same way, the *xinnian zhongxin* 信念中心 reads as though an institution that is seemingly non-religious can provide something as personal and subjective as faith/conviction/will, and is thus similarly awkward and unsettling. The purpose of the collocation is to show how subjective reality is determined by an external power. Moreover, the scale of the structure, described in Liu’s passage, is similar to Winston’s view of the Ministry of Truth building, that it “was startlingly different to any other object in sight” (*tong shiye li de renhe qita dongxi du you ling ren chijing de butong* 同视野里的任何其他东西都有令人吃惊的不同). This is principally stressed in the use of “startling” (*lingren chijing* 令人吃惊).

The slogan, *zhanzheng ji heping, ziyou ji nuyi, wuzhi ji liliang* 战争即和平, 自由即奴役, 无知即力量 is the Chinese translation of the infamous line: “WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH.” Orwell, having read *We*, likely built upon the contradictory propagandistic slogans from Zamyatin. As his D-503 reflects:

解放？人类这种难以根治的犯罪意识真叫人吃凉！我是故意用犯罪这个词的。自由和犯罪是两个联成一体，难以分割的东西……就像一艘飞船的动

72 Orwell, *Yi jiu ba si*, 5-6.
Here, he remarks that “liberty and crime are just as indissolubly bound together” (ziyou he fanzui shi liang ge liancheng yiti 自由和犯罪是两个联成一体) and afterwards concludes that “the only means of delivering man from crimes is to deliver him from liberty” (ba ren cong fanzui zhong zhengjiu chulai de wei yi banfa jiu shi ba ta cong ziyou Zhong zhengjiu chulai 把人从犯罪中拯救出来的唯一办法就是把他从自由中拯救出来). It has the ring of the Faith Center’s ideology: by surrendering one’s self to thought control, one attains freedom. It is the same logic as Orwell’s “freedom is slavery.” But, of course, in Zamyatin’s narrative, the mentally fragmented D-503 is blindly accepting of the One State’s ideology. Orwell’s Winston rather ruminates over what he sees.

The difference with Liu’s visual use of a textual passage is primarily in the historical nature of the written content. Liu Cixin is employing a real symbol from history to show the disturbing nature of its political reappropriation in a fictional future. Orwell’s introductory descriptions of symbols of the regime are seemingly ahistorical, unlike the highly familiar Liu’s Faith Center. It is only through his internal monologues during his work, and in his encounters with Julia over the course of the novel, that we explicitly understand how Winston feels and thinks about Ingsoc. Likewise, Liu’s poem and Orwell’s slogan share in common the contradictory logic employed in propaganda, though one is of reappropriated historical content, the other of imagined

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73 Zamyatin, Women, 37.
74 Zamyatin, We, 49.
fictional content. One character is observing the site while mulling over what he is only seeing for the first time. The other is passively observing, having seen the Ministry many times, where Winston’s increasing cynicism with the regime is established. The distinction essential reflects the higher number of constraints on Liu who, unlike Orwell, is aiming to quickly elaborate only one particular dystopian setting among many in the course of the narrative. because the reader navigates widely different historical circumstances, he must know immediately what characters think, not just feel, about different situations as they come, as well as framing such situations with plot exposition. It is a form of stylistic necessity.

Another striking parallel between Diqiu Wangshi’s and Nineteen Eighty-Four’s respective dystopias is their depiction of inconceivable tools of government surveillance. Before coming to the Ministry of Truth building, as Winston Smith makes his way through London, he thinks to himself: “You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness every movement scrutinized.”75 The phrasing is strikingly similar to Luo Ji’s description of the cosmos. In the same way that telescreens populate Airstrip One in Orwell’s work, similar surveillance devices populate the cosmos, through which Trisolaris and other unknown civilizations can monitor Earth. Tools of surveillance take many forms but the particularly Orwellian ones, those mirroring the pervasive telescreens, are the sophons (zhizi 智子). What is unique about telescreens as a form of monitoring is that, for a mid-twentieth century reader (though not so much by the standards of an early twenty-first century reader), these devices were a technological tool that was difficult for the imagination to conjure. The Ingsoc state did not have to track down or monitor people in person, it was able to keep track of all information seemingly at once. The metaphor of the telescreen represents more generally

75 Orwell, Nineteen Eighty-Four, 5.
Orwell’s attempt at describing the complete erosion of the private sphere for the individual under totalitarian government, or a political system beyond the scope of totalitarianism.

The respective ideas of *sophons* and telescreens are both similar and dissimilar in the way that Orwell’s and Liu’s conceptions of surveillance are employed to different ends. Liu’s description of *sophons* is less a metaphor of and commentary on the nature of surveillance but rather a plot device through which to describe the complexity of an interstellar war. For a writer such as Orwell, within the framework of early Cold War discourse about civil liberties and the threats posed by the Soviet Union, a central theme of his dystopian fiction was the erosion of the private sphere of life and of civil society more generally. Far removed from the political circumstances of Orwell (and far from being the politically charged essayist that Orwell was), Liu Cixin’s dystopian imagery does not point to any real-world particulars. On the one hand, Orwell’s Oceania is a political empire that derives, presumably from a different set of historical events following the Second World War and it is a particular view of the sort of totalitarian society that might have emerged, however hyperbolized. But Liu Cixin’s imagined cosmos is rather a setting within which different dystopias are portrayed as humanity adapts to changing circumstances. It only intersects with a real-world historical narrative at the height of the Cold War and the Cultural Revolution.

This observation should put limits on the extent to which we consider Liu’s work one of dystopian fiction. Rather, we might refer to Peter Stockwell’s idea of an “apocalyptic architext,” that is, a narrative in which the science fiction world described in a story is ultimately dismantled by the end. For all the world-building which is developed and detailed through the trilogy, the Earth, Trisolaris, the Solar System and ultimately the Universe itself, are each destroyed. While I have enumerated here some dystopian narratives, they are sub-narratives to a grander apocalyptic
narrative constantly foreshadowed throughout the trilogy – principally in its title *Diqui Wangshi* – “The Remembrance of Earth’s Past.” In other words, the basis of each of these dystopian worlds is different, and thus have different “internal cognitive model to those of the works of the “dystopia trilogy.” As Stockwell argues, works like Orwell’s aim “to restructure the reader’s ICM [internal cognitive model] of base-reality by increasing the salience of certain disapproved features.” An example of this is “the ‘automatism’ of state control over individual free will…[or the] tendency towards state-control [which] was clearly evident in the early twentieth century societies (Russia and Britain) from which the novels emerged, though, clearly too, *We, Brave New World*, and *1984* are exaggerations from that base-reality.” The difference between these novels and Liu’s dystopias is essentially his attempt at constantly restructuring the ICM over time, the fundamental frame of reference being the larger cosmological scheme.

An example of this shifted frame of reference is found at the end of the first volume, where we see Earth’s reaction to the Trisolaran message aimed at establishing its hostility, simply phrased in the expression: “*You’re bugs!*” (*nimen shi chongzi 你们是虫子*). The insect imagery and its Darwinian connotations has the effect of immediately decentring Earth’s point of view, the categorization of “insect” conveying the inconsequentiality (and vulnerability) of the human species in the cosmological jungle. This use of a copula form is itself striking. As Stockwell argues, “‘pure’ copula forms…seem to be very common in science fiction texts, contributing to the quality of ‘cognitive estrangement’ that is the science fictional aspect of literary defamiliarization…” He cites Zamyatin as an example of this. In *We*, D-503 imagines to himself that he is a sort of microbe. “It may be that I am no longer a phagocyte calmly and in a businesslike way devouring microbes,”

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76 Stockwell, *The Poetics of Science Fiction*, 212.
he thinks, “it may be that I am a microbe and, again, it may be that there is in our midst, a thousand such microbes by now, still pretending to be phagocytes, as I am pretending to be one.” 78 This estrangement is not felt solely towards himself, as can be seen in this passage:

我登上全能船时大家都已集合好，各人都在自己的岗位上，玻璃蜂窝里每一个巢室都已填满。透过船舱的玻璃窗，可以看到下面的人像蚂蚁一般大小，有些站在通讯仪器旁，有些站在发电机，变压器，测高仪，通风装量，标度指示盘，水泵，管道等等的旁边。79

Here, he stands aboard his ship, the Integral, looking through the glass window at the passers-by, “the people below, tiny, like ants, standing by the telegraph instruments, dynamos, transformers, altimeters, ventilators, dial indicators, pumps, tubes.” 80 This particular usage of estrangement with the image of the ant is carried further in the second volume. The Dark Forest begins with the depiction of an ant, crawling across the ground, unknowingly witnessing Ye Wenjie and Luo Ji’s conversation in which the foundations of Cosmic Sociology are proposed. The conversation is intentionally deictic, in that the ant’s knowledge of the two humans talking with each other is similar to that of humanity’s awareness of the interactions of advanced civilizations. Man has a limited view of them but no comprehension beyond that. Ultimately, each are guided by a Darwinian sense of survival.81

In the case of Three Body, the phrase is aimed at estranging the humans in a threatful way. What makes the threat effective is the insecurity of one’s size, the imperceptibility of one’s relative

78 Stockwell, The Poetics of Science Fiction, 178.
79 Zamyatin, Women, 197.
80 Zamyatin, We, 188.
81 Liu, The Dark Forest, 1-8.
power within a system of unknown entities. This point more largely informs the character of Liu’s interstellar dystopia. The principal example of this, of course, is the “Singer” who supposedly destroys the Solar System in Death’s End. While humanity is in the sixty-seventh year of the “Bunker Era,” tucked away in hidden space stations throughout the Solar System, this alien, sitting on the Orion Arm of the Milky Way, picks up signals from Earth and Trisolaris’s interactions. In a similar sense to Zamyatin, Liu’s heliocentric humans are the “Microbes,” “bugs” and “ants” in the wider cosmic scheme. This cosmic scheme, then, is a dystopia, overarching the smaller political vignettes featured within Earth’s history. The overarching dystopia is the Darwinian struggle between interstellar species. The culmination of the utopian themes in the trilogy are thus a departure from the canonical “dystopia trilogy” and the true dystopia is one founded on Liu’s scientism. This dystopia is itself the set of historical chains in which he sees himself dancing.
6) Utopianism

If Liu Cixin’s dystopianism is only cursorily similar to that of Orwell’s, where might he get his deeper inspiration? As discussed in Chapters Three and Four, it is most likely from Liu Cixin’s non-fictional reading. Paul Davies’s descriptions of the universe, being framed ultimately in terms of human moral deliberation, carry dystopian undertones. “Most sudden violence in the universe entails damage that is limited to the immediate cosmic locality. The death of stars or the plunge of matter into a black hole will disrupt planets and nearby stars, perhaps as far as a few lightyears away.” The anthropocentrism he brings to bear on these descriptions is elaborated: “As I have described, huge jets of material are sometimes ejected at a large fraction of the speed of light, and prodigious quantities of radiation are also emitted. This is violence on a galactic scale.”¹ Insofar as these largely indifferent phenomena are described as “violence,” Liu’s cosmos is a physicalist dystopia. Indeed, Davies’s description, like Liu Cixin’s fiction, contains a scientific conflation of the foundational physical and the emergently ethical. This idea is ultimately realized by Luo Ji in The Dark Forest when it is acknowledged that “the real universe is just that black” and “in this forest, hell is other people. An eternal threat that any life that exposes its own existence will be swiftly wiped out. This is the picture of cosmic civilization. It’s the explanation for the Fermi Paradox.”²

¹ Davies, The last three minutes, 129.
² Liu, The Dark Forest, 521.
This is the middle of three scenes in which the idea of a physicalist dystopia is elaborated. The first is Wang Miao’s discussion about the “Shooter and the Farmer,” the third being the Singer’s fatal strike against the Solar System. In each of these scenes, we, the readers, are further and further estranged as the nature of the cosmos is revealed in greater detail. On present-day Earth in Volume One, Wang Miao relates to this thought experiment on a physicalist dystopia from the perspective of a turkey that does not know it shall be slaughtered. On the future Earth in volume two, Luo Ji, having observed proof of more advanced civilizations’ destructive capabilities in the devastation of 187J3X1, appreciates this dystopia not as a hypothesis but as a real living system and a discernible danger. The Singer’s scene, in volume three, is the more profound in that humanity does not feature in it from a subjective standpoint but rather as a piece of data on a screen of coordinates. In essence, the elaboration of the interstellar dystopia moves from a subjective hypothesis to an objective description, from one of the reductionism of human value to the functionalism of a Darwinian sociology. While the story of humanity can only be told from its subjective viewpoint (in order to show its attempts to survive), such a perspective is unable to ultimately reveal why its attempts are futile. Only in this third scene, wholly estranged from humanity’s point of view, is the objective character of the dystopia properly observable – that is, as one in which humans’ attempts to understand the broader interstellar dystopia are more or less irrelevant, as humanity never learns the origins of its destruction. Each perspective provides two answers to the same question: What is humanity’s place in the universe?

If a theme could be extracted from this dystopian interpretation of Liu, it would be of the tyranny of physics, something like Clarke’s “the tyranny of matter.” The constraints of space and time are slowly revealed to be the normative basis upon which moral and historical deictic judgments are formed. In other words, the universe is itself a dystopia and sentient societies are
only as utopian or dystopian as the conditions imposed upon it by external cosmological influences allow. Terrestrial dystopias are only microcosms of the larger one of the Dark Forest. The question that follows is what utopianism means in such a normative cosmological dystopia. As the story shows, if an escape from the dystopian cosmos can be made, that is from space and time itself, one is still faced with the inevitable heat-death of the universe.

This is where Cheng Xin’s narrative arc is crucially important. The end of her journey is most like this type of Stockwell’s apocalyptic architext in one sense: that “a small ‘ark-like’ community of adventurers setting out to re-establish humanity among the stars …and allow the end of the Earth to be narrated and reflected on in the past.” This particular “narration of apocalypse which is spatially detached or perceptually omniscient allows the rubble to be picked over and analysed, and allows the surviving characters to delineate the sense of loss involved.”³ That the story ends in an apocalypse should not be seen as the logic conclusion to the dystopian aspects of the narrative but rather as the result of the overarching narrative structure. Part of apocalyptic architexts is that they “exploit a strategy of closure” by making use of “lucky escape” narrative. He argues that “apocalyptic narratives which are truly architextual use the occasion for a dissection of human society: in the extreme crisis of impending holocaust, the architecture of morality, ethics, science and social organisation can be laid bare for inspection.”⁴

The binary distinction between world building and world-destroying is seen in Cheng Xin’s dilemma at the end of the story. In ultimately having to choose between the world she has constructed, Universe 647, and the one that will be created after the next Big Bang, she is ultimately making a choice between utopianism and dystopia – between “to be or not to be.” It is

⁴ Ibid., 217.
this choice which needs to be made sense of. As Stockwell writes, “Dystopia is not the opposite of utopia. The contrary of utopia (no place) is our reality (this place); dystopia is a dis-placement of our reality.” Specifically, “dystopias tend to be extensions of our base-reality, closely related to it or caricatures of it, rather than being disjunctive alternatives.”

Utopias, on the other hand, rely on aesthetic techniques to overlay an unreality to a word. “Often the most interesting and though-provoking part of reading utopian texts is not so much in the eventful narrative progression (if any) but in the lyrical description of the environment.” This aspect is “expressed either in tiny incidental details or in encyclopaedic detours that account directly for the utopian society.” In fact, “in utopia, it is the environment itself that is symbolically and isomorphically significant in reading, and this is what makes utopia centrally architextual.” Stockwell’s argument here stresses that dystopias rely on descriptions of the objective social reality while utopias rely on subjective mappings on to that reality, stressing that “the fundamental issue at the heart of utopian writing is captured in Thomas More’s original 1516 conflation of ‘eutopia’ (good place) and ‘outopia’ (no place): the perfect social architecture can never exist and thus can never be expressed. Writing can thus only ever be a gesture towards utopia, rather than achieving it.”

This is certainly true of Diqiu Wangshi, where within this objective dystopia, there is a subjective idealism. It manifests itself in certain protagonists’ mental frames of reference, an emotional and philosophical idealism, towards a desire to transcend the dystopian laid out by the universe.

In chapters three and four, I discussed the way that the functionalism of a Darwinian sociology wins over the reductionism of humanist value in the narrative, insofar as the Solar System is destroyed with the near entirety of humanity. However, in the remainder of the story,

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5 Ibid., 211.
6 Ibid., 204-205.
Cheng Xin’s narrative could be seen as a postscript, attempting to reassert a subjective humanist viewpoint. At this juncture, Darwinian sociology becomes reductionist – a simplistic politicized cosmos – and by contrast the complexity of subjective humanist value (which actually drives the course of the narrative) becomes the more subtly functionalist. This is a utopian viewpoint which we are reminded counters the dystopian viewpoint so persistently elaborated throughout the story. It is in this precise sense that the final scenes of the text, while contrasting sharply with the rest of the trilogy, are so important. Thus in returning to the earlier question for which there are two answers: What is humanity’s place in the universe? We are provided with the simplistic answer laid out by the physical nature of the cosmos, of insignificance, and the complex answer laid out by the inherent motivations of our human protagonists, of meaning and of struggle. In this sense, the story could be interpreted as a science fictional “gesture towards utopia,” in Stockwell’s words.

This gesture is not solely conceptual but is also conveyed in an idealist form. Being born in 1963, Liu grew from the age of three to thirteen during the period of the utopian upheaval of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). He writes about this experience in an essay titled Qingchun Zayu 青春杂语 (Some thought on my Youth). “At the time,” he reflects, “the authority of the teacher had sunk to its lowest point in the history of Chinese civilization as children were left to their own devices and nobody dared control them….There was no obligation to study and no one, not even parents, cared about this since it would make no difference to your future.” Despite these burdens, “there was still a childhood and youth in all of this. I did not know what stress was. The sacred purpose of each day was to have fun.” Still, “the self-governed classrooms were not some sort of Garden of Eden but more like the Warring Sates. …. Our class had a Qin Shihuang who controlled our little China.” Despite these worries and these experiences, “our peers remember one clear watershed: the year 1976. In the twentieth century, China only had two eras of purity – one in the
early 1950s and the other in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The latter time was the best anyone could remember, when the real world became richer before our eyes and the idealistic sun had not yet set.” During this period of opening, “we seemingly returned to childhood because the outside world began to unfold before us, such that we could now come into contact with things which we should have had back in childhood, reading European fairy tales and Jules Verne’s novels for the first time,” and he very much had “the feeling of going through childhood all over again, a state that continued all the way to university graduation.”

As Kun Kun asks of his nostalgia, “does Liu Cixin make light of such a complex? It is quite simply the most unlikely thing to appear in his novels.” Writing of Liu’s departure from Niangziguan in 2012, “his home of over twenty years, the place where he spent his youth as a recent graduate and where he wrote all of his science fiction novels to date…he is not reluctant to leave. Liu Cixin feels only the solitude and apprehension of a traveler.” She notes Liu’s own words: ‘The path of science fiction that I have taken is also a path that seeks home; the hometown complex was hidden so deeply that even I myself could not see, because I didn’t know where home was, so perhaps I must travel far to find it.” Liu himself, as well as others, has commented that his writing conveys a certain sort of nostalgia or huixiang qingjie 回乡情结, huixiang meaning literally a “desire to return to one’s home village.” Kun Kun writes of “the moment when a realist discovers the boundaries of idealism in his heart. Liu Cixin, a senior engineer and science graduate who believes in laws more than he believes in inspiration, has discovered an even more mysterious driving force that was hidden behind science fiction literature: a buzzing desire to express himself; a kind of self-inflicted shock; a kind of wild-natured reaction against the mediocre.” The notion of

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8 Kun Kun, “But Some of Us Are Looking at the Stars.”
huixiang qingjie is a psychologically puzzling concept, sometimes called xiangchou 乡愁. What should we make of Liu’s “desire to return home” or “return to the past”? It resonates particularly with the Chinese notion of “youth,” which Liu has reflected about.

While it is crucial to point out that Liu relates the experience of dystopia to his understanding of his youth, his qingchun, he also sees it as a time when the “idealistic sun had not yet set.” It seems that, for Liu, idealism and the experience of Maoist China go hand in hand. This is where Qingchun Wansui is important. What is peculiar about Liu’s insistence on Wang Meng as an influence is that he does not articulate the nature of this influence (as he otherwise does with Clarke, Bradbury, Orwell and so on) but rather highlights its “idealism” (理想主义 lixiangzhuyi). He describes the work as “idealistic” in the same way he describes the period of his life when he read the work. One cannot approach the end of an analysis of his work without at least trying to situate what Qingchun Wansui’s influence means in relation, or perhaps see it as Liu’s way of making sense of his own personal idealism. If it is simply a projection, it is all the more peculiar that it is directed solely at a work of Chinese youth fiction.

Qingchun Wansui is still an important piece of youth literature and one to which many of Liu’s age relate, partly because it had been a classroom text. When one interviewer pointed out that literature of the Proletarian Revolution period (shiqi nian wenxue 十七年文学 [1949-1966]) was not commonly cited by contemporary Chinese authors as an influence, Liu replied that because Qingchun Wansui is “youth literature of the 1950s,” its appeal to him is in fact great. Unlike youth literature of today, this past youth literature exudes a simple idealism.” Here, he feels this sort of

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youth literature bears a strong relationship with science fiction, namely of the 1950s, because of such idealism. As he explains, Qingchun Wansui “shares a common feature with science fiction: idealism.” As he states, “the novel is filled with sunlight and an idealistic mindset, its chief characteristic being purity. In my view, this characteristic is very close to science fiction.” In this sense, he is drawing strong emotional parallels between the futuristic optimism of both early PRC revolutionary fiction and that of the Western Golden Age of sf. One recalls here Liu’s remarks that “the China of the present is a bit like American during science fiction’s Golden Age, when science and technology filled the future with wonder…”

Qingchun itself is a complicated concept in modern Chinese language, particularly its being embodied in the collocation of qing and chun (the pairing of 青 [green/natural colour] + 春 [spring]). The notion of youth was originally characterized by the term qingnian (青 [young] + 年 [years]). Zhong Xueping has shown that “the word qingnian (youth), or xin qingnian (new youth), has a specific genealogy of meanings that emerged with the New Culture movement during the May Fourth era (1915-1927).” But such a foundationally important modern social construct as qingchun has been largely ignored in prior scholarship, its origins in modern Chinese culture only being explored by Frank Dikötter. As he argues, “Youth” as a social category was culturally constructed by biologizing discourses in Republican China,” as scientific thought had an increasingly pronounced impact on Chinese thinking. Alongside changes in the notion of gender,

10 Ibid.
‘the invention of ‘youth’” was equally significant in redefining the boundaries of adulthood and childhood and the overlapping position that “youth” occupied between these two terms. He argues that “young people were not always thought to belong to a separate age of life with specific psychological characteristics” prior to this period.\(^{14}\) The prominent Marxist intellectual, Chen Duxiu famously espoused this term in his “call to Youth” in 1915 where he described “early spring, like the rising sun, like trees and grass in bud, like the newly sharpened blade. It is the most valuable period of life. The function of youth in society is the same as that of a fresh and vital cell in a human body.”\(^{15}\) There were naturally political implications to this idea, trying to imagine a role for youth to play in the reshaping of Chinese society in the early republican period.

It is peculiar that Song Mingwei, as a scholar of both modern Chinese youth fiction and Chinese science fiction, has not identified this particular intersection between the two genres. On Li Dazhao’s September 1916 essay in New Youth magazine on qingchun, Song writes that “through an enchanting poetic discourse, Li’s essay foregrounds the vitality and beauty of ‘green spring,’ the Chinese metaphor for youth, as a great force of revival, and employs it to speak of hope and future, which is not just meaningful to an individual’s growth but also yields a new historical vision for the nation’s development and progress.” Also, “in China’s twentieth century of cultural transition, the restless, elusive, and protean youth was the defining image of revolutionary potential: it comprised both the force to dismantle conventions and the vision of the ideal. From the refreshing, dynamic image of youth arises new paradigms for political, cultural, and literary

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 146.
imagination.”\(^{16}\) Essentially, the meaning of youth radically evolved from the early twentieth century to the Maoist period, moving from the notion of *qingnian* to *qingchun*—that is, from a “young person” to the use of spring as a metaphor for the period of one’s youth. Over time, “the word *qingchun* quietly took center stage, parallel with and sometimes eclipsing the word *qingnian*, and bearing meanings the word *qingnian* did not have.”\(^{17}\) As Zhong Xueping elaborates, “Qingnian literally means ‘young person(s),’ referring to individuals within a certain age range. Qingchun, on the other hand, denotes a time duration in which one is deemed to be a qingnian—it is a temporal term as well as a spatial one.”\(^{18}\) Most crucially, “Qingchun refers to a time period, and grammatically speaking, it is an ‘object’ that one can squander, sacrifice, remember, or commemorate.”\(^{19}\)

In fact, this very representation of youth, particularly as a metaphorical “spring” of one’s early life, changed in literary form over this fluctuating part of recent Chinese history. As Zhong explains further, “twenty years since the end of the Mao era and ten years after the avant-garde revolt, *qingchun* as a collective term reappeared around the thirtieth anniversary of the so-called ‘educated youth movement’ during which urban youth were sent to the countryside to be ‘re-educated.’ We began to hear a new slogan: *qingchun wuhui*, or ‘youth without regrets.’”\(^{20}\) This was part of a larger cultural shift in which emerged “a fantasy for [a] desirable material environment conjoined with a belief in the lofty ideals of the communist utopia projected on the


\(^{17}\) Zhong Xueping, “‘Long Live Youth,’” 156.

\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) Ibid.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 157.
Zhong argues, that young people like Wang Meng enthusiastically “welcomed the founding of the PRC and entrusted their own futures to that of the new nation. The slogan ‘long live youth’ implies a belief in the purity of the young people who symbolized the ‘truth and beauty’ that the new (and young) nation-state was believed to represent.” As she has summarized, the utopian connotations of qingchun which were strong during the height of Maoism are much diminished as Chinese society has transformed. “At the end of the 1990s and after twenty years of post-Mao reform, it would seem to be the utopian dimension of the youth-oriented political and cultural discourses that the ‘unrepentant’ youth of the Mao era reacted to when they reflected on their own youth.” Most importantly, she suggests that “qingchun (as a ‘sublime figure of history’) continues to hold aesthetic and historical meanings for those who grew up during the Mao era.”

_Qingchun Wansui_, was very widely read after the end of Maoism, being voted the most popular novel among Chinese students in 1981. As the scholar of both the literature and political climate of that period Perry Link has argued, around the time of the publication of _Qingchun Wansui_, authors were still cautious. “Wang Meng, for example, finished his first novel, _Long Live Youth_ in the mid-1950s. It told of idealistic high-school graduates in the years right after ‘liberation’ in 1949, and began serial publication in the Shanghai newspaper _Wenhuibao_ beginning in 1957.” Because of his being labelled a rightist during the Cultural Revolution, however, his work had to be dropped, and he was sent to Xinjiang to do labour. It was only in 1979, after the political climate had changed that his book was published as a novel. As both Liu Cixin and Perry Link note, Wang

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21 Ibid., 173.
22 Zhong, 151.
23 Ibid., 173.
24 Ibid.
Meng does not look highly on this earlier work, finding “it embarrassingly ‘naïve and immature.’”25 Rudolph Wagner argues that Qingchun Wansui could conceivably be called socialist realism, an aesthetic approach which “was restated on Mao’s authority in early 1958 as the art to ‘combine revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism.’”26 It was only “in 1979, after [Wang’s] rehabilitation, [that] these formerly young and now matured writers had to ask more probing questions. History had taken its own chaotic course and they had been down under for many years; the new leaders were old men whom they knew well and who had their solid share in the making of that history, having sent their critics down first before becoming victims themselves.”27 In general, “Wang Meng is a skilled craftsman and an eager politician. (In 1986, he became Minister of Cultural Affairs, a post from which he was removed in 1990).” Wagner also notes that his writing exudes a tension between “literature and politics”28

Li Tuo has written, regarding Wang Meng’s style, that “often he has mixed together radically different and seemingly disparate styles and literary elements – in fact it sometimes seems as if he has tried his hand at every possible literary genre in modern Chinese, from poetry to prose to essays to political commentary to cross talk…” In this mixture of styles, “somehow everything manages to cohere into a narrative language that is at once harmonious and integrated, yet reminiscent of the genre called *fu*, popular during the Han Dynasty about two thousand years ago, which was noted for its sumptuous style.” Rather than opt for simple toned-down language, “Wang

27 Ibid., 484.
28 Ibid., 485.
Meng has followed the opposite track, opting for flowery rhetoric and ornate diction, elaborate parallelisms and a profusion of colors.” Such use of language, he argues, “is no empty word game, but rather a challenge mounted from a different corner against conventionalities of language, to present in a different way the multiple possibilities of modern Chinese.”

The rather naïve or youthful style which he adopted for *Qinghun Wansui* bears upon a point made by the translator Nicky Harman regarding the difficulties of capturing such language in English. She writes that “after Liberation (1949), sentimentality mingled with heroic-revolutionary sentiment in the novels of the 1950s thought to the early 1980s…Chinese writers, especially in popular genres, still sprinkle sentimentality throughout their works.” This fact has been noted for some time as “Julian Bell, who was teaching in China in 1936, complains in his letters to…his aunt, Virginia Woolf, about the propensity to sentimentality in the writing of his Chinese students.” As Harman notes, “the Chinese terms nearest in meaning to ‘sentimentality’, [ganshang] 感伤 or [shanggan] 伤感, are neutral adjectives, in contrast to the English term.”

This convention probably has pre-1949 roots, however. McDougall has written of the older influences of romanticism on modern Chinese literature, arguing that “the idealism of Chinese writers in the early twenties is partly due to their own youthfulness (most of them were barely older than the century), and partly to this new humanism in contemporary Western literature…” But it is this sort of particularly Chinese tone, what Liu otherwise expresses as “idealism,” that is important to note here.

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31 Ibid.
32 McDougall, *The Introduction of Western Literary Theories into Modern China*, 260.
In Chinese culture, particularly for the generation which grew up during the Cultural Revolution, such harsh impoverished scenes can nevertheless constitute nostalgic memory, something which might be considered a wider cultural phenomenon in contemporary China. Despite the very dark experience of the Communist and Cultural Revolutions in China, a more Dickensian view of youth in this period is less prominent in literary discourse than a Westerner might otherwise expect. The notion of innocence and idealism is so imbued in the perception of youth itself that stories of childhood in these times are characterized with an inherent idealism, such as one described by Liu. This is a consistent trend across other literary and visual media in China, a chief example being the novel *Wild Beast* (*dongwu xiongmeng* 动物凶猛) by Wang Shuo, popularized by the acclaimed film *In the Heat of the Sun* (*yangguang canlan de rizi* 阳光灿烂的日子) - a famous coming-of-age story set during the Cultural Revolution.

On a related note, Wu Yan has argued that Liu’s work is imbued with a rough industrial atmosphere. This is perhaps linked to Soviet sf, he believes, as those writers often adopted “a very strong industrial colouring in their science fiction. Huge hollows in the centre of the Earth, grand Earth-moving engines, the fierce destruction of the Moon....all of these have a rich industrial setting about them that forms a uniquely "rough beauty" [cuye 粗野] (Liu’s own words), which is given strong expression in his fiction.” And aside from “his nostalgia for classical technologies, traces of past lives are found in Liu's works.”

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our net wider to include Wang Meng, we can see that these influences are of a different character and are not really science fictional in origin.

Here, we should draw our attention to the changes in tone at the end of the trilogy, in which there is a more pronounced elaboration of natural scenery. Once Cheng Xin and 艾 AA escape the solar system to safety on the spaceship *Halo*, they arrive on a foreign planet of strange and unfamiliar yet calm, and natural scenery. Their first step on to an alien world, which has been named Planet Blue by settlers, is not one that produces an unnerving sense of estrangement:

从舷窗和监视画面中可以看到，飞船着陆的地点是一片蓝色的草原，不远处可以看到被皑皑白雪覆盖的群山，这里已经靠近山脚。天空是淡黄色的，与在太空中见到的海洋的颜色一样，浅红色的太阳正在空中照耀着，这是蓝星的正午，但天空和太阳的色彩看上去像地球的黄昏。³⁴

There advanced spacecraft “had landed in the middle of a blue grassland. Not too far away, they could see rolling mountains covered by snow.” The first thing they noticed was that “the sky was a light yellow, like the ocean when viewed from space. A light red sun shone in the sky. It was on planet Blue, but the sky and the sun’s colours made it resemble dusk on the Earth.”³⁵ Yet as the description continues, the unfamiliarity of the scene is given further detail, in the astronomical details:

夜空中没有月亮，但与地球相比，这里的星空要明亮许多，银河系像银色的火海一般，能够在地上映出人影。³⁶

³⁴ Liu, *Sishen Yongsheng*, 460.
³⁵ Liu, *Death’s End*, 653.
³⁶ Liu, *Sishen Yongsheng*, 463.
Here, Cheng Xin observes that “there was no moon, but compared to the Earth, the stars here were far brighter.” Thus, on this planet, the same galaxy she had seen back on the surface of Earth looked “like a sea of silver fire that cast their shadows on the ground.” The estrangement later moves to biological details when they “saw the forests moving in the starlight.” wherein we learn that the blue grass is actually a sea of small moving plants which across the surface to absorb as much of the weaker sun’s light as possible.

It is here they meet Guan Yifan where, in a scene that seems to blend dystopian and utopian ideas together, he explains the nature of the cosmos and “what a true interstellar war is like.” The scene then moves to the description of the light tombs and eventually to the Universe 647. Here, on the subject of natural scenery, we might test the hypothesis of stylistic overlap between Wang and Liu. Part of Qingchun Wansui’s idealistic character is in its depictions of nature and, where such types of scenes are described in Diqiu Wangshi, one can also intuit an idealistic naturalism. Take, for example, the following from the final scene of the trilogy:

这是一个全封闭的生态球，是程心和智子十多天的工作成果，只要球体内的小太阳还能够发光，这个小小的生态系统就能生存下去。

只要有它留在这里，647 号宇就不是一个没有生命的黑暗世界。

This scene describes the “sealed ecological sphere” of the Universe 647 which Cheng Xin and Guan Yifan leave behind at the end of the trilogy. Liu Cixin calmly describes this relic of Earth – which crucially is a piece of ecological nature – in the following way: “As long as the tiny sun inside the sphere continued to give off light, this miniature ecological system would persist.”

37 Liu, *Death’s End*, 656.
38 Ibid., 656-57.
Ken Liu’s English translation cannot wholly capture the tone which Liu’s source text is attempting to convey, parallelism of the “tiny sun” (xiao taiyang 小太阳) and the “miniature ecological system” (xiaoxiao de shengtai xitong 小小的生态系统). The emphasize on the state of the sun and the little ecological forest here is of more descriptive purpose. The xiaoxiao de shengtai xitong, the “miniature ecological system” imposes a sense of calmness upon the scene (One feels it is Cheng Xin’s perspective of the scene, rather than the third person narrator’s). If the use of duplication for this latter purpose is not convincing, it is observed throughout the rest of the closing passage, significant here because this calm duplication is not characteristic of his general style:

聚变发动机启动了，推进器发出幽幽的蓝光，飞船缓缓地穿过了宇宙之门。

小宇宙中只剩下漂流瓶和生态球。

漂流瓶隐没于黑暗里，在一千米见方的宇宙中，只有生态球里的小太阳发出一点光芒。

在这个小小的生命世界中，几只清澈的水球在零重力环境中静静地飘浮着，有一条小鱼从一只水球中蹦出，跃入另一只水球，轻盈地穿游于绿藻之间。40

As the passage describes, “the fusion drive activated and the thrusters emitted a dim blue light. The space ship slowly went through the door of the universe” (jubian fadongji qidongle, tuijin qi fachu youyou de languang, feichuan huanhuan de chuangguo le yuzhou zhi men 聚变发动机启动了，推进器发出幽幽的蓝光，飞船缓缓地穿过了宇宙之门). The duplication follows in describing the “this minuscule world of life,” (zhege xiaoxiao de shengming shijie 这}

40 Ibid.

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个小小的生命世界) in which “a few clear watery spheres drifted serenely in weightlessness. One tiny fish leapt out of a watery sphere and entered another, where it effortlessly swam between the green algae” (ji zhi qingche de shuiqiu zai ling zhongli huanjing zhong jingjing de piaofu zhe, you yitiao xiao yu cong yi zhi shuiqiu zhong beng chu, yue ru yi zhi shuiqiu, qingying de chuan you yu lü zao zhi jian 几只清澈的水球在零重力环境中静静地飘浮着，有一条小鱼从一只水球中蹦出，跃入另一只水球，轻盈地穿游于绿藻之间).41

Duplication is used in modern Chinese as a way of making names and nicknames sound more affectionate, on the part of the speaker. It is nonetheless an older feature of literary Chinese, intersecting at the level of subjective emotion and objective description, usually of natural scenery. One way of understanding this technique is as a form of emotional objectification. Its purpose is to indicate the speaker’s subjective emotional state regarding the described object, rather than prescribe an externalized description on to the object itself. Such is the difference between a phrase like anjing de jiedao 安静的街道 and ananjjingjing de jiedao 安安静静的街道. As Paul Waltraud explains, in duplication, verbs follow ABAB patterns while adjectives follow an AABB structure such that an adjective gaoxing 高兴 becomes gaogaoxingxing 高高兴兴.42 In essence, “adjectival reduplication mainly involves the speaker’s subjective evaluation of the property expressed by the adjective. It does not have a quantitative effect…” Rather “the most productive pattern of adjectival reduplication, i.e. ‘AA(BB)’ indicates that a property is exactly as it should be….“43 More importantly, they refer to the subjective perception of the speaker – they are “adjectives

41 Liu, Death’s End, 721.
42 Paul Waltraud, New perspectives on Chinese syntax (Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 144-146.
43 Ibid., 177.
referring to mental states not readily discernible” to the listener/reader. It general, it could be said that duplication results in the intensification of the subjective vividness of descriptions.

It is, of course, a common feature of modern Chinese literary writing as well and is used to convey emotion in a similar sense to classical poetry. While arguing that Wang Meng’s concern is for characterizing a sort of bliss, of happiness, for school children in New China, it relies heavily on the external scenery. In this passage, Wang writes of children in the “Happy Camp,” trying to fall asleep:

谁都不说话，怕吵着别人，只是静静地躺在稻草垫子上，听那清晰可闻的喧音响：有呼号、走步的声音，那是附近的部队为了准备国庆检阅紧张地操练着；有木轮车咯吱咯吱推过；还有从遥远的工地上广播的…

It describes children “not wanting to disturb anyone else lying quietly on their straw mats, listening to the clear sounds outside: shouting, stepping (these were the sounds of soldiers practicing intensely for the National Day Parade), the creaking of wooden carts pushing past, and the broadcasts from far-away construction sites.” Here, we see such calming objective descriptions using the technique of disyllabic adjectives and adverbs. Firstly, we have another duplicated adverb – jingjing de 静静地 (usually meaning peacefully) – drawing attention to the peace and quiet of the scene. After, we have the repeated onomatopoeic adjective, gezhigezhi 咯吱咯吱, which avoids drawing attention away from the clamour of the military drills and construction. Where the connotation of creaking sounds is ambiguous, the disyllabic use of the adjective here is

44 Ibid., 178.
explicitly pleasant in character, a softer rendition of the sound. Again, this passage is intending to convey the serenity of the children half asleep in the bustle around them.

Through the emotional register conveyed by the young protagonists or the author, the reader is blind to the grimmer picture of the countryside in an impoverished early revolutionary China. The loud disconcerting noises of a changing, rapidly industrializing New China, only appear calm and peaceful – the creaking of carts and the drilling of the soldiers. Other instances can be shown in the surrounding passages, which are filled with naturalistic description:

进了营门往左，可以看见高高搭起的塔形的瞭望台。值勤的“哨兵”扶着军棍，站在台上，警觉地俯视着营地的四周，俯视着田野、道路和池塘。有时 也禁不住放松自己的职责，望望空中多变的云彩、时淡时浓的远山的轮廓，和那边堆满石块的高岗子。从那里，清清的河水稀里哗啦地流过来。46

Here, the duplication of wangwang and qingqing are used in describing “looking at the clouds in the sky” (wangwang kong zhong zuobian de yuncai 望望空中多变的云彩) and “it was from there that the babbling brooks flowed” (qingqing de heshui xi li huala de liu guolai 清清的河水稀里哗啦地流过来). A similar instance follows:

晚上，灼热的空气还没有散尽，就寝号已经吹响。号手站在野营“仓库”旁边，呜呜地使劲吹，他看着满天的星星，满意地体会着自己地位的重要；又 惆怅由于自己一吹，孩子们的欢笑和喧闹顿然消失，星星也变得又高又远，只剩下成群的青蛙，它们的大合唱才刚刚开了头儿。47
Here, the passage describes the bugler “blowing a tooting noise” (wuwu de shijin chui 吱吱地使劲吹), while he “stared at the stars in the sky” (tan kanzhe mantian de xingxing 他看着满天的星星), and these “stars seemed higher and further away” (xingxing ye biande you gao you yuan 星星也变得又高又远). It also describes an “army of frogs…who had just begun to chant their chorus” (tamen de dahe chang cai ganggang kai le tour 它们的大合唱才刚刚开了头儿). Noticeably, in most of these instances, the use of the adverbial “adv + 地” is difficult to render in English translation.

Similarities with such descriptions are not insignificant as they represent a precise stylistic choice on the part of Liu to end the trilogy on a specific tone. But it may be a leap of logic to attribute such a choice of using natural scenery to the influence of Wang Meng, or the “idealism” Liu attributes to him. While it is ultimately tempting to see in Qingchun Wansui a correlation between this work and Diqiu Wangshi – that of a perceptual discordance with the underlying reality implied in these scenes – there is nothing particularly striking from Wang Meng’s novel that can clearly be claimed as an imprint upon Liu. Rather, one has the impression that, among the numerous Western influences he points out in interviews, he wishes to point to at least some Chinese influence, and he returns perhaps to the novel that defined a generation of young Chinese readers. We are, however, still left with the problem of Liu’s description of Wang Meng’s work as “idealist” and with the question of what to make of such “idealism” in relationship to the small ecological utopia into which our last remaining protagonist escapes.

“The most basic sustenance for humanity,” Liu writes, “is its hope for the future and science fiction is the sort of thing that can make such hope a reality, though it has yet to do anything in this regard.” This is not to say that scientific achievement is the only solution to societal
problems. As he says, “One thing is certain: ideal societies are catastrophes.” In the same sense as Cheng Xin’s final decision at the end of the book, “it may be that, the day before humanity is destroyed by inevitable catastrophe, only then can the ideal society reveal itself.” Of his other fictional works, he says that “disasters put humanity through a process of physical and spiritual sublimation.” The same can be said of Diqiu Wangshi. Moreover, he writes, the new mission for science fiction writers should not be describing those societies we would want to avoid – dystopias – but rather, societies we would want to bring about. However, “this mission for science fiction is a new one. The ‘dystopia trilogy’ having already been born (in the West), we in China should bring about a ‘utopia trilogy.’” He concludes: “This task can possibly only be done by the Chinese because our culture is an optimistic one, at least when compared with that of the West!”

It is understandable then that he pins his idealism upon a Chinese source, Wang Meng, rather than a Western work. Likewise, it is not surprising that he also projects a certain sort of pessimism upon Western literature when it comes to describing a utopia. Ultimately, the clue is given somewhere between two facts: first, that Liu identifies a misplaced “idealism” influencing his work and second, that the utopia he describes at the end of his trilogy is one of ecological nature. For Cheng Xin, her ecological sphere, her memento of Earth, left remaining in the void, is a calming image of the relationship between utopia and dystopia, as a moral aim “to be” in a vacuum of nothingness. Ultimately, the limits of the ecological sphere in the vacuum (piaoliu ping yinmo yu hei’an li 漂流瓶隐没于黑暗里) are the limits of his idealism and are a representation of his notion of the sublime. These are the same limits as those found in Western literature – that we

48 Liu, Liu Cixin tan kehuan, 73.
cannot know what the ideal society looks like. The peculiar subliminal depiction that Liu scribes at the end of his story is that a utopia can only be achieved beyond the confines of space and time.

Ye Wenjie’s decision, at the end of the first novel, to contact the Trisolarans, was rooted in her two encounters with the anti-scientific ideology of Mao, described in the Struggle Session, and her reckoning with Deep Ecology, or Evans’s markedly anti-humanist rendition of it. Firstly, her innocence is shattered by the execution of her father. Secondly, she is forever changed through “the influence [that] Silent Spring had on her life.” The use of pesticides, criticized in that work, “allowed Ye to see that, from Nature’s perspective, their use was indistinguishable from the Cultural Revolution.”49 Thus, “for Ye, Evans, and their fellow enthusiasts,” Li Hua notes, “human society on Earth resembles hell. They are extremely disappointed with human nature and the devastating effects of industrial civilization on Earth’s natural environment and ecology.” This judgment inculcates their belief “in a sort of salvationist fantasy about the Trisolaran civilization on account of their admiration for science and technology.”50 The consequence was a loss of faith in her own species, surrendering humanity’s moral responsibilities, to pursue scientific progress (and to view humans necessarily as the authors of such progress), to the Trisolarans. Diqiu Wangshi serves as a vast aesthetic and ethical elaboration on the consequences of this dual rejection of scientistic and humanistic value. So what is there to make of Liu’s aspirations for a distinctly Chinese “utopian science fiction”? Liu’s utopia might be that a scientistic society must embrace humanist ideals and that humanist ideals can never be attained without the continual mastery of science. The question is: would the Western reader understand this to be utopianism?

49 Liu, The Three Body Problem, 24.
Diqiu Wangshi suggests that such utopianism is a process, not an attainable object. To paraphrase this moral framework we can return to Liu’s summation of his work as a description of “the worst of all possible universes…in the hope that we can strive for the best of all possible Earths.”\(^5\) The unanswered question at this point is whether technology is an effective vehicle for manifesting such utopianism. Liu has alluded to the source of this worldview, placing it in his reading of 1980s Chinese sf short fiction. Li Hua argues that this type of science popularization literature, kepu wenxue (discussed in Chapter Two), carries the same sort of technological functionalism that pervades Liu’s writing. It is a “subgenre that has focused on technical innovation or invention, and especially thrived during the early 1980s.”\(^5\) In a similar vein, she argues that “Liu’s narratives make a literary contribution to discussions of environmental degradation and energy exhaustion, and explore ways to reduce production and consumption.”\(^5\) Liu Cixin points out that, whenever 1980s Chinese sf is mentioned, people immediately think of Tong Enzheng, Ye Yonglie, Deng Wenguang and other older writers. But their works, he argues, are not pure products of the 1980s, rather being ones of the Cultural Revolution period, delayed in publication. The new forms of sf which appeared in the 1980s were consequently overlooked because of the popularity of these more established authors.\(^5\)

He does mention several Chinese sf stories, two principal examples being “The Girl who Blew Smoke in my Eyes” (*Tu yanquan de nüren* 吐烟圈的女人) by Wan Huankui 万焕奎, from *Kexue Wenyi*, and “Sweet Water Lilly” (*tiantian de shuilian* 甜甜的睡莲), from *Kexue Huabao*.

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\(^5\) Liu, “The Worst of All Possible Universes,” 367.


\(^5\) Ibid., 29.

The former story describes a massive chimney which expels smoke in a ring-shape such that it is able to project its pollution upward away from the city. The latter describes cosmetic surgery procedures which make use of the aggressiveness of leprosy cells as well as the fast growth of cancer cells.\textsuperscript{55} Referring to these same works, Li Hua argues that they “played an instrumental role in popularizing science and technology, along with introducing juvenile readers to creative visions of future technological advances.”\textsuperscript{56}

Liu Cixin then points out “‘so-called’ science fiction with Chinese characteristics,” or the sort of “boring” sf writing which relies on modifying concepts from historical and mythological rather than play originally with scientific concepts. On this particular point, he wonders if it is only the thousands of years before modern China which make the culture interesting (rather than its present or future). His Anglo-American inspiration is evident when he brings up Anglophone sf as a contrast, for it is sf with “American characteristics” which managed to permeate the whole of modern American culture. Ultimately, he indicates his despair that present-day Chinese fiction looks only at bringing the past to the present, not realizing that sf can bring the present into view of an imagined future.”\textsuperscript{57} But of the Chinese techno-sf of the 1980s, he stresses that “this is China’s own science fiction. It has its own profound reasons for producing it. We ought to draw more upon it. Everyone has been working hard to produce a ‘science fiction with Chinese characteristics.’”\textsuperscript{58} But authentic Chinese science fiction, he notes, is unfortunately unknown.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{56} Li, “Twenty-First Century Chinese Science Fiction on the Rise,” 650.
\textsuperscript{57} Liu, \textit{Liu Cixin tan kehuan}, 85
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
He tries to describe the common features of this burgeoning new genre, coming up with four. Firstly, that technological changes are very much realizable. The key distinction of this early-eighties sf is that it is technical in a “real world” style and he argues that it is itself a subgenre, calling it “technical science fiction” (技术科幻 jishu kehuan). The story which he gives the most note, “The Girl who Blew Smoke in my Eyes,” has a strong emphasis on technical ideas and, in his view, the technical concepts are clever as well as detailed, though expressed with brevity. The story portrays a young mathematician who is coaxed into meeting a young woman by a matchmaker, Miss Peng. The man meets the woman, who appears to him an intellectual, and he is immediately enamored of her. Hardly able to wait to see her again, he goes over to her dormitory and rather than knock on the door, peeks through her window. But he sees a rather different person, the same girl leaning across her sofa smoking, blowing smoke rings so adeptly that she must be a hobby for her. In his view, this was not the sort of woman he should be pursuing for marriage and he feels betrayed by the visage of an intellectual she put on at the matchmaker’s meeting. But later he attends a scientific award ceremony and notices that same woman there, receiving a prize. He learns that she had been researching vortices, as pictured here:

60 Liu, Liu Cixin tan kehuan, 83.
61 Ibid.

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正是在理论上和技术上解决了这个问题。这无疑对环境保护有重要的意义。62

“Putting it in layman’s terms,” he explains, “a smoker rounds their lips and puffs out small vortex rings. The shape of this ring can change but it won’t dissipate into the surrounding air unless its energy is exhausted.” But “if the energy of soot and chemicals puffing from factories can be shaped into these sorts of smoke rings, then they could rise to higher altitudes, preventing smoke from accumulating near the surface.” He realizes at last that he had been tricked by the image of her smoking. Rather she was a respectable intellectual who had simply been working on technologies to prevent environmental pollution. For Liu, such fiction is ultimately defined by a certain pragmatism. Stressing the functionalist character of the above passage, Liu writes that works such as these were a breath of fresh air, together forming a genuine “tributary of Chinese science fiction in the early 1980s.” The technical descriptions are not for their own sake, rather they are like “feasibility reports” (可行性报告 hexingxing baogao), in that they imagine technology as though it were to be practically implemented. Consequently, Liu writes that “this science fiction is the [unique] creation of China!”63 Of course, the roots of such hexingxing baogao might just as easily be found in the style of Herman Wouk, referring to his passages on radar technology and uranium development in the prior chapter, which seem like jishu kehuan if read in the context of science fiction.

But as Li Hua argues, the utopianism implicit in such works indicates “a naively optimistic view that technology can solve all problems once and for all, thereby enabling people to keep on

63 Liu, Liu Cixin tan kehuan, 83.
consuming resources at a high rate and go on living their lives the same old way.” What is neglected in such a viewpoint, she emphasizes, is that “technology might offer various partial solutions to ecological crises, but it alone cannot provide a path to a more sustainable future for humanity.” This disposition reflects the broader ideological attitude of scientism in post-Mao China, “a continuation of the over-confidence in science and technology since the emergence of Chinese sf at the beginning of the twentieth century.”64 In particular, “the environmental destruction brought about by human actions have been presented merely as a misstep in the march of progress,” wherein we are led to accept that “science and technology eventually triumph over ecological crises and energy shortages.”65 And she stresses, Liu Cixin views such triumphalism of technology as a distinctly Chinese viewpoint in the world of science fiction.

What also remains is the cautionary character of this technologist worldview. Liu Hua writes that Liu’s work has a fundamental “focus on the impact of science and technology on human behaviour and social systems.”66 This reflects that “a utopian vision, an emphasis on science and technology, and an emphasis on political implications, have remained salient characteristics throughout the subgenre’s development” in China.67 Li Hua, however, argues that Liu can be compared with other writers like Chan Koonchung in that their works contain an implicit “caution” against totalitarian encroachment. One feels, however, that from the broader historicist and technologist viewpoint that defines Liu’s oeuvre, he is ultimately accepting of a wider variety of socio-political systems, however immoral that may seem at a closer view. Simply put, one detects a less cautionary tone in his work, a mentality perhaps indicated in Liu’s urging for a Chinese

65 Ibid., 25.
67 Ibid., 648.
“utopia” rather than “dystopia” trilogy. It would appear that his moral aims beyond the pursuit of technological progress remain ambivalent and he only cautions against humanity’s remaining insufficiently advanced and complacent as a technological species.\textsuperscript{68} Liu Cixin’s magnum opus, in this sense, supports Li Hua’s view that “the optimistic view that science and technology would necessarily bring about human prosperity and well-being has pretty much remained unchanged.”\textsuperscript{69}

This ideological faith in materialist progress nonetheless betrays the same tensions between scientism and humanism that exist in Western culture, intimated in Huxley’s and Zamyatin’s versions of dystopia. Here, we are again reminded of C.P. Snow’s \textit{Two Cultures} and, more specifically, his mid-century observation that “the non-scientists [“literary types”] have a rooted impression that the scientists are shallowly optimistic, unaware of man’s condition.” On the other hand, “the scientists believe that the literary intellectuals are totally lacking in foresight, peculiarly unconcerned with their brother men, in a deep sense anti-intellectual, anxious to restrict both art and thought to the existential moment.”\textsuperscript{70} When observing this parallel, Liu Cixin’s observation that “the China of the present is a bit like America during science fiction’s Golden Age…presenting both great crises and grand opportunities,” is all the more striking, if we take “America” to reflect the post-war West generally.\textsuperscript{71} And ultimately, Liu’s criticisms of the anthropocentric “narcissism” of modern literature similarly reflect common ideological concerns. What Liu seems to indicate, as mentioned earlier, is that humanist ideals are fundamentally intertwined with the pursuit of science, that is a technological pursuit. In his attempt to articulate

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 658
\textsuperscript{70} Snow, \textit{The Two Cultures}, 4-6.
\textsuperscript{71} Liu, “The Worst of All Possible Universes,” 366.
the quest “for the best of all possible Earths,” Liu is explicit that technology is the only means by which to reach such a terrestrial utopia, the sort of one in which Luo Ji found himself.

In his view, utopianism might be characterized as the struggle away from dystopias rather than the very misguided belief structure that produces totalitarian societies. One has the sense that, in his view, a utopian temperament is correctly used as a compass to navigate dystopian seas already laid before us *a priori* by the cosmos. Moreover, it might be considered an ethical lens through which to view a cosmological scheme that seemingly trends toward physical and moral entropy. In this framework, the imagining of a better place which does not exist, or cannot exist, is the means of making historical progress, technology being the language for conceptualizing this. It is a strikingly different perspective to the Western view that the belief in utopia, in and of itself, is what directly or indirectly produces dystopias. One might argue that this intellectual difference is simply a Chinese variation on a set of Western themes. It would be more appropriate to argue that the influences of Western form and content seemingly manifest as different conceptualizations of universal ideas in the Chinese text, universality pertaining, as discussed, to science, humanity, technology, history and utopia.

If “technological utopianism” indeed represents the distinctly Chinese sf which Liu espouses, it is still deeply entwined with foreign intellectual influences. In invoking such a term, it might be that he is trying to encourage the new generation of Chinese sf writers to follow what he has done in *Diqiu Wangshi* – to portray humans as trying to master and overcome physical nature, though never truly being able to achieve this task. This idea is expressed in the trilogy’s ending wherein Cheng Xin decides that it is better to return to our Universe and allow it to collapse into a Big Bang and for a new cosmological epoch to begin anew, her choice, in a sense, echoes the Savage’s rendition of *Hamlet* in *Brave New World*. Her decision is itself the choice “to suffer
the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” and “to take arms against a sea of troubles” rather than allow the permanent death of the Universe, solely for the sake of an ephemeral existence in the concealed comfort of Universe 647, a choice which would have, in the words of the Savage, “abolish[ed] the slings and arrows. It’s too easy.”

Given my elaboration here of the interplay of Western and Chinese influences, it is up to future critics of Liu Cixin to decide whether these ideas are decidedly ones of “Chinese characteristics.” Ultimately one thinks he is working on a translated intellectual canvas, a view that is more consistent with modern Chinese literary and intellectual history. Given Liu’s achievement, the question that remains is how such ideas of technological triumphantism shall play out and whether we shall indeed end up with a pure science fiction with Chinese characteristics. It is this aim that has seemingly inspired younger Chinese sf authors and which, in the local literary scene, may be Liu’s legacy.

7) Contemporary Fiction with Western Characteristics

Writing on the peripherality of science fiction in China in 2018, Song Mingwei argued that “the situation has changed drastically in the past five or six years” as “Chinese science fiction has suddenly gained worldwide recognition, thanks mainly to the success of Liu Cixin’s The Three-Body Problem…”1 While Liu’s work is undoubtedly unprecedented in its success, that of the Chinese sf genre abroad is less certain and it remains unclear how much it will thrive, though the coming television adaptation of the trilogy will no doubt contribute to its popularity in the near future. The literary accomplishments of Chinese sf abroad really only refer to those of the foreign translations (particularly the English, French and German) of the Diqiu Wangshi trilogy and, more particularly, it refers to the popularity (as opposed to critical success) of this particular work. The same cannot be said for Chinese sf in general. But there is hope for its continued growth. By emphasizing the importance of genre, critics have perhaps lost sight of the forest for the trees. What this analysis of Diqiu Wangshi indicates is the broader aesthetic influence of western literature on Chinese literature in recent decades. This aesthetic and thematic study of Diqiu Wangshi suggests more about the nature of changing literary form and content in contemporary China than it does about the particular significance of Chinese sf.

Song’s interpretation of the trilogy has less to do with these concerns, rather pushing for a critique that inflates the importance of the sf genre in China’s literary scene – particularly in

1 Song, “Introduction,” xi.
trying to apprehend what has been dubbed the “new wave” of Chinese science fiction. To make this point, he emphasizes the grouping of “Liu Cixin, Han Song, and Wang Jingkang…called the Big Three.”\(^2\) As he acknowledges, “the term ‘new wave’ is a controversial concept for critics in China; its emphasis on the subversive, dark side of science fiction is questioned by those who have more faith in a utopia and China’s contemporary pursuit of wealth and power.”\(^3\) Moreover, “in its aesthetic aspect, the new wave speaks either to the invisible dimensions of reality or simply to the impossibility of representing a certain reality dictated by the discourse of the national dream.”\(^4\) In Song Mingwei’s view, today there is to be found a distinctly contemporary form of science fiction with Chinese characteristics. However, Han Song himself has implied the opposite, stating that “the path for Chinese science fiction to go out into the world \([zou\ shijie]\) is a long one and perhaps it will require China to become stronger, especially in its cultural influence.” Crucially, he acknowledges that “we are still imitating Western science fiction, lacking those unique features [in Chinese sf] that make readers say ‘wow.’” In general, he argues, Chinese sf is generally “childish” and “lacking in imagination, depth and acuity of thought.”\(^5\)

For these reasons, such a categorization as the “Big Three” seems forced rather than a natural interpretation of the commonalities between those three authors. What makes Liu Cixin unique and interesting, as has been shown, is not found in the commonalities he shares with Chinese science fiction authors. Much of it comes at the boundaries of the sf genre (in dystopian

\(^2\) Ibid., xvii.
\(^3\) Ibid., xiii.
\(^4\) Ibid., xiv.
fiction and historical fiction) and mostly in translated authors. Of course, Liu Cixin does not avoid identifying himself with Chinese sf writers nor is he indifferent to the state of the genre in China. In fact, he has much to say on the subject and to some degree is a spokesperson for Chinese sf writers. But overwhelmingly the prevailing critical attitude to his writing has been to identify him, largely arbitrarily, with these categories of genre and nationality, rather than more deeply consider the idiosyncrasies of his work and its preoccupation with the foreign. Indeed, in following Han Song’s remarks that there are few discernibly unique characteristics to Chinese sf and that it is very much an “imitation” of Western sf, one might ask what is the character of this “imitation” of Western sf, rather than what is the Chinese we wave?

As Gaffric has argued, much of this can be accounted for by the fact that the success of Chinese sf has needed to be interpreted, by laymen journalists and specialist critics alike, as China’s success. For the sf genre, this phenomenon mirrors what Julia Lovell calls “China’s Nobel Complex,” a preoccupation with the Nobel Prize that has “turned literature into an international ambassador for China.”⁶ Echoing C.T. Hsia’s remarks, Chinese “modern intellectuals, and writers in particular, took on a heavy ideological and artistic burden at the start of the twentieth century as they worried about the fate of the nation and strove to produce a culture that would enable China to vie with the West.” What this complex reflects is “the ongoing confusion over aims and audience among modern Chinese writers caught between national, international, and individual aspirations.”⁷ Lovell, however, argues that “for the younger generation of free writers, the Nobel issue represents little more than a source of amusement, a curious cultural phenomenon well

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⁷ Ibid.
detached from their lives.” But even though Mo Yan won the Nobel Prize in 2012, Liu Cixin’s Hugo Award in 2015 shows that this is not a complex which pertains specifically to the Nobel itself. Rather, it concerns the recognition of literary achievement in any sort of genre for Chinese writing in overseas markets. One can imagine a similar amount of commotion will be made when a Chinese writer wins the Man Booker International Prize. It was only natural, given these specific metrics laid out for Chinese literary achievement over the last twenty years, that the popularity and merit of Liu’s trilogy was read in terms of its supposed Chinese-ness.

In view of these issues, the question that I proposed at the outset was to consider the extent to which Liu Cixin ought to be thought of as a Chinese author in a world literary context. If anything, Liu’s writing seems imbued with you waiguó tese 有外国特色 or “foreign characteristics,” if such a term could be invoked in Chinese. In fact, the notion of a “foreignism,” meaning “the imitation of what is foreign” or “an idiom phrase, or term of foreign origin,” has no translation in Chinese. It is interesting that this concept of foreign characteristics in Chinese language and culture cannot be easily coined in a single term, particularly when one considers that, from the perspective of modern Chinese literary studies, it seems almost tautological to talk about you waiguó tese as this language and literature itself emerged as a consequence of the internalization of foreign style and concepts. This thesis has hopefully demonstrated that it is in fact necessary to delve into foreign translated influence to understand with greater nuance the Chinese-ness of the text.

8 Ibid., 180.
In many ways, the opening of China to Western (and Japanese) ideas and culture was of direct encounter – by intellectuals of an old scholar bureaucracy and those of a new burgeoning civil society, gradually encountering and bringing home new systems of thought and literary works through their travel and study abroad. When Lydia Liu wrote of the foreignization of Chinese in *Translingual Practice*, her work dealt specifically with this historical transformation across the 1900s to 1930s. This process has its parallels, to a degree, with the post-Mao era when many educated Chinese travelled abroad in the 1980s, after the end of isolationism. But the cultural and literary influences on contemporary writers seemed to have taken place domestically, through the availability within China of foreign literature, the Chinese translations of which had by then vastly accumulated and would continue to do so through the decade. For the most part, the Chinese reader of the contemporary period first encountered the outside world on the bookshelf rather than personal travel abroad. Only when framing Liu Cixin’s literary context in such terms does one begin to appreciate the importance of this historical period to understanding the literary period in general. Indeed, we can see that one need not even have travelled to the West, or have been based in the intellectual centres of Beijing and Shanghai, or even have learned a European language, in order to have been markedly influenced by foreign writing.

Even though he describes the introduction of foreign literature in the PRC as a “prodigious expansion,” Li Guangyi overlooks this distinction between the Republican and post-Mao waves of western influence. He explains that, “after the establishment of the PRC, the literary field renewed its outlook on the world” wherein the “state saw translation as a fundamental aspect of a great new cultural wave and placed high value upon literary translation,” bringing in works from the “Asian, African, and Latin American literary fields.”

10 It seem strange to place the early PRC,

rather than the end of the Cultural Revolution, as the point of this “prodigious expansion.” In fact, the increase in translation in the early PRC was short-lived as the country increasingly closed itself off from the outside world until 1976. As discussed in the second chapter, foreign works were summarily banned and what was translated was produced for internal distribution party officials only. Li therefore overemphasizes literary continuity within the PRC period, downplaying the fact that post-Mao period constituted a fundamentally new reacquaintance with foreign literature. Song Mingwei’s view of Chinese sf can perhaps be understood as an emulation of this sort of interpretation. By “focusing on the late Qing and the contemporary” and “paralleling the science fiction writings from these two beginnings of successive centuries,” we are naturally encouraged to accept that “both epochs are characterized by heightened aspirations for change as well as by deep anxieties about China’s future.”

This perspective ultimately leads to view of a teleological continuity between sf, with less regard for the qualitative distinctions (and creative interruptions) between each era.

Song however does note that such “recapitulations of the earlier age’s literary motifs also lead to self-reflective variations that point to the latter age’s singularity,” suggesting the limitations of this emphasis on such continuity. Likewise, Li Guangyi also resolves that we must look to the idiosyncrasies of the contemporary period to understand contemporary Chinese works. He argues that “it is quite difficult for us to see the global significance of the artistry and intellectual depth of the last thirty years of Chinese literature, despite the fact that Chinese writers have attained a degree of internationalism unprecedented in any other historical era. Science fiction is no

12 Ibid.
exception…”\textsuperscript{13} It is here that Paula Iovene, in identifying the stark changes in Chinese literary culture following Mao’s death, usefully points out that “the late 1980s was a period of transition in the economic lives of writers. High expectations mingled with a sense of impending crisis for professionals whose niches were potentially endangered, or at least not particularly favoured, by the new market economy.”\textsuperscript{14} It would seem, therefore, that these critics, from different vantage points, are indicating the utility of demarcating the post-Mao period as a way of appreciating contemporary fiction.

In short, it might prove more fruitful to downplay the notion of continuity between the pre-Mao, Maoist and post-Mao periods, inviting questions of how the conditions – intellectual, social and political – allowed for the creation of new literary ideas. In this way, we can more fully appreciate that this “prodigious expansion” of foreign literature, as Li Guangyi puts it, occurred not with the founding of the PRC but rather with the gaige kaifeng and this expansion, with some upsets (The Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign etc.) has endured continually to this day. What we see in Liu Cixin’s work, particularly in his Diqiu Wangshi, is the quintessence of this “expansion,” namely Chinese readers and writers’ sustained exposure to, and increasing engagement with, Western literature. What scholars have been indirectly hinting at, or perhaps attributing to the wrong period, is a sort of “literary opening” of China, occurring within the context of the economic one of the late 1970s onwards.

Before continuing with this line of thought, one must also address the problem of national and political boundaries within the Chinese world. Since splitting with the mainland in 1949, numerous foreign works were already being translated in Taiwan which were unavailable to

\textsuperscript{13} Li, “China Turns Outward,” 5.
\textsuperscript{14} Iovene, Tales of Futures Past, 104-105.
readers in the PRC. Once foreign literature was reintroduced into mainland China from 1978, Chinese readers would have access to different Chinese translations than those that had been published in Taiwan. Consequently, the same works of foreign fiction ended up being translated into Chinese in very separate spatial and temporal contexts and were thus stylistically distinct. This is a question which this dissertation has not been able to consider, dealing only with the translation in the PRC and sf contexts.

Of course, translation of foreign fiction was not wholly absent on the mainland. Prior to China’s opening in 1978, translation had come principally through the journal Yiwen which, throughout the 1950s, focused on Russian or Soviet literature under Mao Dun’s editorial oversight. While it published all forms of literature, from essays to poetry to narrative fiction, it was not limited solely to Soviet work, attempting to offer its own view of “world literature,” but within Marxist or Socialist Internationalist confines. This journal would therefore be renamed World Literature 世界文学 and would attempt to offer a broader view of fiction from around the globe, as promoter and censor of such material. This development, however, came within the context of broader censorship of foreign fiction.¹⁵ This is evidenced most strikingly in a 1962 notice against bourgeois western literature, in which Waiting for Godot was censored under neibu faxing along with JD Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye, Jack Kerouac’s On the Road and John Osborne’s Look Back in Anger. Criticism of Beckett’s work, “heavily tainted by the conservative political and cultural influences of the time, that mood, unfortunately, led to the dire misunderstanding of Beckett in particular and absurdist dramatists in general.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Refer to Chapter 2 of ibid.
This trend of translation would only pick up after the Cultural Revolution into the eighties with the founding of new literary journals which were heavily influenced by the increased reception of foreign material. As Iovene explains, “editors working at such journals as Shouhuo (Harvest), Zhongguo (China), and Beijing wenxue (Beijing literature)…cultivated modes of writing that would testify to brisk literary change and help Chinese literature ‘reach out to the world’ (zou xiang shijie),” a phrase that was most likely coined by the scholar Liu Panxi 刘泮溪 who wrote in the 1950s that “translation is one important means by which [Chinese] national culture can reach out to the world.”17 Thus, while this explicit aspiration for modern Chinese literature to go out into the world is pronounced in the early years of the PRC, it did not appear to have manifested more widely in the literary culture until the proliferation of translation in the 1980s.

But the translingual influences of western, principally Anglophone, writers extend much further than sf, across many modern literary genres and languages, as well as across the PRC boundaries to Taiwan. Indeed, since the publication of Edward Gunn’s Rewriting Chinese, the question of the reshaping of mainland Chinese literary form from the 1970s, and how this diverges with that of Taiwan, has been neglected. One can perhaps see this tentatively in the two sorts of Mandarin Modernisms which have emerged in the PRC and ROC respectively.18 Of course, the modernist movement in China has its roots in the translation of such fiction during the 1920s and

17 Iovene, Tales of Futures Past, 81.
Liu Panxi, “Lu Xun jieshao shijie wenyi de chengji” (Lu Xun's Introduces World Literary Accomplishments), Wen Shi Zhe (Literature, History and Philosophy), No. 12 (1954): 1397.
1930s in the journal *Les Contemporains* 现代 in Shanghai, under the auspices of Shi Zhecun 施蛰存, but it was pursued only sporadically from that time onwards. The translation of early to mid-twentieth century modernist fiction would continue in Taiwan after the political split with the mainland in 1949, in journals such as *Xiandai wenxue* 现代文学 and through the publishing houses Zhiwen 志文 and Huangguan 皇冠. In other words, the development of foreign modernist forms in Chinese language occurred through sustained translation from the mid-twentieth century onwards in Taiwan. This, of course, is not to downplay censorship of certain types of literary fiction by the Kuomintang regime.

However, the circumstances were radically different in mainland China where translation was essentially halted in the Cultural Revolution. But beginning in the mid-1970s, a multitudinous backlog of translated material emerged in Chinese, much of which goes back to the Western modernists. Paola Iovene crucially identifies this issue, writing that “the observation that Chinese writers in the 1980s were catching up with literary developments that they felt had already happened elsewhere summons up the ghost of belatedness.” Importantly, “even though modernist formal features were certainly not being introduced to Chinese language writing for the first time, a sense of having fallen behind permeates literary debates in the 1980s and contemporary discussions of Chinese modernism and postmodernism.”19 As Henry Zhao writes, “if a kind of chronology truly expresses the reception of literary influence, we can see that literature in China in the 1980s rapidly ran through all the stages of Western literature of the second half of the 20th century.” But “the dominant influences…were, if some simplification is allowed, the rebellious

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19 Iovene, *Tales of Futures Past*, 104-105.
nihilism of JD. Salinger, the local-colour of William Faulkner, the magic realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and the experimentalism of Jorge Luis Borges.”

In the case of William Faulkner’s work, for example, “it would not be until 1984 when the first novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, would be translated into Mandarin in Simplified Chinese characters in mainland China” while “a Taiwanese translation of *The Wild Palms* in Traditional Chinese characters appeared as early as 1960 and a translation of the novella ‘The Bear’ appeared in 1968.” Faulkner is significant in his influence on Mo Yan who was “quite open in acknowledging the influence of Faulkner’s works on his own” and “also acknowledged that *The Sound and the Fury* was among one of the novels that influenced his writings the most.” Another commonly noted inspiration for Mo Yan was Jorge Luis Borges, who “was one of the writers who had exerted [the] greatest influence upon contemporary Chinese avant-garde writers and was also revered as their spiritual teacher.” The question of modernist influence extends to Samuel Beckett who, as mentioned earlier, was “often misunderstood by Chinese academics.”

The circumstances surrounding modernist reception were rather different in Taiwan. As Chang Sung-sheng has discussed, “the 1960s in Taiwan in many ways resembled the 1980 in the People’s Republic of China, when dynamic interactions with Western countries were endorsed by the government and the effects were visible at all levels of society.” In this context, “closer

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22 Ibid., 224.
communication with the West not only increased their knowledge of current Western thought but also incited an earnest desire to catch up with what was happening in the rest of the world.”

Much like contemporary PRC literature, “scholars and critics of post-1949 Taiwan literature have fervently debated the adequacy of such a term as ‘Chinese modernism.’” Some “have argued that the superficial modernist traits of most of this literature are not intrinsically motivated. Lacking the animating spirit of modernism that underlies its Western models.”

Taiwan would see a wave of modernist writers followed by a reaction of Nativist writers. What “inaugurated the modernist trend in Taiwan’s fiction was the publication of the literary magazine Hsien-tai wenhsüeh [Modern literature] (1960-1973; 1967-)” which “published translations of creative and critical works from the Western modernist canon, featuring such writers as Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, and D.H. Lawrence.”

While the modernists wanted “an ideological transformation, taking such bourgeois social values as individualism, liberalism, and rationalism,” the Nativists aimed “to destroy the political myth of the mainlander-controlled Nationalist government, to denounce bourgeois capitalist social values, and to combat Western cultural imperialism, which was thought to be exemplified by the Modernist literary movement.” In this context “obscurantism was rejected and replaced by a deliberately uncouth style, purporting to simulate the rusticity of the less educated. In the new climate, some of the once ardent practitioners of the avant-garde style openly denounced their earlier works as decadent and politically incorrect.”

26 Ibid., 5.
27 Ibid., 4.
28 Ibid., 2.
29 Ibid., 51.
perhaps the first Chinese writers to exempt themselves from C.T. Hsia’s criterion: that Chinese writers stress the moral purpose of literature, being instead a “departure from the largely pragmatic tendencies in traditional Chinese narrative” of pre 1949 fiction for “artistic autonomy.”³₀

In the PRC, it was the end of Maoism that brought a comparable air of literary experimentation, underscored by the influx of translated foreign literature. The 1980s saw, in the literary domain, the emergence of the xianfengpai or Chinese avant-garde writers. As Wang Jing, argues, “the debate over naming – whether the new fiction is ‘postmodernist’ or not – continued even into the 1990s, long after the avant-gardists lost their creative momentum in the fact of the challenge posed by writers of popular fiction.”³¹ But crucially, “they possessed texts about utopia, discursive critiques of dystopia, and volumes of Chinese translations of classical and modern Western masters.”³² Wang Ning has argued that literature of this “New Period” was a consequence of the “the policy of openness to the outside world and foreign cultural and academic exchange enabled more and more Western trends of philosophy and other humanities to flood into China.” The transformations in literary culture were “mainly due to the encounter, interaction, and interpenetration between Chinese literature and foreign literature. Or more specifically, the influence of Western trends of literary thought on present day Chinese literature should be taken into particular account.”³³

³₀ Ibid., 12.
³² Ibid., 8.
The emergence of the Chinese avant-garde has produced a problematic conception – that of Chinese postmodern literature. As Chen Sihe has explained, modernism itself has distinct roots in modern Chinese culture and developed differently than in the Western context. For Chen, Chinese avant-gardism needs to be disentangled from the notion of modernism, having its own distinct roots. Western avant-gardism and modernism are entangled concepts, both emerging in the post-war world. The May Fourth Movement’s radical break with traditional Chinese culture ought to be seen as “an avant-garde movement…similar to the avant-garde arts in the West” and was composed of “the New Youth group of the theorists with Chen Duxiu and Qian Xuantong as its leading figures; the avant-garde literary creations with Lu Xun and Guo Moruo as its leading writers; the translation activities and import of theorists with Shen Yanbing and Song Chunfang as its leading figures. Magazines such as New Youth, Creation Quarterly (chuangzao jikan), and Novel Magazine…”  

34 Put simply, avant-gardism in China started first with literature before moving into other arts, while in the West, this process occurred the other way around.  

35 In general, the literary experimentation of this period ought to be seen “as avant-garde spirit rather than as modernism,” which would come from the 1930s onwards.  

36 The re-emergence of literary avant-gardism in the 1980s raises another complicated question: that of postmodernism in the Chinese context. Yang Xiaobin argues that “Chinese postmodernism can…be characterized as postcatastrophic, posttraumatic, post-Cultural Revolution, and post-Mao-Deng.”  

37 Much like the Holocaust in Europe, the Cultural Revolution

35 Ibid., 185.
36 Ibid., 187.
in China left trauma on the social psyche of the country, in which the development of postmodernism was intertwined. The concept emerged in China alongside the importation of Western cultural theory and became increasingly popular (and controversial) in the 1990s. The emergence of a comparable cultural trend suggests that there is a shared conception of modernity which both Western literature and Chinese literature (in the avant-garde) are attempting to wrestle with and that, most importantly, postmodernism “not a problem unique to the West….” It should not be seen as “a teleological impetus to emulate a certain kind of literary development in the West” but rather as a reaction to a modernity of which Chinese and Western cultures are both separate manifestations. Thus Yang urges for the exploration of creative commonalities which appear in contemporary Chinese literature that are shared with Western translations. Such a perspective intends to avoid interpreting literary experimentation of this period solely as a function of importation and translation in and of themselves.

Here, I have only placed a special emphasis on the question of modernism insofar as it best highlights the crucial fault lines which have appeared within the Chinese literary world and reflect that different ways in which western translation, in its reception and response, would reshape Chinese literature. One can see parallels in the science fiction genre where it has blossomed into a distinct form of literature, particularly popular among the youth in the PRC, (discussed in the beginnings of this thesis) while it has not gained comparable headway in Taiwan. My aim here is simply to stress that the periodicity of contemporary Chinese literature has seemingly been neglected. By periodicity, I am referring to the fact that this section of modern

38 Ibid., 230.
39 Ibid., 236.
40 Ibid., 239.
Chinese literary history – the *contemporary* – is itself historically distinct. Generally, the “contemporary” denotes the post-Mao era and the opening, culturally and economically, of China, while in academic scholarship the contemporary period is treated as an extension of the “modern.” However, if one accounts for both the immense cultural influence and radical cultural changes produced by Western translation, one can make further headway into exploring the questions of contemporary period of Chinese literature discussed earlier.

Returning to Song Mingwei’s arguments on Chinese sf, one can make the case that the characteristics of contemporary literature are really just reiterations of those of the early modern period, the late Qing era, which also saw the first pronounced westernization of Chinese thought. This view refers to David Wang’s suggestion that we re-envision modernity in Chinese literature by drawing comparisons between contemporary fiction and that of the late Qing period (a sentiment echoed by Nathaniel Isaacson writing “the lessons of late Qing SF speak to developments in contemporary Chinese SF…”). In the late Qing, “writers’ pursuit of novelty was no longer contained within indigenously defined barriers but was inextricably affected by the multilingual, cross-cultural trafficking of ideas, technologies, and powers in the wake of nineteenth-century Western expansionism.” In his view, “Chinese literature has returned to the unfinished work of inventing the modern, work begun by the late Qing.” In the way Chang Sung-sheng draws historical parallels between the 1980s PRC and 1960s Taiwan, Wang sees another “ghostly déjà vu of history,” namely “contemporary China undergoing a chaotic social-cultural transformation reminiscent of the late Qing.” (Here, he is writing in the late 1990s). The direction

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41 Isaacson, *Celestial Empire*, 185.
42 Wang, *Fin de siècle*, 5.
43 Ibid., 313.
44 Ibid., 314.
literary scholarship can move in is in “calling attention to the hidden dialogue between the pre-
May Fourth and the post-June Fourth era.” In other words, the modern character of late Qing
fiction can be made all the more discernible when viewed parallel to the literature of the post-Mao
period.

But there are pitfalls to overemphasizing parallels between these periods, particularly if
one is drawn away from the acknowledging the qualitative differences between each period’s very
distinct encounters with, and internalizations of, the foreign – politically, scientifically, culturally,
economically – and, for our purposes, literarily. The difference between these separate encounters
– one of late-nineteenth/early-twentieth-century China and that of the late twentieth century –
cannot be disregarded because of the vastly dissimilar historical contexts within China but also
because of the different Western material being translated into Chinese in these periods. The
purpose of highlighting the separateness of the contemporary period is to clear conceptual space,
away from the subject of modernity and parallel modernities, to consider how the opening of China
to the outside world in the post-Mao period, and the availability of new forms and content form
the West, altered Chinese literature’s historical direction.

To understand this phenomenon, one would have to explore precisely which works
appeared in Taiwan from the 1950s onwards in Taiwan and which appeared in mainland China
decades later. This thesis has provided an example of this type of work regarding the latter region.
To examine texts comparatively, as this thesis has shown, requires one to look not just at novels,
particularly the editions relevant to time period, but also journals. This is evidenced in the fact that
many sf translations appeared in China not in novelized form but as sections within Science Fiction

45 Ibid., 316.
World magazine, whereas translations published across the Strait or in Hong Kong were more often than not in the form of self-contained books. In Taiwan, the premier journal for translation was the aforementioned Xiandai wenxue 现代文学 (1960-73). But in the Mainland, there was a much vaster array of journals, including Waiguo Wenyi 外国文艺 (1978-), Yilin 译林 (1979 -), Waiguo Wenzue Liqi 外国文学季刊 (1981-87), Chunfeng Yi Cong 春风译丛 (1981-1986), Hua Cheng Yi Zuo 花城译作 (1981—1983), Waiguo Wenzue 外国文学 (1980 -), Zhongguo Fanyi 中国翻译 (1980-), Dangdai Waiguo Wenzue 当代外国文学 (1980 -), Waiguo Wenzue Baodao 外国文学报道 （1980s），Waiguo Xiaoshuo Bao 外国小说报 （1981），Yi Hai 译海 （1981），Guowai Wenzue 国外文学 (1981 -), Guowai Zuopin Xuanyi 国外作品选译 (1979-). It ultimately begs the question as to why in one Chinese-speaking region, Taiwan, one can identify a concept of literary modernism, while in another, the PRC, one finds the more idiosyncratic movement of the xianfengpai. By understanding the PRC’s differences with the context of modern and contemporary Taiwanese literature, the aesthetic character of Chinese literature, its cultural and political implications in different regions, as well as its thematic variations, can each be more clearly differentiated and understood.

As shown in this thesis, moreover, the inaccessibility of the Chinese author to the native European language text is less important. Reading in translation, reading the foreignness of concepts, and terminology in Chinese language, is a crucial source of departure, and thus of literary invention, for the author. That Liu Cixin, and other Chinese authors, consciously view themselves in a lineal relationship with the translated western writers, with less (and in Liu Cixin’s case, marginal) reference to native Chinese writers, in and of itself reveals something about the character of contemporary Chinese literature. Whether or not this is a form of posturing by Chinese writers
today, a sort of downplaying of their Chinese-ness to market themselves more widely, is a secondary consideration. What is rather significant is the Chinese author’s conscious choice to view himself in relation to translingual literary traditions.

In Stephen Dougherty’s view, “the kind of intercultural and intersubjective exchange that Liu powerfully describes…has little to do with Harold Bloom’s ‘anxiety of influence.’ Liu does not wilfully ‘misread’ Clarke…”\(^{46}\) However, when looking not only at Clarke but the dystopian and historical authors, we do see such misreading – specifically in the selective appropriation of specific ideas and techniques from these writers, then reassembled in his own stories (This clue, of course, could only be found through a reading of untranslated criticism by Liu). What we have seen in Liu Cixin’s writing, in fact, is more precisely an anxiety of western influence. As Harold Bloom wrote that poetic history/influence extends through poets’ “misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves,” they are necessarily “figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves.”\(^{47}\) For the Chinese writer, it is in translated traditions that material is found to be appropriated and the subsequent “misprison” that Bloom espouses is to be attained. In order to grasp “the profundities of poetic influence,” the essential character of an author’s obfuscations, oversights and recreations of his perceived influences, is the difficult task, one which “cannot be reduced to source study, to the history of ideas, to the patterning of images.”\(^{48}\) This notion of the anxiety of influence has been picked up on regard Borges’s Influence. On Borges, Zhang Xuejun writes that “it is certainly true that the Chinese avant-garde writing is heavily influenced by Borges. However it is not a mechanical imitation but a creative application,” serving


\(^{48}\) Ibid., 7.
“as a point of departure, perhaps an archetype for Chinese writers who have turned the anxiety of influence into a creation with Chinese nuances.”

Such conscious attempts to internalize and respond to foreign literature are evident in the avant-garde school, and in ideas such as “form as content” (xingshi wei neirong 形式为内容) as well as zou xiang shijie. Returning to this last concept, it is still a rather vaguely defined theme in the academic literature. The concept was the subject of volume, published in the mid-1980s by Zeng Xiaoyi, on the very subject of new Western influences on Chinese writers of the first half of the twentieth century. Zeng Xiaoyi’s volume collects essays from numerous literary critics in China during the eighties, dealing with the influence of foreign literature on modern Chinese writers. Compiled in the context of the emergence of world literature in the early modern to late modern periods, the volume shines light on the etymology of the Chinese calque “shijie wenxue.” As Zeng discusses, “The concept of ‘world literature,’ in the modern sense, is usually thought to be derived from Goethe’s conversation with Johann Eckermann on January 31 1827. Goethe begins on the topic of a Chinese legend which has been reading, the impression of which he had was: ‘the Chinamen think, act, and feel almost exactly like us; and we soon find that we are perfectly like them…’” She continues: “Goethe follows by comparing the morals and literary themes of this Chinese legend with the work of the French poet Pierre-Jean de Béranger, asserting

50 Wang Jing also concurs that the expression probably arises from this Zeng’s 1985 work, noting that it began appearing in other literary criticism through the eighties. See note 26 in Wang Jing, High Culture Fever: Politics Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 327. Zeng Xiaoyi, Zou xiang shijie wenxue: Zhongguo xiandai zuojia yu waiguo wenxue (Going into the World: Modern Chinese writers and Foreign Literature), edited by Zeng Xiaoyi (Changsha: Human People’s Press, 1985).
that: ‘I am more and more convinced...that poetry is the universal possession of mankind...’” It is this comparison with Chinese literature that resulted in the famous prediction: “‘National literature has not much meaning nowadays: the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach.’”

As Zeng argues, Goethe’s idea of world literature is significant because “it is foundationally a comprehensive examination of Eastern and Western literature.” Though it is not “sufficient for a complete understanding world vision in time and space,” instead “it foreshadows the essential direction of humanity’s literary exchange and integration in the period following Goethe, as well as the potential realization of a wholly integrated world literature. The significance of the modern concept of ‘world literature’ has completed its great “geographical discovery” – the Orient – hailing the awakening of new world literary consciousness.” The most commonly cited authors in the volume are Byron 拜伦, TS Eliot 艾略特, Shakespeare 莎士比亚, Heinrich Heine 海涅, Goethe 歌德, Vladimir Mayakovski 马雅科夫斯基, Gorki 高尔基, Chekhov 契诃夫 and Tolstoy 托尔斯泰. But chief among them, in numbers, are Shakespeare and Goethe. It is hardly surprising that Liu Cixin’s work, having encountered foreign literature in this period, is imbued with their spirit.

Zeng’s volume exemplifies the literary internalization of western fiction that had taken hold of the Chinese literary scene during the 1980s. It is a trend evident in other translation journals listed above where works tended to be grouped according to a writer’s nationality, downplaying the cross-cultural and translingual character of western literature and writers. This is seen in the

51 These translated English quotes of Goethe were taken from Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann, translated by J. Oxenford and edited by J.K. Moorhead (London: Dent & Sons, 1930).
52 Zeng, Zou xiang shijie wenxue, 656-661.
predominance of the use of the terms *guowai* 国外, *waiguo* 外国 or *shijie* 世界, rather than “Western” or *xifang* 西方 (hence, why this dissertation is titled “Foreign” rather than “Western” literary influence). It raises the question of how cultural categorization compares with Taiwan and its conception of *shijie wenxue*. The accompanying changes in translation style in the contemporary period reflect a desire not only to adapt to western style by means of reception but also for Chinese literary works to be received outside of China, to be more easily understood and appreciated. To apprehend contemporary Chinese literature’s foreign influences is thus essential to appreciating Chinese literature’s increasing prominence on the world literary scene. While the contemporary period of Chinese literature does not itself have a monopoly on foreignism in Chinese literature, as it is a crucial aspect of modern Chinese literature more generally, the pronounced character of it following the 1970s suggests that the contemporary period ought to be differentiated on its own terms.

It is important here to return to Bonnie McDougall’s observations about Chinese literature’s place within the global literary market today, a point addressed towards the beginning of this thesis. She argues (resonating with Gaffric’s commentary on Liu’s popular reception), that the issue of its place in world literature is understood by “Chinese writers, critics, scholars [and] cultural officials” rather as a problem of the “status of Chinese literature in the world, and especially the status of contemporary Chinese literature in the English-speaking world.” 53 Importantly, she observes that “the most prominent phenomena in global literary culture are in the form of popular and middlebrow fiction, often but not always first written in English.” Liu Cixin’s trilogy sits precisely in this sort of category, namely being novels which hold appeal for the widest

possible audiences, or middlebrow commercial fiction. Having to distinguish between “middlebrow commercial fiction and highbrow serious literature” is now “largely irrelevant in regard to inclusive global literary culture.” This is certainly true for Liu’s trilogy where its thematic universality and stylistic similarity to Western fiction is more important in understanding its global relevance than its commercial-intellectual status within the Chinese or the Western literary markets (or rather science fiction markets).

It is clear that Diqiu Wangshi captured the imagination of Chinese readers and foreigner readers in succession because it embodies this idea of zou xiang shijie and it should be understood in terms of this theme – of Chinese literature expanding beyond Chinese thematic boundaries and aesthetic limitations while drawing heavily form the well of western translated fiction. Put more briefly, Chinese literature finds it its path into the world because world literature has found its path into Chinese. This idea may very well signify just what makes contemporary literature a distinct and evolving epoch in Chinese literary history – that of a conscious engagement with foreign literary forms and themes. It is in this sense that one can begin to make sense of contemporary Chinese authors as writers of world literature lest they remain estranged from that grouping in the eyes of non-Chinese readers.

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54 Ibid., 55.
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