



Worldcon 75 Academic Track
Session 5: SF in China

Thursday 10:00-11:30
Room 209

Chair: **Essi Vatile**

Abstract 1:

Mingwei Song (Wellesley College, USA):

How Scientific Romance and Its Implied Epistemology Became Chinese? Notes on Science, Science Fiction, and Realism in China, 1890s-1920s

msong2@wellesley.edu

This paper focuses on the late Qing translations of Western science fiction and their impact on the rise of the Chinese equivalent to the genre, and later the rise of Chinese realism. The paradigm shifts in epistemology, which signaled a pervasive change of Chinese sciences and technologies from the traditional to a modern system, paralleled the sinicization of science fiction. The paper studies some key images and concepts that became popular among the Chinese readers through translations of Verne, Wells, and less-known authors such as Louise J. Strong, including “scientific novum” such as submarine and microscope, “scientific institutions” such as modern museums and communities of scientists, “scientific adventures” such as extraterrestrial expeditions and colonization of other worlds, as well as “scientific ideas” such as evolutionism and utopia. What is uniquely interesting about the early translations of science fiction lies in its intentional Confucianization of both the ideological and materialistic aspects of the imaginary new worlds, which inspired Chinese authors to produce more audacious versions of the Confucian utopias. Translation enabled scientific romance and its implied epistemological change to become Chinese, or at least partly to achieve the intended effect. Early Chinese science fiction, such as Xu Nianci’s “New tales of Mr. Braggadocio” (1904), and Wu Jianren’s *New story of the stone* (1908), is dominated by a truth-claiming scientific discourse: the invisible “truth” of the world is validated by cognitive logic and instrumental rationality; various advanced or imagined scientific instruments serve to visualize the unseen “reality.” These efforts lead to the origin of a revolutionized modern literature that seeks “truth” underneath the surface reality, which largely shaped the mode of realism in the 1920s. However, literary history resists any simplification. This paper also looks into some odd events in the transition from science fiction to realism, such as depicting the grotesque images of cannibals as little children in Lu Xun’s unfaithful translation of Louise J. Strong’s “An Unscientific Story.” This paper proposes that some motifs of modern Chinese literature first emerged in the “unfaithful” translations of “scientific” romances, which opened the eyes of the Chinese readers to see an “invisible” reality. Realism is to remove the “invisibility,” which however also changes the characteristics of the “invisible” objects or worlds.

Mingwei Song is an Associate Professor of Chinese Literature at Wellesley College. He was an Elizabeth and J. Richardson Dilworth Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in 2016. His research interests include modern Chinese literature, cinema studies, youth culture, and science fiction. He is the author of numerous books and research articles, including a monograph titled *Young China: National Rejuvenation and the Bildungsroman*,

1900-1959 (Harvard, 2015), and *Criticism and Imagination: Collected Literary Critical Essays* (in Chinese, Fudan, 2013). He has been researching on Chinese science fiction since 2010. He edited three special journal issues on Chinese science fiction: *Renditions* 77/78 (2012); *China Perspectives* 1 (in English and French, 2015); *Chinese Comparative Literature* 100 (in Chinese, 2015). He organized two conferences on science fiction: “Global Science Fiction” (Wellesley College, 2013); and “Science Fiction Workshop” (Fudan University, 2016). He is currently editing *The Columbia Anthology of Chinese Science Fiction* (Columbia, 2017) and writing a monograph *Posthuman China: The Poetics of the Invisible and the Hidden Dimensions of Chinese Science Fiction*.

Abstract 2:

Sarah Dodd (University of Leeds, UK):

“Things More Wondrous and Strange”: Seeing with Monsters in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Anomaly Tales

S.Dodd@leeds.ac.uk

In *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋志異, or *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* – a collection of almost five hundred tales by Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640-1715) – young scholars fall in love with beautiful fox spirits or meet ghosts in abandoned temples; corpses walk and men change into birds; hideous apparitions invade the home, bodies become unfamiliar, children are born to women long dead, and things are rarely as they seem. The collection was written by a man who was trapped in the 'examination hell' of the Chinese civil service system, and in the years since his death has brought him the success he never achieved in his professional life, being read, critiqued, loved, and adapted by successive generations, and continuing to exert an enormous influence on the speculative tradition in China.

This paper will examine the way in which, throughout the collection, the monstrous intrudes on the ordered spaces of the human world, making it strange, bringing disorder yet also the fulfilment of desire. Ghosts, fox spirits and demons cross the boundaries between worlds; some bring danger and death, but others bring enchantment. All, however, subvert traditional Confucian norms and the social expectations of control and containment, and through this subversion the tales explore the consequences of transgression. From the most central, 'human' space of the home, to the marginal spaces of the wilderness and even beyond, to the underworld itself, the tales open up new vistas, bringing to light the unfamiliar in the familiar, the wondrous in the fearful unknown.

In order to fully understand how the stories defamiliarize the world, the paper will look at the assumed persona of the collection's author – a figure known as the Historian of the Strange – who is himself as hybrid and strange as some of the creatures in his tales. In his authorial preface, the Historian places himself in his studio at night, writing down the stories that come to him from 'the four corners', thus positioning himself in the centre, despite his own geographical and social marginality. Calling out to those 'beyond the dark frontier', he exposes his own longing for boundary-crossing, reflected again and again in the stories he tells; stories of spaces which become liminal; spaces of both destruction and construction, embodying the ambiguous meanings of the uncanny and strange, in which the homely and the unhomely, the open and the hidden, merge into one. Like the strange, hybrid bodies of the monsters in its pages, the spaces of *Liaozhai* are spaces of change and possibility, subverting the status quo, challenging established ways of thinking, demanding new ways of seeing.

Sarah Dodd is Lecturer in Chinese Studies at the University of Leeds. She teaches courses on Chinese literature, history and cinema, and her research focuses on representations of the

monstrous in classical and contemporary Chinese fiction. She is co-organiser of the projects Writing Chinese: Authors, Authorship and Authority (<http://writingchinese.leeds.ac.uk/>) – which aims to create a network of authors, translators, academics and others working in the field of contemporary Chinese fiction – and Reading the Fantastic (<http://reading-the-fantastic.tumblr.com/>), which brings together early career researchers looking at various aspects of the intercultural fantastic. She is also working on a project with *Strange Horizons* on translated speculative fiction.

Abstract 3:

Eero Suoranta (University of Helsinki, Finland):

The Inadequacy of Enlightenment Rationality in Liu Cixin’s *The Three-Body Problem*

Eero.Suoranta@helsinki.fi

In Liu Cixin’s Hugo Award-winning novel *The Three-Body Problem*, a number of characters experience a crisis of faith when confronted by revelations about the nature of the universe and humankind’s place in it, ranging from the seeming refutation of fundamental physical laws to the confirmation of the existence of an alien civilization. Although during the course of the novel human knowledge and natural reality are reaffirmed as being commensurable, as has been the assumption of the Enlightenment tradition, the ending of the novel is ambiguous with regards to whether this reaffirmation ultimately holds any value for humanity: instead of celebrating the victory of science and rational thought over ignorance, the characters are left wrestling with their own insignificance in the novel’s uncaring cosmos, described by Liu Cixin himself as “the worst of all possible universes.”

Drawing on perspectives from critical theory and its analysis of Enlightenment thought, I investigate how *The Three-Body Problem* portrays the end results of the pursuit of scientific knowledge and rationality and argue that the novel offers a critical view of their ability to provide comfort or meaning to human existence. Specifically, I examine how the “miracles” created by the Trisolaran aliens in the novel challenge the characters’ trust in the modern scientific worldview, illustrating Arthur C. Clarke’s famous claim that “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” I argue that in *The Three-Body Problem*, the scientific explanation eventually given for these miracles is shown to be insufficient to restore faith in humankind’s ability to take control over our destiny as a species, casting doubt over the Enlightenment maxim that “knowledge is power.” In addition, I examine how this scepticism towards the idea of knowledge as power is reinforced by the depiction of the characters with the fullest knowledge of the universe as feeling the most powerless. Finally, I ask whether the conclusion of the novel points to some other possible source of meaning for humanity, one that could guide us through the “dark and harsh” existence portrayed by Liu Cixin.

Eero Suoranta received his Bachelor of Arts degree in East Asian Studies from the University of Helsinki in 2014 and is currently working on his Master of Arts degree in the same field. In the master’s thesis, he analyzes the themes of fanaticism, rationality and the legacy of the Cultural Revolution in Liu Cixin’s *The Three-Body Problem*.