

An Ideal Chinese Society? Future China From the Perspective of Contemporary Female Science Fiction Writers

Thought Paper

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Introduction

Female Science Fiction writers are about to occupy a significant spot on the genre's author scene in China. At least since August 2016, when Hao Jingfang (郝景芳, *1984) became the first Chinese woman to win the Hugo Award, it is clear that they are as successful as their male counterparts. Since the introduction of science fiction literature to China in the late Qing dynasty, the scene was male-dominated. Nevertheless, in connection with the current heyday it has lately evolved more diversified. What remains unchanged, however, is the genre's use as a projection for intellectuals to voice their expectations, dreams and also fears of the Chinese future. In the wake of a recent increase in domestic and international readership as well as fulminant media attention, science fictional writings extensively circulate differentiated reflections and alternative visions of the state's self-image of a flourishing China. They can therefore be regarded as a mirror of sociopolitical issues and are of value to research. This paper explores the short stories of Hao Jingfang and Chi Hui (迟卉, *1984), who both are well-known representatives of young female science fiction authors in China.

Focusing on China in an era of rapid economic and social transition, their narratives portray future Chinese societies that critically comment on official political maxims such as Hu Jintao's "Harmonious Society" (和谐社会) and Xi Jinping's "China Dream" (中国梦). Back in the 1990s, Chinese government propaganda started creating an ideology of economic development as a solution to all problems. Up to the present day, party officials continue to foster this utopia in their imagery of the "Harmonious Society" and the "China Dream". I seek to answer the following questions: How do individuals like Hao and Chi assess the official visions of a future Chinese society and what kinds of alternative images do they depict in their works? And what kinds of imbalances exist between the display of an ideal society and the narrations of these post-80s female writers?

In order to answer these questions, I focus on three characteristic stories depicting alternative Chinese societies in the future: *Folding Beijing* (北京折叠, 2014; English translation in 2015) and *Invisible Planets* (看不见的星球, 2010; English translation in 2013) by Hao Jingfang as well as *Nest of Insects* (originally 虫巢, 2008; not yet translated) by Chi Hui. My aim is to analyze these stories by close reading their sociopolitical commentary and to compare their imaginations of a future Chinese society with the official vision. It can be assumed that this comparison will illustrate an imbalance between different narratives of the "Harmonious Society" and the "China Dream".

Class structured society in *Folding Beijing* (北京折叠)

Initially, Hao Jingfang posted her Hugo-winning novelette *Folding Beijing* (*Beijing zhedie* 北京折叠, 2014) online on the student's forum of Tsinghua University in December 2012. It was then issued in two Chinese literature magazines, *The Literature Breeze Appreciates* and *Fiction Monthly*, in 2014.

The English translation was published in *Uncanny Magazine* in 2015 and was also collected in Ken Liu's anthology of contemporary Chinese science fiction in 2016. At first, the near future version of Beijing appears to be a dark projection of current social developments in China. Three diverging urban spaces unfold in a predetermined cycle of 48 hours and separate the 80 million inhabitants by class—upper class, middle class and working class. Since the elite can enjoy the longest period of one day whereas the other classes need permission from the elite to cross the borders of their spaces, the narration centers on growing social disparities. However, this is only used as a prop for telling the story of the blue-collar worker Lao Dao who lives in the third space. He sticks at nothing to provide for his adoptive daughter Tangtang, not even when he has been offered an illegal job. This fictional work is unique for its persistent optimism and the protagonist's indifference towards the bleak situation countless citizens like him are living in. Hao's perception of the urban society in Beijing is a critical portrayal showing how the present-day Chinese accept social reality with a shrug, believing that they cannot change it anyway, and therefore rather focus on their personal matters.

The unspoken aspects of China in *Invisible Planets* (看不见的星球)

Hao Jingfang's short story *Invisible Planets* (*Kan bu jian de xingqiu* 看不见的星球, 2010) was originally published in *New Realms of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (*Xin huan jie* 新幻界) and appeared in English translation in *Lightspeed Magazine*, September 2006. The story begins with the retelling of a previously conducted dialogue between the unnamed first person narrator and his interlocutor addressed as “you”, which is probably a child. A striking characteristic of the storyline is the continuous change of perspective between the dialogue and a report of the narrator's travels to eleven different planets in the universe. Furthermore, the narrator distances himself from the travelogue giving an objective feature that emphasizes the educational tone of the dialogue. The story is particularly interesting because Hao has created impressive new worlds in which the residents of every planet live in societies varying from each other and yet they all resemble various aspects of the Chinese society in reality such as the increasing class disparity. As the title might imply, the planets can be seen as “invisible” or unspoken facets of China. Hao's narrative is indirectly criticizing the politics of the Chinese government especially in regard to the official historiography as well as social disparities and the increasing competitive pressure caused by the rapid economic development.

Predetermined lives in *Nest of Insects* (虫巢)

The short story *Nest of Insects* (*Chong chao* 虫巢, 2008) by Chi Hui was originally published in *Science Fiction World* (*Kehuan Shijie* 科幻世界) and was not yet translated into a foreign language. The story is narrated in third person and centers on the female protagonist Yi'ansa who lives in a peaceful matriarchal society on the planet Tantanula. She belongs to an old species where only women are born and men are kinds of fruits planted and carried around in pots by their sisters. Her vocation is to guard a mysterious nest at the core of the planet. However, the harmony on the planet is disturbed by the colonization of a human race called Taiyang (太阳, *lit.* sun). When the biologist Chen Qingyan travels to Tantanula in search of his missing colleague, not only the conflict between Tanla and the violent humans threatens to escalate, but also the secret of the nest will be revealed. *Nest of Insects* can be read as a feminist utopia because men are either portrayed fully dependent on women or associated with cruelty. The matriarchal society of Tanla stands in strong contrast to the male-dominated society of humans. Chi's vision implies that only a society run by women could be harmonious whereas a society run by men lead to chaos and destruction. It also raises the reader's

awareness for gender inequalities by reversing the actual situation in China. At the same time, it is a coming-of-age story which questions the predetermined way of transitioning to adulthood in Chinese society.

Conclusion

All three stories analyzed in this paper describe the author's visions of future Chinese societies. The storylines are set in the cityscape of future Beijing and on imaginary planets—one is more realistic (*Folding Beijing*) than the others (*Invisible Planets* and *Nest of Insects*). Hao Jingfang places social inequalities as a main motive of her stories. By means of an educational tone and extrapolating social issues like overpopulation, class distinction, regional disparities, and the impoverishment of disadvantaged groups present in contemporary China she stresses out her message. On the contrary, Chi Hui's short story includes outstanding feminist notions in terms of challenging gender roles by creating a matriarchal future society where men are subordinated to women. She perceives the Chinese society as a world where everybody has to follow a fixed set of rules and a paved way from childhood to adulthood, that in her opinion needs to be scrutinized.

The findings will show that the analyzed works display various tensions implied by the officially promoted “Harmonious Society” and “China Dream”. They can therefore be read as a critical commentary of China's drive towards modernization. The contemporary female science fiction writers Hao and Chi challenge the official narrative of a utopian future Chinese society with their disenchanting alternatives. The stories' dystopian elements presented in this paper undermine the state's vision of a harmonious and moderately well-off society. Instead of a proclaimed society where wealth is distributed more equally, the alternative perspectives illustrate the existing social and gender issues as well as growing social inequalities. The disparities are narrated through the literary tropes of space, time, bodies, and plants.

In conclusion, the narratives seriously question the government's propagation of an ideal Chinese society and expose the “Harmonious Society” and “China Dream” as just a slogan for the state leaders to legitimize their politics. Nevertheless, it can be noted that the perspectives of contemporary female writers are not as withering and dystopian as the narratives of their male counterparts. The reason for this approach might be that the discussed authors, especially Hao Jingfang, endeavor to genuinely propose changes than simply criticize China's politics.