

Sinofuturism and Chinese Science Fiction: An Introduction to the Alternative Sinofuturisms (中华未来主义) Special Issue



Virginia L. Conn

Rutgers University / USA

AS a mode of global and temporal situatedness, Sinofuturism has largely emerged as a concept applied externally to China by Western observers. By compartmentalizing sociocultural development as a form uniquely tied to the nation-state while also seeking to maintain both distance and otherness, Sinofuturism differs from theorizations such as Afrofuturism (to which it is often compared) through its application *to*, not development *from*, the subjects it takes as object. As a result, the very label of “Sinofuturism” developed out of the same Orientalizing impulses that previously relegated China to a space of backwardness and barbarism (Niu, Huang, Roh 2015) and which now attribute to it a projected futurity. Yet this Western label is one that Chinese authors and artists have appropriated and weaponized for their own creative ends, without necessarily sharing unified goals.

Authors of science fiction in China have uniquely grappled with this impulse, especially insofar as digital technologies—such as the growing e-publishing industry and networked media platforms—allow for the proliferation of new voices historically barred from traditional publishing venues. (Xu 2015) Too, contemporary science fiction in China functions as a transnational form that centers a technoscientific process or material object as a means of introducing social change, rendering the aim of science fiction inherently future-oriented even when relying on the past or focused on the present. Because potential future ontologies are expected to be relevant to present extrapolations, they fundamentally rely, to some degree, not only on realistic depictions of possible technologies and circumstantial realism, but also the familiar perceptions of the extant material and digital worlds—a central tenet of Sinofuturism’s omnivorous inclusion of technology, labor, art, and the visions it makes possible. (Lek 2016)

The globalizing effect of the internet and the subsequent rise in wide-scale digital exchange, in particular, has created a space for production in which Chinese authors are writing for an increasingly global audience and shifting their goals correspondingly. As early as the beginning of the 20th century, authors and public

reformers in China (such as Liang Qichao, who, in his 1902 unfinished novel *The Future of New China*, described a utopian 1962 in which China was the dominant global power) were envisioning Sinofutures in which China was preeminent on the world stage. The idea of China as a dominant force in the world yet-to-come continues through much Chinese science fiction today, from standout international sensations such as *The Three-Body Problem* to anonymously published digital short stories like “Olympic Dream.” For science fiction authors describing the Chinese future (or the future as Chinese), an awareness of the fact that American and Western media largely paints China as a place of repression and censorship is an integral part of the worlds they depict.

To the extent that this is true, publishing regulations in China mean that the internet and other digital forms of publications, such as video games and online message boards, have become increasingly important outlets for science fiction. *The Three-Body Problem*, for example, was serialized first in the online-only *Science Fiction World* before being published as a book, and Western publication outlets like *Clarkesworld* have partnered with China-based Storycom to publish more Chinese science fiction in translation online. Because of the expectation of a global audience that online publication ensures, science fiction is changing as readership expands, yet the balance of global power remains uneven. Noted science fiction authors such as Xia Jia still describe science fiction coming out of China as having the mission of educating Western readers (Xia 2016), while English translators are increasingly burdened with the necessity of explaining historicocultural specificities through lengthy footnotes. (Liu 2014) That is, just as the West applies the term “Sinofuturism” to an entire national development project, Chinese authors are put in the position of responding and catering to Western assumptions in order to be legible on a global scale.

Here is where the specificity of China as a technologized imaginary, located outside of both space and time, results in an Orientalizing impulse fundamentally different from the fetishization of a high-tech Japan seen prominently in cyberpunk and the gleamingly sexualized noir adoration of the 80s. Shaped by and reliant on Western projections of Asia as the techne through which to shape a future defined by and created for the West, Sinofuturism not only projects China as a temporal locus for the project of modernity (Niu 2008), but also posits Chinese individuals themselves as resources, not originary producers of cultural or technological capital. Reduced

by the West to faceless algorithmic data points, Chinese laborers and producers are commodified in an ideologically reproductive system informed by the racial panic of outsourcing common in the early nineties with the rise of overseas data centers. (Atanasoki and Vora 2015) Chinese science fiction writers are well aware of this and increasingly find themselves in a position to either push back against it or grapple with those fears in order to appear legible to an international readership.

Some authors do this by writing directly to the negative visions of a Chinese future most commonly held by the West: Chen Qiufan's *The Waste Tide*, for example, deals with the physical detritus left behind by the dreams of digital development and the environmental devastation created when those developments are made obsolete and discarded, while Ma Boyong's "City of Silence" shows both digital message boards and spoken language as subject to the same censorship as physical media, giving lie to the aspirations of online communications as a state of expressive exceptionalism. Other Chinese content producers actively embody the digitizing impulse that seeks to turn human beings into images for consumption: Naomi Wu (Shenzhen's "sexy cyborg"), for example, has created a 3D scan of her body and uploaded it for the purpose of 3D printing models. These models are marketed alongside 3D models of Major Motoko Kusanagi from the Japanese anime *Ghost in the Shell*—an explicit juxtaposition of two stylized bodies (one real, one fictional) that, in their respective worlds, represent the future through a conscientious abandonment of the biological for the constructed.

So what, then, does it mean for Chinese science fiction to attempt to depict a Sinofuturist vision in the increasingly globalized space made possible by digital technologies? And what does it mean to produce content within a framework that imagines a techno-utopic future founded on artistic labor while simultaneously reproducing racialized tropes of dehumanization? How is material production changed by an increasing reliance on the digital? In the following essays, various researchers and theorists attempt to grapple with digital imaginaries, production, labor, and futurity across a wide range of topics multiply bound in Sinofuturist space.

The idea for this special issue developed out of a workshop organized by Dino Ge Zhang as part of the WuDaoKou Futurists collective, a collective aimed at decentering Sinofuturism from its Western articulations. The workshop, "Alternative Sinofuturisms," already presupposes Sinofuturism as a venue for alterity and retains a space for various approaches and understandings of who and what is being

foregrounded. Centralized in Beijing but held online with invited speakers from four different continents, the workshop was organized around a series of provocations, most of which are included in this issue. Amy Ireland articulated a view of darkside empathy that positioned Sinofuturist visions as methods of inculcating weaponized empathy, while Gabriele de Seta argued that Sinofuturism functions as a framework for denying the possibility of coevalness to China on the part of the West. I discussed Sinofuturism as an aestheticized projection that fixed images of the country in a perpetual *futur antérieur*; Vincent Garton, not included here, argued for a reappropriation of the term by Chinese theorists and politicians in order to reconstruct a new world system inclusive of heterogeneous futures. The organizer, Dino Ge Zhang (without whom neither the original symposium nor this special issue would be possible), expanded on his concept of Sino-no-futurism to describe a world post-pandemic, which in many ways now reads as a science fictional dream for an American and British audience trapped in the perpetual now of our own countries' ongoing pandemic-based immiserations.

The papers contained in this special issue respond to these various provocations and the overall concept of Sinofuturism from various angles. While some are supportive, seeing in Sinofuturism an opportunity for alternative epistemologies, others criticize its foreclosure of heterogeneous elements and re-centering of global development vis-à-vis the West. What's more, while Sinofuturism is an explicitly temporal projection, it is not necessarily a science fictional one except insofar as any futurist projection is a work of imagination—as a result, some of the essays contained here do not consider science fiction at all, while still engaging with the concept of how to situate the future on a global scale. By questioning who gets to imagine the future alongside who and what contributes to bringing those visions about, these essays incisively demonstrate that the material is never separate from the conceptual and the real-world consequences of imagining such alternatives.

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