

The Boom & The Boom: Historical Rupture and Political Economy in Contemporary British and Chinese Science Fiction, by Lyu Guangzhou

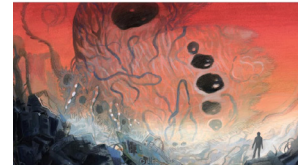


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In *The Boom & The Boom*, Lyu Guangzhao's intention is both to close the intellectual distance between two national zones of global sci-fi, and to widen a breach in its established discourse and structure. Two previously disconnected movements within the genre are beginning to speak to each other without US-mediation. Chinese works have already gone global, and modern British works are finding readership in China (5). Academic discourse can, perhaps, facilitate further and deeper mutual recognition.



His subtitle is a straightforward promise: political and historical analysis of sci-fi from two nations. As for the title, Lyu's 'booms' are two 'new waves' from broadly parallel historical moments: China's transition from Maoist communism to growth-oriented 'post-socialism,' and Britain from postwar social democracy to post-industrial neoliberalism. The title's syntax is an intentional invocation of China Mieville's *The City and the City* (3), in which two worlds exist side by side, each never recognising the other. (China isn't chosen for his name: he's the closest thing to a figurehead of the 'New Weird' strain in the British 'boom.')

Lyu's thesis is that key works in each boom built a space to respond to a national and global swing from state socialism to market capitalism. He lays out how British and Chinese writers publishing at the supposed end of history (and later, 'capitalist realism') rallied to form critiques and imagine alternative societies. Steering clear of denial and wishful thinking, Lyu underscores how different works lament, subvert, or even imagine accelerations of a turn away from the security and grandeur of a society with socialist ambitions. He dwells much upon questions of coming together, or shattering apart

In Lyu's approach, 'Chinese sci-fi' and 'British sci-fi' are two national literatures unfolding against a historical and political backdrop. Other identities and languages within each state fall outside the frame. The first two of Lyu's five chosen British authors are Scots, but this fact proves incidental. Appended to Lyu's broadly left political approach is the use of theorists from the critical

canon—Marx, Jameson, Foucault, etc—but also of figures and schools such as Mark Fisher, Gilles Deleuze, and Object Oriented Ontology. Deleuze in particular bridges orthodoxy and the weirder theorists.

Lyu also draws on literary specialists. Examples concerning China: David Der-wei Wang for Sinophone literature, and Li Hua, Song Mingwei, and Nathaniel Isaacson for Chinese science fiction. Concerning Britain, Stuart Hall for politics and culture in the neoliberal era, and Roger Luckhurst and Andrew M Butler for commentary on UK sci-fi and its boom—not to mention choice quotes from the politicians Tony Benn, Tony Blair, Nigel Lawson, and (naturally) Margaret Thatcher.

Each chapter pairs one novel or series from the British boom with a correspondent from the Chinese boom. Lyu's selected texts also mix intuitive and niche choices. Of the five British authors selected, Iain M Banks and China Mieville are the celebrities, Ken MacLeod a rung or two lower, James Lovegrove a could-have-been who receded into IP tie-ins, and M John Harrison a dark star. Of the five Chinese novels selected, two of the five are not published in English translation. One author, Long Yi, has had none of his works released in English.

The introductory chapter, *Mapping the Field*, sets the model for the book's pleasingly symmetrical approach. After defining 'boom' and introducing each of them, Lyu sets the historical context for one nation, and then the other. Britain goes first. The section *A Journey to the Right: The Rise of Thatcherism* is a detailed political timeline starting with the end of Britain's postwar consensus and progressing to the present. Those familiar with the terrain could skip it, but whether as a refresher or introduction, the marriage of detail and flow is commendable. Next comes *Challenging the Narrative: British SF Boom as Left-Wing Responses*, discussing Thatcher's legacy in British culture, and how it relates to sci-fi. In Lyu's telling, the left's material defeat shifts resistance to culture, which is in turn neutered by institutions (31), yet sci-fi maintains an edge due to its low status (32). In the book's concluding chapter, Chinese sci-fi faces a similar conundrum. When you are nobody, there is no need to become respectable. But when you are somebody, the reverse [277].

Next, China. In the section *Before the SF Boom: Spiritual Pollution and "Top-down" Elitism*, Lyu details the first attempt at a post-Mao emergence of sci-fi, and how it fell victim to an intellectual pile-on in which a new cultural elite resorted to a moralistic backlash that favoured science writing over science fiction. Lyu's summary brings this history into English—extremely helpful for readers previously unfamiliar with the names of key players and publications. Chinese sci-fi's complicated relationship with liberalisation continues in the next section, *The Cat's Colour Does Not Matter: Deng's Reform and the Dawning of the Chinese Boom*. Lyu first details how, despite pushback, China's opening up continued, albeit with a heavy skew toward marketisation. The decoupling of publishing houses from state protection forced them to consider the tastes of readers, thus freeing sci-fi from the judgements of once-dominant intellectual elites (49). Lyu pins the start of the Chinese boom to 1991, when the magazine *Science, Art and Literature* changed its

name to *Science Fiction World*, an indicator of collective insistence on the value of applying fiction, and not just educational writing, to scientific topics (52).

Lyu finishes the introduction with a claim sitting on the verge where academia falls away into esoterica: that the parallel emergence of the UK and PRC booms is not coincidental, but rather two local expressions of the same hyperobject. Or in plainer English, products of a force/system so massive that it resides on the edges of human comprehension (53).

More concretely, Lyu tees up his next task: to initiate dialogue between the booms (54). In his words, they are family: “Fraternal twins already separated for too long.” (53) In Chapter 1, *The Ones Who Walk Away*, Lyu’s first attempt to connect the twins brings in Han Song’s *Red Star Over America* (火星照耀美国) (2000) and Iain M Banks’ Culture series. The topic is ‘disrupted utopias.’ At the opening of *Red Star* (also translatable as ‘Mars’), China is governed by a benevolent AI named Amanduo, whose collapse triggers massive chaos. The main character, a Chinese go champion, sets out across America to seek a replacement utopia. Lyu argues that Amanduo represents various aspects of China’s authoritarian model, from grand-narrative Marxism to post-Mao humanism: secure, static, suffocating. Though it was never perfect nor sustainable, once dead it can be mourned as a lost utopia. But in its collapse, the innocent optimism necessary to conceive another utopia dies (76). Thus, nothing subsequent can suffice.

Lyu ends his discussion of post-utopian China by noting that a search for a ‘new form of sovereignty’ could look to Iain Banks’ Culture: “the other utopia that exists in the shadow of its own disruption” (79). Lyu then introduces the Culture (series) as something less grand: as Banks’ vengeance against Thatcherism (84), taken by modelling a new form of space opera centred on a society running on what we might call “fully automated luxury communism” (Bastani). Then, citing Sherryl Vint’s use of Hardt and Negri’s *Empire*, Lyu details how a close reading of the series indicates that the Culture in fact reflects the real-world shift from classical forms of imperialism (power secured through force, territory, conquest, hierarchy, purity) to the American (90) postmodern form (power secured through values, lifestyle, assimilation, decentralisation, hybridity). He guides the reader to note a fundamental contradiction in both the Culture and the US: a society that vaunts freedom, plurality, and noble ethics, but practices confrontation and homogenisation, driven by a fundamental belief in the value of itself over all alternatives (96). Lyu closes with comparisons of Han Song’s dying utopia and Banks’ contradictory utopia, focusing particularly on a comparison of their respective AI governors: the centralised Amanduo and the distributed, autonomous Minds. Scarcity is also discussed, which leads into the next chapter.

Chapter 2, *What’s Past is Prologue*, concerns ideological options for building an ideal society, operating under the constraints and dilemmas of political reality. Lyu’s chosen texts are Hao Jingfang’s *Vagabonds* (流浪苍穹) (2016) and Ken MacLeod’s *Fall Revolution* series. Lyu starts with *Vagabonds*, which follows youths torn between a high-minded collectivist society built on Mars, and a hyperindividualist consumer society on Earth. The former offers a managed life of intellectual and technical pursuits; secure but solemn. The latter promises personal freedom and

self-expression, but a constant fight to sink or succeed. Lyu's focus is to evaluate this Martian variant of utopia. In comparing one of its key mechanisms with China's once-foundational work unit (danwei) system, he brings in insight those less familiar with China would surely miss (106). He also dwells on the characters' feelings of disenchantment, and notes that the Martian society's noticeably academic system of funding and citation bears a similarity with Earth's capitalism: both systems motivate their subjects through competition and personal ambition rather than solidarity and collective enrichment (116). So, as Hao Jingfang intends, Lyu reads her Mars as an ambiguous utopia.

Lyu then brings in Robert Nozick's concept of meta-utopia to deal with MacLeod's *Fall Revolution* series: that is, a zone in which contrasting utopian models can be attempted and administered, leaving individual humans free to migrate and participate in their preferred version of society. MacLeod's series features and explores both socialist and libertarian ideas, yet for Lyu the series' fascination with the market—imagined to its extremes, and safe from consignment to the scrapheap of history—suggests the “historical exhaustion” (135) of the neoliberal era in Britain. Capitalist realism in space, legislated by a weary socialist. Earlier, Lyu notes that MacLeod's characters are luckier than Hao's (122). The former don't need to forge or overthrow societies to find their ideological home. The latter are orphans forever. But at the chapter's end he evens the score, noting that both authors' characters live in universes where no conclusive utopia can exist (136).

Chapter 3, *Long Live the Vampire*, returns from space to consider how China Mieville's *Perdido Street Station* (2000) and Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide* (2013) use elements of speculative genre, chaos, and the weird to approach social issues and dynamics as they exist on Earth today: foremost the exploitation of the weak and the marginal, hybrid identity, and collective resistance. In Chen's words, spoken in 2007 at a conference in Chengdu (Dongmei): “reality has surpassed science fiction.” The vampire in question is capitalism, not any lone predator. Neither author leads: Lyu's analyses the books in tandem. The theory he deploys here is Foucault's heterotopia, concerning marginal places of otherness and difference: worlds in words, opposite but adjacent, again mirroring Mieville's *The City and the City* (2009). Cities and symbols are Lyu's starting point. He explains that the Silicon Isle (硅屿, guī yǔ) of *Waste Tide* stands in for the real town of Guiyu (贵屿, guì yǔ), a massive e-waste recycling hub on the edge of Chen's native Shantou (141). *Perdido Street Station*'s New Crobuzon stands for London: colossal, mongrel, fluid, and vastly unequal (149). The exploited of the former are, just as in real Chinese cities, domestic migrants from poorer provinces. The exploited of the latter are a diverse array of humanoid species, standing in for London's globalised, multiethnic populace.

Lyu's analysis begins following the natural fault lines for each group, considering class foremost for the migrant workers and identity for the ‘xenoid’ species. But as the chapter progresses, he weaves this back around. Concerning the waste people, he analyses how social demarcations and anxieties form a social caste for them, blocking them from integration or synthesis with the ‘natives’ of Silicon Isle (152), and thus allowing class exploitation for profit

to continue. Concerning New Crobuzon, he explores how the technocratic aristocracy work in conjunction with organised crime to engineer the vampiric conversion of citizens' dreams into a commodity: a drug. The distinction here is that in *Waste Tide*, exploitation has arisen without conspiracy, whereas in *Perdido Street Station* the elite use weird forces to force it on the populace (164). The reader may decide for themselves which world is more frightening and chaotic.

Chapter 4, *From Consumption to Prosumption*, deals with worlds where market logic and consumer psychology have achieved total dominance, and to do so brings the reader into less-mapped literary space. James Lovegrove's *Days* is an early entry (1999) from an author who departed from the British boom to write less ambitious works: mostly teen fiction, pastiche and IP tie-ins. Long Yi's *Earth Province* is far more recent (2018), but is not available in English translation. Lyu uses each to move from class society to consumer society: another mirror, this time reflecting Britain and China's journey across the new millennium. The former from postwar democratic socialism of unions and nationalised industries to a financialised and individualist service economy, and the latter from revolution, rigid Maoism, and the 'iron rice bowl' to market reforms, an expanded personal freedom, and burgeoning inequality.

Days is a satire focusing on a middle Britain fixated upon an all-encompassing department store. *Earth Province* is something darker: a depiction of our planet under the thumb of an alien race who harvest us for food. In *Days*, the store is the locus of prestige and desire. In *Earth Province*, every aspect of society is up for sale, purchase, and taxation. Life ends at 45 for men and 40 for women, but that too can be prolonged by a purchase. This pair clicks perfectly with Lyu's titular concept, presumption: a mode of consumerism in which the consumer pays to contribute to production (203). Aided by *Days*, *Earth Province*, and his chosen theorists, Lyu demonstrates how, in both British and Chinese novels, the desirous and defanged consumer-citizen will now volunteer their own energies to feed the machine, whether tapping at the McDonald's self-service screen, or handing over cookies and content to Meta and Meituan.

In Chapter Five, *Past the Point of No Return*, Lyu uses two trilogies, Liu Cixin's *Three Body* and M John Harrison's *Kefahuchi Tract*, to characterise opposing visions of despair and possibility. The former is the logic underpinning the war for survival in *Three Body*: the universal 'dark forest' in which (A) trust is not possible and therefore that which is not self is enemy (214), and (B) everything which is not strictly economic and strategic is a liability that must be jettisoned (224). Lyu interprets the titular zone of Harrison's series as the opposite (238), not in the sense that it is safe and cheerful, but that it is pluralistic rather than reductive (241), and impossible to capture in any conceivable law or system (240). Lyu frames the dark forest's conversion of social subjects into objects of capital and enterprise as emblematic of post-socialism and neoliberalism, and documents how in China capitalism's beneficiaries (corporate elites) (219) and proponents (the online right) (228) have embraced the aspects of *Three Body* that favour a bleak and narrow will to power. Inability to see beyond the market, recast as virtue.

Lyu finds a line of dialogue in Harrison's series to summarise his proposed opposition: "Uncertainty is all we have. It's our advantage. It's the virtue of the day" (Harrison, 21). Sticking to this line of thinking, Lyu uses Deleuze and Guattari's concepts to characterise the series: a drama of and journey toward radical multiplicity, decentralisation, and perpetual flux. Lyu is not afraid to use Deleuze and Guattari's internal language, either, to frame the series as one in which the principal characters become 'haecceities' rocket along 'rhizomatic' 'lines of flight' to be 'reterritorialised' in a blinding light. He returns to the topic of capitalism at the close, suggesting that Harrison's stories orbiting the Kefahuchi Tract model a way to move beyond capitalism, rather than defeat it through binary war and resistance (255). Readers are free to ponder the length of such a road relative to their own lifespan.

In the conclusion, *A Confession of Breach*, Lyu considers the breach in literary culture where these two national booms have begun to speak to each other. Lyu devotes the most words to the Chinese boom. As he makes clear, the British boom has conclusively ended, while its Chinese counterpart persists. Lyu's personal confessions here—really, they're anecdotes—are illuminating. He recounts conversations with British readers which revealed that their understandings and valuations of the *Three Body* trilogy were remarkably different from his own, leading him to surmise that the contrast hinged on foreign readers' desire to experience "Chinese-ness" (261). This prompts a digression on questions of Orientalism, 'world literature', and an opportunity for Lyu to synthesise the thoughts of key academics such as David Der-wei Wang and Song Mingwei, and his own: suppose world science fiction is a hyperobject (267), or a planetary literature (279)? The polyphonic planet is a pleasing note to end on, and suitable. Consider the Earth as a hard limit (for the time being), but one host to teeming, cross-pollinating multiplicities.

The Boom and The Boom joins a small but growing cohort of English language academic works on Chinese sci-fi, and is the first to bring in another country on equal terms. *The Boom and The Boom* is verbose but easily penetrable, and flush with enthusiasm, and thus could serve as a great step up for Anglophone readers who devoured the essays in the *Invisible Planets* and *Broken Stars* anthologies edited and translated by Chinese-American writer Ken Liu (or perhaps more appropriately *Sinopticon*, whose assembler Xueting C Ni is British-Chinese). Lyu's words can take the reader to places these titles' paratexts can only tease. Sino-specialism aside, the book will also be of genuine interest for those keen to explore readings of British science fiction, and more broadly how the worldwide turn to market economics ushered in by the likes of Thatcher, Deng, and Reagan has rippled through world cultures.

If I were to reach for a critique of the book I might point to its asymmetries. For example, Lyu is far stronger on context and details for Chinese works: take his run-through of Chinese internet culture wars over *Three Body* (228), which is of the top rank of all available in English, or his footnote on Chengdu's botched Worldcon (276). His engagements with British sci-fi skew more broadly, more likely to engage with Britain's literary figureheads and already-archived discourse than beating-pulse intricacies around, say, household registration laws (143) or uproar over crowdsourced marketing for the Tangdaren instant noodle brand (210). In dealing with

Days, for example, we find no mention of Britain's greatest lost middle class utopia: Debenhams. But whether or not the mirror is askew, and though it is hard to say if one academic can link two worlds, Lyu certainly succeeds in widening the breach, and creating a strange and pleasurable portal for the critical and curious to dive into.

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