Cultural Exceptionalism in the New Generation of Chinese Science Fiction

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Science fiction is a kind of literary work that is rooted in reality and combined with the most advanced technology and cultural frontiers in order to carry forward the spirit of science and rationalism. The core of contemporary Chinese science fiction is the transmission of cultural exceptionalism with close relation to real life, including mutual benefits with the development of science and technology and direct connections with the future world. The following passage will give an analysis of the cultural exceptionalism depicted in science fiction written by the new generation of Chinese writers from the aspects of content, strategy, and significance.

The development of new technology plays a certain role in promoting the development of cultural exceptionalism, and sometimes it can even become the carrier of culture. However, they are not the same thing. Focusing on the development of high technology, science fiction may contain some surreal descriptions of the science and technology frontier. However, this kind of surrealism coming from a reasonable deduction of uncertainty must be based on the current facts. Even if the background is fictional, the “future science and technology” described in the science fiction should not be inconsistent with the known ones. Liu Yang’s short stories can be good examples of writings thematically predicated on the frontier of science and technology. For instance, The Pythagorean Theorem (《勾股》, 2010) discusses the constants of nature; Pathlight (《单孔衍射》, 2010) discusses the wave-particle duality of time; Troglodyte (《穴居者》, 2017) shows the entropy conservation and the picture of the universe. In his novel The Orphans of Red Planet (《火星孤儿》, 2019), Liu focuses on what would happen to the world when existing laws of physics had changed. The novel manifests the spirit of science and rationalism as it set out from the contemporary scientific frontier, though Liu discussed some vague future topics or replaced some concepts with new ones. The Waste Tide (《荒潮》, 2013), written by Chen Qiufan, shows the material life condition of human beings in the near future, and is a novel of alienation and weird senses. Along with the rapid development of industrialization and informational processes, the deeper questions of technological ethics is stimulated by this cyberpunk fantasy about “garbage men,” and the novel’s cyberpunk culture itself is simultaneously depicted as inclusive and universal. The unity of the spirit of science and rationalism and the spirit of humanism have been achieved in these works.

The content transmitted by the new generation of Chinese science fiction authors is full of distinctive contemporaneity and perceptiveness. The advanced culture is the integration of ancient and modern Chinese and foreign cultures coupled with creative power to face the future, rather than the simple repetition of ancient and foreign cultures. When commenting on Mobius Continuum (《莫比乌斯》, 2020) written by Gu Shi, Ken Liu said In the preface of the book, "Perhaps the greatest characteristic of science fiction is that it gives readers a perspective to
understand our world that they have never thought of before, bringing a “sense of wonder” often existing in classical science fiction.” All internal requirements or external manifestations of this “sense of wonder” reflect advanced economics, politics, culture, or understandings of the world from different perspectives. Wang Yanzhong’s short stories, “Selling Life” and “Stratosphere Canteens” show the alienation caused by developed capital and the absurdity of human social behaviour. His Sphere and Metamorphosis show the alienation of human beings and a sense of oppression and powerlessness caused by uncontrollable technology. The absurd depiction of the imagined world of the future is based on the anxiety and manic depression caused by our times. The writing of culture oriented to the world, the future, and these modern times is internalized, and following this writing, the emotional problems existing in our times can be relieved.

What the new generation of science fiction in China shows in their writing is tightly linked to the general public, reflecting their desires and aesthetic requirements. In Seafood Restaurant (《海鲜饭店》, 2019) written by Regina Kanyu Wang, the setup of seafood-aversion is so successful and the atmosphere description is so real that the readers even have the feeling of smelling seafood. In Cloud and Mist 2.2 (《云雾 2.2》, 2018), Wang tries to bridge the gap between genre literature and mainstream literature, and she thoroughly observes the crossroad of technology and life from her unique and delicate perspective. The work combines a rational insight into the future of technology with a warm glow of feminism. Childhood Harvest (《收割童年》, 2013) written by Li Wei(Ah-Que) reflect the reality of human emotions, life, and social relations, which allude to the problems we encounter today, inspire the emotions we ignore, and arouses the our concern for human beings as a whole rather than as individuals. These stories also affect our ways of thinking about life's ultimate problems, our yearning for the universe, and our imagining the infinite possibilities of the future. Therefore, a shared future for mankind is no longer a meaningless idea.

The new generation of Chinese SF writers endow their commercial literature with more feeling, which satisfies the pleasure of consumption for readers of science fiction, making them naturally integrate aspects of cultural exceptionalism into their writing. They have not only promoted the development of domestic science fiction, but will also have an ever-increasing influence on the creation of science fiction worldwide.

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