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Pandemic and the (Fanta)scientific: A Prism of Voices from Today's China

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Cover of an issue of *Science Fiction World*.

Jing Tsu 石静远, professor at Yale University, wrote an [article not long ago for the *Financial Times*](#) dedicated to the topic of contemporary Chinese science fiction (SF), in which she argued that the uniqueness of its production could be attributed, among other things, to the genre's ability to simultaneously address the government, scholars, and domestic readers, as well as to appeal to an increasingly broad international audience.^[1] The composite and polyphonic nature of Chinese SF allows it to be appreciated by such a diverse audience. It gives voice to different points of view across Chinese public discourse: these may relate, for example, to the virtues and limitations of scientific progress, to liabilities in the management of the Covid-19 situation and pandemics in general, to freedom of thought and freedom of the press. By spreading scientific and SF-related ideas, these voices in some cases

enhance (in spite of themselves) the state's official narrative, whereas in other cases they produce a tune dissonant to state propaganda. Precisely for these reasons, such voices deserve to be listened to, now more than ever.

Let me first lay out a brief historical premise. In the course of its evolution, Chinese SF has distinguished itself as being both an instrument of “scientific popularization” and a vehicle for outlining a “scientific vision of the world.”^[2] SF aims to merge the two roles, but in some cases they end up in an uneasy conflict. Popularization requires an attempt to communicate techno-scientific theories and practical knowledge to lay readers, and for this reason has social and pedagogical worth and is generally well regarded in the political sphere insofar as it is considered a useful tool with the potential to involve citizens in modernizing processes and communicates images of a technologically advanced

nation. The scientific vision of the world, however, is the outcome of stimulating a “scientific” (therefore, “critical”) reflection on both Chinese and global realities, a reflection that has always been a feature of Chinese SF. It could be said that the recent national and international popularity of Chinese SF has coincided with some of the state’s goals: as Jing Tsu remarks, the state has made the genre’s popularity converge with its interests, both at home and abroad, as a tool of soft power. Furthermore, thanks to the dissemination of science-related content, which the government encourages, SF has managed both to survive the challenges of the Chinese publishing industry without much discredit^[3] and managed to “maximize the space of expressive freedom,”^[4] with some of the genre’s leading writers articulating a strong “social critique” inspired by enlightenment values.^[5]

By examining a collection of writings and declarations made by important figures in the Chinese SF world in the recent period of pandemic, I aim here to highlight how these voices, varied as they are, reflect the complexity of Chinese public discourse and share a predominantly SF-inspired view on events. On the one hand, they reflect scientific visions that proliferate across public discourse, some unwittingly reinforcing the official narrative of the pandemic put forth by politicians; on the other hand, as can be seen in particular in the writings of Han Song 韩松, Chinese SF expresses a point of view configured as alternative, in that it addresses a series of questions (including first and foremost the crisis of the healthcare system) related to modernizing processes taking place in China in an attempt to understand the relationship between man and nature, how to manage a pandemic, and the politics of censorship.

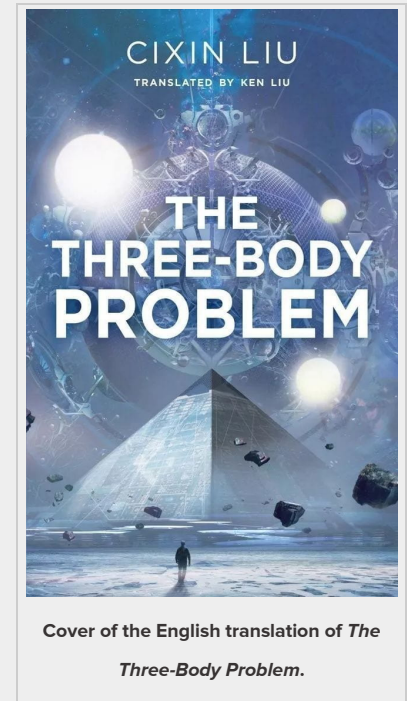
Science Popularization in the Time of Covid-19

It is no surprise that, in the face of the current emergency, the voices of Chinese SF mainly follow a binary pattern. On one side, SF promotes the wonders of modern science, conceived of as a weapon to fight against the epidemic and an engine of national optimism; on the other hand, it offers a reflection on present times, along with a questioning of official versions of reality, in line with the historical mission of “social critique” featured in Chinese SF since its birth. This binary pattern—in which an emphasis is put on one side or the other—somehow coexists in the declarations of individual writers regarding the pandemic. Interestingly, the former side, related to the key role played by technoscience in the fight against the pandemic, at least partially gives resonance to the official Party narrative: in it, the current emergency is depicted as a war waged by the virus against humanity, a conflict in which the state, equipped with futuristic technologies (e.g. robot-nurses, Big Data, 5G), is the vanguard of resistance and appears as a kind of savior of its people, a role model for a world that will turn out to be better and more technologically advanced than the one before the pandemic.

To better understand this pattern, it is useful to consider the “symbiotic relationship” (Jing Tsu 2020) between Chinese SF and the government, together with the science-inspired ideology transmitted through SF to society as a whole. Take for example Wu Yan 吴岩 (1962-), SF writer, scholar, and professor at the Southern University of Science and Technology in Shenzhen, who was one of the first to teach a course dedicated entirely to SF at a Chinese university and founded the Research Center for Science and Human Imagination. When asked about the pandemic in an interview with the Shanghai Pudong Science Fiction Association,^[6] Wu hints at the literary connection between the themes of contagion, a common trope in science fiction, and war,^[7] thus conveying both positive aspects of the

emergency—in particular techno-scientific progress and reflections on ethics and philosophy that suggest a rethinking of the present—and negative ones, especially when considering the psychological effects. As an educator and social scientist, Wu Yan calls attention to the serious damage caused by public fear and panic in the current situation, while also indicating the literary power of SF to cope with the epidemic’s psychological effects, thus showing both the bright and the dark sides of the crisis. Often accused of spreading “negative energies,” SF works can, to the contrary, ease fears of death, of breaking social bonds, and of the spreading of despair about the limitations of science.

Besides promoting SF as a kind of “anti-fear” vaccine and a source of awareness among readers about the pandemic, Wu Yan also anticipates a humanistic-technological optimism that coincides with the state’s grand narrative, emerging more markedly in the declarations of other SF writers in the past months. An example is Liu Cixin 刘慈欣 (1963-), author of the prize-winning best-seller *The Three-Body Problem* (三体) and of the story that inspired the Chinese-style blockbuster *The Wandering Earth* (流浪地球). Nicknamed by his fans “Da Liu 大刘”—“Liu the Great” in English—for his fame both at home and abroad, Liu Cixin is considered one of the “three generals” of contemporary Chinese SF. Liu had a long career as a computer engineer before becoming a full-time writer. When asked about Covid-19,^[8] he warns of the potential global threat that artificially-produced viruses could pose in the future. Yet, at the same time, he expresses confidence in humankind’s ability to defeat pandemics like the current one through decisive measures. For example, the Black Death, which killed more than a third of Europe’s population in the Middle Ages, made important contributions to the development of the Renaissance (e.g. the downsizing of the Church’s undisputed authority and the promotion of individual freedoms). Liu implies that today’s healthcare crisis, in spite of its terrible human and economic costs, could lead nevertheless to the development of a rebirth of societies as cultural communities. He adopts a tendentially optimistic attitude toward the future and the resolution of the crisis and welcomes the possibility of facing such challenges with science and technology. This recalls an anthropocenic and evolutionary concept of development which, as we shall see, pervades Chinese society.



Not all views are so optimistic: the writer Wang Jinkang 王晋康 (1948-), the second “general” of Chinese SF, expresses views that are more pessimistic in terms of development. A retired scientist, he is a prolific author of works focused on recent scientific findings, especially those related to the field of biology. Wang dealt with viruses in his novel *Cross* (十字). One of his recent declarations about the health crisis is that epidemics are an inherent part of human existence; he emphasizes that they are dangerous and inevitable, but also that technology has a fundamental role in fighting them.^[9] On the whole, Wang gives a rather negative perspective on contagion and its containment, notwithstanding his hope in science as an important weapon. In doing so, he somehow recalls the idea of “war on the virus” that is repeatedly explored in SF, and in Chinese SF representations of the epidemic: this idea, along with the importance of science as a weapon, is also part of state-driven narratives. Entrusting science above all with the ultimate resolution of a pandemic produced by an imbalance between man and nature, Wang’s position reminds us of the anthropocenic ideology.



Wang Yao

Wang Yao 王瑶 (1984-), professor at Xi'an Jiaotong University and a SF writer who uses the pen name Xia Jia 夏笳, seemingly has a more positive view of humankind's ability to deal with adversity—thanks, once again, to science and technology. Asked about similar topics during a virtual talk organized by Yale University researchers on the subject of Science Fiction and Global Media, Wang said that the current crisis could represent an opportunity for humankind: though brought to its knees by the virus, humankind has the possibility to reinvent itself with the help of techno-scientific progress. Wang offers an optimistic view founded both on humankind's historical resiliency and on the advancement of knowledge; hers is a reconfiguration of the predominantly humanist notion of humankind's ability to find the resources necessary to face old and new problems.

Chen Qiufan 陈楸帆 (1981-), CEO of a VR company and nicknamed the “Chinese William Gibson,” takes a stand halfway between SF and reality, between “scientific popularization” and the proposition of a “scientific vision of the world.” In his works, such as the novel *Waste Tide* (荒潮), Chen has addressed the possible impact of new diseases on societies. When asked about the epidemic situation in China in an interview for an Italian national daily newspaper, // *Manifesto*,^[10] Chen discusses the impact of the epidemic from both technological and social standpoints: Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Big Data are now a part of daily life in China, but one must not forget the wave of solidarity “from below” provoked by the emergency. This is, according to Chen, a ray of hope in an otherwise bleak period characterized by the negligence of government healthcare strategies: in fact, by referring to “governments' failure,” Chen seems to be critical of the management of the crisis, both domestically and internationally.

Coming from authors with different educational and professional trajectories, the voices of Chinese SF are varied, but they seem united in their view of science as an ally against crisis, a view that sometimes—not always voluntarily—merges with that of mainstream politics, reaffirming the important role played today by science and technology in a situation that is easily depicted by the language of SF. However, aware of the difficulties that come with trusting humankind to use technological tools wisely, some of these authors end up strengthening the image of “war” against the pandemic that has spread in China and abroad. Moreover, from these reflections it is possible to appreciate the features of the ideology of science, based on the notion of anthropocenic and evolutionary development that is so pervasive in contemporary Chinese society. However, it should be kept in mind that, although these declarations don't yet display a strong questioning of the current management of the epidemic—perhaps in order not to attract attention to themselves—they often refer to the important role played by SF literature, a genre that throughout its history has engaged in a critical interrogation of reality.

A (Pre)vision of Reality

As anticipated in these declarations related to the current pandemic, SF writers have explicit positions about the crisis and the importance of science, giving resonance to the scientific views that proliferate in Chinese society. In part, the

picture of a scientific “war on the virus,” inasmuch as it matches the state narrative, is the expression of a line of thought that is vertical and hierarchical: to use Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s terms, it can be described as a “root-tree system,” with a tendency to be exclusive and totalizing. On one side, acceptance of the tragedy for the sake of the “progress of civilization” yet to come, somehow reflects a kind of social Darwinism, an ideology that, Wang Yao reminds us, is part of the epistemic foundations of China’s socio-cultural sphere, at least since the economic reforms of the 1990s, to the extent that key words such as “evolution,” “competition,” “selection”—all terms having to do with the ruthless struggle for survival—have become foundational concepts both in SF literature and in Chinese public discourse.^[11] On the other, the authors’ tendency to trust technology in mitigating the effects of the virus is a reflection of one of the main attitudes adopted by Chinese society when it is confronted with the issues of anthropocentrism, such as the excessive exploitation of the environment.^[12] In fact, Daniele Brombal remarks that in China, society is not bent exclusively on contrasting the negative effects of human action on nature through technology and economic investment (one of the two main answers to the so-called “Chinese Anthropocene”): there are parts of society that aim instead to resolve the current imbalance of the relationship between man and nature through individual and collective self-regulation, and although it may be a minority, it is represented well by the next author considered, Han Song 韩松 (1965-).

Contemporary Chinese SF is, above all, an alternative cultural expression in which parallel and underground voices also participate, multiplying and proliferating beyond the voice of political power, a composition that appears more “rhizomatic” than “root-tree.”^[13] These voices converge in questioning the dominant view and are thus more moderate when it comes to the relationship between man and nature; although this view is also expressed by other aforementioned SF writers (even if to a different extent), it is allegedly best embodied today in the figure of Han Song, a journalist for the Xinhua news agency who has conducted journalistic investigations related to viruses like SARS and the H1N1 swine flu and is considered another of the “three generals” of contemporary Chinese SF. Han’s declarations represent food for reflection, especially in relation to the failures to contain the virus and to freedom of thought and freedom of the press. When asked about the links between the epidemic and SF as a genre,^[14] Han says that the present contagion is different from those faced in the past, given that it is the combined product of industrialization, urbanization, and globalization. Like Wang Jinkang and Chen Qiufan, Han has dealt with public health disasters in some of his stories and novels [e.g., “The Association of SARS Survivors” (非典幸存者联谊会), which dates to 2003 but was never published]. Han Song underlines that, in addition to the important role played by science in the resolution of the current pandemic, the choices made today will have an enormous influence on the type of society and politics that will take shape tomorrow.

Reflecting on the relationship between epidemic and SF, Han’s science-fictional optimism goes beyond notions of glorious fate and progress, aiming instead at a literature that is capable of driving social and political change, anticipating and thus modifying the potentially negative and seemingly unstoppable course of the current transformations. Having for years exposed the absurd science-fictional nature of Chinese reality, Han’s goal today is to stop SF from “becoming real.”^[15] After listing several SF works dealing with the topic of epidemics, he says:

If more people had read these SF novels in the past, they would have been more careful, vigilant, and cautious when the first signs appeared in reality. Now, it is difficult to say. Replacing the mayor of Wuhan with a SF writer

might have been even worse. However, the concerns for tomorrow contained in SF still have great value; after all, not many people worry about the future in today's society. However, SF, which has long been treated as literature for children and regarded as absurd, in some cases is too generous in prophecies and is seen as a tool for spreading negative energies.

如果更多的人提早读到了这些科幻小说，在现实中出现苗头时，是不是就会更小心一些、更警觉一些、更谨慎一些呢？现在也不好说。换了科幻作家去当武汉市市长，也可能更糟。但是，科幻含有的杞人忧天意识，还是有它的可贵处。毕竟，在如今的社会上，对未来怀有忧患感的人，其实不是太多。然而，科幻小说，又长期被视作儿童文学，被认为荒诞不经，有时预言多了，还被认为是散布负能量。

After some veiled criticism of the management of the pandemic, mainly addressed to the mayor of Wuhan (who was unable to grasp some early alarming signs), Han underlines the role of SF works in making people think about the present and how it may foreshadow the future and observes that this literary tool has been insufficiently exploited, often because it got crushed by power dynamics. Aiming to explain certain limitations imposed on SF by censorship, he gives some examples of criticism against the genre. Among these, the aforementioned story “Association of SARS survivors”—never published because it might stir panic among a general audience—stands out: in it, Han imagines that bio-terrorist groups targeting China can create new strains of virus in laboratories. These examples allow him to underscore that “tolerance and freedom of expression are a fundamental premise for the progress and development of any society,”^[16] a position similar to that of Yan Lianke 阎连科 (1958-), whose use of irony and dystopian tone resemble Han Song's in the landscape of Chinese literature.

Not surprisingly, for Han, the ultimate goal of SF is to stimulate critical and humanitarian reflection and to remind its readers about the importance of respect for “nature, man, science, and reality” (自然、人、科学和实际). To Han, this difficult task seems feasible because the genre has the capacity to express a few common ideals: (a) the need for humankind, the last arrival in this world among all other life forms, to show respect for nature and other species, which are too often exploited rather than respected; (b) the promotion of scientific progress, which can help humankind survive and pursue a better world—in this sense, Han refers to a “scientific rationality that does not blindly obey authority and power, but that respects law and reality” (科学理性, 也就是不盲从权威权力, 而是尊重规律和实际); (c) the diffusion of consistent humanist ideas, so that humankind is not a pawn to scientific knowledge and so that we can monitor the influence techno-science has on society and acknowledge important ethical issues, such as the defense of fundamental rights in the age of Big Data. Han Song goes on to say that SF has the important task of

improving and perfecting the institutional mechanisms to achieve important objectives such as better social governance and better legal order. [...] Otherwise, the price to pay could be greater than the losses caused by the epidemic itself and could also lead, one day, to the distortion and destruction of thought, spirit, and culture

改进和完善体制机制，实现更好的社会治理和法律秩序。这些都是非常重要的。否则，付出的代价可能比瘟疫带来的损失还要大，甚至有一天可能导致思想、精神和文化的残废与毁灭。

Thus, in discussing the current health crisis, Han also explores the broader notion of “Chinese modernization” and

questions the gap between the ideals and the realities concerning it. In addressing this discrepancy, he focuses on the individual and collective responsibilities grounding it: those of individual citizens (who have the duty to use science to improve their attitude toward and respect for nature, thus restraining their impulse to exploit it) but also those of politicians who were short-sighted in dealing with the pandemic and who failed to recognize the first signs of alarm. Accordingly, politicians have repeatedly sought to contain the SF genre, a genre that might in fact have helped to deal with the emergency by providing an enhanced sense of awareness. Han is not oblivious to science's ties to law and politics, but he wants to bring attention to the importance of SF writing as an instrument that can stimulate critical thinking and freedom of expression and contribute to creating a socio-political compass for individuals and collectives.



Critical insight, rhizomes, and a particular view of techno-science that comes with it—these are all features of SF. They are all present in Han's narrative, in the shape of a reflection on the need to respect “nature, man, science, and reality” and the tragic aftermath of a failure to do so. Society's health is the theme of Han Song's *Hospital Trilogy* (医院三部曲)—comprised of *Hospital* (医院), *Exorcism* (驱魔) and *Dead Soul* (亡灵)—which was published in 2018. Throughout the trilogy, Han treats topics

that seem to foreshadow many aspects of the current pandemic, such as the “era of medicine,” a war centered on the sick, medical staff and the use of AI, and patients who lose their memories. The trilogy decries views that fail to consider forms of individual and social self-regulation in the management of a crisis at the center of which lies the relation between man and nature. His “scientific view of the world,” his literary critique of reality, is based on the condensation of current information and its extrapolation into allegorical images, turning modernization into a rhizomatic narrative that is different from the Party's position and contrary to common views. In the process, Han exposes the invisible and foresees developments that are not completely unpredictable. Preventing SF from becoming reality is a reaction to reality turning into a dystopian landscape, so Han relies on the prophetic and transformative power of literature.

Universal Contagion as Seen from a Window

Han's thought is rhizomatic and anti-structural; he is eager to communicate not only the virtues and flaws of scientific progress in relation to the current emergency, but also to question the individual, political, and social responsibilities related to failures in the state management of the healthcare system. His works also express concern for the present and the future, requiring thus an expressive freedom, which though not fully possible is nevertheless at the very core of SF's existence. For these reasons, Han's voice is at times dissonant among the voices of contemporary Chinese SF. To picture a different perspective on the genre, following a suggestion by Jia Liyuan 贾立元 (1983-), scholar and writer also known as Fei Dao 飞氲, it is useful to review Han's minor writings, focusing for the purposes of this article on the posts he has written on the Weibo microblogging platform.^[17] During the lockdown, Han observed Beijing from his apartment, entrusting to this digital space aspects of his daily life, ranging from existential considerations to comments on the news. The result is a fragmentary but concrete picture of the lockdown experience that is more

private, intimate, and poetic than scientific or science fictional.

These posts are different from the entries in the diary of Fang Fang 方方 (1955-), who wrote about her personal experience of reclusion in Wuhan from the perspective of “serving the people” rather than obeying the Party.^[18] Han’s postings are, by contrast, very short, sometimes accompanied by images and are not limited to the lockdown experience, but they resemble Fang’s *Wuhan Diary* in their sharing with readers intimate daily reflections about living in a state of confinement and observations on the social and political spheres. Han mainly discusses his commitment to SF, his impressions and concerns regarding the epidemic, and his criticism of the government’s management of the pandemic. All of this somehow recalls a different configuration of the features of SF discussed earlier, resulting in a private, yet universal picture of the pandemic that focuses on the relationship between “nature, man, science, and reality” and shows how Chinese SF, today more than ever, is about us.



Here is a selection of some of Han’s posts.

February 20

Our memory began a month ago and will vanish in the next one.

我们的记忆始于一个月前，并将在一个月后消失。

March 2

Thanks to those friends and SF fans for sending food over, I want to cherish these delights and write something in return. In the meantime, now there are also those who have criticized me, saying that in all these years of writing SF I have not made the slightest progress and that it would be better if I wrote arguments following the principles of logic. Both food and criticism are welcome, I thank you for them; I would have never imagined that this epidemic would have given me so much. I will struggle to write logical SF, or science fictional rationales that I am satisfied with and that everyone can manage to read with little effort.

感谢科幻迷朋友快递来的食物，我要珍惜它们好好吃，写科幻来回报。同时今天还有人批评我，写了那么多年科幻也没有一点进步，不如改写推理。食物也好，批评也好，都让我满怀感激。没想到这次疫情让我有了这么多的收获。我会争取写出自己满意大家也勉强看得下去的推理科幻或者科幻推理。

March 5

According to the farmers' calendar, today is the Awakening of Insects. It is the day in which all kinds of small animals crawl out from their hiding places to celebrate the day of their resurrection, and it is also today that the National People's Assembly should have been opened; people are concerned about the announcement of the national economic growth targets for this year . . . small animals crawl, they crawl and crawl . . . the death toll is above three thousand.

今天是节气中的惊蛰，就是各种小动物都爬出来欢庆它们复活的日子，也是原本全国人民代表大会开幕的日子，让人关注的是要宣布今年中国经济增长要达到的指标。。。小动物们还在爬着，爬着，爬着。。。死亡数字破三千。

March 7

Hanging, like a mask on a silent patient.

像口罩一样，挂在沉默的病体上。

March 8

Let everyone wear a mask, make all beautiful faces and sounds vanish without a trace.

给一切戴上口罩吧，让所有美丽的面容和声音消失无踪。

It is as if the world had been reset.

世界好像是被重置了。

March 12

I don't know where in the universe, but there is another creature allured by the sunset on its planet.

宇宙中，不知在哪里，还有一个生物，也被他的星球的落日吸引。

March 13

There are those who did not rise as usual.

有的也没有照样升起。

March 14

Every day is the same, every day is different.

天天相同，天天不同。

March 16

Today the world has surpassed China. If only we could go back in time a couple of months . . .

今天世界超过了中国。如果能回到两个月前 . . .

March 17

Other than a hat and masks, some friends and SF fans have sent me a sleeping mask, to strengthen my confidence in the fight against the epidemic and to ensure that I will not give up writing SF, even at the cost of ending up fumbling in the dark. Thank you.

科幻迷和朋友，口罩帽子之后，又寄来眼罩，让我坚定抗疫信心，不要放弃科幻写作，哪怕必须在黑暗中摸索。谢谢。

March 21

Reservations are required for a visit to the hospital, but there are not many seats available anyway, besides they cost five hundred yuan each. What about unpaid seats? When will it be possible to go back to normal?

现在去医院看病都要求预约，可是预约也没什么号了。都是五百块钱的。普通号呢？什么时候可以恢复正常？

March 23

Today, two months ago, was January 23rd, the last working day before Spring Break; I haven't taken the subway again since that day. Spring is now in full bloom and it is no longer necessary to wear cotton-padded clothes, yet over ten-thousand people around the world cannot switch wardrobes for the summer. Some people argue that anything could happen in this world, not only from the point of view of medicine. What is about to happen, SF writers cannot even imagine.

两个月前的今天，一月二十三日，春节前最后一个工作日，此后我就再没坐过地铁了。现在已经春暖花开，不用穿棉衣了，但全球已经有一万多人再也换不上夏装了。看到有人说，这个世界已经什么都可能发生，不光是医学意义上的。科幻作家想象不到那会是什么事。

March 27

In the last two months there has been a phenomenon worth noting, namely, the transformation of time: every day passes in a swish, without one being able to do anything, or under the impression of having done something that has not really been done; this trend is growing. After a while I had the impression that one, two, five, ten years had already passed. Actually, I'm afraid that this is really the case. The essence of Coronavirus perhaps lies in changing the flow of time, thus, in its ability to reset the world. The failure to include physicists in research carried out for the emergency is really a shortcoming.

过去两个月，有一种现象，值得注意，就是时间的变化，每天唰的一下过去了，还没来得及做什么，或者做了的像什么都没做，而且这个趋势还在加速。然后觉得好像过了一年两年过了五年十年。事实上恐怕正是这样。冠状病毒的本质可能在于改变时间的流程，从而重置世界。没让物理学家加入应急调查是一个缺失。

April 4

This is not the true color of the world, everything has taken on artificial shades. But maybe the exact opposite is the case.

这不是世界的本色，都是人工变色。不过也可能刚好相反。

April 5

It is very cold. I haven't gone home for a week, I worked overtime and slept in the office, and when I got back I thought that it was very cold. It turned out that it was because the heating had been turned off. This year, due to the epidemic, the turn-off day was postponed for 15 days: it finally happened on April 1st, but even then it was very cold. I have heard that it is still snowing in northeastern China and Japan, but the low temperatures may not be related to heating problems. The world is different from how I used to remember it. It is possible that those who were pronounced dead are actually alive. Soon we will have to pronounce others and re-estimate the rates.

真是冷啊。一周没有回家，加班睡单位，回来才觉得那么冷啊。原来是暖气停掉了。今年因为疫情，推迟了十五天，到四月一号才停。但天还是那么冷。听说东北和日本还在下雪。但也可能不是暖气的原因。世界跟记得的不一样了。有可能那些我们宣布死掉的人才是真正活着。马上还要发布新的，再看看百分比吧。

April 7

I want to thank friends and SF fans for sending me oranges on the eve of the lockdown's end in Wuhan. They gave me new hope in the chance of winning the fight against the epidemic and encouraged me to write SF works that will please readers. After this epidemic, horror novels will also take an unstoppable step forward.

感谢科幻迷朋友在武汉解封前夜邮寄来的橙子，让人进一步鼓舞起战胜疫情和写出让读者满意的科幻作品的信心。当然了，经过这一疫，恐怖小说也必然有望推进。

Qingming's short break ended before the Two Sessions. It is possible that this time machine is broken.

清明小长假在两会前结束了。可能还是这一台时间机器出了问题。

April 8

In face of all this, the universe is undisturbed.

宇宙对这一切是漠视的。

April 13

The enchanting air overflows with the masks' fetid stench.

妖媚的空气中充满发臭的口罩味。

April 15

I thought that the conferences would become less frequent, instead they have increased; now people can participate in any online meeting they like, and just this week I downloaded three apps for this purpose. The one I tried today, based on intelligent bots based on cloud systems, was quite interesting, but the rest were mainly rubbish. Attending meetings is now more frightening than before: I speak of those people that in the last two months have argued

heavily with someone on the internet, but acted as if nothing had happened once the conference started. How scary. 以为会议减少了，但是会议更多了，随便就可以开一个网络会议，我一周里面都下载三个网络会议APP了。今天这个讲云端智能机器人的比较有意思，但其他大部分是垃圾。现在开会更害怕了，心想出席的就是过去两个月那些在网上撕裂了反目成仇的人，一开会又装得什么也没发生样。恐惧。

May 5

The most difficult of all springs has ended. The only option was death. In fact, others were choosing for you. Different hospitals offered different options.

最难熬的春天结束了。可以选择的只有死亡。其实也是别人替你选择。医院不同选择不同。

May 9

Are men unreliable, or else nucleic acid tests? Is the virus too smart or the world too fake?

是人不可靠，还是核酸检测不可靠？是病毒太狡猾，还是世界太假？

May 10

The Internet has a memory, people don't.

互联网有记忆，人没记忆。

May 24

The post-reset world is now four months old

重置后的世界，四个月大了。

Day after day, I still don't understand life and death.

日复日日，不解生与死。

I find a few common threads in these posts, which merge the author's narrative, his journalist's view, and his poetic vein. We can see references to the science-fictional and inscrutable (if not horrific) nature of reality, of a world that has been reset, in which the flow of time is mutating and death seems to be the only possibility; a reset reality in which memory is doomed to vanish, at least the human one. In such a dystopian present, Han sheds light again on the strength of SF literature and on the role of the writer: despite being the object of critique and despite reality's contingency, SF writers must not stop their work, "even at the cost of ending up fumbling in the dark." It is in such a problematic world that gestures of solidarity from below—such as those performed by the SF community—suggest that there is a sprout of hope. This genre, configured as a weapon powered by science and imagination, thus comes to embody the best quality of literature that does not allow itself to be subjugated by power. When its tools fail to prevent reality from becoming science-fictional, SF can even become fertile soil for lyricism, fueled by metaphors and allegories, or transform itself into poetry, displaying at the same time beautiful images of the precariousness of the human condition: as Han tells us, humanity seems to be "hanging, like a mask on a silent patient." With these posts

and their mixing of news, personal experience, and literature, Han ends up multiplying and enriching the discourse on “nature, man, science, and reality” with new nuances and beauty, showing, despite all the horror and the absurdity, that there is still hope for humanity if we allow (SF) literature to teach us to read and question, starting from ourselves.

Notes:

[\[An earlier version of this essay was originally published in Italian in Sinosfere.\]](#)

[1] Jing Tsu 石静远, [“Why Sci-fi Could Be the Secret Weapon in China’s Soft Power Arsenal,”](#) *Financial Times* (May 29, 2020), (accessed June 4, 2020).

[2] Wu Yan 吴岩 and Xing He 星河, “Chinese Science Fiction: an Overview,” *Pathlight* (May 2013), 37-40.

[3] After 1978, Chinese SF was so heavily criticized in official government publications that many authors abandoned the genre. Wu Yan, “Introducing Chinese Science Fiction.” *Science Fiction Studies* 40, no. 1 (March 2013), 1-14.

[4] Han Song 韩松, *Xiangxiangli xuanyan* 想象力宣言 (Imagination manifesto) (Chengdu: Sichuan renmin, 2000), 394.

[5] Jia Liyuan 贾立元, “Han Song de guimei Zhongguo” 韩松的鬼魅中国 (Infested China: China’s image in Han Song’s science fiction), in *Zaisheng zhuan* 再生砖 (Rebirth bricks) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin, 2016), 1-16.

[6] Gu Bei 顾备, [“Kehuan zuojia yanzhong de wenyi: zhuanfang Wu Yan”](#) 科幻作家眼中的瘟疫|专访吴岩 (The epidemic in the eyes of science fiction writers: interview with Wu Yan), *Bilibili* (March 30, 2020), (accessed June 4, 2020).

[7] Wu Yan 吴岩, [“Kehuan xiaoshuo zhong de liuxing jibing”](#) 科幻小说中的流行疾病 (Epidemic disease in science fiction literature), *China Writer Network*, (March 18, 2020), (accessed June 4, 2020).

[8] Gu Bei 顾备, [“Kehuan zuojia yanzhong de wenyi: zhuanfang Liu Cixin”](#) 科幻作家眼中的瘟疫|专访刘慈欣 (The epidemic in the eyes of science fiction writers: interview with Liu Cixin), *Science fiction world* (April 10, 2020), (accessed June 4, 2020).

[9] Gu Bei 顾备, [“Kehuan zuojia yanzhong de wenyi: zhuanfang Wang Jinkang”](#) 科幻作家眼中的瘟疫|专访王晋康 (The epidemic in the eyes of science fiction writers: interview with Wang Jinkang), *Science fiction world*, (Feb. 28, 2020), (accessed June 4, 2020).

[10] Simone Pieranni, [“Intelligenza artificiale e Big Data sono la nuova normalità”](#) (Artificial intelligence and Big Data are the new normality). *Il Manifesto* (April 4, 2020) (accessed June 4, 2020).

[11] Wang Yao 王摇, “Evolution or Samsara? Spatio-Temporal Myth in Han Song’s Science Fiction,” *Chinese Literature Today* 7, no. 1 (June 2018): 23-27.

[12] Daniele Brombal, "[L'Antropocene cinese](#)" (The Chinese anthropocene), *Sinosfere* (Oct. 1, 2019) (accessed June 4, 2020).

[13] G. Deleuze e F. Guattari, *Rhizome: Introduction* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1976).

[14] Gu Bei 顾备, "[Kehuan zuojia yanzhong de wenyi: zhuanfang Han Song](#)" 科幻作家眼中的瘟疫|专访韩松 (The epidemic in the eyes of science fiction writers: interview with Han Song). *Kehuan shijie* (Feb. 26, 2020), (accessed June 4, 2020).

[15] Han Song 韩松, "[Qirenyoutian fei huaishi, bie rang kehuan cheng zhen](#)" 杞人忧天非坏事, 别让科幻成真 (It's not bad to worry about the sky, it's bad that science fiction turns into reality), *Xinhua meiri* (Feb. 22, 2020), (accessed June 4, 2020).

[16] Riccardo Moratto, "[Ansia e rabbia da virus stanno sfumando](#)" (Anxiety and virus rage are fading), *Il Manifesto*, (Feb. 28, 2020), (accessed June 4, 2020).

[17] Han Song 韩松 Blog. <https://www.weibo.com/hansong> (accessed June 4, 2020).

[18] Marco Fumian, "[To Serve the People or the Party: Fang Fang's Wuhan Diary and Chinese Writers at the Time of Coronavirus.](#)" MCLC Resource Center (April 2020), (accessed June 4, 2020).

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