

Q & A

Mingwei Song on the ‘New Wave’ of Chinese Science Fiction

The scholar explains how modern science fiction in China dismantles identity, sheds light on the invisible China and evades the censors.

BY JAMES CHATER — SEPTEMBER 19, 2021

*Mingwei Song is a scholar of modern Chinese literature and intellectual history, and director of the Chinese program at Wellesley College. His first monograph, [Young China](#), was published by Harvard University Press in 2015 and investigates the origin and development of modern Chinese youth discourse. His second book, *Fear of Seeing*, is a deep-dive into the emergence of the “new wave” of Chinese science-fiction writers, heralded by the publication of Liu Cixin’s *Three Body Problem*. Song earned his bachelor’s degree at Shandong University, a Master’s at Fudan University and a Ph.D. at Columbia University. In this lightly edited interview, we discussed the reasons behind a resurgence in interest in Chinese science-fiction, and what it might reveal about China.*



Song Mingwei.

Illustration by Kate Copeland

Q: What first got you interested in Chinese science-fiction?

A: Actually, I was working on something totally different in the 2000s, my book project with Harvard University Press, *Young China*. That book was mostly about young Chinese intellectual thought and ideas of the nation. While I was working on it, by chance, I received a manuscript sent to me by a friend who told me, “This book is for you.” I began to read it but didn’t like it at all. That manuscript was *The Three Body Problem* by Liu Cixin [the popular science-fiction series of books; in 2014 it became the first Asian novel to win the Hugo Award for best novel]. I didn’t like it because it began with the Cultural Revolution. After two chapters I didn’t see much science-fiction, I saw [Scar literature](#), the school of writing that emerged after the Cultural Revolution.

Two years later when the novel was published, I ran into it again in a bookstore. But this time I was hooked because it now began with this global preparation for an alien invasion. After reading the second volume, I was at a total loss. I was dying to read the third one. So I wrote to that same friend and asked if he could get me the manuscript, but he said Liu had not finished it yet. While I was waiting for it, my hobby was to gather as much as possible — books, anthologies — everything about Chinese science-fiction. I read around 500 stories written by Liu Cixin’s contemporaries, because I wanted to see whether he was a lone wolf or whether they were a pack.

How did you end up working on it more extensively?

Well, two events really brought me to the study of it. In 2010, Fudan [University] and Harvard University collaborated on a conference to celebrate the achievement of literature over the first decade of the 21st-Century. Among all the literary big-shots — Mo Yan (莫言), Yu Hua (余华) — there were two science-fiction writers who were the awkward outsiders: Han Song (韩松) and Fei Dao (飞氲). These two writers had prepared their presentations for the conference very carefully. In the literary hierarchy, science-fiction was certainly very low, almost unknown to other people. But when these two writers spoke, they directly engaged with Chinese literature, almost like they represented a new force. They gave the audience the impression that they were a lonely hidden army — that was actually the title of Fei Dao's talk — ready to clash with the mainstream. That totally got me.

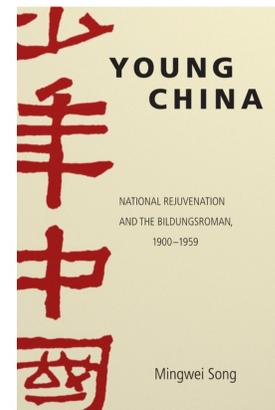
The second event was being commissioned to put together a double issue for *Renditions* that would focus on Chinese science-fiction. That anthology was published in 2012 and was later enlarged to become *The Reincarnated Giant* anthology. While doing that, I wrote two long articles in Chinese and one in English where I coined the term 新浪潮 “new wave.” Gradually, I made some adjustments so that the term came to mean a paradigm change brought about by Chinese science-fiction to be in conflict with the mainstream.

Can you give us a brief history of science-fiction culture's reception in China? As you mentioned, it's increasingly part of the mainstream now but was actively discouraged at previous points in the PRC's history and even going back to the late Qing. How has its reception changed over time and what does that say about China?

The late Qing dynasty saw the first surge of science-fiction as an imported genre. Liang Qichao (梁启超), a leader of the reform movement — while in Yokohama, Japan, in exile — identified from Japanese culture a few good modern, progressive genres, such as political or utopian fiction. In Chinese, we used the term *lixiang* (理想), “ideal or idealized,” but nowadays we know that as utopian fiction. There was an idea that these genres could evoke in readers a yearning for modern things. So it was used as a tool; it was like a vehicle to deliver modern thought, modern ethical principles to Chinese readers.

For the late Qing, on the one hand, they emphasized modernity. They showed submarines, flying cars or spaceships, all this wonderful modern stuff. However, at the same time as this modernity, all the works chose to reinforce the values of Confucianism. It's really interesting, you see a splendid material world, which is completely westernized and scientific, but the core of the story is always about how to keep “Chineseness” intact. When the Republic was founded in 1912, science-fiction disappeared because all of the novels had a teleological endpoint, and that was the founding of the Republic.

Much later, in the years from 1978 to 1983, a short-lived reform period, largely shaped by the efforts of Westernization, reinvented the science-fiction genre as a sort of serious literature that reflected on more profound issues such as politics and history. In 1983, a national campaign was launched to kill all sorts of liberal efforts to change China, and science fiction was targeted as a spiritual pollution during this campaign. The genre disappeared almost overnight. Major writers stopped writing. Major magazines stopped publication; science fiction activities all stopped. So this certainly speaks to the power of censorship.



Song's first book, *Young China: National Rejuvenation and the Bildungsroman, 1900-1959*, examines the ideas of nationhood and modernity in 20th century China through the lens of youth. Credit: [Harvard University Press](#)

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The recent new wave emerged in a totally changed environment. Twenty years after the disappearance of science fiction because of the government campaign, the genre returned on the internet, in a new market economy, at a time when entertainment and making money matter more than political studies. That was the early twenty-first century.

So, going back to 1912, there's a sense in which the founding of the Republic cancelled out the driving force behind this cultural form?

Yes. You don't need this novel that tells you what's happening one thousand years later, it's telling you a story about tomorrow! But one writer — our old friend Lu Xun (鲁迅) — had also written articles to promote science-fiction, almost using Liang Qichao's words but in a slightly different way. Because in Lu Xun's words, he's also trying to see how culture can change people, to think more rationally, and use scientific reasoning to get over that old 'barbarian' way of thinking.

Later, of course, Lu Xun became the most important modern Chinese writer, and arguably the founder of literary realism in China. I wrote an article three years ago entitled, "Can we read *A Madman's Diary* [arguably Lu's most famous work] as science-fiction?" *A Madman's Diary* was the first vernacular, modern Chinese story. And its use of the vernacular is not like today; it's fragmented, almost like something from James Joyce. It also has deliberate allusions to Chinese tradition; it's very complex.

The story is about a man who is hysterical and thinks all his family members are hiding a big secret from him: that they want to kill and eat him. But everyone around him looks so happy; indeed, the happier the other people are, the more he feels scared. He's trapped in his home, so he begins reading all the classic Chinese texts, Confucian classics and so on. Eventually, between the lines, he starts seeing hidden words appearing everywhere: 吃人, "eat people."

Scholars at the time interpreted this madman as an earlier pioneer of Enlightenment thought. And he understood that Chinese thinking is bad: that it is hyper-critical, and in the name of making everyone happy, it exploits everyone to death. This is the standard interpretation of *A Madman's Diary*. In Lu Xun, writing in the 1910s, and Han Song, writing one hundred years later, you see a very similar plot structure — in the writings of both, a madman sees through the hypocrisy of Chinese society.

How does this idea come through in modern Chinese science-fiction?

There's a good example in Han Song's stories. Han Song published a series of novels [in the 2010s] directly paying homage to Lu Xun. It's called the 'Hospital Trilogy'. It begins a little like Lu Xun's story. It is about an ordinary man who is on a business trip, going to a hotel. He feels thirsty so he drinks a complimentary bottle of water. He falls sick after drinking it, but immediately two women enter the room and eventually they take him to the hospital. This happens in the first chapter of the story. By chapter 201, he still cannot get out of the hospital.

Soon after arriving at the hospital, he meets a woman that has been in the hospital for an extremely long time; so long she's actually lost track of how long. In fact, everyone has become either a patient, doctor or nurse; they're all a part of the institution. Eventually, the

protagonist realizes the entire country has become a hospital, and the government's aim is not to cure the patients, but to keep them sick. The government needs to keep them sick, but not kill them, and in so doing prop up the economy.

There's a darker undertone to this complicated story, which involves artificial intelligence and a deadly algorithm. However, ultimately we learn that the characters have been taken to Mars because Earth is no longer inhabitable to repeat this unending cycle of life and death. This has a connection to Lu Xun because it shows us what is invisible, what lies behind ordinary life scenes. Everything that happens behind these institutions is called national progress. The drive for making the hospital better and better in the story is to "build our strong country." But behind all of this is a really dark, hidden and evil force that is not controllable by humans.

So a central feature of more modern Chinese science-fiction culture is that it draws attention to this discrepancy between what Chinese citizens see as reality and what's beneath that?



Chinese science fiction writer and *Xinhua News Agency* journalist Han Song. Credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

That's the main argument in my work on "the new wave." And this certainly has political implications, or a political suggestiveness, because those things are usually hidden from the public, right? I can give you another example with Han Song. He is a journalist at Xinhua; and by night, he writes science-fiction. He jokes that by day, there's so much we cannot write into the news — 见不得光 "out of sight" — because of government censorship. The government needs positive energy and positive policy reports. Han Song saves all the bad things for himself and turns them into nightmarish stories centered on night.

He wrote one marvellous story about a journalist that was translated into English last year called *My Country Does Not Dream*. In the story, everybody's talking about the Chinese economic miracle, how well the country has done, and how happy everyone is. In the daytime, everybody is in a sort of prolonged happiness. But he also recognizes that he doesn't know anything about after nightfall. He can't remember anything, not even dreams.

He meets an American journalist who has a drug. (It's a bit like *The Matrix's* red and blue pill: Do you want to know what happens in China at night, then take the red pill!) The journalist takes it and he stays awake. Within 10 minutes of going to sleep, everyone wakes up again. He sees his wife sleepwalking, and going downstairs; sleepwalking professors feeding knowledge to sleepwalking students in classrooms where nobody needs to think; sleepwalking thieves being chased by sleepwalking police; millions of sleepwalking workers going to construction sites to build for the entire night.

The journalist wants to know what the truth behind it all is. He finds an old man who is not sleepwalking, discovering he's one of the leaders often on television. That leader says, "You must know, we are doing just what Lu Xun told us to do." The journalist is confused because he knows Lu Xun wanted to awaken the nation. The leader says back: "We should let them sleep so they can dream about their country!" The journalist argues back, "But the dream is not theirs!"

BIO AT A GLANCE	
AGE	48
BIRTHPLACE	Jinan, China
CURRENT POSITION	Professor and Department Chair of East Asian Languages and Cultures, Wellesley College

In stories like this, you can clearly see how Lu Xun's motif and criticisms of Chinese civilization and bureaucracy are carried into modern science-fiction, with authors like Han Song.

How are these ideas used to tackle other issues within Chinese society?

In general, it's a question of difference in identity. This new wave of Chinese science-fiction is different from late Qing or communist science-fiction in that it does not create identity for readers, it actually dismantles identity. For example, there's such a contrast between the film of *The Wandering Earth* and the novel. The film, distributed internationally on *Netflix*, is about creating this community for shared human destiny; the government could almost use the film *The Wandering Earth* to publicize its policy on community.

But all the good science-fiction films and novels are not really about creating an exclusive identity. In the work of science-fiction writers like Liu Cixin and a lot of writers following him, you often see this antagonism between one species and another; it's not about the war, it's almost always some kind of mutual understanding that arises from it. In this long war between humans and Trisolaris, in the beginning they are life-and-death enemies, but we eventually see that they are the same small players in this very large play.

What does this cultural form — its re-emergence and increasing popularity — say about Chinese society and its sense of self? What does it show about how people in China today imagine the future?

I consider invisibility to be the key word of this new wave. There are certain parts of Chinese reality that have been represented politically, morally, aesthetically, in literary culture. But a lot of things are suppressed, processed or changed. Of course, today, we can see a lot of raw material that shows that reality, whether it's through short videos or viral videos that are not covered up by the government.

For mainstream literature that has to go through censorship to get published, there are certain taboos and borders; it's almost like there's a China that's guarded by all these things, you can't cross the border. But science-fiction can do that because the phenomena in the plot — like the nightmarish sleepwalking — are so often what the story is about; the message and the form are the same. Science-fiction has this invisible quality, encoding all the important things about society in an absurd story that nobody believes. But after you read the story, you know what it's about.

MISCELLANEA	
ALL-TIME BOOK REC	Les Faux-Monnayeurs by André Gide, Fortress Besieged by Qian Zhongshu, and Dream of the Red Chamber by Cao Xueqin
RECENT BOOK REC	Afterparties: Stories by Anthony Veasna So
FAVORITE FILM	<i>La Double Vie de Véronique</i>
PERSONAL HERO	Pyotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin

This is the unique strength of this genre. And so far, it's the only genre that can do this. I know a bit about martial arts stories, which could be meaningful and socially critical, but they're all distant from the present day; or fantasy, which is more focused on escapism or abstracting from human nature. I think science-fiction is the only

genre that can shed light on the invisible China represented in a way that looks convincing to us. And the miracle is that it still bypasses the censors.

Why does it bypass the censors?

I think it has escaped censorship for two main reasons: first, it was thought to be pure fantasy, which does not engage social reality; second, compared with other genres such as "grave-digging fiction," "fighting-in-the-court," or "danmei" (obsession with male beauty) or even "pornography," science fiction might make the government feel it's much safer, because it spreads scientific knowledge and it applies reason rather than corrupting people's mind.

And then, when Liu Cixin became a national hero after winning the biggest awards for the genre, even national leaders began to praise science fiction. So that gave it a sort of protection. However, it all depends on where and how you look. It depends on whether you see the invisible depth or just the surface prosperity. There can be a deep abyss in the sky, but it's invisible to most of the people.

That's not really a simple answer. Who knows when the censors will become smarter, and when they'll be able to see the invisible? Who knows what will happen next? I remember a great Chinese science fiction writer liked my conceptualizations of the invisibility and said this to me: "What you said [about science-fiction] is all correct; it is just that they do not know yet, and they haven't seen it."



James Chater is a journalist based in Taipei. His writing on politics, foreign affairs and culture from Taiwan has appeared in *The Guardian*, *New Statesman*, *The Spectator* and *Los Angeles Review of Books*. He completed his masters in Modern Chinese Studies at Oxford University. Previously, he also studied at Harvard as the Michael von Clemm Fellow. [@james_chater](#)

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BY EYCK FREYMAN

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