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Interpreting *Folding Beijing* through the Prism of Science Fiction Realism

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With its distinctive sci-fi realism style, Hao Jingfang's *Folding Beijing* serves as a strong voice for social critique. A typical dystopian literature assumes a binary class structure, while in *Folding Beijing*, a middle class is introduced so the binary structure is now triple-layered. Also, setting the story in the mega capital city Beijing adds an even grimmer sense of reality. In addition to highlighting the worsening condition of social stratification and class solidification in China, the story, by pointedly disclosing some social problems, mirrors the living conditions of a proportion of the population in big cities. The story also contains a deeper theme: How would machines and automation affect the economy? Supposing that in the future more and more robots have replaced workers, what would happen to the unemployed? If the basic value of labor is jeopardized and most people's work has lost its meaning, how would they demonstrate their existence as human beings? A somber and profound contemplation is hidden behind this seemingly mild and composed story. The advances of society create inequality, and though mankind has been devoted to studying and eliminating inequality, it appears that it only leads to more inequality.

On August 21, 2016, at the 74th World Science Fiction Convention, Hao Jingfang's 郝景芳 *Folding Beijing* (*Beijing Zhedie* 北京折叠) won the 2016 Hugo Award for Best Novelette, making her the second Asian to win the Hugo Award after Liu Cixin 刘慈欣. This recognition, together with the fact that Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem II* (*San Ti 2* 三体2) did not make onto the short list, has quickly gained Hao Jingfang prominence among young science fiction writers and wide attention.

"Uncategorized Literature" and Science Fiction Realism

Hao Jingfang's science fiction has a unique temperament, which is even more obvious in her early writing. It has put her in an awkward situation, however, as some science fiction readers consider her works to be not sci-fi enough, whereas mainstream literature views them as being not literary enough, so both mainstream and science fiction magazines reject them. Fortunately, she has persisted, especially after receiving encouragement from Liu Cixin. By and by, more people have begun to discover the charm of her works. She is conscious of her own writing style, and refers to her works as "uncategorized literature." She argues that

> if we divide a novel's space into real and virtual spaces, belletristic or mainstream literature is concerned about and expresses the real space, while science fictions or fantasy literature are concerned about and express the virtual space . . . Between these two pure forms is a somewhat blurred style: It cares about the real space but expresses the virtual space . . . It is not concerned about the strong or the weak, win or loss, of the virtual world, but rather, it intends to explore some possibility of the reality outside of reality.[1]

The thought of exploring the real world through a virtual space brings to mind the concept of "sci-fi realism."

Generally speaking, one would think that the most important quality of science fiction lies in logically self-consistent science and free-floating fantasy. Few would regard realism as an element for science fiction. But, in fact, science fiction, as a genre of literature in itself, expresses social life. In science fiction circles in China, some people emphasize the realistic elements of science fiction. As early as 2007, at the science fiction and fantasy conference in Chengdu, the science fiction writer Chen Qiufan 陈楸帆[2] warned that "reality has surpassed science fiction." At that time he meant that it was surpassed in regard to science and technology; then at the Nebula science fiction forum in 2012, Chen Qiufan, in relating to circumstances in China, proposed that "science fiction is the greatest realism at the present time. It provides a window for imagination through its open realism, to delineate a reality no mainstream literature has written about." Afterward, Han Song 韩松 refined the idea, leading to the birth of "science fiction realism." The term "science fiction realism" began to appear frequently in various media covering Chinese science fiction. Later, Chen Quifan elaborated further on this concept in his article "Rethinking Sci-fi Realism" ("Dui 'Kehuan xianshi zhuyi' de zai sikao" "对科幻现实主义"的再思考). He prefers to understand sci-fi realism as a strategy for gaining a voice in a situation in which too many taboos have caused China's realistic literature to wish to escape reality, and in which science fiction literature can instead concern itself more with reality.[3] To Chen Qiufan, there is a certain limit or taboo in actual society that makes science fiction literature a good channel to express reality. Hao Jingfang notes, "Virtual reality can project reality in a purer form."[4] Her adoption of the form is to better express and focus on reality. Regardless of whatever rationale they give, Chen Qiufan and Hao Jingfang's purpose in creating science fiction is to highlight reality. No matter how imaginary or how far-away the space-time framework of their work is situated, what they are contemplating is the state of humanity and the state of reality at the time their stories are created. All roads lead to Rome. This attempt to use science fiction to express the theme of pure literature, this effort to break the line between science fiction and mainstream literature, is it not in itself science fiction realism?

Vibrant Social Critique

One of the most important functions of sci-fi realism is to reveal and critique reality, and to expose conflicts and problems in society. Hao Jingfang's *Folding Beijing* has a distinctive style of sci-fi realism. In the story, the city of Beijing has undergone a large-scale transformation, and its inner six rings have been artificially divided into three different physical spaces where, when one of the spaces appears, the other two fold. Three spaces correspond to three classes, with the third space for the workers on the bottom, the second space for middle-class white-collar workers, and the first space for the powerful. This is a classic dystopian setting. In recent years, numerous Hollywood films such as *The Hunger Games*, *Elysium*, *Upside Down*, and *Snowpiercer* have explored the theme of thorough social stratification in a highly developed future society, which is indeed an irreversible trend the whole world is facing. Therefore, *Folding Beijing* is not aimed only at China, but it also has an international perspective. A typical dystopian work assumes a binary class

structure, the upper class and the poor, the rulers and the ruled, whereas in *Folding Beijing*, a middle class is added so a binary structure is now turned into triple strata; by setting it in the mega capital city of Beijing, the story gains an even grimmer sense of realism.

In addition to pointing out the ever-worsening condition of social stratification and class solidification, the story also sharply reveals some major social issues. "For schools with decent reputations, the parents had to show up with their bedrolls and line up a couple of days before registration. The two parents had to take turns so that while one held their place in the line, the other could go to the bathroom or grab a bite to eat. Even after lining up for forty-plus hours, a place wasn't guaranteed. Those with enough money had already bought up most of the openings."[5] This plainly discloses the prevalence of the uneven allocation of early childhood education resources. In the third space, a breakfast costs Lao Dao, a waste worker, one hundred yuan; and a dish costing three or four hundred is very expensive. The tuition for Tangtang to go to kindergarten is fifteen thousand yuan a month. In the second space, Qin Tian's salary as an intern is a hundred thousand yuan a month. In the first space, Yi Yan pays Lao Dao a hundred thousand yuan to keep his mouth shut, an amount that is just her wage for one week, working only half days at half-pay. The huge differences in income and consumption among the different classes are incredible, but their skewed exaggeration does reveal the truth of the real world. The story also shows the everyday lives of waste workers, of young girls who are tenants quarrelling with the landlord's elderly wife over just a little heating cost, and of how hard the construction workers, who have built Beijing's folding city, strive to become waste workers so as to be able to stay. Floating populations, group rent, and migrant workers . . . The glaring facts of their realities reflect the living conditions of a proportion of human populations in big cities. Heavily burdened by reality, they live like ants. Hao Jingfang's Beijing, apart from being able to "fold like a Transformer," "is almost a reality."[6]

Through the meticulous delineation of social life in *Folding Beijing*, Hao Jingfang explores and contemplates the real world. Hao Jingfang used to live in Beijing's urban-rural fringe area; downstairs were a noisy alley, small greasy spoons, and a big market. She chatted with shopkeepers when she ate downstairs, listening to them talk about their families and children left behind in remote provinces, and about their distress at not being able to afford to go to doctors in Beijing. During a long period of schooling, Hao Jingfang herself was surrounded by students who liked to talk about and were eager to take over the world, with astonishing expectations about the future. Hao Jingfang's job provides her opportunities to participate in conferences, to encounter people who can change the world. The garden she writes about is Diaoyutai, where changing the world and the fate of millions of people is as easy as drinking a cup of coffee.[7] All these fragments and images have collided in her mind and heart, eventually converging in *Folding Beijing*. Hao Jingfang has a clear understanding of *Folding Beijing*: "In fact I do not think it is a fantasy novel, and also what I have written is not a non-existent future at all."[8]

Simple Style, Deep Contemplation

Apart from exposing and critiquing social reality, *Folding Beijing* is also commendable for its steady and composed style. The plot of a regular dystopian novel generally begins with having the upper class crush the lower, with resistance brewing among the lower class while it endures the oppression, until conflict breaks out. Hao Jingfang bypasses this dramatization, and instead, she uses a straightforward narrative to make the city appear plainly in front of readers.

There are no intense clashes among these man-made spaces. To deliver a message, Lao Dao moves from the third space to the second and then to the first; then, carrying the reply, he returns from the first space. There is no choice to be made between life and death, no war between man and nature. There are moments when Lao Dao is about to face a crisis or some twist and turn, yet the story glides smoothly past it. What Lao Dao passes and sees are ordinary people and things, but it is exactly this ordinariness that creates the most realistic atmosphere. This way of writing may be due to Hao Jingfang's quiet and calm personality, or perhaps it is due to her intent "to visualize the abstract, so inevitably the plot is somewhat ignored."[9] Nevertheless, it is precisely because of the plain plot and the author's restraint that readers will not be too distracted by drama or conflicts, and will gain a purer sense of the story's society, which is so real as to be chilling.

Through the words of Lao Ge, readers understand that inflation does not affect the third space, because there is no currency exchange between the first space and the third space. In short, the third space is self-sufficient, with the sole responsibility of handling waste, while the first space provides waste and administration. In fact, due to the advance of productivity, machinery has long been able to replace the workers to handle waste. That the twenty million waste workers, such as Lao Dao, are kept is only for the sake of "maintaining stability," therefore, they are "bundled off into the night," and not involved in social and economic operations. In a regular dystopian novel, the comfort of the upper class is often sustained by exploiting the labor of the lower class, where rebellions occur. But in Hao Jingfang's story, progress in science and technology has long replaced repetitive mechanical work. People in the third space, limited by their outdated knowledge, are simply there to consume resources, and do not create any value. Naturally, rebellions would not happen here, as there is no exploitation. If the arduous labor of people like Lao Dao has become meaningless and unworthy of exploitation, a truly extreme dismay and desperation occurs, which stands in comparison to the cruelty of exploitation. Here lies another deep theme of the story: How would machine automation affect the economy? If in the future more and more robots were to replace workers, what would happen to those people who lost their jobs? If the basic value of one's labor is compromised and has lost its meaning, what is the meaning of being a human and how can it be manifested?

Hidden behind this seemingly gentle and plain story is some serious and profound thinking, which gives readers chills. The development of society causes inequality. Although humanity has been committed to understanding and eradicating inequality, it seems that ultimately it only creates more inequality. The employment of machines was originally intended to liberate humanity and make it more relaxed and happier. But in reality, the reverse has become true. No one can be spared this process.

Twenty million Lao Daos lead a humble life in the third space. From an economic point of view, since they do not create anything but do consume resources, they can be completely disposed of by other means; there is no need even to bother to keep them as waste workers. But Hao Jingfang does not choose to tell her story from this angle. Perhaps it might be due to her entrenched hope for human civilization; though in the end all might be futile, she is still willing to fight against this complicated world—and here we can feel the warmth behind the cold reality of *Folding Beijing*.

Notes

[1] Hao Jingfang 郝景芳, "Qianyan" 前言 ("Preface"), in *Qu Yuanfan* 去远方 (*Going to the Distance*) (Nanjing: Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing House, 2016), 2.

[2] Chen Qiufan, born in Shantou Guangdong, graduated from the Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Peking University, is one of the most promising new-generation science fiction writers in China. His work *Huang Chao* 荒潮 (*The Waste Tide*) won the Best Novel at the fourth Xingyun (Nebula) Awards, hosted by the World Chinese Science Fiction Association.

[3] Chen Quifan, "Rethinking 'Sci-fi Realism,'" *Masterpiece Review* 28 (2013): 38–39.

[4] Hao Jingfang, "Qianyan," 2.

[5] Hao Jingfang, "Folding Beijing," trans. Ken Liu, *Uncanny Magazine* 2 (2015), https://uncannymagazine.com/article/folding-beijing-2/.

[6] Comments on *Folding Beijing* by the science fiction writer Baoshu 宝树 are from: Hong Hu 洪鹄, "Yuguo Jiang ruwei zhe Hao Jingfang: Huangdan zhi di, xiezuo fasheng" 雨果奖入围者郝景芳：荒诞之地，写作发生 ("Hugo Award Finalist Hao Jingfang: Fantastic Land, and Writing Occurs"), WeChat, June 7, 2016, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjEwMzA5NTcyMQ==&mid=2653078520&idx=1&sn=dda5027e91c077b13c70188e6d10bbbe#rd.

[7] *Editor's note*: Diaoyutai State Guesthouse has been the home of Mao Zedong and various other governmental figures, and now serves as housing for visiting provincial officials and foreign dignitaries.

[8] Hao Jingfang, "*Beijing zhedie* xiezuo ganyan" 〈北京折叠〉写作感言 ("Reflections on Folding Beijing"), Sina Blog, October 21, 2015, http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_7bca40a10102vwrc.html.

[9] Hao Jingfang, "Qianyan" 前言 ("Preface"), in *Gudu shenchu* 孤独深处 (*Deep in Loneliness*) (Nanjing: Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing House, 2016), 2.

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