China's Global Strategy as Science Fiction

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STRATEGIC UPDATE
JANUARY 2023

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China's Global Strategy as Science Fiction[1]

> [I]n order to understand the strategic direction of China's global politics we need to probe the science fiction of China's galactic politics.

Xi Jinping is leading China in a new direction, but how are we to understand the PRC's global strategy? To understand domestic and international politics in most countries, we would look for clues in authoritative sources—leaders' speeches, official documents and statistics, elite interviews and essays, and public opinion surveys. In the 2000s this method worked well to probe Chinese politics. But since civil society and independent thought have been severely restricted over the past decade under Xi, it's necessary to go beyond such "factual" sources. To understand China's global strategy, it's best to read fiction, especially Chinese science fiction.

This essay critically analyses Liu Cixin's novels, especially *The Wandering Earth* and the *Three Body Problem* trilogy, to probe how Chinese sci-fi pushes us to think creatively about China's global strategy. In particular, it uses sci-fi to think beyond the current global agenda that focuses on the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the Taiwan crisis: to explore the long-term issues of the relation between humans and technology, between science and politics, and between political communities. Are we doomed to existential struggle, or can we engage with difference in creative and productive ways?

1 This essay originally was written for a 'Global Scenarios 2050 Workshop', held at Shell. The essay benefited from feedback at the workshop, from LSE IDEAS, and from Jessica Imbach, Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, Cho Khong, Wendy Larson, Aaron McKeil, Frank N. Pieke, and Patricia M. Thornton.

For the past decade, many pundits in both China and the West have been predicting that the PRC is on its way to surpassing the US in terms of economic, military, and political power. They start from China's decades of rapid economic development and robust military modernisation, and extrapolate this growth pattern out into the future. The problem with this forecasting method is that it is very linear and determinist, and has a hard time anticipating radical change: e.g., the comprehensive impact of 'black swan' events like the global pandemic. Also, recall that in the 1980s, similar linear methods were used to predict that Japan soon would be Number One.

Another futurology method works to imagine alternative futures through the practice of "estrangement," which allows us to appreciate radical change, and then find a way to either get to this radical future, or to avoid it. China's top science fiction writer Liu Cixin feels that sci-fi is a great source for thinking about the future because it requires you to creatively imagine and practically create new worlds economically, politically, and culturally.[1] And it's not just novelists who do sci-fi futurology. Many military strategists in the West also look to science fiction to get beyond the hard power of bombs and bullets, in order to appreciate the soft power of alternative world orders. In other words, in order to understand the strategic direction of China's global politics we need to probe the science fiction of China's galactic politics. As Han Song, another top Chinese sci-fi writer, explains: "China's reality is more science fictional than science fiction."[2]

Science fiction and strategy

Liu's novels are wildly popular among Chinese readers, including—we are told—top leaders in Beijing.[3] Since 2015, Liu's science fiction has gone global to be popular in the West as well. *The Three Body Problem* won the world's t-op sci-fi prize—the Hugo Award—and was on the summer reading list of Barak Obama and Mark Zuckerberg. Netflix hosts the film version of *The Wandering Earth*, and is making a television series of the *Three Body Problem*. The rise of Chinese sci-fi to global domination happened just as the PRC was emerging as a superpower with its own structures and norms for global governance, as seen in the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank.

To grasp the relation of Chinese sci-fi and China's global strategy, it's helpful to see both in terms of three dynamics. Certainly, it's popular to understand Chinese politics in terms of binary frameworks: China vs. US; conservatives vs. reformers; optimists vs. pessimists; and socialism vs. capitalism. To get beyond this binary paradigm, we can explore three dynamics: pessoptimism, neo-socialism, and *tianxia* (All-under-Heaven).

Pessoptimism

Pessoptimism is a concept that enables us to appreciate how people can be both pessimistic and optimistic at the same time.[4] It's not just in China: the idea comes from a novel, *The Secret Life of Saeed the Ill-Fated Pessoptimist* by Emile Habiby (1974), about the complex and contradictory experience of an Arab-Israeli citizen. When you look closely, it's clear that pessoptimism is very common in China, where people can be both optimistic about their country's achievements and pessimistic about its future. At the macro-level, Xi Jinping's China Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is intertwined with what Xi and others see as China's nightmare of the century of national humiliation (1839-1949), when China was attacked and bullied by the West and Japan. At the micro-level, people want change, but at the same time are afraid of change. This mixture of positive and negative feelings is also very common in Chinese sci-fi stories where characters have "heightened aspirations for change as well as deep anxieties about China's future."[5]

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We can see such pessoptimism in "The Reincarnated Giant" by Wang Jinkang, another famous sci-fi author.[6] Here, a Japanese CEO wants to cheat death—and his inheritance taxes—by finding a way to live forever. At age 72, he has a surgeon graft his brain into the body of an anencephalic human foetus (i.e., one that has no brain). The idea is that the foetus's body will reset the brain's internal clock to zero, so that the CEO can live another lifetime, at least. The operation is a success, and after a month the CEO wakes up and is able to think, talk, and run his company.

In fact, the foetus doesn't just reset the CEO's internal body clock. It also jams his genes' self-regulating commands. The upshot is that his body keeps growing beyond the normal size for a human being. The CEO grows so large that they have to relocate him to live in the ocean, because only salt water can support his huge

body's weight. But eventually the CEO grows too large, dying in the ocean because his organs are crushed by his own body mass.

This parable is pretty straightforward: it speaks to the unlimited desires of China's nouveau riches and is a commentary on China's economic model that values rapid GDP growth over negative social and environmental impacts. Indeed, it shows the dark side of the China model: the CEO has to live in a soup of his own piss and shit, like the air and water pollution which many experience in China. But the story is pessoptimist because it's told from the point of view of the doctor, who is caught in the multiple contradictions of the shady ethics of the procedure, the promise of vast wealth, and the risk that his wealth and professional status will be taken away at the last minute—which is what happens when the CEO suddenly dies.

> "Marxism, Chinese communism, and Liu's sci-fi all worship science and technology."

This story is interesting because it's not just a rational explanation; it also provokes the readers' own ambitions and anxieties. Other authors more directly write about the need to balance rational thinking and emotional thinking, and how it's necessary to have a high EQ (emotional intelligence) to go with a high IQ. Chen Qiufan's "Balin" describes an exotic creature whose special trick is the ability to exactly mirror and mimic the movements of any person. Here, empathy is the creature's key skill, and the story tells us that your level of civilization is measured by your empathic ability to "think from the values and perspectives of others."[7] Importantly, this heightened sense of empathy is even valued by military strategists.[8]

The key takeaway from pessoptimism, sci-fi, and China's global strategy is that we need to look at contradictions as dynamics, where you can be pessimistic and optimistic, happy and sad, greedy and generous, and rational and emotional–all at the same time, or in quick succession. And don't be surprised when one explanation doesn't cover everything, because

pessoptimists have to appreciate many perspectives simultaneously, and empathetically.

Neo-Socialism

After 1989, many people said that China was switching from socialism to nationalism, or at least to a post-socialist system. But rather than post-socialist, China is 'neo-socialist'. Dutch Sinologist Frank Pieke created the concept of neo-socialism to appreciate how the PRC is syncretically mixing Chinese tradition, capitalist modernity, and socialist modernity.[9] Neo-socialism is like pessoptimism because it brings together contradictory things to work together in a loose assemblage.

Here we shouldn't see the future ideologically in terms of China becoming either a more socialist country, or experiencing a grand shift to liberal democracy. Neo-socialism isn't an ideology in the normal sense. Rather, it's an experience, a way of life, a broad way of thinking that informs a particular way of framing questions and answers, and thus a particular way of framing problems and solutions as well.

Liu Cixin's science fiction novels can tell us about China's global strategy because they embody neo-socialist understandings of the relation between humanity and technology, and of the role of humanity in the world. Marxism, Chinese communism, and Liu's sci-fi all worship science and technology. Marxism is also called 'scientific socialism', and prides itself on its scientific method for understanding economics and society. Chinese communism has deified science even more: *kexuexing* doesn't just mean 'scientific', but also rational, truthful, and morally good. Liu describes his writing as "hard science fiction" because he is careful to follow the scientific method in building his worlds with a high degree of faithfulness to the known physical laws of the universe.

In *The Three Body Problem*, Liu's alien characters from across the galaxy are presented as scientific because they don't have "time for or interest in art and literature; at the same time, they do not understand lies or tricks".[10] In *The Wandering Earth*, the narrator describes how his "schooling concentrated on science and engineering"; art and philosophy aren't studied because they are seen as "distractions".[11]

Both novels are good examples of both technophilia and futurology, whereby science is employed to predict answers not just to scientific problems, but also to political questions. In *The Wandering Earth*, the Sun is expanding to become a Red Giant, which threatens to vaporise the Earth. The solution is to turn the Earth into a giant space ship, on which all humans can travel across the galaxy to a safe solar system. There's little or no political discussion of this solution—or all political discussion is framed as misinformation and terrorism. There is no politics because the Earth's gigantic problem requires a gigantic

technological solution. The United World Government evacuates all humans to underground cities, and uses gigantic Earth Engines to travel across the galaxy.

Earth Engines aren't powered by renewable energy, but are fuelled by massive amounts of rock that is mined from the Earth's crust. This is a strange approach to the environment: the solution doesn't save the Earth, but eats up the Earth in order to escape the Sun. This seems to reflect Liu's own view; in a speech he actually criticises the Chinese government for spending too much money on environmental protection and argues that the PRC should spend more on space exploration.[12]

This strange neo-socialist approach scientifically saves humanity while sacrificing the environment. It also saves humanity by sacrificing humanity: the novel has a detailed discussion of human overpopulation, and the United World Government periodically culls old and weak people.[13] Liu himself has such misanthropic views: in an essay, he describes humanity as "irrelevant bacteria".[14]

Importantly, Liu doesn't see *The Wandering Earth* as a dystopian novel. For him, it's utopian, or at least realistic, because society follows science, even when science destroys the Earth and decimates humanity. Liu doesn't fear technology, unlike the authors of many dystopian sci-fi stories, because he dutifully sees technology as the answer to human questions. Another author, Hao Jingfang, presents a more optimistic engagement of humanity and technology. In her story, one of the myriad jobs of the Global AI platform is to be the nanny for a three-and-a-half-year-old boy. After some initial awkwardness, they have fun working together, with the boy learning how to be a scientist and the Global AI platform learning how to be a friend.[15]

The take-away from neo-socialism, sci-fi, and China's global strategy is to think about the relation between science and humanity, and between energy and the environment; whether we should frame the big questions as technical problems or as political issues. Liu presents a popular view that science will save the human species, even as it destroys the Earth and destroys humanity.

Tianxia

The third dynamic is tianxia, All-under-Heaven, which goes beyond the geopolitics of China vs. the US. Again, rather than see a post-1989 ideological transition from socialism to nationalism, it's helpful to think bigger; to appreciate China's transition to what could be called "civilizationalism," where China is a civilization-state that goes beyond the realm of the PRC.

This is where *tianxia* comes in. Over the past few years *tianxia* has become a popular way of talking about China's alternative world order, which we are told is better than the current liberal world order because it offers "peace,

general security, and civilizational vigor."[16] *Tianxia* is also an example of neo-socialism because it's not just an ancient Chinese idea. Philosopher Zhao Tingyang has updated it to solve the world's problems in the 21st century. Rather than look to individuals or nation-states as the focus of politics, *tianxia* makes us think about the problems of the world from the perspective of the whole world.

Here *tianxia* is like sci-fi because it employs a planetary view of things: Liu's *The Wandering Earth* is literally about the problems our planet faces, and how they have to be solved on a planetary scale. Instead of individuals or countries evacuating the Earth in thousands of space ships, Liu has the whole Earth become a gigantic space ship for everyone. This sounds much like Xi Jinping's 'Global Security Initiative' concept: "We need to work together to maintain peace and stability in the world … [because] countries around the world are like passengers aboard the same ship who share the same destiny."[17]

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Typically, globalist and planetary solutions promote cosmopolitanism, and most American sci-fi is deliberately cosmopolitan, where humanity is represented by a diverse group of ethnicities, nationalities, and species. A great example is *Star Trek*'s jamming of Cold War-thinking by putting a Russian officer, Pavel Chekov, on the bridge of the Enterprise. In *The Wandering Earth*, the Chinese protagonist meets his Japanese wife in New York, and they have a son. Hao Jingfang's story about the boy making friends with the Global AI platform is cosmopolitan because the kid is mixed-race: half Scandinavian, a quarter Vietnamese, and a quarter Chinese—a cute and innocent kid with dark eyes, curly hair, and freckles. In "The Rain Forest", all of Chi Hui's characters are non-binary trans-species hybrids: a human cyborg, a talking toad, and sentient trees that can walk.[18]

But most Chinese sci-fi focuses on humanity as ethnically Chinese, and Chinese sci-fi as an instrument of the PRC's soft power. In *The Wandering Earth* and the *Three Body Problem*, all of Liu's protagonists are ethnic Chinese. Other peoples have little or no agency: they passively help China, are ignorant terrorists, or they are absent altogether. In the novella version of *The Wandering Earth*, the Japanese mother rebels against science, and then is sacrificed in the name of population control, while the Chinese-Japanese son is just Chinese. In the movie version, there is a mixed-race Chinese-Australian man who is made to look and sound funny, and he has to defend himself as a 'real Chinese' based on his paternal bloodline.[19]

This is like *tianxia*, which is seen as China's alternative version of globalisation: global norms and global structures come from Chinese culture, typically juxtaposed against a 'failed' American culture. In *tianxia,* even foreign ideologies like Marxism are transformed by Chinese culture into 'Sinified Marxism', and 'Socialism with Chinese characteristics for the new era'.

The *Three Body Problem* novels also have a very stiff notion of culture and identity that pits Chinese elites against the otherworldly Trisolarans; the latter are not presented as a different species, but as a different 'civilization' in a clash with that of Earth. Liu explains this by creating the concept of 'cosmic sociology': "First, Survival is the primary need of civilization. Second, Civilization continuously grows and expands, but the total matter in the universe remains constant."[20] In this zero-sum system, the Earth is fated to be in constant existential struggle, where the choice is to conquer or be conquered. This sci-fi is interesting beyond *tianxia*'s framing of global politics as China vs. the US. We also need to look at Liu's broader conceptual scheme that sees identities as essential and pure, and always in a zero-sum security dilemma with other 'civilizations'. Indeed, it reflects China's current hierarchy of civilizations (and barbarians) that targets minority groups in the PRC: Liu is infamous for supporting Beijing's brutal policies against Muslims in Xinjiang.[21]

Tianxia's essentialised view of civilizations in existential struggle also informs Liu's view of knowledge. Is knowledge open or closed? Is it a system that is open to all, where people from different countries work together to exchange views to advance Science—with a capital 'S'—in a cosmopolitan community for the good of humanity? Or is knowledge a scarce resource that must be controlled in a closed system that is defined by national interests and national security?

In *The Three Body Problem*, this an issue for humanity because Trisolarans are using their sophisticated technology to restrict scientific advancement on Earth. Science here is figured as a national resource within a security dilemma, with the Trisolarans rationally enforcing a

closed and controlled system on Earth. Interestingly, Liu solves the problem of this externally-imposed closed knowledge system not by liberating Earth scientists to work collaboratively in a vibrant open system. Rather, he solves the problem by building the Earth's own closed system for science.

Three Body Problem does similar things with the Earth's security strategy by concentrating power in the hands of a single individual, 'the Wallfacer', who has unlimited resources to guard the Earth. This is a recurring theme for Liu, from his first story in 1989 to the last volume of *The Three Body Problem:* knowledge has to be controlled, usually by a single person.

It's not just that Liu's characters don't like democracy and human rights. They actually don't like politics at all, because Liu sees politics as corrupting "the beauty of science".[22] He worries that: "If you were to loosen up the country a bit, the consequences would be terrifying."[23] Another author, Gu Shi, even sees choice not as a human right, but as the main problem facing ordinary humans; in her story, people are paralysed because they have too many choices.[24]

The takeaways from *tianxia*, sci-fi, and China's global strategy are to think in terms of dynamic dilemmas. First, how should we address our problems: as individuals, as nation-states, as civilizations, or through a planetary view? Second, should we take a cosmopolitan or a civilizational view of community? Third, are science and knowledge closed or open systems? And last, can human communities 'live and let live' in peaceful coexistence, or are we doomed to the security dilemma of zero-sum struggle, where, as the Chinese idiom tells us: "You die, I live."

Conclusion

When we move from the future back to the present, it's not a stretch to read Liu's novels as a parable of U.S.-China relations: as the trade war becomes a tech war, China sees itself as the underdog in an existential scientific and civilizational struggle with the U.S.

This, of course, is neither a new situation nor a new story: as we saw above, in the 'century of national humiliation' narrative China is figured as weak and bullied for its entire modern history. The main point is to appreciate how Liu frames this experience as the key 'problem', and then deterministically limits its 'solution' to particular strategies. Indeed, even as Beijing pursued a robust policy of economic reform and opening to the world from the 1980s to the 2010s, Liu's novels from the same period took the opposite approach to promote zero-sum relations politically, civilizationally, and in terms of knowledge systems. With Xi Jinping, China's global strategy seems to be catching up with Liu's vision of the future: it looks to science to solve political problems, and figures engagement with the Other in zero-sum terms as an existential struggle

for survival. Indeed, while the Chinese leadership from 2010s was dominated by social scientists and lawyers, since the 20th Party Congress in 2022 the PRC is led by natural scientists.

Liu's work is important because he is wildly popular in China and around the world, and influences the PRC's global strategy by imaging it in terms of a specific set of problems and solutions. But Liu's deterministic vision is just one possible future for China and the world. When science fiction employs 'estrangement' to imagine alternative futures separate from our present, the task is not just to find a way to get to this radical future but also to imagine ways to avoid it. If we think that Liu's scenarios are dystopic rather than utopic, then we can work to find ways to avoid them.

Either way, Chinese sci-fi pushes us beyond the geopolitical binaries of the early 21st century to think creatively about key issues that are defining the future: the relation of humans and technology, the relation of science and politics, and the relations between political communities. Are we doomed to existential struggle, or can we engage with difference in creative and productive ways?

In this way, the futuristic Galactic Politics of China can tell us much about the Global Politics of China in the 21st century. As Liu concludes: "China is a futuristic country. I realised that the world around me became more and more like science fiction, and this process is speeding up."[25]

Endnotes

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Xi Jinping is leading China in a new direction, but how are we to understand his global strategy? For most countries, to understand domestic and international politics we would analyse authoritative sources—leaders' speeches, official documents and statistics, elite interviews and essays, and public opinion surveys. In the 2000s these methods worked well to probe Chinese politics. But since civil society and independent thought have been severely restricted under Xi, it's necessary to go beyond such "factual" sources. To understand China's global strategy, it's best to read fiction, especially Chinese science fiction. This essay critically analyses Liu Cixin's novels, *The Wandering Earth* and the *Three Body Problem* trilogy, to probe how Chinese sci-fi pushes us to think creatively about key topics: the relation of humans and technology, the relation of science and politics, and the relations between political communities, i.e. are we doomed to existential struggle, or can we engage with difference in creative and productive ways?

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