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The Political Imagination in Liu Cixin's Critical Utopia: *China 2185*

This article focuses on contemporary Chinese science fiction, specifically the political elements in Liu Cixin's (b.1963) critical utopian novel *China 2185* [*Zhongguo 2185*], written in 1989 against the social and political background of China in the 1980s. Science fiction often has a political subtext or allegorical dimension. It gives its readers some fresh and otherwise unobtainable insights into contemporary society and possible future societies. In many repressive societies across the world, science fiction has often been used for sociopolitical commentary, such as in the former Soviet Union and in today's authoritarian China. Chinese science fiction written after the late 1980s has been a uniquely privileged symbolic response to the conditions of existence in contemporary China. While pointing toward the future, these sf narratives also provide a fresh look at the present. The power of subversive imagining moves readers beyond the present toward a more fulfilling future. Such narratives are more complex mechanisms than earlier Chinese sf works, which were written either in support of radical social change and nationwide modernization during the late Qing and Republican Era (1911-1949), or else to popularize science and technology in stories brimming with optimism about Communist revolution during the Mao era (1949-1976).¹ Many more recent Chinese sf narratives can be read as "critical utopias," which will be the focus of this article.

The critical utopia in China. The literary critic Mingwei Song has noted the reappearance of utopian sf narratives in China during the last two decades. He identifies three major utopian motifs in the works of China's "Big Three" sf writers, Han Song (b.1969), Wang Jinkang (b.1948), and Liu Cixin: the rise of China, the country's development in a variety of directions, and scientific and technological advances ("Variations" 86-96). Earlier utopian motifs are satirized, parodied, and even transformed in recent Chinese narratives. Song goes on to observe that

Deeply entangled with the politics of a changing China, science fiction today both strengthens and complicates the utopian vision of a new and powerful China: it mingles nationalism with utopianism/dystopianism, mixes sharp social criticism with an acute awareness of China's potential for further reform, and wraps political consciousness in scientific discourses about the powers of technology and the technologies of power. ("Variations" 87)

Tom Moylan's observation that "older utopian elements coexist and conflict with the contemporary elements [in critical utopias]" (43) suggests how these new Chinese utopian narratives can also be read as "critical utopias."

Moylan coined this term to refer to the subgenre of new utopian works written by American writers in the 1960s and 1970s, including Joanna Russ's

The Female Man (1968/1974), Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), and Samuel R. Delany's *Triton* (1976). In Moylan's words,

The authors of the critical utopias assumed the risky task of reviving the emancipatory utopian imagination while simultaneously destroying the traditional utopia and yet preserving it in a transformed and liberated form that was critical both of utopian writing itself and of the prevailing social formation. (42)

These novels attempt to strike a balance between the authors' material conditions and their utopian imagination. Specifically, these works are aware of "the limitations of the utopian tradition so that the texts reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream"; they "dwell on the conflict between the originary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated"; they "focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within utopian society itself and thus render more recognizable and dynamic alternatives" (10-11).

If we apply Moylan's theoretical framework of the critical utopia to the Chinese sf scene, we will find both parallels and differences between the American and Chinese versions. The parallel lies mainly in the narrative technique of twisting, parodying, calquing, or analogizing traditional utopian elements for the sake of critiquing contemporary sociopolitical issues. The major differences are the causes of emergence, and the particular subject matter and utopian motifs chosen by Chinese writers. The differences are caused by the two countries' social and political backgrounds. Moylan argues that the American novels "emerged from the ferment of opposition and creation in the United States" (41). They were a response to "a variety of autonomous oppositional movements that reject the domination of the emerging system of transnational corporations and post-industrial production and ideological structures" (11). When we look at Chinese science fiction, we find that some critical utopian narratives begin to appear after 1980 or so, including Liu Cixin's *China 2185* and his short story "The Western Ocean" [*Xiyang*, 1998], Wang Jinkang's *Life of Ants* [*Yisheng*, 2007], and Han Song's *Mars over America: Random Sketches on a Journey to the West in 2066* [*Houxing zhaoyao meiguo: 2066 nian zhi xixing manji*, 2012].

The emergence of utopian impulses in China echoes what happened in the 1960s and 1970s in the West. As Fredric Jameson suggests, these various utopian visions reveal "the development of a whole range of properly spatial Utopias in which the transformation of social relations and political institutions is projected onto the vision of place and landscape, including the human body" (*Postmodernism* 160). Specifically, Song attributes the emergence of these new utopian works to the Chinese government's commitment to a peaceful rise, to Chinese intellectuals' long-term obsession with development since the theory of Darwinian evolution was introduced to China at the end of the nineteenth century, and to the Communist Party's goal of achieving advanced scientific and technological modernization ("Variations" 86-96). In addition to these

factors, I argue that these new utopian sf narratives also emerged from Chinese writers' political and ideological skepticism about the PRC's sociopolitical system. The Chinese sf critic Wu Yan also claims that Chinese science fiction's "most significant characteristic is the frequent exploration of themes of liberation and release from old cultural, political, and institutional systems" (4). The writer Han Song similarly argues that present-day Chinese sf authors "put the country in hypothetically extreme situations to see how people might respond to radical changes. Sometimes they can put China to the test in a way that no mainstream writer can" (17). The critical utopia in *China 2185* is part of the political practice and vision shared by Liu's contemporary Chinese intellectuals in the late 1980s that reject the domination of one party and authoritarian rule, and call for a democratic system in China. The major conflict in *China 2185* can be viewed from "the tragic perspective" analyzed by Raymond Williams in his "Afterword" to *Modern Tragedy* (207-19). In the narrative, the uprising of the "electronic pulse beings" symbolizes the final resistance of a dying social order or class. The tension between the younger generation and the ossified gerontocracy reveals the tensions between the "extending and complex revolution and the extended and very bitter resistance to it" (Williams 207). As I will discuss in detail later in this article, the final elimination of the virtual Huaxia Republic symbolizes the end of Mao's ideology and his socialist utopia.

Liu Cixin's science fiction. For a number of years, Liu Cixin has worked as a senior computer engineer in Shanxi province's Niangziguan Electric Power Plant. Liu began his creative writing career in the late 1980s, though his works were not published until the late 1990s. He published his first sf short story "Whale Ballad" [*Jing ge*] in 1999. During that same year, he won first place in the Milky Way Award competition—China's most prestigious sf award—with the story "Travel with Her Eyes" [*Daishang tade yanjing*, 1999], although Liu says that "these two works were nothing more than a forced compromise with the dictates of the market" ("Beyond" 23). Since then he has become China's most prolific and popular sf writer, with numerous short stories, novellas, and full-length novels.

In his essay "Beyond Narcissism: What Science Fiction Can Offer Literature," Liu reviews what he considers to be the three different stages of his creative writing, though I believe this self-categorization does not accurately reflect the actual trajectory of his career, because it ignores the overlap of thematic concerns at different periods of his writing and overlooks some of his most important works. According to Liu, the earliest stage was that of pure science fiction, focusing on the strange beauty and power of science. Two representative works are his short stories "The Microcosmic" [*Weiguan jintou*, 1999] and "Condensation" [*Tansuo*, 1999]. During the second stage, Liu's writing shifted from pure hard sf to the depiction of "humanity's relationship with the natural world" (26). This period lasted for quite a while, and includes most of the works he has published to date. The representative works from these years include the novella *The Wandering Earth* [*Liulang*

Diqiu, 2000], the short story “The Village Schoolteacher” [*Xiangcun jiaoshi*, 2001], the novel *Ball Lightning* [*Qiuzhuang shandian*, 2005], and the first part of the THREE BODY trilogy, *The Three-Body Problem* [*San ti*, 2006]. Liu refers to the third stage as “social experimentation,” during which he has focused on “depicting the effects of extreme situations on human behavior and social systems” (29). The major works here are the last two novels of the THREE BODY trilogy—*Dark Forest* [*Hei’an senlin*, 2007] and *Dead End* [*Sishen yongsheng*, 2010].

The development of these stages reveals Liu’s constant exploration of what the genre of science fiction can offer to literature: from the pure and strange beauty of science to the interaction between humanity and the natural world, and finally to the effects of cosmic events on human behavior and social systems. What Liu does not mention in that categorization, however, is a group of his works set in the future but haunted by the swirl of recent events in Chinese politics and society. These works include the full-length novel *China 2185*, the short story “The Western Ocean,” and the novella “*Mirror*” [*Jingzi*, 2004]. Though these works were written during the first two stages of his career, they bear a key characteristic of the later works: a focus on the impact of science and technology on human behavior and social systems. It is worth noting that *China 2185* and “The Western Ocean” have never been published in magazines or in book form, but only circulated in electronic form on the Internet. Never has ever been listed among Liu’s representative works. They have received only limited critical attention in Chinese-language articles and essays written by Liu Cixin himself or by critics such as Mingwei Song (see his “Tanxingzhe and mianbizhe: Liu Cixin’s Science Fiction”). So far, no critical discussions of these two pieces have been published in English. At least five articles in *SFS*’s special issue on Chinese sf (40.1 [Mar. 2013]) include some discussion of Liu Cixin’s science fiction, but none mentions *China 2185* or “The Western Ocean.” Liu Cixin himself seldom brings up either of these two works in his essays and lectures.

There are two major reasons for this. First, the two works contain very politically sensitive and/or even forbidden topics such as gerontocracy and universal suffrage in *China 2185* and an alternate Chinese history in “The Western Ocean.” Even though “sf writing is now supported by the Chinese government, as it is considered to be a genre that can inspire the whole nation’s ability to think imaginatively and popularizes science nationwide” (Han 17), “the government can step in if it seems that the genre has gone too far conceptually” (Han 21). As an icon of contemporary Chinese sf, Liu Cixin has a deep concern for the development of science fiction, and he has promoted the genre through his critical essays, through introducing foreign sf writers and their works, through participating as one of the judges for the Milky Way Award and Xingyun Award (Chinese parallels to the Hugos and the Nebulas), and through various fan club meetings. I assume that Liu himself might want to maintain a low profile with respect to these two works because he does not want the Chinese government to ban the publication of his other works merely on account of these two relatively daring fictions. This does not

mean that Liu Cixin is apolitical, however. He has skillfully inserted sociopolitical critique into many of his seemingly science-centered narratives.

The second reason for the low profile of *China 2185* and “The Western Ocean” has to do with Liu’s predilection for hard science fiction. As a big fan of Jules Verne and Arthur C. Clarke, Liu regards himself as a “hard sf” writer. Hard sf is typically defined as “fiction grounded in the ‘hard’ sciences of physics, astronomy, chemistry, and biology,” as well as computer technology in recent decades.² Most of his works place the focus on scientific speculation and technological thinking, though Liu has sought to maintain a careful balance between scientific speculation and general literary concerns such as characterization, stylistics, and thematic depth. Many of his narratives draw specifically upon Stephen Hawking’s theories as well as other ideas in astrophysics such as wormholes, time travel, the curvature of the universe, the expanding universe, and black holes. He even pays homage to Hawking and Einstein by making them fictional characters in his short stories “Hearing the Way in the Morning” [*Zhao wen dao*, 2002] and “Messenger” [*Xinshi*, 1999]. Liu’s fiction has frequently featured praise for humanity’s ongoing drive to explore the still largely unknown universe; other interests include space opera, apocalyptic motifs, and computer-based species. Science and technology have always been at the core of Liu Cixin’s fiction, even during the second and third stages of his writing career, when he shifted from pure science to the interactions between humanity and science. In contrast, *China 2185* and “The Western Ocean” belong to sociological sf and expound a critical utopian vision. It thus not surprising that Liu, his readers, and his critics have not ranked them among his representative works.

China 2185. In spite of the relative obscurity of *China 2185*, it is one of Liu’s most important pieces of fiction from the early stage of his career. The importance of this novel has begun to attract the attention of literary critics. Mingwei Song argues that *China 2185* is one of the works that inaugurated the Chinese “New Wave” because the author “recreates the 1980s Chinese intellectual’s ideals and frustrations in an alternative history, and combines his reflection of China’s reality with his imagined world of estrangement” (“Tanxingzhe” 19). Liu Cixin claims that he completed this novel in February 1989, two months before college students took to the streets in Beijing to protest the Communist officials’ corruption and to call for political democratization in China—and four months prior to the June 4th military crackdown on the unarmed demonstrators. We probably should be cautious about the date of the novel’s completion, however, for we have no other evidence that the text was completed at that time. The novel remained unknown until Liu Cixin became famous in the early twenty-first century and has only been circulated on the Internet since that time.³ My discussion of *China 2185* takes 1989 as the date of the novel’s completion. In it, Liu shares with most Chinese intellectuals and university students a vision of China’s political democratization in the near future. He also sees various hidden problems in China: the aging of the population, the potential conflicts between

younger and older generations, and the continuing problem of gerontocracy in Chinese governance. He also predicts how digital information resources will affect Chinese society and China's political system in the Internet era.

The novel starts with a young computer engineer named M102 who sneaks into the Mao Memorial Hall to take a holograph of Mao's brain.⁴ M102 has invented a holographic simulation software. This software can simulate all the information stored in the holograph and analyze it. M102 is very curious about what would happen if he were to put this software to work on a deceased but undecayed human brain. So as an experiment, he decides to scan Mao's brain along with the brains of five other dead men. The consequences of this experiment soon escape M102's control, however. After he inputs the holographic information of these six dead brains, they come back to life in the computer. At first people are very excited to hear this news because it means that human beings can achieve immortality with the help of holographic simulation software. A human brain can thus live forever in a computer after the physical body attached to it has perished. The situation soon becomes disastrous. One of the revived brains starts to copy itself and produces millions of "electronic pulse beings" [*maichong ren*] across the Internet. These electronic pulse beings invade the National Computer Network and establish their own Internet-based regime called the Huaxia Republic.

Liu here echoes Lu Xun's story "Medicine" (1919) in its use of "Huaxia" (another term for China) in *China 2185* to symbolize the cultures and forces of conservatism and stagnation ("Medicine" 49-58). In "Medicine," Lu Xun, one of the most important figures of early twentieth-century Chinese literature, gives his two young protagonists the surnames of Hua and Xia. The revolutionary youth Xia dies as a martyr in order to overthrow the imperial Qing and establish a modern China for the Chinese masses, including the Hua family. After Xia is executed, however, his blood is purchased as a tonic that will supposedly cure Hua's tuberculosis. The cure does not work and Hua also dies. Lu Xun has deftly interwoven the fates of young Hua and Xia to advance the twin motifs of a sick state and a sick body. In Liu's story, the mission of Huaxia is to revive national tradition and culture. The Huaxia Republic negotiates with the government for legal status as a virtual state. Otherwise, they will destroy large civil engineering projects in the country, such as dams on the Yangtze River and chemical and power plants. The electronic pulse beings have gained control of all these facilities through the Internet. Eventually, with the help of various children, the chief executive of the country shuts down the national power system and eliminates the virtual Huaxia Republic. The country is thereby saved from the revived old men.

Keeping in mind Darko Suvin's definition of science fiction as a literature of cognitive estrangement, in Liu Cixin's novel estrangement is created through the politically suggestive narrative of the revival of the older generation and the crisis they cause for the Chinese government and country in 2185. The oblique political and social commentary leads readers to ponder intensifying political and social problems in contemporary China, such as an aging demographic and the ossified gerontocracy. The provocative depiction

of a democratic Chinese government in 2185 also encourages consideration of China's possible political reform in the era of digital information resources.

China 2185 as critical utopia. Drawing upon Moylan's theoretical framework of the critical utopia, I will examine *China 2185* on three levels: "the iconic level," the way an alternative society is presented; "the discrete level," the way the protagonist is presented; and "the level of generic form," the way the text "becomes self-aware and self-critical" and is "connected back with the historical process" (43-44). Through these three layers of analysis, we move from the individual text through the broader social dimension of ideology, and on to the horizon of history itself. I hope to show how the ironic and parodic counterpoint in Liu's novel provides an exemplary demonstration of how science fiction can offer spirited contemporary political commentary. I also hope to show how Liu's critical utopian novel presents a challenge to the common misappraisal that he "appears to be the least influenced by Chinese politics" in comparison with contemporary writers such as Han Song and Wang Jinkang (Song 95). In fact, Liu Cixin often addresses many of the same issues raised by sociologists, historians, and political scientists, and his critical utopian narrative not only contains the three major utopian motifs observed by Song but also fiercely parodies contemporary China's deep-rooted political problems.

First, I will read the novel at the iconic level—how an alternative society is presented. In the novel, the utopian society is a democratic China in 2185, when universal suffrage has at last become the basis for social equality. A young woman has been elected as the chief executive (president) of the country. This is a revisiting of the utopian motif of "the rise of China," which first appeared in Liang Qichao's *The Future of New China* [*Xin zhongguo weilai ji*, 1902] and was subsequently reintroduced by Han Song (Song 87-91). This utopian society is drastically different from the authoritarian sociopolitical order that Liu has lived under all his life. Both the democratic model of government and the Internet era depart from the actual empirical order; full-blown democracy and the popularization of Internet networks were beyond the author's real-life experience in China in the late 1980s when the novel was written. This discrepancy between the fictional or imaginative world and the everyday empirical world creates a sense of estrangement that attracts readers and makes the empirical world seem unfamiliar. It invites readers to view all normal happenings in the empirical world from a skeptical perspective. In this way, readers obtain a critical cognition of the empirical world, the political and social problems in contemporary China, and the prospects for China to evolve into a democratic country during the digital and Internet era. In contrast, however, to traditional utopian works such as Liang Qichao's *The Future of New China*—that always present a perfect political or social system—Liu's utopian society is presented in a more critical light. In spite of its democratic system, advanced technology, and affluent material life, this alternative society still has its share of faults, inconsistencies, crises, and even cover-ups. Specifically, it is saddled with a growing and aging population, a generation

gap, an identity crisis, and a conflict between human beings and posthumans. These imperfections in a would-be utopian society are revealed at the discrete level through the development of the plot and characterization.

Liu Cixin describes his two techniques of characterization as “species portrayal” and “world portrayal” (“Beyond” 27-28). “Species portrayal” “superimposes the image of an entire species over that of an individual character.... [T]hese species can be aliens or distinct human communities in outer space. These species can even be robotic” (“Beyond” 27). “World portrayal” presents the image of “an environment or an entire world” (“Beyond” 28). Such “worlds” can be stars and galaxies, parallel universes, and even virtual worlds existing only in a computer’s memory. These self-described techniques cannot speak for other sf works, but they shed light on the author’s approach to characterization in *China 2185*.

Characterization in *China 2185* draws upon both “species portrayal” of the electronic pulse beings and “world portrayal” of virtual communities. The novel’s depiction of virtual community and the electronic pulse beings encompasses more universal themes of science fiction, especially within the subcategory of cyberpunk. When Liu wrote *China 2185* in the late 1980s, Western cyberpunk fiction had not yet been introduced to China nor translated into Chinese. His novel anticipates many tropes of cyberpunk, however, such as technologies related to computer communities, virtual reality, and human/machine interfaces. In addition to its richly nuanced political commentary, the novel broaches conventional cyberpunk tropes such as the idea of the posthuman, the rejection of the body, and the relationship between embodiment and subjectivity in a posthuman era.

Cyberpunk is “best known for its rejection of embodiment and embrace of an existence in cyberspace” (Vint 103). In the novel, the virtual communities and the advent of the Huaxia Republic reinstall human agency at the site of terminals, the very site where technology intervenes and dismantles the human subject’s autonomy and unity. When the electronic pulse beings in the Huaxia Republic negotiate with and threaten the chief executive of the human society, technology and humanity begin to share the narrative foreground. In the novel, technology creates a new version of the human, or of the posthuman—the electronic pulse beings. The appeal of cyberspace for the electronic pulse beings is linked directly to the repression of the material body when the old people were alive in the real world. The Huaxia Republic’s ambition to rule both the virtual community and the human realm addresses a more profound and universal concern in science fiction, the relationship between embodiment and subjectivity. The development of biological and computer technologies has allowed the subjectivity of the electronic pulse beings to exist without a rootedness in the human body. The physical embodiment of an electronic pulse being is simply a computer terminal. Such a being has transcended the human body and its limitations, though it still has a similar way of thinking and of holding an ideology. The electronic pulse being’s virtual reality is in cyberspace. The conflict between electronic pulse beings and human beings is the conflict between virtual reality and human reality. At a more abstract level,

it is the conflict between subjectivity and the human body. The subjectivity of the electronic pulse beings is interested in repressing the human body and tries to gain control of the human world by threatening to destroy large engineering projects. Human beings undermine this destructive scheme, however, by temporarily turning off the electricity grid and thereby eliminating the electronic pulse beings from cyberspace. Liu's treatment of the crisis caused by the electronic pulse beings invites the reader to ponder the interaction between human and posthuman subjectivities.

Virtuality. Let us examine the novel's portrayal of the virtual communities in detail. In an essay entitled "City: from Reality to Virtual," Liu writes about his vision of future virtual cities on the Internet. He envisions these virtual cities as being independent of any political entity in the real world. They can form a federation, but he hopes there will never be wars between these virtual cities. The two virtual communities presented in *China 2185*, however, are the opposite of what Liu describes in the above-mentioned essay. Both communities interact with the political entities in the real world. One virtual community effectively helps human society strengthen and implement its democratic system. The development of technology and the popularity of the Internet have made the ultimate democratic model more possible in the China of tomorrow. The sharing of digital information resources makes it more difficult than ever for any government to hide the truth from its people. The People's Congress and universal suffrage have all been realized through virtual communities on the Internet. At the end of the novel, the female leader raises the idea of establishing an Internet-based virtual state, one that is parallel to the real world. In this virtual Internet state, people with similar interests and ideologies can build their own community and live together. Though the novel was written in the late 1980s when personal computers and the Internet had not yet entered the lives of ordinary Chinese people, Liu predicted that computers and the Internet would bring about a revolution in ways of life, family structures, and the country's political system.

Aside from this benevolent or ideal virtual community, the novel also features a malevolent virtual community—the Huaxia Republic. The crisis that the virtual Huaxia Republic brings to the country also reveals Liu Cixin's concern about the relations between human beings and technology. With the development of science and technology, computers and artificial intelligence might someday control and rule the human world, just as those electronic pulse beings manage to do for a while within the narrative. Here, Liu revisits the other two utopian motifs that Song identifies in contemporary Chinese utopian narratives and combines them in the crisis stirred up by the electronic pulse beings: the unlimited development of science and technology has created an apocalyptic posthuman world. Unlike Liu's later works, which always contain "powerful symbols of the possible eventual triumph of technology over [human] culture" (Song 97), in this novel human beings eventually triumph over technology.

Aside from portraying the virtual community, Liu's novel also portrays a new species—"electronic pulse beings." One of the main characters in the novel is the revived Mao Zedong. He is one of the electronic pulse beings, although he does not admit that he is a member of the Huaxia Republic. Mao is a variant of the motif of the visitor from the author's homeland in the traditional utopian novel. As noted by Moylan, in most utopias since Thomas More, the visitor departs from his own land, arrives at the utopia "by choice or by accident," travels around, extolls the benefits of this alternative society, and eventually returns to his own society and reports back to his compatriots about the utopia (44). In this novel, Mao is brought back to life and voyages to the future society by means of advanced technology—but he exists only in mental form within a computer's memory. The other five revived brains, especially the one who copies himself and establishes the Huaxia Republic, can be seen symbolically as Mao's alter egos. Those electronic pulse beings copied by the revived brain can be seen as the followers of Mao's old ideology. The three personas comprise the entirety of the dying social class. By dividing Mao Zedong into three different personas, Liu Cixin provides different possibilities for the ways in which Mao's ideology might impact China in the future. In contrast with the traditional utopia in which the utopian setting is normally primary and the plot and characters are secondary, the primacy of societal alternatives over characters and plot is reversed in *China 2185*. The visitors—Mao, his alter egos, and their followers—are not just observers of the alternative society. Instead, they intervene and even set off a crisis in this new society. In this way, the author's empirical society is linked to the alternative society through these visitors. The alternative society and the empirical society both function as background settings for the foregrounded political interests of the author.

The authoritarian old order. Mingwei Song points out that these new Chinese utopian novels disclose "connections between China's imagined future and the historical memory of its past. In other words, while the projected future seems to evoke change, it also illuminates what has already been" ("Variations" 88). His point is very well illustrated in *China 2185*. Most of the social problems and crises brought about by the revived brains in the alternative society are a continuation of the problems in the author's empirical society. The novel thus becomes allegorical and directly addresses major sociopolitical issues as well as current ideological conflicts between the Party's hardliners and more democratic-minded intellectuals, including the author himself. Specifically, the story reveals the potential political and social problems that the aging population will bring to Chinese society: shrunken residential space, an expanding generation gap, conflicts between the young and the old, and continuing authoritarian gerontocracy. More importantly, the story presents an extrapolative political model in the Internet era: the ultimate democratic country in which every citizen's voice can be heard by the top leader and can thereby participate in the country's decision-making and policy formulation. In the following sections, I will examine the novel's treatment of the aging

population demographic and the ideal political model presented in the novel, and explore how they cast a revealing light on the political and social system in contemporary China. This examination is at the level of “generic form” within Moylan’s critical utopian framework, looking at the way in which the text is connected back to Chinese historical processes in the 1980s.

Thanks to advances in medical technology, human embryos in the novel are created in test tubes, and people enjoy a much longer life span. The population of the country has reached 2 billion; 1.2 billion people are over 100 years old. Juveniles and children amount to merely fifteen percent of the population. Multiple generations usually live together under the same roof. One of the major conflicts in the story is the generation gap. The children feel suffocated by the lifeless and drab atmosphere at home. In order to escape from the stifling atmosphere generated by old people, children form flying motorcycle gangs and ride their motorcycles in the sky at night. Elderly people feel rejected by the younger generation. They denounce the younger generation for its betrayal of Chinese traditions and moral values. They are especially irritated when the top executive authority sets aside the country’s marriage laws. Here, the old order or class experiences shock and loss when facing a new social order or class. This sense of shock and loss is a response “not only to an abstract social order, but to millions of lives that have been shaped to its terms” (Williams 210).

Among all these conflicts, readers can sense the author’s general standpoint. Liu makes it very clear in the story that juveniles and children are the main hope for the country. In the narrative, the only character that bears a name is the ten-year-old boy Xiaoyu (little rain) who befriends the chief executive of the country. All the other characters are either identified by their numbers, or by their official titles. In her inaugural press conference, the chief executive tells the journalists that the people she loves most are the children. When the virtual Huaxia Republic threatens the country and government, she cries out: “Save the children.” This cry echoes Lu Xun’s cry in the short story “Diary of a Madman” [*K’uang-jen Jih-chi*, 1918] (29-41). This has often been hailed as China’s first modern short story. Lu Xun’s madman is “afflicted with an increasingly sharpened perception of reality” (Lee 55). The only characters the madman can read in Chinese history books are the two representing cannibalism [*chi ren*]. At the end of the story, the madman desperately cries out in an attempt to save the children from being eaten by others or becoming cannibals themselves. Liu’s story provides a brighter ending than Lu Xun’s, however. At the end of the story, when the old people control all the networks and power facilities, it is the children who save the country. The young motorcycle riders help the chief executive break through the insidious siege the old men have set up, and escort the top executive to a secret satellite base where she can temporarily shut down the national power grid, hence eliminating the Huaxia Republic.

The conflict between the young and the old is the fundamental reason that one of the revived brains copies itself and establishes the Huaxia Republic. This conflict may remind the reader of Raymond Williams’s description of

“the deep relations between the actual forms of our history and the tragic forms within which these are perceived, articulated and reshaped” (207). Specifically, the tragic form is the tension between an old and dying social order and a new social order. Williams’s argument draws upon the historical context of 1970s protests and revolutions in such countries as Czechoslovakia, Chile, and Zimbabwe (207). In Liu’s novel, the historical context is post-socialist China. The story illustrates that “when the old social order is dying, it grieves for itself,” experiencing “shock and loss,” and resisting the new social order (Williams 209-10). The old man and his “electronic pulse beings” want to revive traditional Chinese culture and moral values accumulated over thousands of years. They require the government to recognize and submit to their virtual Huaxia Republic so that they can resume their autocratic rule over Chinese society. The general principle of the Huaxia constitution is to “rescue the national culture from the brink of extinction within the national Internet network, and revive our ancestral culture to ascendancy in the real world” (Liu, *China* 2185). Those revivalists vent their anger against the younger generation by destroying all places of entertainment and sports facilities. They believe that these places and facilities encourage societal degeneration.

Liu’s depiction of the Huaxia Republic and its mission reminds the reader of the “Root-seeking” movement of the Chinese literary scene in the 1980s. The leader of this movement was Han Shaogong (b. 1953), who argued that literature should explore the roots of a writer’s traditional regional culture, such as the Hunanese Han Shaogong’s ancient culture of Chu. By exploring local cultural traditions, Chinese writers and readers will arguably develop a more nuanced understanding of contemporary Chinese culture. The “Roots-seeking” movement has often been praised as a principled literary revolt against formulaic Mao-era writing and even Maoist ideology itself. In contrast, Liu’s novel portrays the call to return to one’s traditional Chinese roots as a reactionary tactic of the old social order or class.

Politically, the story of the Huaxia Republic is a parody of the party-state’s “Eliminating Spiritual Pollution” [*qingchu jingshen wuran*] (1983-84) and “Anti-Bourgeois Liberation” [*fandui zichanjieji ziyouhua*] (1986-87) purge-like campaigns of the 1980s. The political campaign to “eliminate spiritual pollution” was launched by the Communist Party with Deng Xiaoping’s speech at the Second Plenum of the Twelfth Central Committee on 11-12 October 1983. The campaign aimed to root out Western-inspired liberal ideas among the Chinese populace. Deng defined “the substance of spiritual pollution as disseminating all varieties of corrupt and decadent ideologies of the bourgeoisie and other exploiting classes and disseminating sentiments of distrust towards the socialist and communist cause and to the Communist Party leadership.”⁵ This campaign started out as a criticism of pornography and certain trends in philosophical, literary, and art circles, but swiftly expanded into an attack by hardline CPP apparatchiks against a broad range of phenomena and social forces. Under the pretext of attacking spiritual pollution, a lot of legitimate personal choices were lumped together as part and parcel of the “bourgeois life

style.” These included women who permed their hair or wore make-up, as well as youths who wore stylish clothes and attended dance parties.

The campaign reached its climax in mid-November 1983. It faded into obscurity in early 1984 after intervention from Deng Xiaoping himself, who finally realized that many individuals in and out of the Party were taking advantage of this campaign to “attack people, policies, and behavior they disliked, with potentially severe consequences for social stability and the Four Modernizations” (Gold 962). Various themes of the campaign reappeared in virtually identical form, however, in Deng’s “Anti-Bourgeois Liberation” campaign of 1986. This campaign was specifically against the liberal Communist Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang. Deng Xiaoping insisted that Hu Yaobang had not dealt firmly enough with peaceful student protests in 1985-86 calling for political reform. It was a way of saying that some people had taken the reforms too far and crossed into the forbidden zone of challenging the principle of absolute Communist Party rule. Hu Yaobang was removed from the position of party general secretary, but remained a member of the Politburo Standing Committee till he died of heart failure in 1989. Liu completed this novel in early 1989 after observing both campaigns at their peaks of intensity. Liu could closely relate to his own experiences the chilling effect these two campaigns had on the rise of Chinese science fiction to his own experience. In several essays, Liu has described how the “Campaign to Eliminate Spiritual Pollution” stunted the development of sf in the 1980s. In addition to the campaigns’ criticism of unorthodox behavior, including purveying and viewing pornographic materials and wearing make-up and fashionable clothing, the basis of the campaigns was a concerted attack on certain trends in the fields of philosophy, literature, and art. On the literary and artistic front, Party Central’s Propaganda Bureau singled out specific types of works and genres to attack and suppress. “Science fiction works that contain ghost stories, violence, sex, anti-scientific assumptions, and veiled criticism of socialism” were among the genres and subgenres castigated as spiritual pollution (Gold 972). Because of this official suppression, Chinese sf remained at a low ebb from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. The publication of PRC sf slowed to nearly a standstill, and the translation of foreign sf works also fell sharply in comparison to some previous years. Liu’s *Huaxia Republic* can be read as a satire of these two political campaigns in China during the 1980s.

Gerontocracy and political reform. The most severe political criticism in this novel is directed at the party-state’s ruling gerontocracy, and its politically audacious motif is the return to life of Mao Zedong’s brain. It is not Mao, however, but an ordinary old man who clones his brain or consciousness on the Internet and thereby establishes the *Huaxia Republic*. As I indicated earlier, this persona is just another side of Mao’s character. This old man had committed suicide at the age of 185 after having a stormy argument with his great-grandson. When his dead brain is brought back to life in the computer, he wants to resume his place of authority in the old autocratic order through the power of his *Huaxia Republic*. This old man claims that, although he has

cloned himself on the Internet, each of these cloned “electronic pulse beings” has its own individual aspirations and goals, so he has no control over what they may think or do. All these electronic pulse beings without exception, however, support the old man’s decision to restore the old social order. The author seems to be suggesting that Mao’s old ideology still has a lot of followers in China. The crisis caused by the revived brain and its clones is a sardonic commentary on the gerontocracy at the core of the communist party-state. Among the communist leaders, Mao Zedong was 82 when he died. Deng Xiaoping retained a powerfully controlling influence in Chinese politics until he was nearly 90. During the 1980s, China’s political system was ruled by elderly Party cadres. The average age of the twenty-odd Communist Party Politburo members at the apex of the government hierarchy was over 70. In particular, the so-called “Eight Immortals of the Chinese Communist Party” were making almost all of the key decisions about China’s future. Deng Xiaoping and his fellow “Eight Immortals had fought in the civil war for CCP rule and were imbued with its claims to historical legitimation” (Gilley 112).

In 1989 when student protests dragged on into late May, party elders and hardliners allied against Zhao Ziyang, whom they accused of the same ideological and political mistakes that Hu Yaobang had supposedly committed before being shorn of his positions and authority in 1986. In the novel, the elimination of the Huaxia Republic conveys the message that the old men who are in charge of everything should withdraw from the political stage and retire at an appropriate juncture. The country also pays a heavy price, however, because powering off the the national electricity net is a heavy blow to the country’s production and economy. The resolution of the crisis demonstrates that “the old order is still powerful, even if visibly dying; it still exercises, even if in new forms, its many determinations” (Williams 209). Ironically, the ossified gerontocracy takes the new form of “electronic pulse beings.” The high executive has to use the most traditional method of eliminating them—simply cutting off the electric power. At the surface level, it seems that advanced technology is on the side of the older generation. In essence, Liu equips the old class with technical advances in order to reveal that the old order or dying class can assume a new guise and resist progressive change by means of the most advanced technology. The shut-down of the national power grid is the moment of sharp break between the new society and the old order, between the young and the old. It is the moment of revolution.

In addition, the old men’s Huaxia Republic can be viewed as their “Utopian space.” According to Jameson, “Utopian space is an imaginary enclave within real social space, in other words, ... the very possibility of Utopian space is itself a result of spatial and social differentiation” (“Utopian Enclave” 15). In the story, the ossified gerontocracy creates their Utopian enclave in the virtual community. The Huaxia Republic differs from the real social space where the female executive and her people live. The emergence of the old men’s Utopia results from the older men’s dissatisfaction with the new ideas and social order embraced by the young generation. Their attempt to legalize their Huaxia Republic and their threat to destroy civil engineering projects reveal their

certainty and their persistently obsessive “search for a simple, a single-shot solution” to all the ills they have perceived in the new social order (Jameson, “Utopian Enclave” 11). Jameson argues that in communist-ruled countries such as the Soviet Union in the twentieth century, “ideology” during the Cold War meant Marxism or Stalinism, and “Utopia” meant “socialism or any revolutionary attempt to create a radically different society” (*Postmodernism* 159). The elimination of the virtual Huaxia Republic can be seen as the end of Mao’s ideology and of the “socialist Utopia” in post-socialist China.

If the leader of the Huaxia Republic represents the autocratic side of Mao, then the other side of Mao is portrayed in a relatively sympathetic light. In the novel, the revived Mao is presented as an affable old man who talks to the young boy Xiaoyu about his Hunan hometown, his favorite dishes, and his world view. Liu’s sympathetic portrait of Mao reflects some Chinese people’s nostalgia about Mao during the post-Mao Reform Era. In the wake of Deng Xiaoping’s 1980s economic reforms, the Chinese government allowed and even encouraged some regions and some individuals to get rich sooner than other regions and other individuals. Meanwhile, corruption and other sociopolitical problems worsened. Most people at the bottom of society have remained poor. The gap between the rich and poor has been increasing. Under these socio-economic circumstances, some Chinese people have looked back nostalgically at the egalitarian spirit that supposedly prevailed during the Mao era. Some taxi drivers nowadays even hang Mao’s likeness in their car as if he were a deity who could protect them from car accidents.

Curiously, Liu never directly refers to Mao in the novel. But the various depictions of this old man enable most readers easily to identify him as Mao, such as his Hunanese accent, his favorite spicy dishes, and his achievements in twentieth-century China. It is hard to tell if Liu really believed Mao to be an affable person, or if he was prettifying Mao for reasons of safety or to avoid alienating the most naïve segment of his readership. The novel, however, does reveal Liu’s view of Mao through its depiction of the young female leader of the country. After the Huaxia Republic is eliminated, the female leader reflects on the crisis and says: “Sometimes history endows one individual with ultimate authority and power. This would bring great harm to the people. What we should eliminate are the historical conditions which give an individual excessive power, not the individual himself.” There is also a short conversation between the revived Mao and the woman leader. She asks Mao: “Since Marxist Materialism is the philosophical foundation of the CCP, why did you call yourself ‘The savior of the Chinese people’? And why does Mao’s Memorial Hall have such a strong resemblance to the tomb of an ancient monarch built in the center of Tiananmen Square?” Mao answers: “The country needed authority at that time. It was not right to say that, but we did not have any other way out. As for that building on Tiananmen Square, it was totally out of my control” (Liu, *China 2185*). At the end of the novel, the woman leader asks Mao about immortality. Mao replies with a philosophical explanation that immortality is actually a variation of mortality. Immortality means constant change, but if there is no change and reform, then a reversion

to the conditions of mortality occurs. Even if a dead but undecayed brain manages to achieve immortality, it is still dead because it clings to old values and rules. Both Mao and the woman leader believe that the future belongs to the younger generation, and that the world needs change. In this way, Liu dismisses the likelihood of the biggest horror of all—that Mao’s violent and harebrained ideology would be revived someday in China. In the novel, people also learn that Stalin’s tomb has been blown apart by some Russians because they were afraid that Stalin’s brain might be revived in the same way that Mao’s brain was.

Aside from the aging demographic, another important issue the story addresses is the political system. Liu presents a visionary political model for China, and touches upon such issues as freedom of speech, transparency of the media, universal suffrage, and female leadership of the nation. In this novel, Liu presents an almost ideal democratic system defined by standard works such as Seymour Martin Lipset, Juan J. Linz, and Larry Diamond’s *Democracy in Developing Countries*, and summarized by Paul Christopher Manuel in his article on the governments of the future (Manuel 183). First of all, the democratic regime allows “extensive and realistic competition between either individuals or organized political groups for effective positions of authority in government” (Manuel 195). In the novel, the chief executive of the country is a twenty-nine-year-old woman elected by a majority of the country’s two billion people. She serves an eight-year term as president. More importantly, a majority of the populace can initiate a process to recall her from power at any time during her eight-year term. It seems that most of the opposition to her rule comes from senior citizens. With the development of medical technology, many people now enjoy a lifespan of more than one hundred and eighty years. They criticize the leader’s marital status (she is recently divorced) and the sports outfit she often wears; they also claim that she is too young to serve as the top leader of a world power. The extrapolation of the woman president and universal suffrage is in sharp contrast to China’s present political system—China’s lack of suffrage and the invariably all-male lineup of officials on the all-powerful CCP Politburo Standing Committee.

Second, the democratic regime allows “a very high level of political participation” and “public contestation of all policies” through the Internet (Manuel 185). In the novel, the female leader hosts a People’s Congress. Every citizen is eligible to attend the People’s Congress through the National Computer Network. At the congress, people talk to the country’s leader directly, not through a lower-ranking minion as the PRC government has always arranged things in contemporary China. People vote to make decisions for the country. People even vote on whether or not to allow the five revived brains to participate in the People’s Congress and policy making. The democratic system also grants full freedom to the media. Two major state-run newspapers, the *Guangming Daily* and the *People’s Daily*, also appear in the story to represent the Communist Party’s official media. In contrast to the reality of the *Guangming Daily* and *People’s Daily* as Party propaganda organs, especially during the periods of the “Eliminating Spiritual Pollution”

and “Anti-Bourgeois Liberalization” campaigns, the two newspapers in the story both enjoy independence from state control and have the freedom to report news in the manner of professional journalists. Liu’s visionary depiction of the ideal democratic regime in the novel again echoes Chinese intellectuals’ repeated calls for political reform and liberalization in the 1980s. Despite the two campaigns against “spiritual pollution” and “bourgeois liberalization” and the ouster of the relatively enlightened Party leaders Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang in the 1980s, many or possibly most of China’s citizens have continued to consider political liberalization and the critique of the CCP autocracy as valid topics for public discussion.

Aesthetics. Finally, I would like to look at the aesthetic features of the novel. In *China 2185*, the scientific and technological issues are not front and center, since the reader is propelled through the novel by a good-guys-versus-bad guys plotline. This novel is science fiction as a literature of ideas, with social and political commentary at the core and character development at the periphery. The inner lives of the characters are not really central nor are they intended to be, though the novel does integrate the female leader’s life story and Xiaoyu’s personal tale into the plot dynamics. In spite of its frequently two-dimensional characterization, the language of the novel is noteworthy. The prose is straightforward, transparent, and light-hearted, and is spiced up with suspense, humor, and black humor. The novel begins like a detective novel and leaves readers in suspense with its twisting plot. A young man sneaks into the Memorial Hall under cover of darkness to take the hologram of Mao’s brain. Then the narrative switches to the contrasting scene of a brightly lit news conference held by the country’s female highest executive. All this makes the reader wonder what will happen to Mao’s brain and what sort of connection will emerge between the female leader of the country and Mao.

There are also a few humorous scenes in the novel. For example, when the young computer engineer M102 and the guardian of Mao Memorial Hall M103 wait for the software to process the hologram of Mao’s brain, they are both half drunk on hard liquor and beer. They both practically faint with terror when Mao’s revived brain writes on the computer screen, “Where am I now? Didn’t I die?” In another episode, ceremonies and plans related to a divorce are described as every bit as complicated and lavish as a wedding in the twenty-third century. These narrative techniques reveal the author’s efforts to improve the literary merit of his sf writing. This effort is connected to the literary scene in China in the 1980s.

The 1980s witnessed many discussions about the nature of science fiction. Is literature or science at the root of science fiction? There were two reasons for this discussion. First, many sf narratives were published in mainstream literary magazines. In order to compete with other literary genres, sf writers had to improve the literary merit of their fiction. Second was the introduction and translation of Western New Wave sf. Though the New Wave movement occurred in the West during the 1970s, it did not reach China until the 1980s. Some non-sf writers in China started to write fiction that contained features of

sf. Some explored the secrets of the universe through their private point of view and personal feelings, and others sought inspiration from traditional Chinese myths and supernatural stories. I believe Liu Cixin was influenced by this ferment in *China 2185*.

China 2185 is not an anomalous novel, but bears a resemblance to Liu's other narratives and those of some of his peers. Wu Yan, Mingwei Song, and other critics have all noticed recurrent utopian motifs in contemporary Chinese science fiction, and have identified their pedigree in the works of Liang Qichao, Lu Xun, Xun Nianci, and Lao She written in the first half of the twentieth century. These utopian motifs are not merely a continuation of old utopian elements, however. Rather, old utopian elements have been appropriated in a more critical way. They reflect the authors' anxieties and hopes as to what must be changed in contemporary China in order to pave the way for a relatively emancipated society in the future. At the historical juncture of China in transition from socialism to post-socialism, from a planned economy to a market economy, and from an industrial society to a post-industrial society, some PRC sf writers believe that China's future will outshine that of the West, which will continue to get bogged down in financial crises. These writers "believe that China's future looks more colorful and positive than ever, and is more open to the spirit of discovery." On the other hand, "a number of writers are not so optimistic about the world's future, which they render as far from utopian" (Han 18-19). For example, the human-versus-rat battle in Chen Qiufan's (b. 1981) short story "Year of the Rat" (*Shunian*, 2009) draws a nightmare picture of China's development of gene-modification technologies. The fast-growing crops and insects in the "time farm" of He Xi's (b. 1971) "Foreign Land" (*Yiyu*, 1999) satirize no-holds-barred technical innovation. Both stories make poignant comments on Chinese advances in science and technology. He Xi's "Six Lines from Samasara" [*Liudao zhongsheng*, 2002] reflects China's current dilemmas of over-population, territorial disputes, and ethnic conflicts. Wang Jikang's *Life of Ants* is a profound reflection on the Cultural Revolution and a criticism of Chinese government rhetoric about a harmonious society. Han Song's *Subway* [*Ditie*, 2011] reveals a "gloomy China with veiled elements of political protest" (Jia 110). All these critical utopian narratives resonate with Liu's *China 2185*. They focus on the continuing presence of difference and imperfection within utopian society itself, and thus point to more recognizable and dynamic alternatives.

China 2185 is also related to Liu Cixin's other sf narratives, as it resonates with many of Liu's later works. Chinese politics have always been a concern in Liu's writings. Though a determinedly hard sf writer, Liu's concern has less to do with technology itself even during the first stage of his career, and is more focused on the impact of technology on human behavior, history, culture, politics, and social systems. These social and political concerns reveal the most prominent feature of Liu's aesthetics: a framing of one or more astrophysical hypotheses in a relatively plausible or realist narrative plot. Within these narrative frameworks, he has ventured upon in-depth explorations of various

political models and detailed depictions of dynamic political interactions, especially during a historical period when the general public in the PRC had little or no access to official venues for serious political debate. The political content of Liu's fiction sometimes comes across at the interplanetary or international level such as in the *THREE BODY* trilogy and "Glory and Dreams" [*Guangrong yu mengxiang*, 2003], novels that deal with political negotiations and conflicts in the distant future or on alien worlds. In other works, Liu's political message can be relatively obscure, such as in "Hearing about the Route in the Morning" [*Zhao wen dao*, 2002] and "Earth Canon" [*Diqiu dapao*, 2003], in which the political dimension is secondary to other motifs or story lines. Meanwhile, at other junctures the political content can be relatively explicit and specific, such as in his "Butterfly Effect" [*Hundun hudie*, 2001], "The Western Ocean," and "The Village Schoolmaster," in which Liu offers commentary on the Serbian War, globalization and colonization, and problems in Chinese K-12 education, respectively. Among the sf narratives with a focus on China's social and political quandaries, *China 2185* is one of the most audacious.

Conclusion. In the above paragraphs I have analyzed *China 2185* at the "iconic level," at the "discrete level," and at the level of "generic form" in the framework of Moylan's study of the critical utopian novel. I have also related this novel to other contemporary Chinese sf narratives as well as to Liu's other works. My examination reveals that Liu's novel parallels Moylan's model in the way that the novel "retains the older elements of the utopian, but works with these elements in a radically different way" (43). The novel's primacy of societal alternatives over character and plot is reversed. The alternative society with a democratic political system and digital information resources available to every citizen is the background setting for the foregrounded political quests of both the protagonist and antagonist. The visitors from the past metamorphose into Mao's three personae, who become the novel's anti-heroes. The novel's "play between generic form and deviation" is a symbolic activity that expresses the current tensions in Liu's empirical world (Moylan 43). The particular cultural and sociopolitical contradictions of the historical moment of 1980s China are the limitations that the novel encounters and for which it provides imaginary solutions. But the novel's utopian impulse is different from that in most Western critical utopian novels of the 1960s and 1970s. Moylan argues that Western critical utopian novels were written to resist the affirmative culture of contemporary capitalism and its marketing mechanisms. Liu's novel is a direct response to the cultural discourses and the sociological and political models in 1980s China. Therefore, Liu's novel enriches Moylan's critical utopian model by providing a text from a post-socialist country and a highly accessible form of sociopolitical imagination.

China 2185 is a novel more about the present than the future. The novel conjures an alternative political system with the features of universal suffrage, a female presidency, and freedom of speech. Moreover, it posits radical variations in family structure and marriage amid unusual speculations about

virtual communities on the Internet. These advanced sociopolitical models are not actually utopian, however, for they have already been achieved in many other countries, though not yet in mainland China. The story concludes with the elimination of the ossified gerontocracy, which is also likely to occur in China at some point in the future. The novel thus spurs the reader to ask: is Liu really imagining China's future? In "Progress versus Utopia, or, Can We Imagine the Future?," Jameson argues that "closure or narrative ending is the mark of that boundary or limit beyond which thought cannot go" (283). He also asks and answers whether sf is capable of imagining the future:

The most characteristic SF does not seriously attempt to imagine the "real" future of our social system. Rather, its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come. It is this present moment ... that upon our return from the imaginary constructs of SF is offered to us SF thus enacts and enables a structurally unique "method" for apprehending the present as history. (288)

Liu's novel makes a good case to support Jameson's claim about our incapacity to imagine the future. The novel foresees important issues in post-socialist China such as the consequences of the aging of the population and the impact of digital information resources and the Internet on China's political system. Liu amplifies both sociopolitical problems and the potential for change in mainland China and conjures forth an imaginary future transformation in order to create a critical distance from the present. *China 2185* opens up a literary space for a type of advanced sociopolitical existence that has not yet been achieved in mainland China; at the same time, the novel brings us down to earth to perceive the serious limitations of present-day post-socialist China. The novel also demonstrates the strength of a critical utopia, which entails both a vision of future transformations as well as a critique of present-day flaws.

NOTES

1. For a brief history of Chinese science fiction and a chronological introduction to Chinese sf writers, see Wu Yan's "Great Wall Planet: Introducing Chinese Science Fiction" and Han Song's "Chinese Science Fiction: A Response to Modernization." For a more detailed account of the development of Chinese sf during the Mao era, see Rudolf G. Wagner's "Lobbying Literature: The Archaeology and Present Functions of Science Fiction in China." In addition, Zheng Jun has written a very detailed history of Chinese sf entitled *Zhongguo kehuan xiaoshuo jianshi* [Brief History of Chinese Science Fiction], which has been circulated on the Internet.

2. Many critics and sf writers have offered similar definitions of hard sf. Here I am quoting Norman Spinrad (94).

3. The full text of this novel can be read online on *Kehuan xiaoshuo wang* [Science Fiction Net].

4. Shortly after Mao Zedong died in 1976, his body was embalmed. A mausoleum, known as Chairman Mao Memorial Hall, was constructed in the middle of Beijing's Tian'anmen Square to display Mao's preserved body.

5. The original Chinese text was published in *Renmin ribao* [People's Daily], 16 Nov. 1983: 1. I am using Thomas B. Gold's English translation. See Gold 952.

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on contemporary Chinese science fiction, specifically the political elements in Liu Cixin's (b.1963) critical utopian novel *China 2185* [Zhongguo 2185], written in 1989 against the social and political background of China in the 1980s. I analyze *China 2185* at the "iconic level," at the "discrete level," and at the level of "generic form," in the framework of Tom Moylan's study of the critical utopian novel. I also relate this novel to other contemporary Chinese sf narratives, as well as to Liu's other works. The critical utopia in the novel is part of the political vision and practice that Liu shares with contemporary Chinese intellectuals of the late 1980s that reject the domination of one party and of authoritarian rule, and that call for a democratic system in China. The novel foresees important issues in post-socialist China such as the consequences of the aging of the population and subsequent gerontocracy, and the impact of digital information resources and the Internet on China's political system. Liu amplifies both sociopolitical problems and the potential for change in mainland China and conjures forth an imaginary future transformation in order to create a critical distance from the present.

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