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Counter-discourses to social inequalities and urban modernity: Subaltern women in post-2000s Chinese science fiction

Danxue ZHOU  and Xi LIU 

Department of China Studies, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Suzhou, China

ABSTRACT

The issues of resurgent class and gender inequalities, rapid urbanization, and huge regional disparity were a notable focus of many post-2000s Chinese science fiction, which vividly created images of subaltern females. This paper looks at how contemporary Chinese sci-fi authors seek social justice by representing the experiences of various subaltern women within the specific genre of science fiction. It argues that the images of socially and culturally marginalized women were used as effective tools for questioning the intersectional social inequalities in contemporary China. The works discussed in this article all problematize the nature and influences of urban modernity by revealing the intersections, tensions, and contradictions between subaltern women and the classed, gendered modernization process. The sci-fi realist portrayal of subaltern agency and gender struggle also helps to generate powerful counter-discourses to urban modernity and technological utopia.

KEYWORDS Social inequalities; urban modernity; technological utopia; subaltern women; Chinese science fiction; subaltern agency

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Introduction

Post-2000s Chinese science fiction is characterized by its active engagement with changing socio-economic conditions in twenty-first-century China. The topics most frequently addressed by contemporary Chinese sci-fi writers in their fantastical or speculative works are huge regional disparity, resurgent class, gender inequalities, and rapid urbanization. Different images of “subaltern” females, including rural women, female migrant workers, and lower-class sex workers in the city, could be seen as objects that reveal and reflect upon the intertwined social problems in contemporary China. This paper will interrogate these themes in Chen Qiufan’s (b. 1981) “The Flower of Shazui” (*Shazui zhi hua*, 2012), Wu Chu’s (b. 1984) *The Happy You Gang*

CONTACT Xi LIU  Xi.Liu@xjtlu.edu.cn

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(*Xingfu de yougang*, 2020), and Wanxiang Fengnian's (b. 1984) "Through the Fog, a Distant Land Appears" (*Wuzhong xilai de yuanyang*, 2019).

Before implementing the economic reform and trade liberalization, China had started modernizing its economy and society. However, it was primarily isolated from the world economy and its own economy was centrally regulated and highly inefficient (Morrison, 2013, p. 2). The transition from a rigid planned economy to a market economy demonstrated the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) determination for economic progress and modernization that differed from previous socialist modernity. Since the 1980s, post-socialist China joined the quest for global capitalist modernity by opening itself to "private and global capital" and allowing "the capitalist apparatus and relations to regulate not only economic life but also social and cultural life" (Pun, 2005, p. 7). It has rapidly transformed itself into the world's factory by providing international investors a significant quantity of natural resources and cheap labor at a massive scale, causing the serious rural/urban divide as well as massive rural-to-urban migration, a movement from "poorer," "backward" margins to the "wealthier," "more civilized" centers (Jacka, 2005, p. 5). In contrast to the Maoist era, which promoted a notably egalitarian social order in the first three decades of the PRC, post-reform Chinese society has become stratified in terms of class, gender, and region (rural vs. urban; west vs. east), at a dramatic speed (Whyte, 2012, p. 229). Social stratification in contemporary China is a hybrid of complexities. The *hukou* (household registration) system further exacerbates China's most significant and inequitable division, which is between the city and the countryside. Modernization and globalization have been accompanied in contemporary China by a rise in the prevalence of discourses that privilege the city as the site of development and modernity. The rural area is frequently seen as a moribund place of stagnation and a part of the country that needs to be modernized and advanced (Gaetano, 2008, p. 633; Yan, 2003, p. 584). Simultaneously, a resurgence of class hierarchy predicated on education, income, and personal assets acquired via competition in China's revitalized markets, is observed in contemporary social stratification. These structural systems of power overlap and intersect with one another, and have deeply influenced the lived experiences of different subordinated social groups who directly suffer economic, social, and cultural marginalization in contemporary China. The examination of these social groups and their media representations will contribute to an in-depth understanding of the significant changes in contemporary Chinese social structure over the last few decades.

All of the selected sci-fi writers in this paper were born in the 1980s, after the CCP began its reform at the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978. These authors grew up amidst the rapid modernization and urbanization that occurred as a result of this political shift. The social background of the authors' adolescences therefore serves as significant

thematic inspiration for their literary works, which offer alternative perspectives to the grand narratives surrounding the rise of China in the latter half of the twentieth century. For Example, Chen Qiufan identifies “a feeling of exhaustion about life and anxiety for success,” and notes that “the burdens on their shoulders grow heavier year after year and their dreams and hopes are fading” (Chen, 2016, p. 373). The sci-fi works analyzed here actively portray the experiences of migration, work, and daily life of many dispossessed women. These women are more vulnerable to the reconfigured system of class and gender oppression than their urban, middle-class counterparts as defined by today’s ideological framework of “neo-liberalism, urbanization, and globalization” (Liu, 2012, p. 513). Their stories embody multiple distinctions and inequalities in Chinese society in terms of “gender, class, urban/rural, safe/insecure, development/underdevelopment and modern/backward divisions” (Moon, 2003, p. 38). In order to look at the social inequalities that are the product of complex interactions among different social categorizations, this paper engages in an “intersectional” reading strategy which confronts “the multifarious ways in which ideologies of race, gender, class, and sexuality reinforce one another” and in so doing “illuminate the diverse ways in which relations of domination and subordination are produced” (Smith, 1998, p. xxiii). This kind of reading allows for a deeper understanding of the complexities of the socio-political and cultural marginalization of contemporary China and its relevant cultural imaginaries.

Accordingly, this paper scrutinizes how these sci-fi authors represent the experiences of different subaltern women while seeking social justice within the specific genre of science fiction. It examines the following research questions: What kinds of women’s images are constructed, and what gender views are expressed? Are existing intertwined marginalities and inequalities in terms of gender, class, and rural/urban divide challenged and re-imagined? How are different social classes imagined to be empowered or disempowered by scientific development and new technologies? How are humanist concerns articulated with the help of science fiction in these works?

“Subaltern literature” and “sci-fi realism” in contemporary China

As a literary phenomenon beginning around 2004, the genre of “subaltern literature” (*diceng wenxue*) focuses on the lives of individuals from the lower strata of society in the context of huge social changes in contemporary China. It combines realism with an empathetic attitude toward socially and economically disadvantaged groups. Different from popular literature and literature of “mainstream melody” (*zhuxuanlü*), this literary trend is known for its critical stance toward social realities and strong desire for social change (Guo & Zhang, 2012, p. 59; Nan, 2014, p. 184; Wei, 2016, p. 155). This

writing tradition can be traced back to an early twentieth century revolutionary project in Chinese literary realism known as “speaking bitterness” (*suku*), which referred to the expression of grievances experienced by oppressed individuals of pre-1949 Chinese society (Anagnost, 1997, p. 19). Variations of realist style in Chinese literary writings such as “revolutionary realism,” “socialist realism,” and “post-socialist/neo-realism,” appeared at different times in response to the changing socio-political circumstances in twentieth-century China. Despite these variants, active engagement with ongoing socio-cultural changes in the form of representation and reflection, has had the largest contribution to the modern ethos of contemporary Chinese literature. As will be shown in the following discussion, contemporary Chinese science fiction occupies a vital position in examining and imagining the relationship between science, technology, and socio-political transformations. Science fiction is now seen as the most effective cognitive framework for comprehending reality (Scarano, 2019). For instance, Chen Qiufan, one of the new-generation’s leading Chinese sci-fi writers, has argued that, “science fiction is the biggest realism in today’s China. It provides a window for imagining through its open realism, and for delineating a kind of reality that no mainstream literature has written about” (Chen, 2013, p. 38). This idea was later redefined as “science fiction realism” by veteran Chinese sci-fi author Han Song (Ren & Xu, 2018, p. 55). Many critics attend to the strong social relevance created by this especially popular literary genre, and have referred to it as “augmented reality” (Song, 2020, p. 187), “a higher value on reality” (Wu, 2021, p. 217) and as “imaginary solutions or alternative social systems” (Yang, 2018, p. 7).

Because of the intertwined regional, class, and gender inequalities in the process of China’s urbanization and globalization, tragic stories of dispossessed and marginalized women are an essential part of the story of “China’s globalizing economy” (Dooling, 2017, p. 133). Women’s stories provide vehicles for expressing ambivalent responses to the social and economic transformations brought by reform and opening up. In post-2000s Chinese science fiction, lower-class women’s voices from the margins can be heard in unique ways amidst technological progress and socio-political transformations. A number of Chinese sci-fi writers have taken up the subject of urbanization, migration, and gender for critical exploration of a wide range of social issues. Their works offer diverse narratives of migration experiences and delve into thought-provoking explorations of gender-related themes against the backdrop of urbanization and rapid social change.¹

Ranjit Guha, a scholar of Subaltern Studies, once pointed out that under nationalist agendas, the lower class had been compressed into a few “small voices” without history or any effective form of resistance (Guha, 2015, p. 304). As “lower-class voices are absent from the majority of authoritative

media," the representation of these marginalized groups in non-mainstream literary writing inspires questions (Nan, 2014, p. 184). Women have often been "objectified as the very devices of representation, as signs that bear specific moral or artistic significance in a world created by men" (Chow, 2001, p. 40). "Can the subaltern speak?" the famous question posed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in 1985, is also relevant here in understanding the actors representing Chinese subaltern women and their motivations (Spivak, 1994, p. 66). What is the role of subaltern women in fictional narratives for understanding Chinese society? Only by placing the changing image of subaltern women in the context of the grand history of China's social transformation can its connotations clearly be understood. In this way, we would make clear the patterns of unequal representation and the influence of "systems of patriarchy, classism, heterosexism, and imperialism" on the creation of content in media, culture, and society (Crain et al., 2016, p. 9).

This paper thus focuses on the intersection of gender, rural-to-urban labor migration, and the science fictional representations of subaltern women. Wolmark states that a significant convergence since the 1970s between feminism and science fiction has resulted in "the production of texts in which gender and identity are central" (Wolmark, 1994, p. 1). In the following sections, evidence of pro-feminist themes from the selected works of science fiction will be discussed to identify expressions of socio-economic issues, which both draw on and further inform the experiences of women living at the bottom of the society.

Stories of subaltern women as ways for social criticism

The intersectional social differences and discriminations experienced by subaltern women are revealed through stories exposing their disadvantaged social status. The negative consequences of rapid development highlight the helplessness of subaltern women. Along with the market economy, regional inequalities in China are rapidly growing. The "rural" is not just a spatial concept but also designates the "backward" life pattern and the "distance from the 'modern'" (Wang, 2003, p. 180). The inequalities within the city are delineated in Chen's "The Flower of Shazui" via the tragic life experiences of subaltern urban women. The differences between rural and urban areas are also reflected in Wanxiang Fengnian's "Through the Fog, a Distant Land Appears" and Wu's *The Happy You Gang*.

Chen Qiufan's short story, "The Flower of Shazui" presents a unique perspective on the everyday experiences of marginalized urban residents. Set in the near future in Shenzhen under the backdrop of rapid urbanization, this story depicts how lower-class people struggle at the margins of a rapidly developing metropolis in the urban village. On the other side of the

standardized and normative space of the modern metropolis, the urban village is an in-between space of city and countryside, past and present.

I imagine these buildings growing as fast as cancer cells, finally settling into the form they have today. Inside the apartments, it's always dark because there's so little space between the buildings that tenants in buildings next to each other can shake hands through the windows. The alleyways are narrow like capillaries and follow no discernible pattern. The stench of rot and decay permeates everything, sinks into everyone's pores. Because the rent is cheap, every kind of migrant can be found here, struggling to fulfill their Shenzhen dream: the high-tech, high-salaried, high-resolution, high-life, high-Shenzhen. (Chen, 2017)

A series of social problems of contemporary China are exposed in this work, including poor and cramped living environment, precarious and low-income immigrants (the "new citizens" of rural origin), as well as the high risk of crime and violence endured by lower class people. The female protagonist, Snow Lotus, is an underprivileged rural woman from Hunan province who is a sex worker in the urban village of Shazui. Snow Lotus's story is narrated by her next-door male neighbor, an unnamed man, who formerly worked as an engineer, but was arrested and charged with illegally selling new technology. The story depicts the social discrimination and mental suffering of Snow Lotus as a lower status woman in terms of region, class, and gender. Compared with other young people who sell their labor in Shenzhen, she suffers more discrimination and violence as a sex worker who is forced to sell her body. "Shazui Village," the narrator explains, "is home to thousands of prostitutes at all price levels. They provide the middle – and lower-class men of both Shenzhen and Hong Kong with all varieties of plentiful, cheap sexual services" (Chen, 2017). The bodies of these prostitutes are like "a paradise where the tired, dirty, and fragile male souls can take temporary refuge. Or maybe they are like a shot of placebo so that the men, after a moment of joy, their spirit restored, can return to the battlefield that is real life" (Chen, 2017).

This description reflects a profoundly sexist and objectifying perspective of women. Snow Lotus's ex-engineer neighbor reduces the sex workers' bodies to objects of transient pleasure or solace, depicting them as little more than instruments for men's comfort and restoration. Dong is Snow Lotus's husband and her boss/pimp, who makes money from Snow Lotus's sex work. Snow Lotus has to obey her employer and husband Dong, the embodiment of both patriarchy and capital. "He hit me again ... He said that I haven't been turning enough tricks. He needs more money" (Chen, 2017). She is even deprived of reproductive rights as Dong does not want to lose her as a money-making machine. In the story, Snow Lotus cries out, "He'll tell me to abort it. This is not the first time ... I'm getting old. I want to keep this child;" "He'll kill me. He will" (Chen, 2017). Snow Lotus does not fully possess her own body, for consumers can exchange money for the right of

using it. As an uneducated woman migrant in Shenzhen, Snow Lotus suffers from intersectional marginalization and becomes a victim of rapid urbanization, marketization, and patriarchy. The negative influence of social injustice caused by urbanization is visualized through the portrayal of Snow Lotus's tragic experiences. In this way Chen clearly demonstrates the widening social and economic disparity evident in distinct communities referred to as "the urban village."

"Through the Fog, a Distant Land Appears" is a short story by Wanxiang Fengnian about Gu Huilan, a female migrant worker returning from the city to the countryside. This story is set in a desolate village, and the cityscapes only appear in the protagonist's memories. Just like other migrant workers who are constantly disregarded and marginalized, Gu Huilan struggles with her identity whether she is in the city or the countryside. Although she runs away from the village to pursue a modern identity, a "peasant mentality" always haunts her and obstructs her from configuring a new subjectivity. In the city, Gu Huilan is trapped in the duality of "economic acceptance and social rejection" (Ngok, 2012, p. 252). In the end, she fails to earn enough money to support her children back in the village, and becomes alienated from others, including her family members, because she has not caught up with the "evolution" of urbanization. Ultimately, Gu Huilan finds herself abandoned in a mist-filled village, receiving a final call from her son, Qingtian, who is orbiting Jupiter 20,000 kilometers away. The vast physical distance between them highlights the even greater disparity in their perceptions, making it impossible for them to comprehend each other.

In the story, Gu is also forgotten by the villagers who are taken and controlled by alien creatures. "You can't join us. The fusion has been going on for too long and you've lost your synchrony." She is expelled from the city that received her economic contributions, and is then rejected by the countryside resulting in a kind of double alienation. Here it is productive to use Pierre Boudieu's concept of "social space" which indicates "the sum total of occupiable social positions at any one time and place" (Grenfell, 2014, p. 231). Gu Huilan becomes double marginalized in the social spaces of both the city and countryside. The story juxtaposes the rural/urban divide with an Earth/extraterrestrial divide to signify the massive gap in regional development. This shows that urbanization brings not only a geographical difference, but also a more serious gap in ways of thinking symbolized by "dys-synchrony" in the story.

When Gu Huilan backed out of the door, she found the paving stones of the street now teeming with pale blue figures, shuttling silently back and forth. She recognized some of them; others looked familiar, but she could not quite place them. The sun setting behind the hills cast a faint reddish hue over the houses and the streets and made these shadow figures appear to emit a pale blue steam. None of them responded to Gu Huilan's calling. They were like

spirits; apart, cut off from her. Some of the figures vanished suddenly, and others suddenly appeared. (Wanxiang Fengnian, 2019).

The author creates a strong effect of defamiliarization through various imageries such as “pale blue figures” and “shadow figures.” The figures’ abrupt vanishing and sudden appearance accentuate the air of mystery and difference, highlighting the profound divide and alienation in the piece.

On the surface, the story is about the change in the villagers’ living space, but it is also about the differences in value systems and socio-cultural identity. The term “distant” in the title not only refers to geographical distance, but also the huge gap in perception and the inability of mutual communication amongst people even within the same space. This becomes a metaphor for the different beliefs and cultural practices that are developed in the process of urbanization. In China, the long-term dualistic urban-rural social structure and the unbalanced regional development have also created unequal discursive power between urban citizens and peasants/migrants. However, in this process, women have suffered more because of their “natural” roles as wives and mothers. The migration of rural women to urban areas does not help them achieve much freedom from rural patriarchy because the gendered division of labor remains the same. As a rural woman, Gu Huilan is still expected to “settle in her husband’s village” and “take responsibility for the domestic sphere, including child rearing, housework, and agriculture” (Jacka, 2005, p. 8). Gu Huilan recalls her decision to leave the country for the city, recognizing the tedious chores associated with these responsibilities that restricted her freedom and limited her opportunities for personal growth:

Why did she have to go out to the city? ... Maybe the world out there represented another kind of life, without family and the endless tedium of every kind of chore. Maybe there was a place where responsibility and freedom coexisted. Longing to see someone again could coexist with flight from them ... When she had received the call that Dandan was ill, even as she was on the road rushing home, she felt her own annoyance that her two children prevented her from going to a bigger city. But when she came back to find Dandan lying in bed, she did not want to go anywhere. All that was left of the world was this village, this bed. (Wanxiang Fengnian, 2019).

This passage reveals the complex mixture of emotions experienced by Gu Huilan. The desire for freedom and escape from her current circumstances is juxtaposed with her deep attachment to her family and the limitations imposed by societal expectations. In the story’s narrative, Gu Huilan’s status as a migrant worker has caused problems in her family and has created a rift between Gu Huilan and her daughter. Gu Huilan guiltily believes that it is because she insists on working outside that her daughter commits suicide by drinking pesticide. She tries to redeem herself by integrating

into her daughter's world. While the role of the mother in the child's development is emphasized, the role of father is missing. Gu Huilan's husband is not present throughout the story.

The story of *The Happy You Gang* is set in a remote village in "Universe 046," where a fierce war between ignorance/tradition and technology/modernity is taking place. In the story, You Er and Niu Hongmei's child is born with the congenital birth defect anal agenesis which leads to the child's death. Just over a month after losing her first child, Niu Hongmei is asked by her husband to have another child, which she also loses to the same genetic disorder. Her physical and mental trauma is ignored by her husband and Niu Hongmei is often ridiculed by the other villagers for giving birth to two children with anal defects. After that, You Er does the genetic testing and finds that he is afflicted with a genetic disorder that has caused the anal atresia of his offspring. Doctors in the city tells the couple that a new gene-editing biotechnology has been created to fix this problem by replacing the problematic gene in the fetus with genes from a donor. The couple struggles to understand this technology, ultimately spending 20,000 yuan on gene correction treatment and giving birth to a healthy baby, You Gang.

Similar to numerous science fiction works, the beginning of this story seems to focus on the use of biotechnology to improve the quality of human life. Nevertheless, the narrative unfolds in a rural backdrop, where the presence of technology is seen as a curse rather than a beneficial force. The villagers believe that You Gang is the son of another man and call him a "bastard." The irresponsible and timid You Er runs away from the village after feeling embarrassed by this ridicule, leaving the honest Niu Hongmei and her son to become targets of the villagers' bullying. Niu is incredibly kind, but weak in front of the villagers and her husband. After You Er leaves home, Niu Hongmei does not receive any money from him after he gets a job as a casino manager in the city. She gradually loses her ability to work, and in order for her son to survive, she becomes a prostitute. This leads to her being mocked and humiliated by others, including You Er when he returns to the village. He becomes deeply affected by the villagers' gossip and chooses to abuse his wife for her choices:

"Even if you're forced to. Others say that starvation is less trouble than disobedience, but in your case it's the other way around," You Er said unrelentingly ... You Er caught up with her from behind and yanked her hard by the hair, kicking her over and low again. You Er stomped on Niu Hongmei's chest and asked her what the hell to do. (Wu, 2020, pp. 339–340)

Being a prostitute brings stigma, insult, and violence to Niu Hongmei. When her husband beats her, "Niu Hongmei does not resist, moan, or scream, she does nothing to protect herself but looks at the ceiling above her head with her unimpressed eyes" (Wu, 2020, p. 340). It is evident that You Er

holds himself and his wife to different moral standards. For *You Er*, women are just tools to produce children at one point thinking, "If Niu Hongmei is unwilling to have another child, or could not get pregnant, then he will get another woman" (Wu, 2020, p. 112). Suffering from intense pressure, Niu is barely able to survive the depressing and miserable life she has with her son. Her family of origin has abandoned her after getting married, referring to her as "a married daughter – spilt water" (Wu, 2020, p. 182). In the end, it is this rural woman who most seriously suffers from deprivation and violence from sexist ideas and traditional ethics of blood. "The physical violence and mental trauma Niu Hongmei suffered push readers to think about how the development of new technologies may be overshadowed by entrenched sexist ideas and practices" (Liu, 2022, p. 120).

These three works of science fiction vividly show how subaltern women are left far behind in contemporary China's rapid economic and technological development. None of the female characters can change the status quo, no matter how hard they try. These works widely dispel the state's grand narrative of a prosperous China by offering challenging, alternate visions of the future China. In the near-future setting of the three stories, the patriarchal family structure is maintained by patrilocal marriage practices and unequal division of labor in the realm of work and the household. Subaltern women are regarded as breeding machines and have their bodies exploited whether they are from rural areas or cities. Their bodies are positioned as the sites of both "production and consumption in the circuit of global capital" (Pun, 2003, p. 469). They suffer not only from lingering patriarchal mentalities, but also from social distinctions and inequalities underpinning the pursuit of "modernity." Realist experiences of these subaltern women are used for reflecting on and criticizing the multi-layered marginalities they have to confront. By telling the tragic stories of these subaltern women who are constantly devalued and degraded, alternative narratives of urbanization are unfolded. Gender representation, especially the exposure of hierarchical social order and patriarchal powers, is one of the main thematic concerns in these sci-fi works.

Subaltern agency as counter-discourses to urban modernity and techno-utopia

Although in reality, migrant lives are usually full of "transience and liminality" (Pun, 2005, p. 6), the lives of the subaltern women analyzed in this paper are not represented as monolithically dark and pessimistic. What has been explicitly depicted are the yearnings, desires, and discontents of lower-class women. Though "female desire is rooted in emotional and bodily needs," this desire is not viewed as an "authentic space of libidinality outside social regulation" (Felski, 1995, p. 87). In addition to their difficult lives and unfair

treatments, the possibilities of female autonomy and their resistance to prevailing class and gender hierarchies are also explored by these contemporary authors. Their works do not merely make the invisible visible, but also produce subversive voices from below, exemplified by the female characters' rebellious responses and courageous actions.

Firstly, images of weakened and disempowered men in the process of rapid transformation are constructed to highlight the women characters' dilemmas and also their agency. In "Through the Fog, a Distant Land Appears," the absent father, who avoids any family responsibilities, only appears once on a phone call. "It is the auto-answer voice, like the chirping of cicadas in late summer, intermittent. 'I'm ... not going back'" (Wanxiang Fengnian, 2019). Working outside the home has caused a gap between Gu Huilan and her daughter, and a rift in their family. Gu Huilan guiltily believes that her daughter's tragic death is caused by her insistence on working outside the home. As a result, she seeks redemption by integrating herself into her daughter's world. On the other hand, the father seems to find himself completely irresponsible for his daughter's suicide. The absence of fathers in children's growth and family life is a common situation in real-life families of left-behind children. Gu Huilan has been taking on the responsibilities of supporting her family, and she is the one who bears the weight of its internal changes.

In *The Happy You Gang*, You Er is defined by his wife: "90% of his reputation comes from his wife whose name is Niu Hongmei – the most beautiful woman of the You Village and around the Xiaoshi Town" (Wu, 2020, p. 3). You Er is mentally frail and weak; in contrast, Niu Hongmei gradually becomes stronger and more independent. She devotes all her energy to supporting her son. She resists and takes revenge on the man You Delai who labels her son a "bastard" and forces her to sell her body. In the end, she decides to kill him and herself:

Naked Niu Hongmei stood up from the floor and stabbed the fruit knife into the back of his heart ... When she withdrew the knife, blood spurted like a fountain from You Delai's back heart, and You Delai let out a grunting gasp, Niu Hongmei then covered his mouth. You Delai struggled like a fish on a hook ... She dipped her finger in You Delai's blood and wrote on the white wall a line that read:

"You Delai raped me, I killed him."

After writing, Niu Hongmei wiped the fruit knife clean and stabbed it into the underside of her left breast. (Wu, 2020, pp. 356–357)

At the climax of the story, Niu Hongmei, the oppressed woman, finally awakes to revolt against patriarchal powers. Her words on the wall indicate that all those villagers who once stood by and did nothing are complicit in her tragedy.

Similarly, "The Flower of Shazui" concludes with an account of Snow Lotus's rebellion against her husband's violent beatings. With the help of new augmented reality contact lenses, provided and supported by the narrator, Snow Lotus is able to do what she wants and finally frees herself from the narrator who originally controlled this technology. This high-tech equipment allows Snow Lotus to become stronger physically, eliminate her original fear of her husband, and successfully resist him.

The knife is now right in front of her face, the thin, sharp edge glowing with a cold light. I can no longer sit and watch. I lift Snow Lotus's hands, grab the man's wrist and the knife handle, and turn the knife around. He's unprepared for her speed and strength and doesn't know how to react.

Snow Lotus's entire body leans forward, pushing the tip of the knife toward her husband's chest.

"Stop!" Big Sister Shen yells. But I'm not doing anything. It's Snow Lotus. I don't even have a chance to restrain her. (Chen, 2017).

The brief but powerful process of stabbing Dong to death is completed with all her strength. The narrator who helped Snow Lotus use this new technology, can no longer stop her. There is a stark contrast between the passivity of Snow Lotus before she puts on the "puppet suit" and her initiative afterward. This "female cyborg" finally develops a newly liberated self-identity in this process. At the same time, she can control these machines with her mind powers. From a victim to a perpetrator, she responds to violence with counter-violence instead of acquiesce. However, the author is not optimistic about this technology, and continues to question the structured social problems. After killing her husband, Snow Lotus believes that "death is the best placebo" (Chen, 2017), which reflects her helplessness in the face of the unchanging status quo. This kind of cyborg transformation highlights "body politics and biopolitics, which represents the oppression from hierarchy and patriarchy" (Jiang, 2020, p. 665). In these stories, women's plight and resistance become potent tools for criticizing serious social issues such as violence and lack of bodily autonomy.

All of these sci-fi works actively explore the possibility of subaltern women's struggle against both class and gender inequality and how their agency could be asserted in the process of social transformation. While the masculine urban modernity is revealed and challenged, the roles of technology in social changes are frequently addressed in each work. The genre of Chinese cyberpunk often closely interacts with the style of "science fiction realism" (Healey, 2017, p. 5). These writers address how humans can deal with the shock brought about by the rapid development of advanced technology. At this point, these authors are echoing the criticism of the "High Tech, Low Life" phenomenon introduced by cyberpunk pioneers such as

Philip K. Dick and William Ford Gibson (Henthorne, 2011, p. 40). Science fiction serves as a useful means of critiquing existing social systems and understanding, dissecting, and shaping the future, especially the future of innovative technology (Jiang, 2019, p. 33).

As shown in these sci-fi works, the development of new technologies is not necessary to cultivate people's scientific and rational thinking. The idea of new problems caused by the abuse of technology was first introduced by Lewis Mumford in *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development*, where he hypothesized that, "man will become a passive, purposeless, machine conditioned animal" (Mumford, 1966, p. 3). These Chinese sci-fi works are a sort of cautionary parable of technological dystopia rooted in existing social and economic conditions. They expound upon the idea that happiness generated by the development of technology may be a kind of illusion that cannot solve social problems. In "The Flower of Shazui," the faces of sex worker clients are filled with "a dreamy look of satisfaction" after getting a fake "extra-strength aphrodisiac," but in fact, "the aphrodisiac contains nothing but fiber, and it has no effect except causing them to shit regular" (Chen, 2017). It is an illusory sense of satisfaction but people indulge in it. These anecdotes show that if structural social problems are not solved, these technical means may only provide a distraction from reality. In these less developed areas, people still need affordable mental opium, such as *Fengshui* (Chinese geomancy) masters and shamans. Technological means are like a new sort of "shamanism," which provides spiritual comfort to people during an era of rapid development. Problems of digital alienation and high technological development are highlighted in these writings. The science fictional way of representation helps to expose the side effects and psychedelia of rapid development, especially the high cost of people's suffering beneath the shield of economic prosperity.

Moreover, the debate as to whether technology will help achieve gender equality or reinforce inequality continues. Some scholars believe that technological development can close the gaps between gender and class. In Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto," she proposes that communication technologies and biotechnologies are crucial tools for re-crafting bodies. She regards technology as a force for human liberation and for women to achieve gender equality in particular. Some new reproductive technologies could lead to a redefinition of motherhood and have the potential to empower women (2000). In *Our Posthuman Future*, Francis Fukuyama (2003) argues that "there could be no end of history unless there was an end of science" (p. xii). He believes that the evolutionary development of new technologies will bring about changes in social perception and culture, as well as hierarchical relationships. Some Chinese critics also believe that gender can serve as an effective perspective for science fiction writers to contemplate the roles

and consequences of new techno-science, especially its ability to update ways of living and thinking (Liu, 2019; Song, 2022).

These selected works on subaltern women explore the multiple roles of new science and technology in relation to intersectional social inequalities in artistic ways. Technology may make it possible to subvert and break down unequal power relationships, and the subaltern women represented in these works can become more than docile bodies. By confronting domination and oppression, they can also become resistant subjects. Snow Lotus is conscious of gender hierarchy with the tools of technology. Her revenge is aroused under the narrator's control with "wireless earbuds," "augmented reality contact lenses," and "a special black unitard" (Chen, 2017). She has previously been submissive to her husband, but this time she chooses to plunge the knife into his heart. Snow Lotus's first and only resistance comes about with the help of technology.

Current advances in biotechnology have made it possible for women to fight against patriarchal expectations. However, in *The Happy You Gang*, the author displays how the technology of eugenics becomes a new tool for men to control women. In the story, biotechnology is structured around the male need and recreates unequal power relations. The intervention of technology only magnifies the gender injustice that already exists. In the story, the gene therapy called "H.D.E.N" is for germ cells, and "embryonic cells are officially available worldwide" (Wu, 2020, p. 18). This DNA editing technology is for correcting genetic disorders by introducing a male chromosome from a donor, "to replace the genetically defective sperm or eggs" (Wu, 2020, p. 25). The cost of gene therapy is very high and unaffordable for low-earners. For *You Er*, the H.D.E.N carries a stigma as a sexually transmitted disease. If the couple had decided to forego the gene therapy intervention, Niu Hongmei would not have been criticized for cheating on her husband, and may have avoided becoming a victim of domestic violence. However, their son, *You Gang*, would have died like their first two children without the use of the treatment. *You Er* does not truly believe the scientific explanations given by doctors and thinks *You Gang* is the son of another man. Their son's life is less important than the loyalty of his wife or his reputation. The consequences would have been completely different if the villagers had rebelled against entrenched patriarchal ideas. The author identifies technologies as mere tools that are used by humans for different purposes. It is the rural woman that is left to bear the brunt of the conflict between the rapid development of modern technology and the backward ideology of the countryside.

Instead of solving problems, the advancement of technology may expose more problems such as the uneven distribution of social resources among different regions and male-centered ways of thinking. Technology is subordinated to the existing social order and can even reinforce the hierarchy and

prejudices in human society. Technology still serves vested interests, and social stratification is further solidified through its usage. In "Through the Fog, a Distant Land Appears," alien creatures have occupied and transformed a village, and have used new technologies to inhibit free communication between different people. In "The Flower of Shazui," people master new technologies only to mark social status or satisfy their material desires. Residents of Shazui village wear the latest technology of "body films" to display their social status (Chen, 2017). The advancement of technology does not necessarily alter underdevelopment and subalternity. Male-dominated scientific standards hidden in technology hinder the achievement of gender equality. These works show that a technologically advanced society is not necessarily a utopia. Through the portrayal of subaltern agency and gender struggle, counter-discourses to urbanization and technological utopia are constructed in science fictional ways. In summary, these works convey strong social criticism of rapid urbanization while offering deep reflections on the use of technology in contemporary China.

Conclusion

Science fiction serves as a useful means of critiquing existing social systems and understanding, dissecting, and shaping the future – especially the future of innovative technology (Jiang, 2019, p. 33). In an interview in 2017, Chen Qiufan also argues that "there is something very science fictional and fantastic about this very drastic social transformation. At the foundation, the soil of rural China is still there, not thoroughly washed away. This has led to the co-existence of many different layers of society, which science fiction is best suited to present." The broader context in which China presently finds itself is mirrored in Chinese science fiction (Yen, 2020).

On a social and technical level, the post-2000s Chinese sci-fi works discussed above offer critical and reflective voices against urban modernity by disclosing the dilemmas of both "development" and "underdevelopment" in the process of modernization. The urban village in "The Flower of Shazui" and the countryside in *The Happy You Gang* are abandoned by the rapid urban development. In "Through the Fog, a Distant Land Appears," Gu Huilan's village is isolated from everywhere else. The personal experiences, frustrations, and struggles of subaltern women serve as significant lenses for seeing through the turbulent process of pursuing capitalist modernity, which is built up upon a strict system of social hierarchies. While critiques of problems in the social system behind economic prosperity are present, humanist concerns for marginalized social groups are strongly expressed. Song Mingwei points out that this genre is "more sophisticated, reflective, and subversive in terms of mixed representations of hope and despair, utopianism and its dystopian reflection, and nationalism and cosmopolitanism"

(Song, 2015, p. 8). These Chinese sci-fi works not only represent the problems of China in an era of economic and social transition but also criticize capitalism as a global phenomenon. With the help of science fiction, the irreversible marks on the bodies and souls of people brought on by modernization are visualized.

According to Rita Felski in her work *The Gender of Modernity*, “industry, consumerism, the modern city, the mass media, and technology are in some sense fundamentally masculine,” and the feminine values of “intimacy and authenticity remain outside the dehumanizing and alienation logic of modernity” (Felski, 1995, p. 17). The capitalist urban modernity China is pursuing now is also based on a series of unequal social relations, which are classed and gendered, as illustrated by the plights of marginalized women at the bottom. The works discussed here all problematize the nature and influences of urban modernity by revealing the intersections, tensions and contradictions between subaltern women and the classed, gendered modernization process. The “marginality” of specific social groups is the key field for writers to express their social criticism and humanist visions. Female characters are usually associated with tradition, and male characters are represented in many texts as symbols of modernity. But these sci-fi writers explore the complexities of modernity in relation to gender politics. They do not fully affirm that modernization will bring an unambiguous improvement to subaltern women’s lives, nor do they aspire to return to the past without technological alienation.

These three works of science fiction all construct subjectivities of subaltern women in historically specific ways. They explore the possibility for marginalized women’s liberation from both social and gender inequality. However, they do not treat this group as homogeneous, but present different women’s images as “a variety of culturally constituted desires, purposes, and projects that emerge from and of course reproduce different socially constituted positions and subjectivities” (Ortner, 2001, p. 79). Besides critical stances to modernity, these works also offer strong counter-discourses to technological utopia via a sci-fi realist portrayal of subaltern agency and gender struggle. Lower class women are not viewed to be certainly empowered by scientific development and new technologies. Whether technological development will be beneficial to subaltern women or not depends on positive changes in current social systems. Therefore, social justice, including gender equality, is actively sought out within the specific genre of science fiction in these representative works.

Note

1. Relevant works include Liu Weija’s (b. 1974) “Come See the Paradise” (*Laikan tiantang*, 2000), Hao Jingfang’s (b. 1984) “Folding Beijing” (*Beijing zhedia*,

2014), Wang Weilian's (b. 1982) "Wild Future" (*Ye weilai*, 2021) and Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide* (*Huangchao*, 2013).

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Notes on contributors

Danxue Zhou is currently a PhD candidate at the Department of China Studies, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University. Her research project focuses on contemporary Chinese science fiction from a spatial perspective, particularly exploring its relationship with the development of urbanization and modernization in China. Her research interests encompass contemporary Chinese science fiction, feminism, and literary geography.

Xi Liu (corresponding author) is Associate Professor at the Dept. of China Studies, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University. Her main research fields are Chinese literature and Chinese women's studies. Her research articles appeared in journals including *Journal of Gender Studies*, *SFRA Review*, *Theoretical Studies in Literature and Art*, and *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China*. She has published two monographs on Chinese literary and gender studies and has co-edited one volume on cultural studies of contemporary Northeast China.

ORCID

Danxue Zhou  <http://orcid.org/0009-0007-0954-8637>

Xi Liu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6095-5835>

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**ABSTRACT IN CHINESE**

很多发表于2000年后的中国科幻小说生动地创造出各种底层女性形象，以关注和讨论复苏的阶级和性别不平等、快速的城市化，以及巨大的地区差异等重要社会议题。本文探当代中国科幻作家如何借助科幻小说这种独特文体再现不同底层女性的经验，以寻求社会公正。我们认为，在社会和文化上被边缘化的女性形象在此被用以质疑当代中国交叉性的社会不平等。本文讨论的几部代表性作品皆通过揭示底层女性与阶级化、性别化的现代化进程之间的交织、紧张和矛盾，将城市现代性的性质和影响问题化。而作品中对底层能动性和性别抗争的科幻现实主义式的描绘，也有助于产生有力的对城市现代性和技术乌托邦的对抗性话语。