

Do Not Fear the Future! The Legacy of Confucian Optimism in Modern China: A Response to “Science Fiction in South and North Korea”

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Dong-Won Kim’s article compares the reception of science fiction (SF) on the Korean peninsula in two traditions that are—not surprisingly—shaped by different ideologies. Broadly speaking, since its inception and translation in East Asia in the late nineteenth century, science fiction can be understood as a form of predictive imagination of possible futures, both in the technological and ideological sense. The author argues that the popularity of science fiction is undoubtedly culturally contingent, and it is for this reason that he identifies a considerable gap between the presence of science fiction novels and short stories in the regions north and south of the thirty-eighth parallel. While the translation of Russian SF literature in North Korea since the 1950s and its film adaptations in the 1970s under the rule of Kim Jong-Il have been particularly successful, the capitalist South seems to have shied away from fantastic imaginations of possible futures despite its tremendous achievements in technological modernization.

Kim’s discussion of the political and cultural factors characterizing science fiction identifies for the case of South Korea the Confucian tradition as an important obstacle to its popularity, alongside a lack of communication between SF writers and engineers. Noting that “the Confucian tradition also remains in Koreans’ strong interest in the past and neglect of the future” and that “Confucianism primarily supports the status quo, and its ideal society, or utopia, lies in the past, not in the future,” Kim argues that this has resulted not only in a disinterest in globally popular Hollywood SF productions (with the exception of some that focus on family relationships and parental love, such as the 2014 film *Interstellar*), but also in a preference for dystopian and rather pessimistic SF productions in South Korea (such as *The Host* [2006] or *Snowpiercer* [2013]). Yet, when comparing South Korea with another Confucian state in East Asia that has fully embraced the Marxist vision of a teleological future while (since recently) trying to reintegrate Confucian morality, one might wonder whether or not such a judgment only applies to the Korean case.

In the last decades of the Qing Empire (1644–1911), the scholar Kang Youwei 康有为 (1858–1927) propagated a Confucianism that viewed Confucius not as a wise sage,

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but as an uncrowned king and reformer. Kang's radical rupture with the then institutionalized Confucian thought at the Qing court resulted in one of the most famous utopian writings in twentieth-century China, *The Book of Great Unity* (*Datongshu* 大同书). It described a future world of material abundance, where war and exploitation have disappeared, and where even space travel is possible (an idea influenced by the translation of Jules Verne). It did not revolutionize Confucianism, but rather confucianized revolution by situating the notions of evolution and progress in the New Text School of Confucianism (*Jinwen xuepai* 今文学派). By this reading, Confucian thought and progress do not necessarily exclude each other (contrary to the findings of Max Weber). Later political thinkers such as Sun Yat-sen 孙逸仙 (1866–1925) and Mao Zedong 毛泽东 (1893–1976) referred to *datong* as a political ideal that combined the notion of human dignity, and the firm conviction that any human being can become a sage, with the idea of both national and civilizational progress of China. The recent restoration of Confucian values in contemporary Chinese society as part of a state-guided, active process of social engineering shows that Confucianism does not necessarily prefer a return to the past to a progression to an unknown future. Rather, the noncontingent character of modernity in China makes it clear that the future is not to be feared, but offers new spaces for creating an ideal society.

Such realistic hopes can also rightly be found in the case of North Korea as described by Kim Dong-Won. Thus, both states view progress in SF not as utopian in the sense of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), but as an imagination into a fantastic—yet possible—future. This optimism explains the dominating presence of utopian—rather than dystopian—SF in twentieth-century China (unlike Japan). Mao Zedong's insistence on socialist realism as the primary form of literary fiction that combines realistic science elements with the revolutionary future (Wagner 1985), and the ideology of historical materialism that was, especially after 1949, enforced by Soviet influence via translation of popular science journals such as *Knowledge Is Power* (*Zhishi jiushi liliang* 知识就是力量), presented a future characterized by technological advances that were less fantastic and more a clear sign of optimism in science (Zhang 2010). Their task was primarily to promote the nation's wonderful socialist future by popularizing science among younger readers. In this context, SF is less characterized by escapism or sociopolitical critique (as in the case of Thomas More) than by the realistic hope of achieving a better world (Kunze 2017). Mao's insistence on scientific practice (instead of pure theory) further strengthened that optimism to such an extent that dystopian novels were unthinkable (likewise, SF stories that were too fantastic were often criticized as pseudoscientific, i.e., contradicting correct science, or Marxist materialism, see Wang 2017). While Soviet SF experienced an antiutopian trend in the late 1950s after Stalin's death, China continued to propagate a utopian optimism (or optimistic utopia) that only receded with the introduction of the reform and opening-up policies of Deng Xiaoping after the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). The loss of socialist ideology's persuasive power replaced utopianism with hedonism (Ci 1994), while at the same time only a few dystopian SF works appeared, such as Han Song's 韩松 *Rebirth Bricks* 再生砖 (2010) or *Mars over China* 火星照耀美国 (2012).

Wu Yan argues in his 2011 monograph on the theories and typologies of SF in China that the utopia of science and technology is a central motif in contemporary Chinese SF. Popular visions of a scientific utopia have influenced Liu Cixin 刘慈欣, whose 2007 trilogy *The Three-Body Problem* 三体 won the 2015 Hugo Award for best novel.

From a larger perspective, faith in science and technology has trumped faith in human moral consciousness not only in coping with the future, but also in assuring a known and secured future. Such conviction can be considered a primary factor in explaining why time travel stories are so absent in Chinese SF: time travel stories oftentimes involve changing history, either intentionally or by accident, and how altering the past changes the future and creates an altered present, and thus future, for the time traveler. As the teleology of history in China dictates clear outcomes (such as the plan of becoming a “moderately well-off society” (Xue Qingchao 2007) by 2021 and of achieving modernization by becoming a developed nation by 2049), it at the same time requires an unchanging past. It is for this reason that time travel movies on Chinese state TV are restricted to plots where individual figures long for the return to a lost past or for the rediscovery of a lost love, instead of changing the future or the past. As in South Korea, the Confucian nostalgia for an unspoiled past has trumped futurist science fiction.

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