

■ The Sinicized Posthuman Future: Reimagining Cyberpunk and the Cyborg in Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide**

Pattarapong Kongwattana
National Chung Hsing University

Abstract

Chen Qiufan comes from a new generation of Chinese science fiction (SF) writers who use a style of SF realism to interrogate problems in Chinese society. In 2013, his novel *Waste Tide* (2013) won a Chinese Nebula Award. The novel depicts a dystopian posthuman China where a female protagonist is forced to transform into a cyborg and seek justice for members of the underclass who lives on a hazardous waste site. This paper aims to examine how Chen's *Waste Tide* applies cyborgs to counter the impacts of globalization, environmental destruction, and the hegemony of the premodern system of Chinese society. In doing so, this paper employs the concept of a cyborg from Donna Haraway to explore the embodiment and functions of a cyborg, particularly in the context of Chinese society, together with the concept of "slow violence," a term coined by Rob Nixon to explore environmental issues. Four main discussions are presented in this paper. First, the paper suggests how Chen's SF realism sheds light on a relationship between the premodern Chinese clan system and globalization, which becomes a cause of environmental exploitation and oppression of subordinate humans and nonhumans in the novel. Second, the paper scrutinizes how Chen integrates Chinese elements into his cyberpunk narrative to resist the oppression of marginalized people in Chinese society. Third, the Sinicization

Pattarapong Kongwattana is PhD candidate in the international PhD program in Taiwan and Transcultural Studies at National Chung Hsing University, Taichung, Taiwan. His research interests include contemporary Chinese science fiction, posthumanism, ecocriticism, and cultural and gender studies. E-mail: shenpeng.kps@gmail.com

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of Chen's cyborg is discussed. The narrative illustrates how Chen uses the female body as a radical figure to challenge the concept of human beings through supporting the subaltern, thus subverting dominant Chinese culture. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the limitations of Chen's narrative regarding a cyborg and how his narrative reflects elements of traditional Chinese gender ideology.

Keywords: Chen Qiufan, science fiction, cyborg, *Waste Tide*

Introduction

Chen Qiufan is recognized as a major representative of the new generation of Chinese science fiction (SF) writers who have emerged to challenge the ideological state apparatus. Chinese SF critic Song Mingwei has called this new generation of Chinese SF writers “the new wave,”¹ which for him refers to a representation of the conflict between the modernization of China and its negative effects on Chinese society (“After 1989” 8). In 2013, Chen’s novel *Waste Tide* (2013) won a Chinese Nebula Award. The novel depicts a dystopian China where a female protagonist is forced to turn into a cyborg and seek justice for the subaltern who lives in a hazardous waste site. The novel is unique among Chinese SF works. As Song puts it, “The main achievement of *The Waste Tide* is that it opens up a journey to interiority for the new wave of Chinese sf. In contrast to Han Song’s focus on invisible social reality and Liu Cixin’s fascination with the sublimity of the universe, Chen’s novel points out a new direction for Chinese sf” (“Representations” 561). In the novel, Chen hybridizes elements of SF to expose negative realities in Chinese society during the age of China’s rise.

One of the major concerns in Chen’s *Waste Tide* (hereafter *Waste*) is the threat to the environment, and this is caused by the Anthropocene epoch. This term was introduced to academia by Paul Crutzen in 2000 to be an alternative to the Holocene, which is the current epoch that began 10,000-12,000 years ago (Foster 9). As the Holocene is an idea that underpins human civilization and gives priority to human knowledge, “[t]he Holocene, in other words, was the well-tempered cradle of civilization” (Horn and Bergthaller 2). Unlike the Holocene, the Anthropocene is used to describe the most recent period in the Earth’s history when human activity has had a significant impact on global systems. The term later became a concept for investigating the human influences on the environment, and called attention to the ecological crisis on the planet (20). As it emerges from an interdisciplinary practice, the term encompasses both environmental science as well as arts and humanities. Several scholars employ the concept to examine the environmental crisis related to the rapid modernization of China. For instance, as Lo Kwai-Cheung observes:

¹ Song’s definition of “the new wave” is borrowed from Anglo-American SF history and points to the subversive, cutting-edge literary experiments of these writers. Song lists three characteristics: “1) China’s rise as a one-nation utopia; 2) the myth of China’s high-speed development; and 3) the post-human utopia of technologies. In the science-fictional representations of all three motifs, prosperity begets apocalypse; the utopian vision of China’s ascendancy to a superpower as promoted by the government has often been shown with nightmarish and inhuman social and ethical effects” (“After 1989” 8).

If the blame of the Anthropocene does not just fall on the shoulders of the Western capitalist nations since their Industrial Revolution and global colonization from the eighteenth century onwards, the long course of China's history, that of the Han Chinese agrarian populations, in particular, is also responsible for the current environmental crisis. (3)

In the age of its rise, China has become one of the biggest nations in terms of the production of a huge carbon footprint. Its rapid economic growth has improved people's living standards at the expense of a great reduction of natural resources. Now, it appears that China, through great economic growth, has driven the Anthropocene because its development produces pollution and greenhouse gases. As a consequence, China's enormous industrialization has undoubtedly impacted the global environment for both human and nonhuman beings. This national rise is engaged with by Chinese SF as the genre is well suited to conveying scientific knowledge and depicting the power of the nation state. However, to offer an alternative vision of China's future, Chen's SF hybridizes local Chinese elements to mirror realistic environmental problems in the age that the country has acted as a catalyst for the Anthropocene.

Therefore, this paper attempts to scrutinize how Chen fuses Chinese elements with his posthuman narrative as a challenge to the Chinese premodern system, globalization, and environmental degradation, and as a way of creating a new direction of Chinese SF. In doing so, this paper employs the concept of a cyborg from Donna Haraway to explore the embodiment and functions of cyborgs, particularly in the context of Chinese society. Haraway defines a cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (149). Her concept of the cyborg aims to eliminate the binary in dualistic thinking, and it helps to explain how Chen challenges the Chinese clan system through the revenge of a cyborg who is transformed from being an oppressed underclass girl. Furthermore, this paper employs Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" to explore the environmental casualties that are "most likely not to be seen, not to be counted" (13). The crisis plays an important role in forcing the protagonist to transform into a cyborg. In this paper, four main discussions revolving around the issues of cyborgs and the environment are presented. First, this paper proposes the relationship between the premodern Chinese system and globalization, which becomes a cause of oppression of the subordinate population and that leads to the uprising of the underclass people in the novel. Second, the study examines how Chen adopts the cyberpunk form to expose problems of the premodern Chinese system and globalization. Third, the paper discusses how a cyborg is utilized to counter oppression. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion

of the limitations of Chen's narrative regarding cyborgs, and how his narrative might be compromised by traditional Chinese ideology.

The Premodern Chinese Clan System and Globalization

Waste Tide is set in the near future of China on Silicon Isle (Guiyu 硅嶼), which is located on China's southeastern coast. The island is a hub of the recycling industry where electronic and medical waste, such as prostheses, toxic chemicals, machines, and armaments from World War II are shipped to. On the island, the recycling business is dominated by three clans: Luo, Chen, and Li. Their businesses exploit the domestic migrant workers, who are called "the waste people," in order to make money. In this scenario, Chen depicts confrontations between the three clans, who stand for traditional Chinese hegemony, and Scott Brandle, a representative of an American company, as well as Chen Kaizong, a translator who was born in Guiyu but was raised in the US. The novel begins with the investigation of Scott Brandle and Chen Kaizong on the island. Scott's mission is to strike an agreement to modernize the island's recycling system. In reality, the corporation's true intention is to take advantage of the waste industry in China. The situation becomes intense when Kaizong rescues a girl named Xiaomi who is accidentally infected by a medical waste helmet, and who has escaped from Luo's clan to Chen's area. Xiaomi is one of the migrant workers whom the natives refer to as "the waste people." Later, Xiaomi ventures outside Chen's territory, and she is attacked by gangsters from Luo's clan. As she is on the verge of passing out, her mind unintentionally combines with a giant robot, which is waste from World War II. Then, Xiaomi is able to take control over her body as a robot, and she kills the gangsters who have been attacking her. The next morning, she is rescued by Brother Wen, who is the leader of the waste people. In order to obtain revenge for her, all of the waste people gather and plot against Luo's clan. As a consequence, the war between the waste people and the upper class begins. Simultaneously, Xiaomi finds out that she has been occupied by another subconscious digital identity in her body, called Xiaomi 1. This entity has the power to control the computer network, and it attempts to transform humankind into a posthuman population. In the end, the original Xiaomi decides to let Kaizong shoot her to stop Xiaomi 1's plan.

In parallel with the story, the novel's setting is revealed to be the author's hometown, which suits Chen's agenda of creating what he calls "SF realism." Moreover, it has an impact on the readers as it blurs the boundary between

reality and imagination. Among the new wave of SF writers, Chen believes that SF is a tool to reflect reality, and has emphasized the concept of “science fiction realism” (SF realism). In Chen’s words:

I’m discussing “realness.” “Realness” is not equal to “reality.” It is a product of logical self-consistent and rigorous thinking. This may differentiate “science fiction realism” from “realism” as it pushes the latter one step forward. With this step, the whole universe and history will become our game consoles and testing ground. We set rules, and these rules are based on our knowledge and understanding of the existing patterns of the world. Then, we add some variables based on the rules. . . . The whole world will be changed by the rules that we set. But all of these rules are logical, so the changes are understandable and determinable. Our stories will be performed on such a “realistic” stage. (“Dui ‘kehuan xianshi zhuyi’” 39)²

Chen demonstrates that he is attempting to set SF realism apart from traditional realism. His “realness” is akin to the verisimilitude that requires logical imagination and cognition in the narrative to reflect problems in societies. Echoing reality in the narrative can raise readers’ awareness of the real problems in China. Following this idea, Chen utilizes Guiyu to mirror China’s reality, as the island has been mainly affected by globalization. As Carlos Rojas points out:

In the 1990s and 2000s, China emerged as the world’s largest destination for the disposal of electronic waste, and until 2013 the town of Guiyu—in the Guangdong province municipality of Shantou, which in turn also happens to be the hometown of Chen Qiufan himself—was unquestionably the single largest recipient of e-waste in China, thereby earning it the title of “e-waste capital of the world.” (28)

Interweaving fiction with reality, Chen portrays Silicon Isle as a site for the entanglement between globalization and the traditional Chinese trade empires. Globalization grants freedom to developed countries to exploit developing countries’ resources. As Peter Christoff and Robyn Eckersley argue, globalization has “brought many benefits, including a wider variety of cheaper goods to those in the affluent consuming centers of the world,” and “these developments have clearly come at a considerable ecological price, particularly for those living outside the consuming centers” (7). In the novel, the effects of globalization are demonstrated by the coming of TerraGreen Recycling, which attempts to develop recycling plants in China. TerraGreen Recycling has the technology to recycle rare-earth elements in consumer e-waste. However, the pollution produced by the procedure significantly exceeds the regulations of the EPA (the Environmental Protection Agency). Also, the company must pay huge expenses, such as high labor costs and expensive insurance for the workers to follow the strict

² Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Chinese are by the author of this essay.

regulations (*Waste* 151). Therefore, TerraGreen Recycling has to develop a creative plan at the same time as working within the legal restrictions. As a result, the company transfers waste and pollutants to the vast regions of underdeveloped countries under the guise of a “Green Economy.” While helping these countries construct industrial parks and production lines, TerraGreen Recycling can reap the benefit of their unlimited cheap labor. In return, the company has the right to purchase expensive rare-earth elements at a great discount (99). This is a win-win situation for all parties. As the novel states:

Scott remembered that the last page of the internal report contained a large equilateral triangle whose vertices were colorful circles filled with bold, giant letters: “WIN-WIN-WIN.” *The government wants economic development: we give them GDP growth. The people want to eat: we give them jobs. We want cheap rare earths: all the costs have been carefully calculated.* (152)

Once the e-waste has been transported to China, it must be dismantled by the migrant laborers. The problem is that invisible toxicity from e-waste has an impact on the workers and their environment (41).³ This unseen biological problem is what Nixon calls “slow violence.”⁴ However, these environmental crises caused by globalization cannot be solved easily because this would involve local governments and the local Chinese social system. As Chen narrates, dealing with TerraGreen Recycling would satisfy the needs of the local government by ensuring “a long-term, steady cash flow that could be used to repay the interest and principle on the loan from the bank and bring about a handsome yearly increase in GDP” (99).⁵ To shed light on the problems, what Chen offers in his novel is more robust and insightful than what is provided by other forms of academic studies. His narrative is able to expose the logic of how the Chinese clan system takes control in the area, and how they seek commercial opportunities from globalization and cooperation with the local officials. This mechanism of the Chinese system is hardly mentioned in social science

³ According to research by Ni Hong-Gang and Eddy Y. Zeng on e-waste in China, during the process workers there would be exposed to polybrominated diphenyl ethers and “may carry these and other hazardous materials home on their skin and clothing, thus unintentionally exposing their families to harm” (3992).

⁴ To Nixon, slow violence refers to “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2).

⁵ In a study about e-waste in China, Scott R. Frey points out that the environmental problem “is a result of lax enforcement of regulations due to bribes and corruption. In turn, local government officials are evaluated by the central government in terms of overall economic growth in their areas, so there is a strong incentive for officials to protect e-waste activities since they contribute to the economic growth of the area” (84).

academic research or general information about China. Therefore, Chen's SF realism is able to demonstrate how the clan system underpins the slow violence and environmental problems of the area, and continues to exploit migrant workers in the e-waste industry.

In accordance with his SF realism, Chen portrays the realistic entanglement of the power relations between the Chinese clan system and globalization. These two socio-cultures have severely influenced humans and nonhumans on the land. In this crisis, what Chen tries to criticize is the corrupt relationship between the traditional clan system and globalization that engenders environmental degradation and exploitation of the poor. On the island, the clans have bargaining power with the government, thus forming a patronage system. Hence, with the clan system, the official laws are ineffective. In other words, both the laws and the government are corrupted by the power of the clans. In one conversation, Kaizong and Uncle Chen discuss the existence of the three clans:

It's because the clan system has evolved to adapt to the modern world. The contemporary clan is more like a joint-stock company. . . . All clan members follow the same set of internal regulations and possess the same company culture. Of course, since all members share the same family name and the same ancestors, there's more of a sense of identity with the joint enterprise, which makes management easier. (36)

Their conversations make it clear that the system binds all of its members with the Chinese idea of family. The system has been established because it can provide the clan members with a sense of security. As the uncle explains, "If a man is robbed or beaten up, a company employing him has no obligations to help him. Could he seek the aid of the law? If he's lucky, maybe it will work. But when all the legitimate paths are ineffectual, the only people he can count on are the people in his clan" (36). Their discussion reveals that the official law of the government is impotent within their society. Instead, the law that they need to abide by is the law of the jungle. Having adapted to the modern world, the premodern clan system is omnipotent, and thus able to negotiate with the government and introduce corruption to the legal system. As the novel describes, "A real-life example of the Matthew effect, the triumvirate of Luo, Chen, and Lin clans had in effect been reduced to reign by the Luo clan alone. It was even powerful enough to influence government policy" (19). In this case, Chen's narrative also incorporates the reality of China.⁶ The novel reveals that the clan system and the local officials cooperate in order to earn benefits from each other.

⁶ According to Jennifer Joines's study, "[w]hile Beijing feebly attempts to exercise its power, the local authorities develop new ways to bypass restrictions: cover-ups, misreporting, and lax enforcement. The two realms are constantly resisting the other, and this is all to the detriment of the Chinese people" (11).

Therefore, the local government has to turn a blind eye to this connection in order to maintain its power. Given this situation, it is ironic that Chinese society still adheres to the premodern clan system, despite the country's development.

Against this backdrop, the corrupted Chinese clan system is challenged by the coming of Scott Brandle and Chen Kaizong, who are representatives of modern globalization outside China. Scott, as a foreign representative of TerraGreen Recycling, which is planning to expand its business by establishing a high-technology recycling plant, comes with the excuse of improving the quality of life for the people on the island. In fact, Scott's true mission is to track down the Arashio virus, which has been accidentally transported to Guiyu. Although Scott uses the environmental proposal as a cover story, he still plays an important role in challenging the local sources of power. This is revealed in what Scott says when he negotiates his business proposal with the clan leaders. He says, "Have they discussed the technology? Or all the benefits that will accrue to Silicon Isle because of the project? Their children and their children's children will no longer have to breathe this shitty air or truck in drinkable water from far away" (223). It emerges that the coming of Scott and TerraGreen Recycling shakes the status of the premodern clan system. As Director Lin says:

TerraGreen Recycling always treats the three clans as obstacles, instead of applying the principle of divide and conquer and allying with some to check the others . . . TerraGreen Recycling always wants to appeal to the people of Silicon Isle with environmental protection and productivity gains, but you don't seem to understand that robots are even more efficient and environmentally friendly. The natives are concerned about what will happen to the excess laborers and whether they'll turn into a roving, destabilizing force. (136)

It appears that Scott's proposal is rejected by Director Lin. The reason is that Guiyu does not need any help because it is a temporary space that humans can use at will. While the upper classes want to make as much money as possible from the e-waste business, the migrant workers do not care about the environment because they want to earn money and leave this place (23). This narrative reveals how Chinese culture contributes to environmental catastrophe. However, Scott and the company's clean technology start to pose a threat to the dominant Chinese culture. In this way, Chen Qiufan reflects the conflict between local and global values through the outsider, Scott. Chen's narrative attempts to demonstrate that the situation in the zone is too complex to be resolved because of the clan structure and the local authorities' interference, which render the environmental policy ineffectual.

Furthermore, globalization and the clan system have induced slow violence through the displacement of humans and nonhumans. As Nixon

argues, “Attritional catastrophes that overspill clear boundaries in time and space are marked above all by displacements—temporal, geographical, rhetorical, and technological displacements that simplify violence and underestimate, in advance and in retrospect, the human and environmental costs” (7). Here, the e-waste and the migrant workers are displaced in Guiyu due to globalization and the clan system. This displacement of the workers and the e-waste is caused by external and internal factors. On the one hand, globalization pushes the e-waste to China. On the other, it is the clan system in cooperation with local officials that underpins the environmental degradation and slow violence toward the people of the underclass. This exhibits Guiyu’s actual circumstance, where “[i]n order for these gadgets to be broken down safely and to not spread toxic contaminants, much of the disassembly requires manual labor. While this can be more cost-efficient, the manual labor force in developed countries is more expensive than those in developing countries” (Joines 5). Ironically, what creates the displacement of the e-waste and the low-wage workers originally comes from the developed countries that gain the benefits of the cheap costs of the Chinese laborers. The long-term danger of death from ingesting harmful e-waste particles, however, must be borne by the Chinese migrant workers themselves. In this light, Chen’s SF realism exposes how globalization affects the developing countries through the e-waste’s displacement; this compels the reader to realize how human activities affect the Earth’s system in the Anthropocene epoch.

As such, the relationship between China and the world facilitates the exploitation of minorities, nature, and women in Chinese society. At this point, the Chinese cultural background plays an important role in Chen’s implementation of the cyberpunk and cyborg narratives as these genres are Sinicized⁷

⁷ Both terms “Sinicize” and “Sinicization” generally refer to China as a center. For example, as Evelyn Rawski claims, Sinicization is “the thesis that all of the non-Han peoples who have entered the Chinese realm have eventually been assimilated into Chinese culture” (842). For Rawski, the term has a connotation of assimilation or colonization of other cultures. However, in this essay, the definition of the term is borrowed from Richard Madsen. Madsen categorizes the term into “Sinicization from above” and “Sinicization from below.” The former means “following the commands of the Communist Party. As one Chinese scholar remarked, making a pun based on similar sounds for Chinese words, *zhongguohua* simply means *tinghua*—obedience” (2). The latter refers to “what Western scholars—social scientists or theologians—might call indigenization, localization, or enculturation” (2). Nonetheless, Madsen also argues that “the boundary between Sinicization from above and below is often blurred” (2). In this essay, the term Sinicization refers more to the latter one, which shares some similarities with Shih Shu-mei’s concept of Sinophone. Shih’s concept cuts across the boundary of Chinese ethnicities, by articulating the varieties of Sinitic-languages, as well as negotiating with all China-centric ideologies (710). (For more on the concept of Sinophone, see Shih’s essay.) Based upon Madsen’s definition, which suits the idea of countering the hegemony in Chen’s novel, here Sinicization refers to the hybrid and adaptive strategies when appropriating foreign concepts. The term will be utilized to examine the adaptation of cyborgs and cyberpunk in the Chinese context.

and applied to address these problems in the Chinese context. To counter the realistic environmental problems and the oppression of the workers, Chen's SF imagination expands the effects of the toxic waste, by engaging a hybridization of cyborg narratives and cyberpunk to break down the oppression of the clan system. This will be discussed in the following sections.

Sinicized Cyberpunk: A Hybridization of Premodern Chinese Culture and Technology

As represented above, the power relations become dominant on the island because the clans and the government encourage the exploitation of the migrant workers who work there. To counter the problems, Chen combines classic cyberpunk with Chinese cultural elements to deal with the class oppression under the clan system. In terms of its cyberpunk characteristics, the novel conforms to classic elements of the genre through the representation of the oppression and resistance of the underclass characters utilizing technology and cyberspace. These components are akin to traditional cyberpunk elements, which have the common quality of presenting low-life struggles in a posthuman society under the influence of high technology. Chen's underclass characters take on cyberpunk roles and challenge the natives and the upper class on the island. This echoes what Lawrence Person writes in his "Notes Toward a Postcyberpunk Manifesto": "Classic cyberpunk characters were marginalized, alienated loners who lived on the edge of society in generally dystopic futures where daily life was impacted by rapid technological change, a ubiquitous datasphere of computerized information, and invasive modification of the human body." To Person, these cyberpunk characters are either anti-heroes who are engaged with class struggles or are outlaws. However, Chen's cyberpunk stylistic features are not only displayed through the use of cybernetic augmentation to fight against the natives, but also by combining this with premodern Chinese culture.

Hybridizing his narrative with classic cyberpunk, Chen utilizes the character of Kaizong to cut across the boundary between classes. In one instance, Kaizong sneaks into a camp of the waste people to find Xiaomi, but he is captured and beaten by a "waste" woman because she mistakes him for an intruder. After this event, Kaizong accidentally loses his right eye, so he has to have an artificial lens implanted. Nevertheless, he does not blame the waste people for hurting him. Instead, the cyborg eye enables him to be more understanding of the waste people, and to help them in the uprising against the natives. As the novel describes, "[H]e [Kaizong] knew only that he was closer to Mimi [Xiaomi],

at least a little” (*Waste* 219). As a result of his transformation into a cyborg, the binary opposition between the classes is undermined, and hence one could argue that he also becomes a cyborg in Haraway’s sense. The transformation of Kaizong does not mean that he has transcended humanity in that he has a superhuman power in transhumanist ideology, but it enables him to understand other classes or nonhuman others. Therefore, his artificial eye symbolizes the equality between classes.

Incorporating his story with the context of premodern Chinese culture, Chen blends his cyberpunk narrative with local Chinese superstition or spiritual beliefs to make a juxtaposition between modern and premodern culture in Chinese society. As the novel portrays:

The face of the lohsingpua—a local witch of Silicon Isle—appeared especially hideous in the light of the green-glowing film applied to her forehead: her eyes seemed to be two bottomless dry wells under the shadow cast by her brow bone, and no light reflected from her irises. Accompanied by an electronic prayer machine, she muttered an incomprehensible incantation in the slow rhythm of some ancient chant like a blind beast. (53)

In the novel, spiritual beliefs are combined with technological gadgets, such as chanting machines, or the polyimide films charged with magical symbols. This demonstrates that futuristic technology coexists with superstition and folk beliefs which are functional in society. This combination highlights the dilemma between modern and premodern culture in China as Chinese society is still affected by Chinese spiritual culture despite the country’s modernization. Possibly, this dilemma may result from the ongoing process of modernization. As Chiara Cigarini argues:

We can consider China’s encounter with Western technology and modernity from the last Qing period (1902-11) as some sort of very unique Chinese disenchantment: On one side, science and technology were progressively introduced after China’s contact with Western Imperialism. On the other hand, this relationship also produced a progressive attempt to “liberate” China from supernatural forces (somehow connected with tradition), that culminated with the birth of a new Chinese “atheist state” in 1949. This process of modernization, yet to be completed, resulted in fact in the coexistence, in contemporary China, of three systems of life, one pre-modern, one modern and one postmodern producing a never fully accomplished abandonment of a supernatural dimension, inextricably connected to a pre-modern life experience. (235)

It appears that the premodern coexists with modern discourse in contemporary China. As China has to adapt to external conditions and strive for a high degree of development in order to compete on the global stage, alienation when confronting its own culture is one result. As Han observes, “Chinese sf writers

are in a rather contradictory situation. Science, technology, and modernization are not characteristic of Chinese culture. They are like alien entities. If we buy into them, we turn ourselves into monsters, and that is the only way we can get along with Western notions of progress” (20). In the metanarrative of China’s rise, SF writers in this era, including Chen, engage in self-reflection or self-criticism in the context of the nation’s discourse of modernization. Therefore, Chen’s cyberpunk motif is not only utilized to erode the dominant culture, but also to mirror the contradictions between modern and premodern culture resulting from rapid development of the nation.

The Sinicized Cyborg: Resistance to Environmental Crisis and Chinese Oppression

In addition to hybridizing cyberpunk, Chen also exposes the impacts of the Anthropocene and the clan system through the use of Xiaomi. He also exposes the problems of environmental degradation, which impacts humans and nonhumans on Silicon Isle. Chen’s narrative reveals the struggles of humans and nonhumans that are poisoned or exploited by the industrialization of China under the influences of the clan system, globalization, and the government. This causes a condition that could bring about the oppression and subordination of both humans and nonhumans, especially women. On the one hand, the natives do not wish to replace the waste people with technology from the Western company because they want to retain their stable workforce. That is why the waste people are treated the same as disposable garbage and have low wages. On the other hand, the local Chinese government is ignorant of the low living standard of the waste people because the government has to maintain an ambiguous relationship with the clan’s economic system. In this respect, the local clan’s power relations with the government and globalization help catalyze the effects of the Anthropocene, and engender the manipulation of subordinate humans and nonhuman nature.

Against this backdrop, Chen depicts Xiaomi as a cyborg who fights against the exploitation of women and the environment. To emphasize how the cyborg is created, the narrative concentrates on the transformation of the innocent Xiaomi, who is a victim of slow violence and oppression in Chinese society. Within Chinese anthropocentric and premodern domination, the female protagonist and nonhumans alike are exploited by the system. To begin with, at a point where Xiaomi has not yet become a cyborg, she takes Kaizong to see sparkling jellyfish in the sea. There the naïve Xiaomi learns a lesson from a

boatman about jellyfish in a contaminated environment. She subsequently realizes that the jellyfish gather in these polluted locations every winter because the power plant's discharge has increased the temperature of the sea. As the environment has been disrupted, the jellyfish are forced to spawn near the plant because other areas are severely damaged. In this way, the narrative raises our ecological consciousness of the fact that the Earth's system has been interfered with by humans. The story of the jellyfish thus becomes a parable that parallels the lives of the migrant workers on the island. In other words, the jellyfish are metaphors for humans and nonhumans that have been polluted and displaced under the impact of the Anthropocene. As Chen Kaizong narrates, "[S]he [Xiaomi] and others like her had left their homes to come here under the euphemism of 'economic development' so that they could eke out a living in pollution and poison, suffer the prejudice and exploitation of the natives, and perhaps even die in a land far from home and loved ones" (*Waste* 67). The novel explicitly portrays the lives of the marginalized people who suffer from the state's high levels of technological development. The workers on Silicon Isle are not the original local people as they have been tricked or trafficked from somewhere outside the island. They have no choice but to risk their lives here to make a little money, with a few hoping to return to their hometown. These groups of people are ostracized from society and treated like garbage. The people are displaced in Nixon's sense because they are forced to be aliens within their own country. Ironically, Chen depicts the waste people on the island as ignorant. As the narrator portrays, "They seemed to think this was the natural state of the world and nothing disturbed their joy" (25). Despite the presence of contaminated materials, such as black water, black shores, and dark green ponds, the people deal with these "black" objects without any fear or protection. For example, women are using their bare hands to wash laundry in the black water. Children are playing on the black shores (25). In actuality, these black elements are noxious substances, such as plastics ashes, polyester films, fiberglass, and so on. For the people there, playing with and having contact with these poisonous materials becomes part of their lives, as if they were organic. However, these lethal substances are overlooked because only gradually do they seep through the body of every living thing on the island and have long-term effects that include death. In this light, the narrative demonstrates the process of slow violence, meaning that their lives would not suddenly be in jeopardy as the violence has a delayed effect. As Nixon points out, "[I]t is those people lacking resources who are the principal casualties of slow violence. Their unseen poverty is compounded by the invisibility of the slow violence that permeates so many of their lives" (4). Similarly, the waste people have a tendency to disregard the dangers of the

environments they live in as a result of their extreme poverty. In addition, to raise the recognition of environmental problems, the novel reveals the effects of these unknown toxins to the reader. For instance, the novel provides data on the increasing number of cancers in the area, or the baby that is born deformed (*Waste* 41-42). Moreover, it shows that the cancers and other mysterious diseases are not only caused by one factor, but by the overall condition of all contaminated or toxic materials in the areas. As a result of these terrible environmental conditions, Xiaomi, the cyborg conceived as an emblem of resistance, is created to combat the power dynamics that damage the island.

The effects of the Anthropocene and slow violence cause Xiaomi to eventually become a cyborg after absorbing contaminated materials. This process is triggered when Xiaomi accidentally wears a helmet when she is playing with Brother Wen. The helmet is a kind of waste prosthesis that contains viruses. It is experimental headgear created by Project Waste Tide that had been used to test and control a chimpanzee's brain during World War II. At the same time, over the long period of time that she has been a waste girl, for years she has had contact with contaminated waste without protection. As a consequence, the toxic substance has gradually infiltrated her flesh. When the virus from the helmet invades her brain, it integrates with all the previously absorbed toxic materials in her body. Then, it suddenly emerges as a superpower when she is abused, so that she can merge with a giant machine. As Xiaomi's body is infected by imported waste that comes from all over the world, her transformation represents the corporeality of all nonhuman materials on the earth. In this condition, Xiaomi 1 emerges as another digital cyborg identity. Xiaomi 1 declares to Xiaomi 0 that "I'm accidental; I'm inevitable. I'm a new error. I'm the master and the slave. I'm the huntress and the prey. . . . I'm only a beginning" (276). To some extent, the "beginning" as she claims could imply a disruption to anthropocentric humankind. As all of these nonhuman materials are combined to make an animated Xiaomi 1, the transformation into a cyborg might be interpreted as the revenge of nonhuman entities. In this regard, her body becomes an embodiment of a cybernetic entity and organism in Haraway's sense. The main mission of Xiaomi 1 is similar to Haraway's cyborg figure that functions to erode the dualism in Western culture and thought. As Haraway puts it, "Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia" (181). Like the concept of Haraway's cyborg, the emergence of Xiaomi challenges the dualistic thinking that separates humans from nature, as she is the corporeality of polluted materials.

Furthermore, the cyborg indicates the dissolution of dualism in Chinese culture, as Xiaomi obliterates the boundary between the natives and oppressed workers. While the government and the clan system choose to suppress the issue of environmental damage, Chen portrays Xiaomi as a catalyst for the people to become aware of the mistreatment of the environment and the marginalized. To illustrate this, the rape of Xiaomi becomes the awakening of the migrants to fight for their rights. When Xiaomi returns alive after nearly being beaten to death, she is naked and bloody, and she walks to the village that is crowded with the waste people. The return of Xiaomi makes Brother Wen realize that “she was a reminder to every witness that they were also only the walking dead of the future. She was like an oracle bringing us a message from the spirits: a person lives not just for the fact of existence itself. The war has begun” (*Waste* 136-37). Ultimately, the revolution of the waste people led by Xiaomi successfully counters the clan system. Thus, the cyborg (Xiaomi 1) is a signifier for the political struggle in which Xiaomi plays a role to unite all the waste people in rebelling against the natives.

In terms of Sinicized cyborgs, Chen adds a unique characteristic of the cyborg contextualized in the Chinese environment. In Chen’s novel, Xiaomi is utilized to castrate the dominant premodern Chinese culture. Xiaomi, after becoming a cyborg, goes to Luo’s house to perform an oil fire ritual that Luo Jincheng believes can cure his son. Xiaomi discovers that the boy has been sleeping for months because he has been afflicted with the virus. Then, Xiaomi uses her ability to access the boy’s nerves, and to normalize those nerves in his brain again:

Abruptly, Mimi [Xiaomi]’s mental tentacle hardened and reached into the boy’s Broca’s area, located in the inferior frontal gyrus of the left hemisphere, which was responsible for speech production and control. Like a precise laser scalpel, the tentacle manipulated this most refined and complex artifact as though the wielder were in possession of billions of years of practice and experience. . . . Slowly, in response to his father’s cries, the boy opened his eyes. Out of kindness, Mimi had not modified his Wernicke’s area, responsible for understanding language, so that he could still understand the Silicon Isle topolect. However, for the rest of his life, he would only be able to speak in Mandarin with its four sparse tones, like the outsider waste people that his father so despised. (176)

After Xiaomi’s modification, the boy loses his native language and talks to his father in Mandarin. It turns out that Luo Jincheng, who is the leader of the clan, is very disappointed to hear the Mandarin accent of his son because they always use local Guiyu topolect to symbolize their privilege on the island. In this case, the topolect that differentiates his son from the migrant laborers who speak Mandarin is disabled. In fact, the natives want to maintain their status

quo through their supposedly superior culture and language, so they refuse any forms of hybridity that would signify contamination by the lower class. As such, the configuration of the language is critical because it can alter how one perceives the world. Chen's narrative articulates the function of the cyborg in Haraway's sense because Xiaomi has the ability to undermine the dominant language through her "writing." According to Haraway, "writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs, etched surfaces of the late twentieth century" (176). To Haraway, the cyborg emerges to challenge the norms of Western culture through languages. As Haraway argues, "Cyborg politics are the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism. That is why cyborg politics insist on noise and advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine" (176). In Haraway's view, the mission of the cyborg is to promote a variety of languages while eradicating the dominance of one language. Similarly, Xiaomi also writes the language through her coding ability. With her writing, Xiaomi is able to contaminate the dominant culture, by subverting the language of the natives. This aspect of Xiaomi's operation is even more advanced than Haraway's cyborgs as Xiaomi rewrites the language of the dominant culture from the inside.

In the novel, the political struggle is rendered through Xiaomi's writing. This is akin to what Haraway claims about writing and political struggle. As Haraway points out, "Contests for the meanings of writing are a major form of contemporary political struggle. Releasing the play of writing is deadly serious. The poetry and stories of US women of colour are repeatedly about writing, about access to the power to signify; but this time that power must be neither phallic nor innocent" (175). In addition, Chinese elements are engaged in Chen's narrative. Unlike the status of language and dualism in Western culture, in Chinese culture, there are contradictions between official spoken language and dialects. Official Mandarin refers, instead, to the language of the lower class. To challenge the dominance of the natives, Xiaomi has to change the dominant language. Xiaomi modifies Broca's area in the brain of the boy, which controls language output, but she does not modify Wernicke's area, which controls language input. In this regard, Xiaomi implants the ability to listen to other languages, so now the boy can understand the different languages of the natives and the underclass. This could be interpreted as suggesting that Luo's son is modified to be a cyborg in Haraway's sense as well. The coding of language for the boy denotes the dismantling of the barrier between the classes. He is a new mutant seed that shares a quality with the marginalized people. In this regard, the boy is similar to what Haraway asserts.

As she claims, “[T]he main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential” (151). The boy signifies the beginning and the future of the new generation as he is modified into an “illegitimate offspring.” Furthermore, changing the oral language of the son directly subverts the core value of the Chinese patriarchal culture because the son plays an important role in Chinese ideology as the successor to the head of the family. By castrating the Chinese patriarchal system, the cyborg Xiaomi sows a seed of hope for future generations.

In the end, through the efforts of Xiaomi to eliminate the dualist thinking with regard to class issues, the waste people receive some compensation for healthcare and illness. As the narrator explains, “TerraGreen Recycling formed a special foundation to use part of the profits to aid those migrant workers who suffered damage to their health as a result of their work in waste processing. Xiaomi was the foundation’s first aid recipient” (*Waste* 293). However, it is ironic that they only receive compensation for the healthcare; the novel makes no mention of how the government addresses or compensates for other issues, such as poor wages or the damaged environment. In Chen’s narrative, it seems that despite the cyborg’s efforts to free the underclass, the problems in Chinese society are not easily resolved.

Sinicization of Cyborgs and Its Limitations

Overall, the cyborg in Haraway’s sense is articulated through Xiaomi. In Haraway’s view, “[t]he cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity” (150). The rejection of unity lies within the contradiction of Xiaomi 1 and Xiaomi 0 in the novel, which demonstrates a dissolution of the unity. The unity or utopia that Xiaomi 1 seeks could help transform humans into being posthuman, but her invisible force that attempts to change humankind also becomes a corrupted mode of thinking. The domination of Xiaomi 1, however, is collapsed by the humanistic traits of Xiaomi 0, who always shows her sympathy toward the subordinate group and the environment. In order to preserve both humans and other creatures, Xiaomi 0 gives up on selfishness. This narrative is akin to Haraway’s cyborg in the sense that “the cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality,

the two joined centres structuring any possibility of historical transformation” (150). In this regard, the self-destruction of Xiaomi 0 could signify a new alternative mode of “imagination” that rejects dualism. In other words, the shutting down of the cyborg suggests a breakdown of the boundary between humanist (Xiaomi 0) and anti-humanist (Xiaomi 1) ideology. This narrative of the cyborg points to a posthumanism movement that embraces other possibilities for human and nonhuman survival in the Anthropocene.

Chen adapts the concepts of cyborg and cyberpunk to counter the oppressive conditions in China. First, the cyborgs and cyberpunks are echoing the spirit of the May Fourth Movement. As Cara Healey argues, “[L]ike the May Fourth literature of almost a century ago, Chen Kaizong’s initial self-righteous attitude contrasts a provincial China with a more enlightened West” (14). Apart from echoing the May Fourth Movement’s spirit, the cyberpunk narrative mirrors ambivalence toward traditional Chinese culture (12). In a similar vein, Xiaomi the cyborg is Sinicized in terms of conveying the spirit of the May Fourth Movement as well. As discussed above, Xiaomi has castrated the dominant language. Here, the topolect of Guiyu in the present is compatible with the hegemony of classical Chinese that dominated the people during the timespan of imperial China. In this sense, the cyborg is echoing Lu Xun, who advocates liberation through the idea of the vernacular language that was used during the May Fourth Movement (Ropp 60). Although the concept of the cyborg originates from Western culture, it is appropriated to represent problems in the Chinese context. In addition, based on the aspect of language in Haraway’s cyborg, cyborg writing emerges from a dualism such as oral and written languages in Western culture (Haraway 175). As Haraway puts it, “Writing has been crucial to the Western myth of the distinction between oral and written cultures, primitive and civilized mentalities, and more recently to the erosion of that distinction in ‘postmodernist’ theories attacking the phallogocentrism of the West” (175). In Chen’s novel, the dualism in Chinese culture is about the conflict between the topolect of the native and the official language of the workers. It is perverse that the official language in Chinese culture becomes the subordinate one. Although applied in a different context, Chen still conveys the main idea of the cyborg in undermining dualism in Chinese culture.

Second, the figure of the cyborg is adapted in the Chinese context to criticize the long history of hegemony and patriarchal attitudes toward women, which has been passed down to the present. Xiaomi is transformed into a cyborg when she is raped and almost killed on the Tide Gazing beach. The beach is the location where the ancient people of Silicon Isle, who date back to the Tang dynasty, practiced “palirromancy,” a technique of divination (*Waste* 101).

In the ritual, special ropes and knots were used to bind the sacrifice so that the creatures could not escape. The living sacrifice was thrown into the ocean by the ancient people of Silicon Isle, who then waited on the Tide Gazing beach for the drowned animal to be washed ashore. The soothsayer would make a prediction of the future based on the condition of the corpses that were washed up. It should be noted that humans can be used as sacrifices for palirromancy as well (101). In this regard, the rape of Xiaomi on the Tide Gazing beach is comparable to—and a reproduction of—palirromancy. In the past, the creatures were sacrificed to serve human divination. In the present, Xiaomi is sacrificed for the patriarchal clan system that reproduces the same tragedies which have happened in the location. Chen creates the contaminated cyborg who, emerging from the Chinese sacred place of the sea, calls out for the subordinate and the oppressed throughout Chinese history. Accordingly, Chen illustrates the Sinicized posthuman future in which the posthuman concepts are hybridized in the Chinese context.

Nonetheless, when employing Haraway's cyborgs to examine the novel, it becomes clear that not all aspects of the cyborg can apply to Xiaomi, particularly in terms of gender. In Chen's narrative, the cyborg is Sinicized by preserving the humanistic values of women. Ultimately, the silencing of the cyborg at the end could represent the reaffirmation of the conventional values of Chinese women. In this regard, one can observe that Chen's cyborgs are restricted by conservative Chinese gender discourse. To further explain, Xiaomi, who comes close to achieving success in emancipating women from patriarchy, is already devastated when Kaizong shoots her. As the novel depicts, "The minefield in Mimi's brain had been eliminated by this carpet bombing, but the damage to her logical thinking, emotional processing, and memory was severe. Currently, she was the mental equivalent of a three-year-old" (293). This damage to Xiaomi's brain signifies two phenomena. First, it reflects the fact that Chinese society rejects posthuman and feminist ideology. The radical Xiaomi 1 prevails over Xiaomi 0, and is even stopped by Chen Kaizong, who represents masculinity. It is perverse that the powerful cyborg on the verge of changing humanity's future is demolished and transformed into an innocent state by the Chinese male. Second, the unconsciousness of Xiaomi also signifies the silence of women in Chinese society. The silencing of Xiaomi is reminiscent of the traditional patriarchal ideology in Chinese culture, which advocates that women should be obedient and subordinate. The narrative implies the lack of gender understanding in Chinese culture. As Chen Qiufan argues:

Chinese contemporary science fiction is insufficient in terms of writing and exploring sexuality and gender issues. Or it stops at the superficial level as symbols, and has

not yet really entered the level of cultural foundation. This phenomenon is inseparable from the degree of gender awareness in the entire society. (“Kehuan”)

Chen’s observations reveal that mainland SF writers share comparable features in attributing traditional Chinese values to females. Apart from Xiaomi in Chen’s work, Liu Cixin and Wang Jinkang also share similar characteristics in creating idealistic female characters who sacrifice their lives to save the world. For example, the female protagonist Cheng Xin in Liu Cixin’s *Death’s End* (2016) has to sacrifice her life to save the universe. Likewise, the traditional female protagonist in Wang Jinkang’s *Ant Life* (*Yisheng* 蟻生, 2013) fights to protect her virginity as well as the village from her mad scientist boyfriend who wants to transform human civilization into an ant-like society. This illustrates that the use of women to preserve civilization is a common theme among these SF writers. In other words, their conventional gender ideals are contained within the female body. This tendency is comparable to Chen’s finding that Chinese culture is unable to sustain in-depth discussions on gender issues. Ironically, it appears that even the cyborgs of Chen himself are limited to the Chinese context. Therefore, it is feasible to conclude that mainland Chinese SF authors are incredibly conservative when it comes to gender awareness.

Conclusion

Chen Qiufan’s posthuman elements emerge from oppression within Chinese culture and engage Sinicization, in that they are hybridized with Chinese elements, such as premodern Chinese culture, the Chinese hierarchical system, and traditional Chinese values. His Sinicized cyborg figures and cyberpunk help expose many layers of conflict and category in Chinese society, such as humanism/posthumanism, dominant/subordinate, and nature/humans. In the broader picture, *Waste Tide* is a representation of Chinese SF’s movement in the twenty-first century, as the Chinese elements and contradictions in the novel parallel the Chinese national ambition that pursues the growth of its commercial and political capital, but excludes people of poverty. As Song observes, the posthumanism in *Waste Tide* represents “a nightmarish counterpart to the ‘Chinese dream’” (“Representations” 560). By adopting cyborgs as a form of resistance against the premodern system and globalization’s oppression, Chen Qiufan seeks to predict a bright future for China. Despite being a reproduction of traditional Chinese gender ideology of Chinese writers, his cyborg reimagination is an effective strategy for addressing Chinese societal problems. Under the Chinese government’s strict censorship of literature,

Waste Tide is one of a few Chinese SF novels that explicitly criticizes Chinese society through the implication of what Chen calls SF realism.

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中國化的後人類未來： 重新想像陳楸帆《荒潮》中的 賽博龐克與賽博格

摘要

陳楸帆是中國新一代科幻小說作者，善於利用科幻小說寫實主義探究中國社會問題。2013出版的小說《荒潮》獲得全球華語科幻星雲獎，小說描述反烏托邦式的後人類中國社會裡，被迫變形為賽博格的女主角為同處危險廢棄物掩埋場的社會底層社群尋求正義。本論文試圖檢視陳楸帆的《荒潮》如何應用賽博格來應對全球化、環境破壞、以及中國社會前現代制度霸權所帶來的影響。本論文應用唐娜哈洛威（Donna Haraway）的賽博格概念，探討中國社會脈絡下賽博格的具體化與功能，以及源自羅伯尼克森（Rob Nixon）討論環境問題的「慢暴力」概念。本文主要討論四點：第一，本文認為陳楸帆的科幻寫實主義可以闡明前現代的中國宗族制度與全球化之間的關係，此關係也是小說中造成環境剝削以及次人類與非人類被壓迫的原因；第二，本文檢視陳楸帆在賽博龐克敘事中如何整合中國元素，抵抗對於中國社會邊緣化族群的壓迫；第三，中國化的賽博格敘事說明陳楸帆利用女性身體作為一個激進的形象，透過支援社會底層挑戰人類的概念，顛覆強勢中國文化；第四，陳楸帆敘事中的賽博格反映傳統中國性別意識形態的元素，本文最後將討論其限制。

關鍵字：陳楸帆、科幻小說、賽博格、《荒潮》

