

# **Urbanity, Cyberpunk and the Posthuman: Taiwan Science Fiction from the 60's to 90's**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper proposes to trace the history of three generations of SF writing in Taiwan since the 60's. In developing the thesis that these writings form a corpus of fiction dealing with cityspace within a movement from Humanism to the post-human, this paper concentrates on themes and motifs such as Cyberian community, the hyperreal and virtual reality, the spectacle society (mediascape), the body and monstrosity in relation to gender politics, and so on. The ultimate purpose for bringing forward these categories for an analysis is to argue for a potentially positive process of identity formation for those Chinese who live in megacities in Asia, Taipei or Hong Kong being excellent examples. In this direction, the paper will also explore issues such as metropolis and metropolitanism set at the present juncture of a cultural globalism/localism paradigm.

## **KEY WORDS**

cyberpunk  
Taiwan Science Fiction  
Hsi-kuo Chang  
urbanity

the Posthuman  
Catherine Hayles  
cyberspace  
the hyperreal



It may not have been recognized by the general reading public that Taiwan SF has gone through its three generations, both in terms of thematic concerns and its underlying philosophy.<sup>1</sup> By following these stages and with special attention given to its changing views on issues surrounding humanism (the liberal subject vs. virtual community), the body which lives in an urban setting, etc., I hope to develop a thesis in this paper that Taiwan SF has led the way of coming out of the traditional brand of Chinese obsession with humanistic values, then gone into a readiness of embracing the disembodiment in cyberspace as a counterpart of the western cyberpunks, and finally prepared itself for a more balanced, post-cyberpunk kind of position which takes up the concept of co-evolution of the humans and their environment.<sup>2</sup> It is my view that Taipei as a modern city in Asia has been playing an important role in support of such a complex movement. Urbanity here merges with technoculture to provide a space in which Chinese humanism finds its transformation into something broadly identified as the posthuman. Meanwhile conceptual categories relevant to contemporary SF such as spectacle society (mediascape), imploded cyberspace, postcolonial (postmodernist) geography, the virtual communitarianism of informatics, even interculturalism, become the substantial components through which my thesis will be formulated. But cities are crowded (most of the time overcrowded) with people. How these people look at themselves and those around them, now as an index of values from the point of view of the posthuman, will be delineated through a reading of Taiwan SF, with specific reference to the possibility of its establishing a technoscience hermeneutics in time to come.

Starting from the late 60's, SF by Taiwan writers has now well established itself with a traceable development of styles and themes. Roughly speaking, the 70's witnessed an upsurge of interests on media, environment and urbanity in SF writing. Writers such as Chang Hsi-kuo 張系國, Cheung Hsia-feng 張曉風 and Wong Fan 黃凡 wrote stories expressing their concerns about social movements, overpopulation, city squalor, pollution and media surveillance. Understandably they were alarmed by what Taipei as a city would be like, say, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and many stories, consciously or unconsciously, take up their cues from the Western tradition of Lang's *Metropolis*, Clark's *The City and the Stars*, Nolan's *Logan's Run*, Blish's *Cities in Flight* and even Silverberg's *The World Inside*. In many ways all these can be placed within the tradition started by H. G. Wells's *Time Machine* and can be summed up in the 70's by Silverberg's "Urbmon" and "Home urbmonenis" which develop a certain claustrophobia which induces a hallucination as monstrous hands coming out of the walls to get them (Silverberg 116). As for the Chinese writers, underground places below the city do play a role of first registering the deterioration of urban environment, only that this time our Taipei warlocks became scientists and engineers. In Chang Hsi-kuo's "It's Ridiculous!" 豈有此理, three famous classical beautiful women are brought back to the present by a typically crazy scientist whose research laboratory is situated "at the oldest building in the Arts Faculty, without even a window" (Chang 48).<sup>3</sup> Other stories, such as "Zero Chances" 零機率 by Cheng Wen-hao 鄭文豪 and "Sinking Night" 夕沉 by Ho Fu-chen 何復辰, all have their scientists living twenty or thirty floors below ground or in some maze-like structures guarded by twenty-inch-thick steel plates.

It would have been nothing much had there been no other points to be made about Chinese SF's following the step of this Western tradition of city space. What is more important, as I would like to suggest, is that this marginalization of the scientists' space as part of the contemporary cityscape can be considered a symbolic rendering of first, how SF as a literary genre fares in the light of Chinese Humanism, and second, how it is threatened and maintained through SF,

while being parallel to the speedy urban development of Asian cities such as Taipei. Our first point here hardly needs elaboration. Having been influenced by the Western views in, say, romanticism, aesthetics, psychoanalysis and so on, the Chinese conception of what constitutes a good literary text is still enmeshed in general in the mires of the whole modernist thinking. Added to all these would be the sustained human values, a kind of classical anthropomorphism. For example, when a translator tries to render E.T. in Chinese, the word "ren" 人 (person, man) has to be there to make up "Outer-star-man" 外星人 (Wai-xing-ren). Our second point, however, does warrant a description of Taipei having undergone a transformation into a "postmodern" city, postmodern in the Jamesonian sense of the word.

It was in the 70's and 80's that Taipei evolved into a mega city both in terms of economic advances and scale of urbanity. In the midst of this bloom came also, of course, confusion and social problems. There had been, according to urban theories, "serious contradictions between metropolitan and peripheral spaces" (Hsia 248-52). The rapid growth of the economy, population and architectural construction created a certain "model of distortion" in relation to the cultural imaginary, resulting also in a deterioration, estrangement and falling-out of cultural space through a process of "dependent urbanization." Due to uneven distribution of wealth, cultural space and consumption of, say, European goods, Taipei experienced a certain dislocation and irrelevancy between its people and the alienated style of cultural consumption. Therefore, if we look back at the first generation of Taiwan SF writing, we will be able to detect certain resentments against such an urban development, which in turn could also speak to their status and condition as SF writers go against the grain of the literary mainstream. The scientist in "It's Ridiculous!" portrayed as "weird and confused," always wanting to communicate with the ancients rather than people in reality, also represents the kind of new consumers in the capitalistic system imposed upon them, both being marginalized and unorthodox.

SF of the 80's can well be placed alongside postmodernist culture as well as the full scale onslaught of the so-called information

age. Again, Taiwan SF is no exception, and it can also be analysed as a truthful reflection of the second generation of SF writing. During this time a strong impact was effected by a group of young writers in Taiwan, who did not so much come out of the underground, so to speak, but rather, marched bravely into the imploded space of urbanity. In this context, one must mention Chang Ta Chuen 張大春, a prolific writer, a self-proclaimed prodigal son of contemporary literature, a keen eye on all kinds of postmodernist cultural imaginary, including of course the relationship between information and urban mapping. When his "The Metropolitan Szemee" 大都會的西米 first came out in the early 80's, Taipei was practically announcing its allegiance with the postmodernist cities of the world. Here the dichotomized world in the Wellsian sense is maintained, but the underground of modern cities is transformed into the ultimate space of implosion. Szemee, as a synthetic being who lives in a metropolis under extreme surveillance, takes refuge in his "quarters" which takes the form of a bed, toilet and a rocking arm-chair all in one piece within a coffin-like room (Chang 9). This extremely compressed space of privacy, itself forcing a regression process for this adult cyborg's sexual desire to be fixated back to anal pleasure, can only be invaded by a T.V. screen which is a means of total control by the authority. This story, however, marks a transformative process from the external "real" cityspace into a Baudrillardian hyperreal, resulting of course from the estrangement of a distorted model of city zoning and structuring as mentioned above. From this point on, the hyperreal of modern urbanity will pave a way for the advent of the cyberian culture or the "cyber-real" in the next few years.

Towards the late 80's Taiwan SF writers read Gibson's *Neuromancer*, and they were fascinated by the hectic and fast development of mass media, information super-highway, global networking of electronic enhanced communication such as the Internet MUD and ICQ. In other words, these writers viewed themselves as the adopted children of the cyberpunk culture whose gospels have been preached by, say, Gibson and Sterling. Intrinsic to its ideological and cultural nature, cyberpunk was an ideal art form at the time to reflect on a

repertoire of the postmodernist life style, and its themes include issues such as cultural and urban identity, representation (visual excessiveness in the spectacle society) simulacrum, sex and gender, together with what Frances Bonner calls the four Cs: computer, corporation, crime and corporeality (Bonner 191). The Baudrillardian hyperreal is the outcome of what environment in the postmodern condition does to the neurons of the human mind within an urban setting. It is like reality having “become a case of nerve—i.e., the interfusion of neurons system and computer matrix, sensation and information, so all battles are fought out in feeling and mood, with dread exteriorized in the world itself” (Csicsery-Ronay 274). For David Porush, “Punk is natural urbanity” (Porush 255). As for the Chinese, we have already given some attention to the futuristic mediascape as early as the 60’s, say, in Chang Hsi-kuo’s “Dream-Cutting Romance” 剪夢奇緣, in which dreams are totally wiped out from the world with the advent of the so-called “Sky-Vision” 天視, a kind of computerized VR program connected to an electronic chip planted into the human brain. But what excludes it from the cyberpunk proper, however, is that while resorting to a humanistic value at the end, the story lacks the double-coding of a postmodernist discourse, which emphasizes the positive-negative dialectic or love-hate relationship of the cyberian subculture in its attitude towards human-machine interface.

One of the characteristics noticeable in the Taiwan cyberpunk SF is that it now tends to be beyond the humanistic and moral overtone—as in the tradition of Zamyatin’s *We*—in which individual values are threatened. The implodedness of urban space is now made more acute by the fact that what makes up the “outside world” in stories of this kind is the endless horizon of the virtual environment, the virtual world of other people’s private life. Here cyberspace is, as Kevin Robins has it, both a “nowhere and somewhere” (Robins 136), both in a decentered condition of subjectivity and a dialectic of dislocation/relocation of senses of community between the inside and the outside. With stories such as Ping Lu’s 平路 “Chronicles of A.I.” 人工智慧紀事, there arrived on the Taiwan SF scene an in-depth exploration of the human-machine relationship in which the question of

whether machines are capable of feeling and of possessing emotions is explored; and it is the dramatization of the postmodernist query of a unified and centered subject which qualifies these works to be early cyberpunk literature. Other stories such as Yeh Li-hua's 葉李華 fiction push Chinese SF through the themes of computer, A.I., and VR into the cyberian world proper, by an abandoning of the humanistic concern altogether. Yeh's story "The Game" 戲 for example, not only thematizes the virtual world, but it also embraces the idea of game playing as the ultimate ground of value, and such a move goes hand in hand with the postmodernist categories such as post-industrial, leisure-seeking society, in which cybernetics no longer implicates the human with the social and psychological formations that define the liberal subject.

This attempt at leaving behind values surrounding a liberal subject, especially in the Chinese humanistic context, may have been spurred on by the kind of feverish technophiles such as Sherman and Judiths who think that VR "is the hope for the next century [which] may indeed afford glimpses of heaven" (134). However, as the title and theme of "Game" makes clear, the cyberpunk writers in Taiwan at this stage were not even concerned with the possibility of considering VR as "communitarian places online" (Rheingold 115). It is found to be still immersed in "a need to dwell in fiction" where "cyberspace's inherent immateriality and malleability of content provide the most tempting stage for the acting out of mythic realities, realities once 'confined' to drug-enhanced ritual, to theatre" (Benedikt 6). We should also note here that these Taiwan imaginers of the cyberspace still find themselves intoxicated in the Gibsonian rendering where flesh has become data incarnate. As James Kneale puts it, VR is "a thin space, in which speed and movement are the key metaphors for spatialized experience" (Kneale 206).

Discussion of cyberpunk literature in Taiwan SF will inevitably lead us to the third generation of SF writing, both in terms of periodization as well as in subject matters. Again, in the early 90's there was an unprecedented flourishing or achievement in Taiwan, where a group of very young writers such as Chang Chi-chiang 張啟疆, Hung

Ling 洪凌 and Chi Tawei 紀大偉, joined forces to bring Taiwan SF into a new era of posthumanism.<sup>4</sup> Together they initiated a movement in the Chinese speaking world in which humanistic values of all kinds are toppled, done with. These people are the generation who read Burroughs, Ballard, Kathy Acker, Russ, Delany and Cadigan, Charnas and Elizabeth Hand. In films, they were fans of *Aliens*, *Terminator*, *Naked Lunch*, *Crash*, *The Net* and especially *Blade Runner* whose future noir became a kind of cult manifesto through which creative imagination and imagery found their home. Under such umbrella terms as postmodernism, feminism and postcolonialism, these writers took it upon themselves to explore the hitherto untapped areas, namely eroticism, city, body politics, cultural hybridity, diaspora, globalism, postnationalism, etc. Placed well within the tradition of Gibson and Sterling's kind of the cyberpunk, these writers produced stories which not only revolve around themes such as video game, A.I., VR, gender, and queer under the notion of cyborg and so on, but they also support each other in representing a kind of absolute world of simulacrum in which the virtual and the real have no significant boundary whatsoever. Among all these, two themes stand out to grasp the imagination of Chinese readers within the dialectical interaction of cultural production and consumption. They are first the theme of monstrosity, and second, all computer related categories, both of which can be referred back to our concerns of cityscape and the post-human. Let us now take a close look at some stories, and let us subject them to a close scrutiny to derive a better understanding of how these issues come together to make up a general picture of Taiwan SF at its best.

The Taiwan version of "virtual imaginary" (Jordan 179), following the tradition of its counterpart in the West, is best read as a particular kind of obsession with cityscape. Negative space such as back alley, dark corners and basement are the favourites where the interface of human and machine takes place. For example, when Hung Ling's "Story of Memories" 記憶的故事 (1994) presents a post-industrial, late capitalistic but ideologically controlled society in which any resistance can only be part of the hegemonic scheme of



international corporations, her characters move in and out of cyberspace to such an extent that nobody knows which is which. The result is that the illusiveness of a unified subject in such a world of inverted millenarianism, as Jameson depicts it, is doubled up by the discovery of the hero at the end of the story that they themselves are after all replicants, genetically engineered by the corporation research projects. Chi Tawei's "A Rose Grows out of His Eye and Your Palm" 他的眼底你的掌心·即將綻放一朵玫瑰 (1994) also plays with the idea of "games of Hallucination." Set in a consumer society of the future where endless duplication is the only philosophy, and where paranoia and conspiracy are inherent to the hegemonic structure of corporations which lurks behind everyone, the story thematizes the culture of simulation to the extreme. Using icons such as mirrors and media vision to heighten the effects of visual excess and prosthetics, it portrays a kind of continuous and multiplying implosions where "the limited infinitive space is entering the unlimited infinitive space" (Chi: 104). The corporation "Imperial" "does not occupy land; it only occupies people's senses, their souls and dreams." Here, senses become the only reality, an all-neurons world of cyberian culture. Again, between science, technology and organized resistance, there is "an unholy alliance," in "the underground world" where the readers cannot help but be sucked into the obscenity, fascination and paradox of voyeurism. In this space where a game of hallucination unravels itself, all relations between people, between people and society will be drawn into a whirlpool of infinite self-fertilization and multiplication. Echoing the dictum that technology is us, the hero has a final realization that "my own shadows keep multiplying, flying out of the mirror in all directions; finally, all shadows blend and wriggle into the slow motion of a dark screen" (105).

Chang Chi-chiang's "Big Sisters are Watching You" 老大姊大注視你 is my second example. This work is unique by virtue of its hybrid discourse through an amalgam of elements such as A.I., VR, gender politics together with classical Chinese ghost stories. This is an ingenious combination which follows also a tradition of using as a hero a detective who finds himself (or herself, since gender positions

are much more fluid in this world) dragged into an intriguing murder case on the net. This is a world of absolutely no physical contact; and the hero is brought up in the “crooked and circling-round kind of negative space” of the metropolis landscape. In a world where “Cyberspace supplants physical space” where people “break free, like the monads, from bodily existence” (Heim 99), there is in the story always a merger of different realms of existence, among the scenes of murder, sub-way station, the Ghost House of Pleasure in the VR game, and the cyberspace within himself, the “Buddy-companion” computer planted inside his body and consciousness. There are therefore a number of elements we find in this story which may help to qualify it as a part of the cyberian subculture. First, the motif of drug or Euphoria is largely used to heighten the cyberpunk consciousness, especially when the hyperdimensional terrain is mapped out within the cyberspace where “thoughts are beheld rather than verbalized” (Rushkoff, *Cyberia* 93). Such a psychedelic exploration is clearly presented in the story to heighten the hero’s search for a personal identity. And during this search through the door between humanity and hyperspace, writers call for an awakening of “a virtual-reality nightmare,” where corporation becomes the sender who gains “control of physical movements, mental processes, emotional responses and apparently sensory impressions by means of bioelectrical signals injected into the nervous system of the subject” (Rushkoff, *Cyberia* 221). Chang Chi-chiang makes no mistake in presenting the so-called Big Sisters as underground witches and terrorists and the totalitarian authority all at once, hence, blurring even the line between coercion and hegemony.

In terms of cityscape, we are led by the hero to roam around many a back street with “serpentine and crooked circuits of negative space,” which means also “every wet and dark rotten corner of the city” (24). Within the super-midi computer matrix there is a totally different world replete with “mutilations, scrabblings, collages, pasting, blip images exchangeable with each other when projected out in three dimensions.” This seems to be the only way out for our detective to the other world where his “Dark Tales Club” 聊齋館

provides services of “wild grass, lone graves, ruined temples on deserted hills, all glittering with lights of different kinds. It’s almost like the merging line between the cliff and the sky where a crack of lightning blasts out, or it’s like that far-away bottleneck of the upper corner of the world of deaths which has no colour nor sign-post” (12). In this way Chang quite ingeniously brings together the Western high-tech world of VR and a Chinese classical world of deaths. But what is more interesting for us here is how he creates at the same time a monstrously fantastic negative space of a human-vampire world within the cityscape. Here is a good example:

Don’t have to turn it on, already I feel it, it’s strong: that “woman” is shaping, materializing herself at my back.

Here and now, I (should) be standing in the upper level of the Dark Tales Club, at the centre of a passage the 4<sup>th</sup> floor below the tube. Darkness everywhere; the closest old-style lamp is 50 meters, ahead of me, dimmed, softened, very much like the merging line of a bottle neck of cracks in the Dark Tales World.

What strikes me as strange is why didn’t I take the lift after leaving the club, ending up here walking in this winding maze of circuits and damp steps without my burning it? This is like . . . why isn’t the location of the club chosen at the commercial centre of the city? Why not at the floating areas of villas or the panhouse on the newly built inverted pyramid centre? Why does it have to be here . . . old town below the deserted railroad station?

“Lone young man got lost in the underground, found murdered . . .” Not knowing since when, my companion had been switched on. (13)

Between switching on and switching off, the author here has a firm grasp of what cyberpunk literature has been emphasizing, namely the very juncture of interaction between human and machine at the end of neurons of the mind. The love-hate relationship between

computer and human sensation or feelings and even passion within our psychological realm of existence undergoes a perfect implosion, albeit it's exploding into pieces within it. During this process of merging our cityspace into the cyber-real, with our standing right at the middle of two mirrors, we no longer can locate any postmodernist remnants of hyperreal in which the moving subject is still able to narrate its relation with the space, despite its being a confusing and dislocated one. "Big Sisters" seems to have been sucked into "the multiple reflections of a prism," a both real and unreal world all at once, "an enamel garden out of the Kaleidoscope" where what is real or true can only be "hidden in the infinite expansion and creation of ephemerals" (14). In a way, this is comparable to the voodoo elements Gibson himself describes in his sequels, which Bukatman argues should be "conceived as a *kinetic* system of empowerment, a religion explicitly involved with the tactics of the street" (Bukatman 213).

Chang Chi-chiang's classical Chinese Dark Tales, as a motif, functions as a kind of other-worldliness which paves the way for a kind of exoticism in VR in an age of the posthuman. With the issue of gender, however, Chang's story displays a certain political ambiguity, or rather, ambiguity seems to be the author's message when it comes to the role the big sisters, the woman ghost and the hero's mother play in the story. Qualities which have been traditionally attributed to women in general, namely, mysteriousness, fluidity, medusa-like intrigues are used concomitantly to add to the suture of the world of death and electronic wilderness. What is more important is that there is a deep sense of cynicism on the part of the author against femininity, in which big sisters are simply the counter-part of the traditional "big brothers" in the tradition of dystopian literature. For a more gender-conscious or feminist position, we will have to hark back to Hung Ling's works, especially the already mentioned "Story of Memories," which generate the most powerful creature-like energy in the whole history of Chinese SF with a specific intention to overthrow patriarchal domination. For her, both cityspace (cyberspace) and posthumanism are tools for establishing her unique brand of hybrid discourse, a mixed style embracing gothic horror, fantasy, vampire and

SF. It is also a discourse of subculture, with its unmistakable defiant attitude which gives support to explicit purposes of resistance through a series of images such as monstrosity, mutilation, animality, eroticism and deaths (or undeads).<sup>5</sup>

At the age of 24, Hung Ling has published four or five books of both fiction and criticism. Together, they form a canon of monstrous writings on monstrosity as weapons against all kinds of cultural domination. Here I would like to go into some details of one of her novels, *Rain of Roses on the Judgment Day* 末日玫瑰雨 (1996) for an illustration of the way this third generation of Taiwan SF writers is concerned with cityscape and the posthuman. True to the style I just mentioned, *Rain of Roses* is a blending of Japanese comics, Indian mythology, Chinese ghost tales, Western vampire stories and Western SF. In terms of style, such a mix enhances a sense of dialectic and interactive structure of literary production and consumption, retaining in the front at all times its own defiant position of subversiveness against the mainstream, especially against the everlasting dominant literary world of Chinese humanism. There is a continuous effort on the part of the author, to want to topple the traditional Chinese sense of what a novel should be like, very much in the sense of how gothic in 18<sup>th</sup> century was doing to the "novel proper," as Halberstam has theorized it.<sup>6</sup> Through this hybrid discourse, Hung is able to make full use of a hermeneutics of excessive meaning, particularly relying on the uniquely multiple extra-otherness as represented by all kinds of monstrosity. As Cohen theorizes, one of the seven theses characteristic of the monster is that it does dwell at the very "visible edge of the hermeneutic circle itself" (Cohen 7). Hence a monstrous text becomes the sacrificial altar on which we find the gothic style of vampires, Indian gods and their reincarnation, mutants, beast-like life-forms, corpse-eating half-animal/half humans, even blood-thirsty parasites living in the body of others, in a word, monsters of all kinds. On the SF side, these characters are to live together with avatars in cyberspace, half-harp half-human beings who are in love with genetically bred life-forms and of course many different models of cyborgs.

The main purpose for creating such a world of monsters is of

course to subvert humanism and with it, the hegemonic power of mainstream literature. Through multifarious forms of interaction, the very interface of monster/human/machine is rendered possible by a certain electronic eros, a kind of flesh and blood crossing-over—through explicit descriptions of desire, passion and love of course—so that what it means to be human is seriously put into question. It is a process of pushing the reader to follow a kind of hermeneutic circle through which the “othering of self” is achieved and a surplus of pleasure is made parallel with an excess in meaning through the act of reading. Inside the matrix or the virtual reality, subjectivity is confronted with mutilation and fragmentation, so that human hypocrisy is unredeemably destroyed. As Hung’s cyborgs are provided with the kind of destabilizing qualities described by Donna Haraway, they are able to liberate human sex from its false naturalism through a thematization of its constructedness; these alternate life-forms are empowered to find a way out of the impasse of cultural confrontations between, say, humanism and posthumanism, the global and the local, monoculturalism and interculturalism. As to her vampirism, Hung follows the tradition of the Western undead from Byron onward, tracing the vampires’ heritage in queer discourse all the way up to Anne Rice and others, always keeping a close touch with monstrosity as the ultimate motivation of taboo and resistance in terms of identity and gender politics. By also identifying itself with the arch monster in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Hung’s text highlights its own textuality, placing itself always at the in-betweenness of narrating and interpreting, producing and consuming, pushing all the time its power of reminding us that we are all blood thirsty monsters after all. Such a mix of things hammers home the fact that it is monstrosity itself which generates all sorts of narrative or textuality, its body always at a point of being chopped to pieces, never to appear as a whole. From the perspective of the mainstream, therefore, Hung Ling’s texts become the symbol of “the feared” invasion of the popular, a productivity of monstrous power, which also represents pop, feminist/queer, or passion for the “other” of all kinds.

With Hung Ling’s cityspace turned absolutely inward into the

narration of cyborgs within the cyber-real, an illusion could be created that all references to the city have been left behind and forgotten in our analysis of Taiwan SF in terms of cityscape and posthumanism. However, this fear of losing the theme can be redeemed somewhat by our reminding ourselves of the fact that cyberspace is simply an imploded landscape created through modern technology or is an electronically enhanced means of communication. It is a kind of cityscape which can best be labeled as "the future noir," most characteristic for Asian cities such as Taipei. Not only can such a merger of cityscape and mediascape be found in some SF writing in Chinese, but the cityscape of these places itself becomes the source of inspiration as a model setting for SF—both in the West and in Japan—related to either cyberpunk or simply computer culture in general. If Antony King was right to think that cities with a colonial history have the best chance to become megacities of the world, then looking at cities such as Taipei in terms of their relationships with the imploded media world, be it films, T.V. or computer, would be useful in our determining how these cities, in one way or another, become an appropriate model for a kind of futuristic setting that SF is prone to depict. This kind of discussion will provide another way of explaining how the imploded space within an electronically designed world is instrumental to the shattering of humanistic values, and also how the negative space related to the first generation of Taiwan SF mentioned above is now turned around to be a positive one by our adding another dimension of negativity, that of cyberspace onto it. By positive I refer to the kind of possibility for citizens of these cities to acquire a sense of identity within a matrix of cultural hybridity, diaspora, postcolonialism, postnationalism and global/local dialectics.

I have on another occasion tried to delineate a scenario of a postmodernist cityscape, by using Hong Kong as an example, which has attracted the interest of art designers in films such as *Blade Runner* and the Japanese animation *Ghost in the Shell*.<sup>7</sup> There I pointed out that the unique combination of decadent, anarchic but fantastic cityspace on the one hand, and a hi-tech, hyperrealist one created by some mismatched electronic scenes in some shopping areas, on the other

hand, has become a perfect model of a futuristic city of melancholia, with its intertwining of past and future. I have also endeavored to work out details for Japanese artists to take Hong Kong street scenes as characteristic of the flows and excess or even flood of information in designing settings for powerful animation. Cities like Taipei and Hong Kong being swamped with billboards, neon lights and symbols, are now places where massive communication systems are being built into their urbanscape. This can also be related to the kind of reality these cities are faced with, where mediascape does display an ever fluid capability of information and where the fluidity of ideoscape is “complicated in particular by the growing diaspora” (both voluntary and involuntary) of citizens “who continuously inject new meaning-streams into the discourse of democracy in different parts of the world” (Appadurai 11). Such a combining of cityscape and mediascape, therefore may have a role to play in an “enculturation” process of the radically disjunctive global flow of culture in the contemporary world. And it was my contention in my earlier argument that the traumas of deterritorialization and reterritorialization with which dwellers in these cities are faced, as presented in their lived experience of the “other spaces,” will have to be sorted out by our theorizing the process of global interculturality.

My present concern, however, is to try to establish a closer connection between cityscape and mediascape in terms of how such a relationship fosters a kind of Lacanian subject-formation for city dwellers in Asia, and it is my argument that this process does inspire SF film designers, on the one hand, and can be considered very science fictional, on the other. It is as if Taipei, if one were to follow its postmodernist logic of spatial structure of an absolute mixture of East and West, ancient Chinese geography and modern, high-tech architectures and so on, were itself a SF narrative, telling stories about its citizens in a futuristic setting. It is also my claim that, given the urban and social space of this city, the kind of capitalistic and commercialized condition, with its alluring signs and sights, there is a desire on the part of city dwellers to be possessed with “a heightened sense of self-dispersal,” that is the inassimilable otherness of these



sites, and also a desire of an “unfulfilled promise of the urban spectacle, the consumption, the lure of pleasure and joy which somehow seem destined to be always disappointed” (Lapsley 193-94). As real, the city is beyond the possibility of achievement, and this particular register of human reality, according to Lacan, represents precisely what is excluded from our reality. There is therefore the paradox of our getting back to reality by virtual reality, or by a posthuman way of electronically created reality for a regaining of some kind of humanness.

What these stories have inspired in our thinking, through the future of urban development in terms of social space, may have been a reminder of the necessity of turning our attention to the importance of both spatializing history and historicizing geography, as Soja suggests. Maybe in a sense Taipei citizens have been replicants who lack a history of identity. Maybe through art, film and architecture, we will be more equipped to take a closer look at our environment and our relation to it as an exploration of our past. We want to ask first if our historical space in such a postmodern urbanism has been an index of our looking for a genuine history of our own, and second whether anything can be done about it. In this light I would like to invoke Soja’s theory of the “thirdspace” which I think will eventually pave the way of our discussion about the future with a more radical sense of urbanism for Taipei people at large. This kind of “thirdspace,” or for that matter Foucault’s idea of “heterotopias,” can join forces with the posthumanizing effects of the electronic media’s creation of reality for city dwellers in Taipei.

Facing this “immense cultural pluralism” (Jameson 57) of our age, city dwellers in Taipei feel the urgent need to make sense of these changes. In the face of the disturbance and dislocation of history, culture and identity, migration and marginality throughout their colonial days, Taipei’s people have long practised the art of cultural blending, and they are more than ready to develop new forms of polyglot cultural creativity. SF, as we have seen, has proven powerful in delineating a kind of transformation from presenting negative space to registering both the urbanspace and generic space to a post-

human “thirdspace” congenial to a utopian impulse for subject formation. This thirdspace, however, can be described as moving in and out of sight-being-site, mediascape-being-urbanspace until a “theatrical space” (Hetherington 142) is established. Through a study of Chinese SF relevant to urbanity and posthuman strategic maneuvering, it is hoped that we can have a grasp of how citizens in these cities can learn to identify the changing forms of multiculturalism and to explore the multiple structural possibilities for the Chinese speaking world to “offer an alternative modernity and globalism” (Liu Kang 168). Between the diasporic flow of peoples, commodities, money and hybrid cultures, on one side, and politics of location, ethnicity and commitment to indigenously historical selfhood, on the other, we may be able to project a scenario on the parts of all Chinese a forceful heterogeneity of cultural praxis, an increasingly differentiated global landscape of interculturality. Movements and settlements of the city as a flow, and so borderization of the world, as many cities in the world are now characterized by this “woof of human motion” (Appadurai 7), have propelled citizens of Asian cities to follow “ways of going out and coming back in” (de Certeau 160). It is of course this possibility for these citizens to create narratives—SF narratives in our case—which reflect their “subject’s self-positioning and social agency in a cosmopolitan context” (Ong 755) that makes Taipei one of the global megalopolises in the future. As cosmopolitans, and under concepts such as trans-ethnicity, transnationality, hyphenated identities, and through the push and pull of globalizing tendencies, it is hoped that new combinations can be created by Chinese SF in a plurality of knowledge, culture and their continuous fusion.

All the above concerns encountered by our third generation of writers of cyberculture lead inevitably to yet other issues which are just as important to the post-cyberpunk era in the 90’s. Within cultural studies, critics are now interested in how cybertelematics or urban telematics studies can be best put alongside discussions of technocity development in the wake of global/local dialectics. Having gone through stages of extremity by the technophiles and the technophobes, who in turn can be registered by their respective construction

of teletopia and technodystopia, both subsumed under the fate of crude scientific and economic determinisms, cyberculture now joins forces with the latest development of informatics theories and technoscience hermeneutics, with a rather conspicuous orientation towards a general concept of a posthuman discourse. With an emphasis of, say, "geographic information systems," (Curry 129-50), virtualities of all kinds in electronically enhanced communication and media, cyberpower and politics of the internet, cybercritics are now more prone to constructing a balance between cyberspace or matrix and the actual world we live in. As Kevin Robins advises us, we can only begin to imagine virtual communities from the real world, and "it is time to relocate virtual culture in the real world . . . we must demythologize virtual culture if we are to assess the serious implications it has for our personal and collective lives" (Robins 153).

With this return to our offline reality, especially to our urban setting of technocity, it is quite easy for us to accept Katherine Hayles's argument that we should be theorizing ourselves away from the absolute disembodiment of the virtual world. By drawing our attention to the ironic link between the Cartesian subject and liberal humanism, Hayles is keen at warning us of the danger of being raptured out of our body at the sharp turns of the information superhighway. Tracing the development of informatics—defined as "technologies of information as well as the biological, social, linguistic, and cultural changes that initiate, accompany, and complicate their development" (Hayles 29)—Hayles works out a history of cybernetics in three stories: first, how information lost its body, second, how the cyborg was created, and third, how the liberal subject is giving way to a different construction called the posthuman" (Hayles 2). These stages are then in turn put back into a "feedback loop"—itself vital to the development of cybernetics—to establish a "robot teleology" (Hayles 3) within a process of privileging pattern over presence, reflexivity over homeostasis, randomness over predicability. Here, as the liberal subject is at a point of being toppled over, a posthuman perspective seems to be within sight:

In the posthuman view, by contrast, conscious agency has never been "in control." In fact, the very illusion of control bespeaks a fundamental ignorance about the nature of the emergent processes through which consciousness, the organism, and the environment are constituted. Mastery through the exercises of autonomous will is merely the story consciousness tells itself to explain results that actually come about through chaotic dynamics and emergent structures. If, as Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, Evelyn Fox Keller, Carolyn Merchant, and other feminist critics of science have argued, there is a relation among the desire for mastery, an objectivist account of science, and the imperialist project of subduing nature, then the posthuman offers resources for the construction of another kind of account. In this account, emergence replaces teleology; reflexive epistemology replaces objectivism; distributed cognition replaces autonomous will; embodiment replaces a body seen as a support system for the mind; and a dynamic partnership between humans and intelligent machines replaces the liberal humanist subject's manifest destiny to dominate and control nature. (Hayles 288)

As mentioned above, the virtual worlds that are created in Taiwan SF have in general followed the Gibsonian tradition in which cyberspace provides a fascinating "hide-out" for hackers or electronic cowboys who jack into the matrix through their "disembodied consciousness" (Jordan 20). These virtual worlds, for, say, Chang and Chi, are characterized by their "shimmering" and "opalescent" effects of intoxication, a trembling quality of sensation so alluring that visuals become music (Morse 180). However, there are still other SF works which manage to resist this cyberpower of disembodiment by striking a balance between the online and offline worlds, even though they are considered to be part of this movement. I am here referring to Wei Ke-fung's 魏可風 "Inane" 尹南, a story about a girl working in a florist shop who is helped by a computer programmer whose

physical being has already been transferred, much like Dixie Flatline in *Neuromancer*, into the virtual world as Einstein II. The story centers on the power of creativity in flower arranging generated from this computer avatar, and then the loss of it due to lack of love and trust between the girl and Inane. Whereas Lucy's world is occupied by characters who are realistically anchored in Taipei city, the programmer Inane is represented as an electronic being in cyberspace with "his head tightly inscribed into the white-square screen of the computer" (65). But what makes this story different from an old style SF which (as in the first generation works in Taiwan mentioned above) turns around to reconfirm humanistic value, is its weaving together of the cyberworld and offline reality without privileging one or the other. In other words, the physical world of "people" is never in danger of being "disembodied" into virtual reality, and the potentials of leaving it open for a parallel "coevolution" structure for both are clearly present. Responding to Lucy's selfish request for appropriating other people's talents as her own, Inane advises her to try to "recognize her own ignorance" instead, and to accept the fact that the computer's scanning device also absorbs information of people's brain waves in a collective way (74), and that in the VR here, personal interests will have to step aside in favour of the community's good. When Lucy is faced with the random appearance of noises, people on the street and families which do not really make too much sense to her, she is actually facing what Hayles calls "flickering signifiers" through which "information is identified with choices that reduce uncertainty" (Hayles 30-31). Here, what Lucy sees are "magnetic patterns in a multidimensional computer space" (Hayles 36), wherein "data are thus humanized and subjectivity is computerized, allowing them to join in a symbolic union whose result is narrative" (Hayles 39).

It would be an exaggeration if I were to suggest that Wei Ke-fung's story represents a post-cyberpunk SF in Taiwan which clearly advocates for a human-machine coevolution point of view. However, instead of grounding the liberal subject in the teleological trajectories associated with humanism, the story at least opens itself up to the

possibility of taking prerogatives over into the realm of the posthuman. As a discourse of chaos accelerating the evolution of biological and artificial life, the posthuman cannot be considered antihuman. Instead, it “envisions the conscious mind as a small subsystem running its program of self-construction and self-assurance while remaining ignorant of the actual dynamics of complex systems” (Hayles 286). As different from the subject which roots itself in presence as a unified, self-centered entity, such a discourse is “located within the dialectic of pattern/randomness and grounded in embodied actuality rather than disembodied information . . . and offers resources for rethinking the articulation of humans with intelligent machines” (Hayles 287). What is lacking in the story, however, is direct references to a process of interpretation, to a kind of technological sublime based on a chaos theory of cultural significance, without which one can hardly call the story a harbinger of the posthuman. With this in mind I would draw upon yet another story: Chang Kuo-li’s 張國立 “The Man on the Bicycle” 自行車上的人 for a reading which will hopefully lead to a sense of direction as to where the future of SF writing in Taiwan could be located.

Despite the usual gimmicks such as robots, a magnetic floating train, computers, genetics and cloning, “Bicycle” turns out to be softer than a soft-core SF story. In fact, it should be read as a parable for science and technology, a drama of how environment, information, genetics and philosophy of technology can be woven together to form a technocultural discourse particularly relevant to our urban lifestyle in the new millenium.<sup>8</sup> The story begins with a self-proclaimed “most calm observer in the whole great Taipei city” (Chang Kuo-li 48), a cyclist hired to circle around on a five-storey high platform at a shopping centre seven hours a day, presumably as a live commercial selling bicycles. Once his “circling” observation routine kicks off, the narrative goes from one character to another within a spiral structure, looping back to the cyclist at the end. In between, or, within the purview of his observation which covers the “7.8 million population of Taipei” in general and the “41,326 occupants of the thirty-storey building opposite him,” we meet an unhappy entrepreneur worrying

about his women, a genetic scientist who has cloned a girl 19 years ago, and a Dr. Liu, a statistician who has designed a computer formula of love. Having been frustrated in his own romance despite the formula, he is now told by his chauffeur that he must buy and learn to ride a bike to be successful with women, as the chauffeur himself has found love from the cloned girl who is now a prostitute; finally, the chauffeur's friend by the name of "Hsing Fu" 幸福 or "Happiness" thinks that he has fallen in love with the same girl but in fact with another clone who sells bicycles in the shop. Riding his bike, and discovering the cyclist up on the platform for the first time, Hsing Fu now suddenly realizes that "it never came to his mind at all that there are so many people riding on bikes in this great city. There is even one pushing his bike and another putting it on his shoulder. He does not know the person doing the pushing, or else he would for sure go up to him and ask him whether there is a connection between bike pushing and reasoning. Then he realizes that the person shouldering the bike is Prof. Wang, the scientist, thus would it be the case that shouldering rather than pushing the bike is more profound when it comes to thinking? Prof. Wang never answered; he simply muttered to himself: "Why is it that she loves me and also loves so many others? Why didn't I think of the possibility that the data I downloaded to the computer would fit so many others?" (58).

The richness of the symbolic significance of this bicycle which takes centre stage in the story should be readily recognized. As both the contact and interface points between human and machine, it provides a particularly ideal image for our looking into how technoscience will become central to the social and cultural structure of societies in the near future. The Chinese term for bicycle "self-propelling vehicle" is infused with multiple ironies, since it also points to the fact that its rider has to contribute quite a bit of physical power to it, hence insisting in a way to put a check on technological automaticism. There is in the bicycle a certain balance or mutual dependency between human and machine that has been lost with some other automatic devices. As far as the story goes, therefore, there are two seemingly disparate worlds, one about human love in a contem-

porary (or near future) urban setting, the other about techno-automatic extremes such as a computer formula, cloning and electronically enhanced or mediated communication machines. Between them we have the bicycle, and when the author makes a connection between the ways (some of them absurd) the bicycle is "used" and human reasoning or thinking, he is virtually drawing our attention to the possibility of a hermeneutics of technosciences. It may be that the story is telling us that human relationships (love in this case) should be uniquely humanistic and that information could be simply a "probability function with no dimensions, no materiality, and no necessary connection with meaning" (Hayles 52). But through its very mechanical characteristic, a bicycle is an apt metaphor for improving human capability, physical or otherwise, by "splicing" it into a feedback loop with machines. Here we see a process of evolution for informatics to go beyond homeostatic stability and move into cybernetic reflexivity in which the observer himself is deeply involved, without at the same time falling into the trap of determinism.

It seems that "Bicycle" does provide us with a dramatization of the condition in our technoculture where a cybernetic movement is enacted for "the hyphenated subject" to be transfigured into a function of splicing human and machine together within a looping circuit. From here we can also infer a step further that there has always been a peculiar relationship between science and fiction, between, that is to say, the seemingly neutral or non-semantic oriented technoscience on the one side and the world of imagination, feeling and meaning on the other. However, as the history of scientific developments will show, "culture circulates through science no less than science circulates through culture," and then the "heart that keeps this circulatory system flowing is narrative—narratives about culture, narratives within culture, narratives about science, narratives within science" (Hayles 21-22). After all, recent science studies would tell us bluntly that "all science is local" (Jacob 97). Therefore, in stark contrast to the traditional humanistic approach to technology which is deemed to be essentially "explainable" by its "function and efficiency" rather than by a "hermeneutically interpretable meaning" (Feenberg 83), we should



read into "Bicycle" and extract from it elements which will enable us to investigate how technologies themselves become the "objectification of social values and cultural system" (Feenberg 85). But since every machine has a story to tell, let us first turn to how the bicycle created its own narrative.

The early evolution of the bicycle in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Pinch and Bijker tell us, illustrates the point that technologies develop their fitness to cultural interests, rather than economic or efficiency elements according to its own system of technicity. We learn that there were many years when this technological device wavered between a sportsman's racer and a means of transportation, the former having a much bigger and higher wheel in the front and the latter with two equal wheels for safety's sake. There is therefore a certain ambiguity demonstrated by the bicycle, as a technological object, a certain interpretative flexibility under the concept of underdetermination which leads us to look for the "fit between devices and the interests and beliefs of the various social groups that influence the design process" (Feenberg 79). As Feenberg reminds us: "Differences in the way social groups interpret and use the objects are not merely extrinsic but make a difference in the nature of the objects themselves" (80). Using again the bicycle as an example, Feenberg puts forward the concept of "technical codes" through which a technological object can be defined and interpreted "in accordance with the social meaning it has acquired" (Feenberg 88). Here technology, as the "systematic locus for the sociocultural variables that actually diversify its historical realizations" (Feenberg 201), will readily subject itself to hermeneutic efforts, which also take into consideration mediated elements such as ethical, aesthetic or even ritualistic ones, and all these can be readily found in Chang Kuo-li's "Bicycle."

For this particular social group in the story, the bicycle culture does require an investigation of certain technological codes for us to understand how it shapes this future world and imbues it with significance. For the 21st century Taipei, bicycles are of course obsolete as a means of transportation. As pollution, an important theme in the 1<sup>st</sup> generation Taiwan SF as delineated above, no longer poses threats to

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the city, thus freeing it from crude determinism, the bicycle is now equated with a device by which it is possible "to be successful with women" yielded by "the emergence of the unexpected variable in Dr. Liu's computer formula design" ("Bicycle" 55). Moreover, for the scientist Prof. Wang, the act of riding is a means for "calm observation and thinking, helping one to grasp what one wants in life" (57). To a five-year-old child, the bicycle is a source of excitement "because there are not many things which can draw his attention nowadays" (50). Finally, the paid rider, despite his claiming to be "the most calm observer in the whole of great Taipei," turns out to be the most pathetic person, since he too is one of those who is frustrated in a love relationship and suffers from social inertia. All these variables or technological codes can also be considered hermeneutic codes for interpretation. The loopback circuit in cybernetics can now be put alongside the hermeneutic circle since both have a similar movement of reflexivity, pulling the observer/scientist of the technological object into the picture of interpretation which bases itself on facticity and historicity back towards the Gadamerian "fusion of horizons." This is important because, as Donna Haraway has it, shifting the scientist as spectator to participant is definitely linked to an ethical awareness, political conviction, and social responsibility (Haraway 196). By splicing into the loop, the human subjects and the technological objects, the technology hermeneutics points to what Rip and Kemp call "a technological regime" which prefigures and prestructures (much like the Heideggerian *Vorhaben* and *Vorstructure*) specific problem-solving and interpreting activities which in turn define the contours of constraints and trajectories of change (Rip and Kemp 340).

This bringing our lifeworld to bear on technological systems rooted in socioculture dimensions should be guarded against the temptation of dividing the two into body and soul, means and ends. Instead we will look at them as a circularity which restores for us the centrality of meaning where their reflexive thrust remains clear; and SF here plays a vital role to weave together facts and values in our age of informatics. A technoscience hermeneutics implicates both

and a technoscience hermeneutics, I would like to quote the following words by Hayles as a reminder for those who find these concerns interesting as well as exciting:

The chaotic, unpredictable nature of complex dynamics implies that subjectivity is emergent rather than given, distributed rather than located solely in consciousness, emerging from and integrated into a chaotic world rather than occupying a position of mastery and control removed from it. Bruno Latour has argued that we have never been modern; the seriated history of cybernetics—emerging from networks at once materially real, socially regulated, and discursively constructed—suggests, for similar reasons, that we have always been posthuman. (Hayles 291)

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> By Chinese SF, I refer mainly to published works in Taiwan, some by Hong Kong writers. I must confess here that I am rather ignorant about what has been done in PRC as far as SF is concerned.

<sup>2</sup> By Chinese humanism, I refer to the insistence on permanent human values and qualities which can be attributed particularly to Chinese philosophy. On top of the usual emphasis on human dignity, moral strenuousness and exercise of will and reason by looking inward, the Confucian humanism is unique in its rejection of speculative projection of supernatural elements. Its preoccupation with ethical universals has long been cited in this Confucian remark, “As we don’t know enough of humans, why bother to investigate the ghosts and gods.”

<sup>3</sup> All translations are mine.

<sup>4</sup> For my discussion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation SF in Taiwan, I will mainly draw upon stories appearing in the March 1994 *Youth Literary*, no. 483. All these stories were published as winners of awards given by the Magazine.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Kember has, by following the concept of “cyberevolu-

tion" to work on the new machinic-biology, equated cyborgs with vampires. She asks: "In so far as we are all (arguably) cyborgs now, are we (therefore) also vampireshooked on the flow (blood) of information (life)?" (Kember 106).

<sup>6</sup> Halberstam theorizes in her *Skin Show: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* that what monsters are to the generally "normal" people has a parallel structure in what gothic horrors are to mainstream novels.

<sup>7</sup> I am referring to "On the Edge of Spaces: Hong Kong Cityscape, *Blade Runner*, *Ghost in the Shell*" published in *Science-Fiction Studies* (Nov. 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Most recently Veronica Hollinger has noted the relationship between studies on science and technology and SF in her run down of new friends in SF criticism. She notes: "SF is increasingly featured in the expanding areas of cyberculture studies" (see Dery's *Escape Velocity*, for example) and cultural studies of science and technology (such as Balsamo's *Technologies of the Gendered Body*) (Hollinger 261).

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