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Banner calligraphy Huai Su 懷素 (737–799), Tang calligrapher and Buddhist monk

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DISPLACED FANTASY: PULP SCIENCE FICTION IN THE EARLY REFORM ERA OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

王 Rui Kunze 王瑞

Science fiction (*kexue huanxiang xiaoshuo* 科学幻想小说) became tremendously popular in the early reform era (c.1978–83) of the People's Republic of China (PRC).¹ The (re)emergence of this genre, like that in the 1950s and the early 1960s, took place under the aegis of the official policy that promoted science and technology as a means of modernising China. In 1978, the Chinese government's central task of the New Era (*xin shiqi* 新时期) was to realise the Four Modernisations — modernisations in agriculture, industry, national defence, science and technology — by the end of the twentieth century.² This aspiration, predicated on China's century-long desire for national modernisation and an implicit sense of millennial destination, led to a surge of science fiction in literary production, which fervently imagined a future empowered by science and technology. Between 1978 and 1983, not only nationally acclaimed literary journals and presses but also regional popular science magazines (*kexue jishu puji chuanguzuo zazhi* 科学技术普及创作杂志) published a large number of science fiction stories.

In his seminal study of science fiction in the PRC, Wagner suggests that the science fiction works produced in the early reform era — what he translates as 'science phantasy' — be considered as a 'lobby literature' for the scientific community, which presents the group aspirations of 'scientists' in the form of the 'phantasy future' and portrays 'how scientists would operate in the larger framework of society if their demands were met'. The target readership, therefore, consists of the scientific community and the authorities, 'to whom these texts would be presented publicly in printing, as the collective demand and offer of compromise from the science community'.³ This thesis is certainly applicable to most works produced by scientist-authors such as Tong Enzheng 童恩正 (1935–97), Zheng Wenguang 郑文光 (1929–2003), and Ye Yonglie 叶永烈 (b.1940). Their stories featuring patriotic scientist-heroes promised that sci-

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1 Ye Yonglie's 叶永烈 (b.1940) story *Xiaolingtong manyou weilai* 小灵通漫游未来 (1978), for example, sold over a million and a half copies. Several anthologies of Chinese science fiction were compiled between 1979 and 1983. Important Western science fiction authors such as Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, Robert Heinlein were translated, and the works of Soviet science fiction writers such as Alexander Belyayev and Vladimir Obruchev were reprinted. For more information on the translation of science fiction in China, see Qian Jiang, 'Translation and the Development of Science Fiction in Twentieth-Century China,' *Science Fiction Studies* 40 (2013): 116–32.

2 The goal of the Four Modernisations was first proposed by Zhou Enlai in 1963 at the Conference on Scientific and Technological Work in Shanghai. In the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Communist Party of China Central Committee in 1978, the government proposed this goal as its central task of the 'New Era'.

- 3 Rudolf G. Wagner, 'Lobby Literature: The Archeology and Present Functions of Science Fiction in China,' in *After Mao: Chinese Literature and Society: 1978-1981*, ed. Jeffrey C. Kinkley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p.44.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.41.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.41.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p.27.
- 7 Zhan Ling 詹玲, '1980 niandai qianqi zhongguo kehuan xiaoshuo de zhuanxing,' 1980 年代前期中國科幻小說的轉型 *Ershiyi shiji* 二十一世紀 8 (2014): 62-76, at pp.70-71.

ence and technology would bring about a bright future for socialist China. Wagner's study, however, does not fully consider those science fiction stories written by minor authors that were published in regional magazines aiming to popularise science. Therefore, his thesis cannot convincingly account for the immense popularity of science fiction among general readers and the fierce attacks this genre suffered in the Campaign against Spiritual Pollution (*fandui jingshen wuran* 反对精神污染, 1983-84), when Communist conservatives tried to suppress theoretical debates on humanism, 'socialist alienation', and any ideas suspected of 'bourgeois liberalisation'.

Wagner's original study nevertheless provides many insights for further discussion. In analysing the debate in the late 1970s over the nature of science fiction — whether it should be literature or an artistic form of science popularisation — Wagner detects that the lack of a generic definition of science fiction offers writers 'a chance to explore the potential of science phantasy as part of a new popular literature'.⁴ More importantly, he draws attention to the subversive potential of 'phantasy' once science fiction is defined as literature: this genre would then enter 'a field defined as "realist"' while carrying its 'contraband of phantasy, which did not feel bound by the definition of "rational induction" from present-day scientific knowledge'.⁵ Wagner refers to the *Oxford English Dictionary* to differentiate 'phantasy' from fantasy: the former means 'imagination, visionary intuition', while the latter denotes 'caprice, whim, fanciful invention'.⁶ I shall use 'fantasy' in this paper to include both meanings, not only because it has become an acceptable variant of 'phantasy', but also because I believe that the demarcation between visionary intuition and whimsical thinking implies the presumption that reality is opposed to fantasy, history to fiction, a presumption that would forestall a productive probe into fantasy.

Zhan Ling's 詹玲 recent research into Chinese science fiction in the early 1980s acknowledges that popular (*tongsu* 通俗) science fiction stories constitute the major part of the genre at the time and that fantasy (*huanxiang* 幻想) is key to examining those stories. Yet her argument still hinges on the assumption that the genre should convey 'proper' scientific knowledge. In response to the question 'What sort of fantasy do we need to support science?' she dismisses fantasy in popular science fiction, asserting it has gone awry. These stories fantasise violence, eroticism, and 'non-scientific' supernatural power, Zhan concludes, therefore they 'deviate from the essence of science fiction'.⁷

Thus the threads left by Wagner on fantasy and popular literature have not been picked up. Furthermore, the bulk of science fiction stories produced in the early reform era, especially those published in regional popular science magazines, remain largely unexplored. These stories will be used in this essay as source material. I propose to rethink these science fiction stories as 'pulp fiction', whose complex mechanism of fantasy merits an examination combining close textual analysis with sociocultural and psychoanalytical approaches. Produced in early post-Mao China, these science fiction texts exemplify the enmeshment of and tensions between the national project of modernisation, the Communist Party's ideological control, the nascent consumer economy, and the populace's urgent need to relieve their repressed desires, discontents, and anxieties. An investigation into these ephemeral yet immensely popular texts will help us to achieve a better understanding of the early reform era of the PRC.

In the first section, I briefly delineate the generic history of Chinese science fiction up to the 1970s, in particular its notion of fantasy, which had been closely associated with the agendas of national modernisation and the popularisation of modern scientific knowledge. Against this historical background, I define my source material as ‘pulp’, which catered to a new consumer readership and are characterised by highly formulaic narratives and brief popularity at a certain historical moment. Introducing Suvin’s theory of ‘cognitive estrangement’,⁸ the Freudian concept of ‘displacement’,⁹ and the psychoanalytical approach to ‘the literary fantastic’,¹⁰ I propose to explore the mechanism of fantasy in these science fiction stories in relation to the social and cultural contexts of the early reform era. The analysis considers two interconnected aspects of fantasy: first, the contents of fantasy defamiliarise the implied reader’s empirical world and thereby suggest what is lacking in real life; second, fantasy has to be articulated in ‘proper’, hence often displaced, ways, given the ideological and social controls in the early reform era. The second section offers a close reading of three most popular tropes in these stories — mind-reading gadgetry, sensual enjoyments, and alien encounters — as examples to demonstrate various forms of ‘displaced fantasy’ in the highly formulaic narrative of pulp science fiction. The analysis also shows that many texts contain discrepancies and ruptures on narrative and linguistic levels, which render their message equivocal and allow the implied reader to detect and decode subtexts and latent messages in the process of consuming them. The last section retraces the debates over fantasy in the genre of science fiction between 1979 and 1983, arguing that it is the potential power of fantasy to destabilise the didactic function and scientific optimism of the genre that resulted in its expulsion by both ideology-critics and scientist-authors in 1983.

Science Fiction as Pulp, Fantasy as Reality

Coining the term ‘pulp science fiction’ to describe my source material so as to discuss them as popular literature may sound redundant for an English-speaking reader. The generic term ‘science fiction’, such as American science fiction in the tradition of Hugo Gernsback (1884–1967), functions as ‘a distinct marketing category’ and is largely ‘pulp’ by definition.¹¹ Yet Chinese science fiction originated in the early twentieth century, mainly as a literary means to disseminate scientific knowledge and thinking for national enlightenment and modernisation. In the words of the nationalist reformer and journalist Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873–1929), science fiction (*kexue xiaoshuo* 科学小说) should ‘elaborate science by means of novels’.¹² This means that the genre has been entangled with the didactic function of popularising scientific knowledge from the very beginning and has more often than not upheld the optimistic view that scientific-technological progress necessarily brings about social improvement. After 1949, the generic term science fiction was replaced by ‘science-fantasy fiction’ (*kexue huanxiang xiaoshuo* 科学幻想小说), a literal translation of the Russian term *nauchnaya fantastika* (научная фантастика). In Russia, ‘science-fantasy fiction’ was a literary genre that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. During the Stalinist era, but particularly after the canonisation of Socialist Realism in 1934, it was subjected to a larger artistic category that aimed to popularise scientific knowledge — ‘science *belles-lettres*’, or *nauchno-khudozhestvennaya* (научно-художественная), translated into Chinese as *kexue wenyi* 科学文艺.¹³ Soviet

8 Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

9 Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, trans. W.J.H. Sprott (New York: W.W. Norton, 1933).

10 Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981).

11 Mark Bould and Sherry Vint, *The Routledge Concise History of Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp.2–3. In *Pulp: Reading Popular Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) by Scott McCracken, the author examines detective fiction, popular romance, science fiction, and gothic horror.

12 See Xin xiaoshuo baoshe 新小說報社 [Liang Qichao 梁启超], “Zhongguo weiyi zhi wenxue bao *Xin xiaoshuo* 中國唯一之文學報《新小說》”, *Xinmin congbao* 新民叢報 14 (1902). For discussions on the origin and early development of Chinese science fiction in English, especially on its relation to modernisation and nation building, see D.E. Pollard, ‘Jules Verne, Science Fiction and Related Matters,’ in ed. David E. Pollard *Translation and Creation: Readings of Western Literature in Early Modern China, 1840–1918* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1998), pp.177–207; and several articles in *Science Fiction Studies* March 2013: Yan Wu, “‘Great Wall Planet’: Introducing Chinese Science Fiction,’ 1–14; Nathaniel Isaacson, ‘Science Fiction for the Nation: *Tales of the Moon Colony* and the Birth of Modern Chinese Fiction,’ 33–54; and Shaoling Ma, “‘A Tale of New Mr. Braggadocio’: Narrative Subjectivity and Brain Electricity in Late Qing Science Fiction,’ 55–72. Early Chinese science fiction demonstrates a historical moment of epistemological transformation — and hence confusion — rather than conveying correct knowledge of modern science and technology. For this epistemological transformation, see David Der-wei Wang, ‘Confused Horizon: Science Fantasy,’ in *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1848–1911* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997) and Chen Pingyuan, ‘From Popular Science to Science Fiction: An Investigation of “Flying Machines”,’ in Pollard, *Translation and Creation*, pp.209–39.

13 Wagner, ‘Lobby Literature,’ pp.26–31; Matthias Schwartz, *Die Erfindung des Kosmos. Zur sowjetischen Science Fiction und populärwissenschaftlichen Publizistik vom Sputnikflug bis zum Ende der Tauwetterzeit* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2003), p.13.

14 For example, the writings of M. Ilin (Ilya Marshak, 1895–1952), a well-known Soviet popular science author, were translated in the 1930s by the leftist popular science educator Dong Chuncai 董純才 (1905–90), who promoted Ilin's idea that the development of science and technology is the necessary condition to eliminate classes and to realise the full freedom of mankind. See Dong Chuncai, 'Fanyi yilin zuopin de jingguo he yinxiang' 翻譯伊林作品的經過和印象, in *Bu ye tian* 不夜天 (Shanghai: Kaiming shudian, 1937), pp.78–86. The earliest – and truncated – translation of Russian science fiction that I have found is *Huo Xing* 火星 (1908) by Alexander Bogdanov (1873–1928), translated by Chongji 崇基 and serialised in *Tongsu wenhua: zhengzhi, jingji, kexue, gongcheng banyuekan* 通俗文化: 政治, 經濟, 科學, 工程半月刊 during 1935 and 1936. According to Wagner, dystopian trends in Soviet science fiction in the 1920s, such as works by Majakovski and Zamyatin, were not introduced into China. Soviet writers' relinking with this critical tradition in the late 1950s again failed to reach Chinese readers due to the Sino-Soviet rift. See Wagner, 'Lobby Literature', p.29.

15 For example, Shanghai-based *Chaofeng chubanshe* 潮鋒出版社 brought out a series of translated Soviet science fiction based on the selection of Soviet National Children's Books Press (Детгиз). Other science fiction titles were published by *Kexue puji chubanshe* 科學普及出版社 and *Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe* 中國青年出版社, the favourite author being Alexander Belyayev (1884–1942). Almost every issue of *Zhishi jishu lilian* 知識就是力量, a popular science magazine launched in 1957 in imitation of its Soviet namesake Знание-сила, featured one or two Soviet science fiction stories.

16 For the concept of 'formula' in analysing popular literature and film, see John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) and articles in his *Mystery, Violence, and Popular Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

17 I thank one of the readers for this insightful comment. Jeffrey C. Kinkley notes in his study of Chinese crime fiction at the turn of the 1980s that the combination of science fiction and detective formulas were popular with Chinese readers, citing Ye Yonglie as one of the examples. See Kinkley, 'Chinese Crime Fiction and Its Formulas at the Turn of the 1980s,' in *After Mao*, p.97 and n.29.

18 In 1955, for example, *Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe* published a series of Soviet spy thrillers (*jingxian xiaoshuo* 驚險小說), which were reprinted many times. For *Sufan* thrillers, see *Sufan xiaoshuo xuan 1949–1979*

popular science writings and science fiction, two subcategories of science *belles-lettres*, were introduced into China as early as in the 1930s¹⁴ and massively translated in the 1950s.¹⁵

It is against this historical and ideological background that I resort to the term 'pulp science fiction' to emphasise that the stories examined here, instead of being part of the didactic science *belles-lettres*, are products of an emergent consumer economy. Although they were probably not produced self-consciously to sell on the market, they were meant to be read for pleasure and thereby anticipated the commercialised popular literature of the late 1980s. The 'pulp' features of these science fiction stories include, among others, highly formulaic – and often sensationalistic – storylines and characters as well as visual illustrations.¹⁶ One may argue that some science fiction stories by scientist-authors, such as the vastly popular 'Death Ray on a Coral Island' (Shanhudao shang de siguang 珊瑚島上的死光, 1978) by Tong Enzheng, and the detective-sci-fi thriller series featuring the policeman-hero Jin Ming 金明 (1980–83) by Ye Yonglie, may be reconsidered as pulp.¹⁷ They belong to the persistent pulp tradition that had never been uprooted in Maoist China despite waves of suppression. By reading Soviet adventure stories, spy thrillers, and science fiction as well as indigenous thriller stories dealing with the theme of 'suppressing counter-revolutionaries' (*sufan* 肅反, 1950–52), Chinese readers managed to gratify their taste for the thrilling and the lurid.¹⁸ The circulation of underground hand-copied literature (*shouchaoben wenxue* 手抄本文學) during the Cultural Revolution, in the most coarse and unstable manner, continued the pulp tradition.¹⁹ Produced mainly by hack writers for consumption, pulp science fiction in the early reform era was highly formulaic and not written skillfully. The narratives were often fractured by discrepancies in narrative perspectives and tones, dissonance between the text and its subtext, unnatural developments of story and characters, logical lapses, and so on. Now, most of them have been forgotten. They were, therefore, literally 'pulp' due to their disposability in cultural production and circulation.

Science fiction flaunts fictionality and fantasy. The connection between the fantastic and the empirical worlds in this genre is theorised by Darko Suvin as 'cognitive estrangement': 'SF [science fiction] is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment.'²⁰ The fictional world of fantasy makes sense to the reader only when its relation to the empirical world is recognisable – as its alternative. It defamiliarises the empirical world and thereby suggests different, albeit not necessarily progressive, possibilities: how the real world should be, could have been, or will be.

The addition of fantasy to the generic term in the 1950s did not just bring about a terminological change to Chinese science fiction, it also orientated its fantasy towards that of 'socialist science fiction'. Their fantasy had to be carefully prescribed so that it would not contradict the dominant literary creed of 'socialist realism'. When Alexander Bogdanov's (1873–1928) Bolshevik utopia *Red Star* (красная звезда) (1908) was serialised in the semi-monthly *Popular Culture* (Tongsu wenhua 通俗文化) during 1935 and 1936 as science fiction, its translator, Chongji 崇基, justified the scientific feature of the Martian society in the story – an imagined future society after the success of the Bolshevik



Figure 1

The cover of a picture-book version of Death Ray on a Coral Island. 700,000 copies of this version were printed.

Revolution — by stressing that it was fantasy rooted in social sciences.²¹ When Chinese science-fantasy fiction was promoted in the mid-1950s targeting mainly children and teenagers,²² the scientist-author Zheng Wenguang took as his task to explain — and domesticate — the element of fantasy in science fiction. Attributing the statement that ‘fantasy is the most precious quality’ to Lenin, Zheng posits that fantasy in science fiction imagines the near future (metaphorically called ‘tomorrow’) based on achieved scientific results. Like Chong Ji, Zheng also legitimises fantasy in science fiction by emphasising its ‘scientific’, hence empirical, grounds. According to Zheng, fantasy in science fiction does not predict the future, but points out the possible directions for further scientific research. Fantasy in science fiction, he further elaborates, inspires young readers, cultivates their interest in science and technology, and encourages them to ‘march forward to science and achieve the victory of building Socialism and Communism’.²³

Rosemary Jackson, by contrast, sees fantasy as a compensation for the lack resulting from cultural constraints. The literary mode of the fantastic allows desires that threaten or disturb the cultural order to be ‘expelled’ through having been ‘told of’, and in doing so, makes them ‘vicariously experienced by author and reader’. It thereby ‘traces the unsaid and the unseen of culture’, because it opens up, ‘for a brief moment, on to disorder, on to illegality ... on to that which lies outside dominant value systems’.²⁴ To understand the culturally subversive mechanism of fantasy in pulp science fiction of the early reform era, one has to combine Jackson’s psychoanalytical approach to fantasy with a Freudian concept of repression — ‘displacement’. Also known as ‘transference of accent’, displacement refers to a repressive mechanism by which ideas, desires, and wishes deemed as unacceptable find their expression distorted and displaced in the dream. What appears to be the most important element in the dream can be secondary in the dream-thoughts while what is important among the dream-thoughts ‘obtains only incidental and rather indistinct representation in the dream’.²⁵ Thus the mechanism of displacement enables ‘devious’ ideas and wishes to ‘harmlessly’ surface in distorted or disproportionate forms in non-realistic contexts such as dream — or in our case, the fantastic narrative.

As a product of a nascent market economy, pulp science fiction is consumer-oriented. Like other forms of popular culture, its formulas are created

肃反小说选 1949–1979 (Beijing: Qunzhong chubanshe, 1979). For the development of pulp culture in Hong Kong made possible by mainland émigrés after the communist takeover of mainland China, see Sai-Shing Yung and Christopher Rea, ‘One Chicken, Three Dishes: The Cultural Enterprises of Law Bun,’ in eds Christopher Rea and Nicolai Volland *The Business of Culture: Cultural Entrepreneurs in China and South Asia, 1900–65* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015), pp.150–77.

19 For some of the most circulated texts, see Anliu: ‘Wenge’ *shouchaoben wencun* 暗流: “文革”手抄本文存, ed. Bai Shihong 白士弘 (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2001). The hand-copied literature was mostly written by amateurs. The texts often changed drastically in circulation due to copying mistakes and the copier’s own creative addition or deletion. For studies of hand-copied literature, see Perry Link, ‘Hand-copied Entertainment Fiction from the Cultural Revolution,’ in eds Richard Madsen and Paul G. Pickowicz. *Unofficial China: Popular Culture and Thought in the People’s Republic of China* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), pp.17–36; and Lena Henningsen, ‘Crime, Love, and Science: Continuity and Change in Hand-copied Entertainment Fiction (*shouchaoben*) from the Cultural Revolution’. *Kodex* 6 (2016): 101–19.

20 Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, pp.7–8.

21 Chong Ji 崇基, preface to *Huo Xing* 火星, *Tongsu wenhua* 通俗文化, 27 (1935): p.19.

22 This wave of science fiction took place when the state promoted science and technology in 1956 — a policy popularised through the slogan ‘Marching forward to Science’ (*Xiang kexue jinjun* 向科学进军). Science fiction stories of the period appeared mainly in newspapers, magazines, and books for children and teenagers, such as *Zhongguo shaonianbao* 中国少年报, *Zhongxuesheng* 中学生, *Ertong shidai* 儿童时代, *Shaonian wenyi* 少年文艺, etc. The major publishing houses involved in translating Soviet science fiction and the works of Jules Verne as well as publishing Chinese children’s science fiction were *Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe* and *Shaonian ertong chubanshe* 少年儿童出版社.

23 Zheng Wenguang 郑文光, ‘Tantan kexue huanxiang xiaoshuo’ 谈谈科学幻想小说, *Dushu yuebao* 读书月报 3 (1956): 21–22. Cf. Wagner’s quotation of S. Ivanov: ‘Soviet science fantasy must reflect tomorrow, that is, that space of time separated from our days by one or two decades, or perhaps only years’. Wagner, ‘Lobby Literature’, p.28.

24 Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, pp.3–4.

25 Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, pp.33–34.

26 Cawelti, *Mystery, Violence, and Popular Culture*, pp.134–35.

27 This interest in supernormal abilities as well as their entanglement with the notion of science find their resonance at the beginning of the twentieth century, when, for example, Xu Nianci's 徐念慈 1905 science fiction story 'A Tale of New Mr Braggadocio' (Xin faluo xiansheng tan 新法螺先生譚) talked about 'brain electricity' (*naodian* 脑电) as a means of remote communication and a source of energy. According to Max K.W. Huang's study, Chinese Spiritualism during the May Fourth era studied 'heavenly eyes' (*tianyantong* 天眼通) and telepathy (*chuanxinshu* 傳心術). See Huang, 'Minguo chunian Shanghai de lingxue yanjiu: yi "Shanghai lingxuehui" weili' 民國初年上海的靈學研究: 以「上海靈學會」為例, *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindaishi yanjiusuo jikan* 中央研究院近代史研究所集刊 55 (March 2007): 99–136). For an analysis of somatic science in the 1980s, see David A. Palmer, *Qigong Fever: Body, Science and Utopia in China* (London: Hurst & Company, 2007).

28 Luo Dan 罗丹, 'Shenmi de dianbo' 神秘的电波, *Kexue Tiandi* 科学天地 1(1979): pp.55–61.

'within a cultural matrix that results from the interactions of writers, audiences, and publishers or producers' and function by 'reflecting values and assumptions shared by a community of reader'.²⁶ In the next section, I choose three formulaic elements in the fantastic narratives of pulp science fiction for a (sub)textual analysis in order to probe into the mechanism of displaced fantasy in this body of texts. By reading the fantastic narrative in relation to the social and cultural contexts of the early reform era, my analysis intends to trace the twice-concealed ideas and desires in the empirical world of the author and the reader.

Displaced Fantasy: A (Sub)textual Reading of Pulp Science Fiction

In 1979, the Association of China's Popular Science Writers (*Zhongguo kexue jishu puji chuanguzuo xiehui* 中国科学技术普及创作协会) launched its magazine *Popular Science Creation* (*Kepu chuanguzuo* 科普创作). It included in the category 'science *belles-lettres*' a broad spectrum of creative arts, ranging from text-based science fiction, 'science sketches' (*xiaopin* 小品), fairytales, poetry, and screenplays for radio broadcast to visual culture such as 'science education film' (*kejiao dianying* 科教电影), painting and calligraphy (*kepu meishu* 科普美术). Meanwhile, regional associations of popular science creation (*kepu chuanguzuo xiehui* 科普创作协会) were established in many provinces, publishing their own monthly or bimonthly magazines.

Science *belles-lettres*, latest news of technological development from home and abroad, and biographical stories of scientists constituted the major parts of these popular science magazines. It is, however, notable that plenty of space was also given for discussion on how to improve the quality of everyday life 'scientifically' – for example, dietetics, horticulture, health tips, geographical knowledge about local scenic spots, and recipes featuring local delicacies or specialties. These topics anticipated subsequent consumer interests in tourism, gastronomy, and health regimens (*yangsheng* 养生). Science fiction stories published in these magazines suggest a similar desire for depoliticising everyday life, although the following analysis shows that their imagined modernised future is at once conformist and subversive.

1. Mind-reading Gadgetry

The early reform era witnessed a remarkable fascination with somatic science, when phenomena such as *qigong* 气功 and supernormal powers (*teyi gongneng* 特异功能) were frequently reported and debated in the media. One of the most discussed supernormal abilities was the ability to penetrate barriers to detect things invisible to the naked eye. In pulp science fiction, such an ability is achieved through various gadgets that help to find mineral reserves, to obtain military secrets, and, most important of all, to read minds by receiving, saving, interpreting, and even retrieving the 'brainwaves' (*naobo* 脑波) of the target person.²⁷

In 'Mysterious Waves' (*Shenmi de dianbo* 神秘的电波) (1979), by Luo Dan 罗丹, a 'biological wave receiver' is installed on a high-tech machine that can synthesise protein and sugar with water, air, and solar energy.²⁸ This receiver guards the machine because it responds to the brainwaves of the person touching it. Together with a 'biological wave interpreter' that restores the received brainwaves to intelligible language and pictures, this gadget helps the police catch the foreign spy who steals the machine in order to obtain

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Figure 2

An advertisement for regional popular science magazines in Kexue Tiandi 科学天地 (October 1980).

its advanced technology. The ‘thoughts detector’ in ‘After the Expert Was Assassinated’ (Zhuanjia yuci yihou 专家遇刺以后) (1981), by Wang Qinlan 王琴兰 and Wang Yi 王沂, reads and interprets human minds.²⁹ The police use it to trace the suspect’s thoughts and nail the spy assassin. These two stories are reminiscent of *Sufan* spy thrillers, whose paranoia about enemy infiltration is typical of the Cold War era and embodied in the frequent appearance of the spy in popular culture of both sides.³⁰ In pulp science fiction of the early reform era, the spy appears less as a political traitor than as the saboteur of the economic and technological development of socialist China.

Besides guarding against the enemy, the mind-reading gadget can be used in other ways. In ‘Unprotected Drafts’ (Wengao shimi 文稿失密) (1981), by Shan Ming 单明, the ‘thought recorder’ follows the thinking process of a scientist, converts his thoughts into language, and enables his ideas to be published simultaneously.³¹ ‘Same Dream in Different Beds’ (Yichuang tongmeng 异床同梦) (1980), by Ying Qi 应其, tells a story in the style of ‘scar literature’ (*shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学) about the spiritual reunion of two lovers through a ‘thought detector’.³² Due to a misunderstanding, Xiao Xiao broke up with her engineer boyfriend Luo Tian in the Cultural Revolution. A married woman in the late 1970s, Xiao Xiao meets Luo again, only to find out that her husband was the one who drove a wedge between them. Presenting Xiao Xiao with his invention, the ‘thoughts detector’, Luo Tian makes it possible for them to share their thoughts with each other every night, thus maintaining a platonic but loving relationship.

If the feverish interest in somatic science and supernatural power shows the complicated relations between science, the undercurrent of religious

29 Wang Qinlan 王琴兰, Wang Yi 王沂, ‘Zhuanjia yuci yihou’ 专家遇刺以后, *Kexue tiandi* 6 (1981): 40–45.

30 For spy stories in post-war American pulp fiction, see Cawelti, ‘Take That, You Commie Rat!’, in *Mystery, Violence, and Popular Culture*, pp.312–27.

31 Shan Ming 单明, ‘Wengao shimi’ 文稿失密, *Kexue yu shenghuo* 科学与生活 3 (1981): 41–42.

32 Ying Qi 应其, ‘Yichuang tongmeng’ 异床同梦, *Kexue yu shenghuo* 6 (1980): 55–59. ‘Scar literature’ refers to those literary works produced in late 1970s PRC which denounce, often sentimentally, the Gang of Four for imposing injustice and suffering on intellectuals and cadres in the Cultural Revolution. This literary trend began with Lu Xinhua’s 卢新华 1978 short story ‘Scar’ (*Shanghen* 伤痕).

- 33 Yang Yang 杨洋, 'Shaxun de zhuanli' 沙逊的专利, *Kepu chuangzuo* 科普创作 3 (1980): 55–59.
- 34 Xie Shu 谢树 and Wang Yishan 王义山, 'Jiexu de hunli' 接续的婚礼, *Kexue shidai* 科学时代 4 (1980): 39–42.
- 35 The Red Flag sedan had been used exclusively by high-ranking cadres in Maoist China. For the legacy of it as a symbol of privilege and the creation of its new image as a consumer good in the post-socialist era, see Geremie R. Barmé, 'CCP™ & Adcult PRC', in *In the Red: On Contemporary Chinese Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp.235–54.

practices and beliefs, and the creation of a national identity in the early reform era, then the fantastic narrative about the power of mind-reading gadgetry in pulp science fiction appears to reflect an unshakeable faith in the machine. By imagining a machine that is able to convert invisible thoughts neatly into traceable, unambiguous articulation, the texts reflect a displaced desire for unhindered interpersonal communication. However, they also assume that language is transparent and the human mind is not stratified. Furthermore, surveillance and invasion of privacy are accepted without qualms in these stories. All these, I argue, should be seen as symptomatic of the trauma of political movements and mass surveillance in Maoist China.

Aided by the linguistic-social system of Mao-speak (*Mao huayu* 毛话语), mind-reforming political movements were repeatedly carried out, often in combination with mass surveillance, to instill the binary thinking of good versus bad (with many extensions such as revolutionary versus counter-revolutionary, progressive versus conservative), striving to wipe out intellectual complexity, psychological equivocality, and linguistic ambiguity in Chinese society. In these stories, surveillance of individuals is accepted as necessary. In order for the mind-reading gadgets to work, the characters must have 'unadulterated' minds — either as purely good or as single-mindedly evil. The cheerful celebration of transparent communication via mind-reading gadgetry demonstrates how the authors have internalised political control, mass surveillance, and naive optimism about technological advancement of Maoist China.

To articulate directly the distress of lacking human communication and trust, pulp science fiction had to resort to the strategy of displacement — that is, to move them out of socialist China to a spatial 'Other', as exemplified in the story 'The Patent of Sassoon' (Shaxun de zhuanli 沙逊的专利) (1980). Professor Sassoon from 'a certain developed country' invents a mind-reading computer to commemorate his daughter, who committed suicide after her fiancé cheated on her. Unfortunately, what this patented machine discloses to Sassoon is a (capitalist) world full of lies.³³

Hedonism for the Nation

Displacement takes place at various levels when desires for material enjoyment and sensual pleasure (taboos in Maoist China) seek expression. In addition to using the spatial 'Other' (that is, the capitalist world), the most remarkable strategy in pulp science fiction — whether used consciously or not — is to legitimise private desires by means of the grand narrative of national modernisation. The clashes and negotiations in this process of legitimisation, as the following analysis shows, are manifested in the discrepancies and ruptures on narrative and linguistic levels in many pulp science fiction stories.

In the story 'The Wedding Continued' (Jiexu de hunli 接续的婚礼) (1980), by Xie Shu 谢树 and Wang Yishan 王义山, for example, highly incongruous narrative components coexist, reinforcing and undercutting each other's discursive power.³⁴ The story is told from the perspective of Zhihai, who has spent years researching at the South Pole and now flies back to continue his wedding, which was disrupted five years ago because his wife was suddenly sent on a secret mission. Zhihai is picked up by a chauffeur in a Red Flag (*Hongqi* 红旗) sedan, who brings him directly to their new apartment.³⁵ He is not bothered by the fact that his wife's whereabouts are unknown, and his attention is

immediately drawn to the apartment, which is described in meticulous detail. It features French windows, a self-illuminating ceiling with pink stars, and a stereo system. The walls are covered with floral wallpaper and decorated with paintings. On one wall hangs a gouache painting entitled, following the zeitgeist, *The Future Rises from Our Hands*; while on another is a reproduction of Rubens's (1577–1640) work *The Origin of the Milky Way*. Zhihai's wife comes back at the end of the story, bringing him the good news that the secret mission of developing a special sort of aluminum foil for spaceships, which took her away from the wedding, has just been successfully completed.

Both Zhihai and his wife appear to fit the profile of scientist figures in the 'lobby literature' analysed by Wagner, who are loyal to the party-state and live in the closed Science Republic. They do not question the invasion of the state into their private life; they doggedly follow the rules of keeping secrets about their scientific projects, and their emotions are conditioned by their work rather than their personal life. This image of the scientist devoting him/herself wholeheartedly to the national project of the Four Modernisations is, however, not completely congruous with the narrative voice, whose description of the apartment reflects the enthusiasm for a modern 'cultured' domestic space in the early reform era. Floral wallpaper, French windows, the self-illuminating ceiling with pink stars (somehow reminiscent of the ceiling of the Great Hall of the People), and the stereo system seem to be essential material elements that contribute to the formation of a comfortable home. The paintings on the wall should demonstrate the owner's cultural taste. The gouache painting suggests propagandistic messages about the future of modernisation, while the Rubens reproduction implies a certain familiarity with Western culture. The coexistence of the Rubens painting, the propaganda poster, and the daily amenities in the private apartment of two Chinese scientists, incompatible as they may appear, shows the authors' imagined future in terms of Western-style, consumption-based modernisation — in contrast to Soviet-style state-conditioning. The fact that the text does not describe the Rubens painting in detail may suggest that the authors intend to address implicitly those who know Rubens's work — his fleshy female figures and Roman mythology. These gaps between the general storyline and the narrative voice, therefore, allow the repressed longings for domestic comforts and physical sensuality to be articulated — both wrapped in the discourse of national modernisation.

Ci Jiwei's thesis that the utopianism of the Chinese revolution is a sublimated form of hedonism may provide a philosophical explanation for the limitations of pulp science fiction's imagination of the future. At the core of this hedonism, Ci argues, is 'the view, based on a materialist ontology and an empiricist epistemology, that happiness consists in the satisfaction of the senses (as well as the intellectual faculties) and the pleasure consequent upon such satisfaction'. Serving as the ultimate end of the revolution, hedonism was denied here and now (hence the seemingly opposite asceticism in Maoist China) and forever postponed in the future.³⁶ It comes as no surprise that pulp science fiction tends to fantasise this postponed future, in which sensual pleasures, especially food and daily amenities, are satisfied. It consequently appealed to the reader in the early reform era who had been denied these pleasures for decades.

The sensual pleasure of sex, which may easily trigger more transgressive issues such as individuality, freedom, and human rights, is often shunned

36 Ci Jiwei, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: from Utopianism to Hedonism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p.135. Such hedonism found its way in science fiction stories produced in the 1950s. For instance, the children's science fiction story "Elephants sans proboscis" (Gediao bizi de daxiang 割掉鼻子的大象 (1956) fantasises about abundant food production, in which the pig, by means of pituitary gland stimulation, can be raised to the size of the elephant.

37 Wei Shilin 韦世林, 'Xiwang dao' 希望岛, *Kexue zhi chuang* 科学之窗 3 (1982): 53–57.

38 *Ibid.*, 55.

39 Xie Shijun 谢世俊, 'Danqin guniang' 丹青姑娘, *Kexue yu shenghuo* 5 (1980): 26–31.

in pulp science fiction. In the story analysed above, we see that the issue of sexual pleasure, tantalisingly suggested in the plot of the wedding and the reunion of the couple, is displaced into the joy of a successful scientific project. The story 'Hope Island' (Xiwang dao 希望岛) (1982), by Wei Shilin 韦士林, which centres on a scientific project of eugenics, exemplifies, on the other hand, a text exhibiting patriotism yet haunted by sex.³⁷ The astronaut Zuo Liang, after his mission to Pluto, visits his fiancée Chen Na, a researcher at the eugenics research centre on Hope Island. This private visit, however, is immediately channeled into a scientific research project for the nation: Zuo is asked to participate as a sperm donor to make the fittest test tube babies. He is then put in the Dream Pool of the research centre. His dream is described thus:

... On the shimmering surface of the lake, a yacht came to him. Zuo Liang looked closely and saw that the driver was no other than Chen Na. Overjoyed, he sprang onto the yacht which was still two metres away from the shore. He caught Chen Na and held her tight in his arms.

The yacht floated on the lake. Charming landscapes flashing through, fragrance lingering around, music faintly discernible, and the tender Chen Na nestling against him. All these pleased Zuo Liang, who felt a pleasure never experienced before. He closed his eyes and took his time to enjoy it ...³⁸

These two passages show the irrepressible urge of the narrative voice to touch upon the topic of sex. Even though the story develops in the direction of a research project, the scientific practice of eugenics and the storyline of the exciting meeting of a young couple at a reproduction centre are clearly sexually charged. Resorting to dreams — a classic literary trope of fantastic narrative — the text describes Zuo Liang's masturbation and pleasure in highly suggestive language: the surroundings full of water, his fiancée as the object of his desire, and enjoyment of all senses. The subtext about sexual behaviour and pleasure, which can hardly be missed by adult readers, unsettles the overt message of carrying out a eugenic project for the nation.

The desire for hedonistic enjoyment finds its explicit articulation in stories set outside China. In these texts, the narrative voice takes great pleasure in depicting the imagined fancy lifestyle of rich capitalists, while simultaneously denouncing this way of life and its moral decadence. Such schizophrenic narrative allows the implied reader to project their 'deviant' desires and doubts about science safely on the fictional Other — the immoral capitalist. Mr Wood, from the capitalist country M. (referring to the United States, which is *Meiguo* 美国 in Chinese), in the story entitled 'A Girl Named Danqin' (Danqin guniang 丹青姑娘) (1980), by Xie Shijun 谢世俊, is a case in point.³⁹ His possessions and vices are enumerated by the narrator: he owns a villa on the beach, a private helicopter, and a butler; he not only indulges in whiskey, cigars, and other luxuries, but is also sexually obsessed with the national beauty queen Tess. In order to possess Tess as an eternally young beauty, Mr Wood employs Dr M. to produce a clone from a cell stolen from her. When the clone-daughter turns fourteen, Mrs Wood discovers her husband's secret and encourages Tess and her clone to sue Mr Wood, who loses the case and is thrown into prison.

This story is roughly structured and pitted with inconsistencies. Described as a decadent womaniser, Mr Wood is, however, rather persistent in pursu-

ing Tess and cares about the clone-daughter; the fact that the girl grows up and will grow old obviously does not fulfil Mr Wood's intention to possess an eternally young beauty. The story about the immoral capitalist Mr. Wood and the unscrupulous, money-driven scientist Dr. M, on the other hand, raises several issues not allowed to be discussed in Maoist China — for example, extramarital relations, sexual desires, and the ethics of scientific research. This storyline questions the use of science and implicitly interrogates the official discourse that promotes science as a positive force in shaping the future.

Encounters with Aliens

If the capitalist world and capitalists serve as negative Others in pulp science fiction, then aliens and their societies are, more often than not, presented as positive Others showcasing a desirable alternative world. As with science fiction in many other countries, Chinese pulp science fiction is interested in encounters with extraterrestrial beings. The possible existence of intelligent beings beyond Earth has long been a topic of popular science magazines before and after 1949. In early 1961, shortly before the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin (1934–68) travelled into outer space, the illustrated periodical *Knowledge is Power* (*Zhishi jiushi liliang* 知识就是力量) published a couple of articles speculating on the existence of intelligent beings on other planets.⁴⁰ In 1978, a short essay in *China Youth* (*Zhongguo qingnian* 中国青年) asked whether there would be 'guests' from outer space coming to visit Earth, implying an optimistic attitude towards alien contacts.⁴¹

Despite bold speculations ventured by these major magazines and increasing global interest in UFOs in the 1980s, most scientist-authors chose not to write about alien encounters, because evidence of alien existence was elusive. Pulp science fiction, unperturbed by the problem of scientific evidence, pursued this topic with gusto. In these stories, the earthlings' encounters with extraterrestrial worlds are invariably positive; it is usually Chinese scientists who meet aliens; and the aliens and their societies are always more advanced in technology and more rational in social organisation. I argue that the writing of alien encounters can be read as the euphoric popular imagination of the PRC coming into contact with a modern, implicitly Western, Other. This imagination, in turn, bears visible traces of social norms and values from Maoist China.

Xiao Jianheng 萧建亨 (b.1961), one of the best-known authors of science fiction and popular science, wrote a story about a Chinese philologist enabling communication with aliens by translating a letter from alien astronauts (1980). It turns out that the letter expresses warm greetings from the aliens and their excitement about discovering civilisations on Earth.⁴² Conversely, the aliens in 'After the Disappearance of the Demonic Shadow' (*Moying xiaoshi yihou* 魔影消失以后) (1980), by Zhou Kun 周昆, use an interpreting machine that learns the languages spoken on Earth in no time by automatically discerning linguistic rules.⁴³ In both stories, the problem of communication is solved by technology, which allows both sides to express their good intentions and friendliness. The portrayal of these positive encounters may refract the optimism about the (economic) open-door policy in the Chinese popular imagination, in which technological modernisation plays a central role.

40 La Li 拉里, 'Yuzhou zhong de zhihui shengwu' 宇宙中的智慧生物, *Zhishi jiushi liliang* 知识就是力量, 2 (1961): 1-5; Qi Gai'er 齐盖尔, 'Huoxing shang you ren ma?' 火星上有人吗? *Zhishi jiushi liliang* 4 (1961), 22.

41 Wu Haoyuan 吴浩源 and Zhao Chengjing 赵成璟, 'Tianwai shifou you ke lai?' 天外是否有客来?, *Zhongguo qingnian* 中国青年 4 (1978): 46-47.

42 Xiao Jianheng 萧建亨, 'Jinxing ren zhi mi' 金星人之谜, *Kexue huanxiang xiaoshuo xuan* 科学幻想小说选 (Beijing: Zhongguo qingnian chubanshe, 1980), pp.154-84.

43 Zhou Kun 周昆, 'Moying xiaoshi yihou' 魔影消失以后, *Kexue shidai* 科学时代 6 (1980): 46-53.

- 44 Tao Wenqing 陶文庆, 'Taikong qike' 太空奇客, *Kexue tiandi* 2 (1981): 10–13.
- 45 Zhang Yonglin 张涌林, 'Xinshi' 信使, *Kexue tiandi* 3 (1980): 50–54.
- 46 Sigrid Schmalzer, *The People's Peking Man: Popular Science and Human Identity in Twentieth-Century China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
- 47 Jing Weiru 井维如, 'Yüzhouren de mimi' 宇宙人的秘密, *Kexue zhi you* 科学之友 1 (1980): 31–34.

For ordinary Chinese citizens in the early reform era, going abroad was, perhaps, psychologically no nearer than flying to other planets. The literary trope of alien encounter that is structured on the Self/Other binary foregrounds the increasing self-consciousness — and anxiety — of positioning the Chinese identity in a larger world. Pulp science fiction creates an external gaze of the aliens — the Other — to champion a proud Chinese identity by making Chinese scientists the key player in alien encounters and asserting China's long history with a brilliant (ancient) civilisation. In 'The Stranger from Outer Space' (Taikong qike 太空奇客) (1981), by Tao Wenqing 陶文庆, Chinese astronauts receive a package from intergalactic travellers from a planet named Duna, which includes a long letter with pictures and a 'dictionary', translating the signs on Earth into the Duna language. With the help of this dictionary, the astronauts are able to decode the letter expressing the aliens' pleasure at finding high civilisations on Earth and to understand the pictures that introduce the Duna.⁴⁴ In 'The Messenger' (Xinshi 信使) (1980), by Zhang Yonglin 张涌林, it is again Chinese astronauts who find a research report produced by aliens on Earth's civilisation. This report covers topics ranging from geometry and the theory of relativity to the discovery of Peking Man fossils.⁴⁵ As Sigrid Schmalzer shows us, the construction of Peking Man as a symbol of China's long history and one of the early civilisations took place mainly in Maoist China, when the archeological work on Peking Man was used as scientific evidence of evolution to cement nationalism and Marxist historical materialism.⁴⁶

The deployment of Peking Man fossils is not the only indicator of the impact of Maoist China on the popular imagination. The fantastic narrative of the aliens' physical features and social organisation also reflects its influence. Aliens are often described, at least from the perspective of the (Chinese) earthling narrator, as a more evolved species. In the story of 'After the Disappearance of the Demonic Shadow' mentioned above, the Chinese astronaut Luo Qiong lands on Lotus Planet. Its inhabitants resemble earthlings, but they are extraordinarily healthy and beautiful, suggesting the positive result of eugenic technology. The aliens on the planet Sirius, as observed by the Chinese marine scientist Lu Ying in 'The Secrets of the Aliens' (Yüzhouren de mimi 宇宙人的秘密) (1980), by Jing Weiru 井维如, seem to be a post-human race: they obtain energy as plants do and reproduce by cloning. As a result, they have no physical need for food and sex, hence, in the words of the narrator, no moral confusion. In contrast to their reduced biological needs is their exceptional ability to think with multiple organs.⁴⁷ The rationalised body corresponds to a rationalised social organisation. On Lotus Planet, wars have been eliminated because its inhabitants found out that it hindered social development. Technology is so developed that they do not have natural disasters because the weather can be conditioned according to their needs. Factories and farms are moved to other planets and operated by robots. Unhealthy individual habits such as smoking and drinking have been completely stamped out. The inhabitants of Lotus Planet work two to three months a year and spend the rest of their time learning and enjoying their lives. Returning to Earth, Luo Qiong claims that this alien civilisation represents the future of human society. Similarly, the alien society on the planet Sirius in 'The Secrets of the Aliens' uses robots for daily chores so that its members can do scientific research during work hours and enjoy entertainment (*yüle* 娱乐) in their spare time.

Such imaginings of aliens and their societies exemplify the scientific discourse of modernisation in China that has seen technological progress and the rationalisation of the man and society as the way to a modern future — a view held by both Nationalists and Communists.⁴⁸ Technology not only offers human beings material comforts, freedom from natural disasters and daily chores, but can also mold the human race as desired — as eugenic technology is described without qualms in many texts. The positive depiction of the post-human races that know no pleasure — and therefore no sin — of sexual and culinary enjoyments reflects the internalisation of the repressive moral codes and total social control in Maoist China. A society whose control of the individual goes as far as eliminating personal habits such as smoking and drinking brings to mind the Soviet writer Yevgeny Zamyatin's (1884–1937) dystopian novel *We* (Мы, 1921), in which the characters are dehumanised due to their loss of individuality and human frailty in a highly modernised future. Pulp science fiction writers, furthermore, seem uninterested in fantasising about the political system of the alien world, and their collective imagination seems to dry up when it comes to describing entertainment that supposedly occupies a large part of alien life.

The alien world as the positive Other, characterised by advanced technology, material abundance, and social order in these stories produces an estranging effect, denoting the lack of these things in real life and the desire to change the status quo. Yet, as the examples analysed above show, to a large extent, alien encounters in pulp science fiction demonstrate how social and cultural values of Maoist China have been internalised. Little consideration is given to individual freedom, human frailty, and other political alternatives. On the other hand, one may argue that the remote and fantastic contacts with the aliens can be seen as displaced expressions of China's popular imagination of its encounter with the rest of the world — especially the technologically more advanced West. The emphasis on the role of Chinese scientists and astronauts in making contact with aliens not only asserts Chinese identity in the wider world, but also shows China's return to professional science to realise its modernisation project.

Fantasy Disciplined: The Decline of Science Fiction in the Early Reform Era

As mentioned in the first section, Chinese science fiction had long been burdened by scientific optimism and didacticism, which required that science fiction disseminate correct scientific knowledge. Pulp science fiction in the early reform era tended to undermine both, albeit often inadvertently, and thereby teetered on the verge of ideological transgression. The attempt to discipline fantasy in science fiction — particularly in pulp science fiction — and the resistance of science fiction authors, led to many controversies from 1979 through to the end of 1983. They developed in roughly two periods, involving major media outlets such as *Guangming Daily* (Guangming ribao 光明日报), *China Youth* (Zhongguo qingnian bao 中国青年报), *People's Daily* (Renmin ribao 人民日报), and *Wenhui Daily* (*Wenhui bao* 文汇报). The first period (c.1979–80) witnessed debate over the relation between literature and scientific knowledge in the genre. In the second period (c.1981–83), the controversy escalated and the focus shifted to the content of fantasy in science fiction, which suggests that critics realised fantasy's potential to destabilise the dominant ideology. Towards the end of 1983, controversy was replaced

48 For the Nationalists' attempt to make Chinese people, society, and administration scientific, see William C. Kirby, 'Engineering China: Birth of the Developmental State, 1928–1937,' in *Becoming Chinese: Passages to Modernity and Beyond*, ed. Wen-hsin Yeh, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp.137–60. For an intellectual history of scientism in China, see D.W.Y. Kwok, *Scientism in Chinese Thought, 1900–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965).

- 49 For the defence of science fiction, see the articles by Xiao Jianheng 萧建亨, Ye Yonglie, Peng Zhongmin 彭钟岷 and Peng Xinmin 彭辛岷, Huang Yi 黄易, Tong Enzheng 童恩正, and Zheng Wenguang, in Huang Yi, *Lun kexue huanxiang xiaoshuo* 论科学幻想小说 (Beijing: Kexue puji chubanshe, 1981).
- 50 It is interesting to note that the same issue was also discussed, with less ideological load and risk, in Taiwan a bit later. See 'De xiansheng. Sai xiansheng. Huan Xiaojie' 德先生, 赛先生, 幻小姐, in ed. Zhang Xiguo 张系国, *Dangdai kehuan xiaoshuo xuan II* 当代科幻小说选II, (Taipei: Zhishi xitong chubangongsi, 1985), pp.209-56.
- 51 Tong Enzheng, 'Tantan wo dui kexue wenyi de renshi' 谈谈我对科学文艺的认识, *Renmin wenxue* 人民文学, 6 (1979), 110.
- 52 Lu Bing 鲁兵, 'Linghun chuqiao de wenxue' 灵魂出窍的文学, *Zhongguo qingnian bao* 中国青年报 14/8/1979.
- 53 Zhen Shuonan 甄朔南, 'Kexuexing shi sixiangxing de benyuan' 科学性是思想性的本源, *Zhongguo qingnian bao* 19/7/1979.
- 54 Ye Yonglie, 'Kexue. Huanxiang. Heli - da Zhen Shuonan tongzhi' 科学. 幻想. 合理 - 答甄朔南同志, *Zhongguo qingnian bao* 2/8/1979.
- 55 Xiao Jianheng, 'Shitan woguo kexue huanxiang xiaoshuo de fazhan - jianlun woguo kexue huanxiang xiaoshuo de yixie zhenglun' 试谈我国科学幻想小说的发展 - 兼论我国科学幻想小说的一些争论, in ed. Huang Yi, *Lun kexue huanxiang xiaoshuo*, pp.8-47.
- 56 Wagner, 'Lobby Literature', 40-43.
- 57 Cai Zizheng 蔡字征 et al., 'Pinglun Xiaolingtong manyou weilai' 评论《小灵通漫游未来》, *Kepu chuanguo* 科普创作 1(1980): 88-92.

by negative criticism. Science fiction in general, and pulp science fiction in particular, was under fierce attack by all major newspapers for spreading spiritual pollution.

It should be noted that the critics' remarks — instead of attacking a particular work or author — were directed against the genre as a whole, which put pressure on all science fiction writers. Scientist-authors who were better equipped in theory to defend the genre, were more vocal. Interestingly, their responses, while asking for more tolerance, supported the ideologue-critics and tried to expell pulp science fiction from the genre by confirming the didactic function of science fiction and its role in national modernisation.⁴⁹

In the first stage of controversy, the central issue was whether science fiction should lean towards science or literature. In other words, to what extent can science fiction be freed from the task of disseminating scientific knowledge?⁵⁰ Tong Enzheng argued against science fiction's function of popularising scientific knowledge, reformulating its goal as spreading 'a scientific view of life'.⁵¹ The critic Lu Bing 鲁兵 saw the refusal to disseminate scientific knowledge as taking the soul (*linghun chuqiao* 灵魂出窍) from science fiction.⁵² In July 1979, *China Youth* published an article criticising Ye Yonglie's story 'The Miracle on the Highest Mountain of the World' (*Shijie zuigaofeng shang de qiji* 世界最高峰上的奇迹, 1977) for disseminating scientific falsehoods.⁵³ Ye argued that science fiction differed from popular science writing in that its speculation about the future did not have to fit precisely with present-day scientific knowledge.⁵⁴ Xiao Jianheng emphasised the literariness of science fiction by calling for the separation of science fiction from science *belles-lettres* and by including social sciences in the notion of science.⁵⁵

Even though no-one touched upon socialist realism explicitly in the debate, Wagner observes that this controversy moved Chinese science fiction into 'a categorical no man's land'. The 'contraband of phantasy' in science fiction may put literary realism in question and the lack of categorical legitimacy may offer writers a chance to explore its potential 'as part of a new popular literature'.⁵⁶ Yet, in the early reform era, when the writing of fantasy in science fiction was constantly policed and disciplined, this exploration proved difficult. In 1980, a group of articles published in *Popular Science Creation* discussing Ye Yonglie's highly popular story 'Little Smart Tours the Future' (*Xiaolingtong manyou weilai* 小灵通漫游未来) (1978) anticipated the second stage of controversy. A story about a child-journalist called Little Smart touring the City of the Future, the book is generally considered a children's fantasy story dramatising the ideas of the Four Modernisations. One critic complained that the description of the life in the City of the Future focused mainly on daily amenities, while the modernisations of industry and national defence were barely touched upon. Instead of engaging in meaningful scientific explorations, another critic commented, the robot in the story only functioned as a domestic servant. Moreover, the way Little Smart entered the City of the Future (he loses his way) was considered by the critics as too effortless. It could not prepare the reader for the long, toiling process of realising the Four Modernisations.⁵⁷ Taking issue with 'triviality' in the story's imagining of the future, these critical remarks expressed an anxiety that fantasy in science fiction did not fit neatly into the grand narrative of the Four Modernisations and thereby might spill out of ideological control.

As I have argued earlier in this paper, the future characterised by material abundance and a comfortable lifestyle was one of the reasons that science fic-

tion was popular in the early reform era — it addressed the repressed desires and discontents of its readers. The surge of pulp science fiction around 1980–81 alarmed some critics, who interpreted its fantastic narrative as a form of tasteless escapism, which played no role in helping the reader to understand reality and develop science and technology. At this point, the literary creed of realism entered the debate. Two articles are representative: Xiao Lei's 肖雷 'The Other Side of the "Boom"' ('Fanrong' de lingyimian' '繁荣' 的另一面) and Zhao Shizhou's 赵世洲 'Questioning Science Thrillers' (Jingxian kehuan xiaoshuo zhiyi 惊险科幻小说质疑).⁵⁸ Whereas both articles conceded that science fiction was a tremendously popular genre at the time, Xiao dismissed most of the stories as 'fantasy plus love' or 'fantasy plus thriller', which, in his view, failed to reflect social reality and were, therefore, escapist in nature. Zhao, a popular science writer himself, characterised science fiction as unrealistic, unreasonable, and vulgar. Rhetorically asking what 'murder, eroticism, theft, and crazy men have to do with science and technology', Zhao politicised the debate by arguing that developing 'spiritual civilisation' (*jingshen wenming* 精神文明) side by side with science and technology was a feature of socialist culture. Very few science fiction authors came out to confront the charges. Ye Yonglie, many of whose stories verged on pulp science fiction, responded to the charges, ironically, with the rhetoric of orthodox literary criticism. He defended the genre for its power to predict scientific developments, its function of setting up a model for the socialist 'new man', its ability to forecast the future, and its contribution to the Four Modernisations.⁵⁹

In October 1983, the Campaign against Spiritual Pollution started. The next month, science fiction was ferociously attacked in major newspapers and pulp science fiction stories were tagged as 'frauds' (*maopai huo* 冒牌货). *Guangming Daily* reported on the meeting of the Association of China's Popular Science Writers, which aimed to 'eliminate spiritual pollution in order to guarantee the healthy development of popular science creation'. According to the report, some science fiction works spread pseudo-science, 'feudal superstition', and the belief in God; some promoted bourgeois egoism and hedonism; some indulged in murder, detection, or eroticism; and some even displayed discontent over the socialist system and the party. Although these science fiction stories were just one part of the genre, the report warned, their harmful influence, especially on young people, should not be overlooked.⁶⁰ *People's Daily* reiterated the scientism and didacticism of science fiction by harking back to Lu Xun's 鲁迅 (1881–1936) 1903 essay on science fiction. It accused 'certain' science fiction stories of discussing social and political problems instead of conveying correct scientific knowledge, and expressed alarm at science and technology being abused by criminals and unscrupulous scientists. These stories, it concluded, were neither scientific nor realistic. Furthermore, they abandoned the communist ideal in favour of bourgeois liberalisation and commercialisation.⁶¹ In the same vein, *Wenhui Daily* identified the 'deviant paths' (*qitu* 歧途) of science fiction creation as follows: escapism, political incorrectness (criticism of the socialist system), bourgeois decadence (fascination with horror and sex), and the obsession with profit.⁶²

These intense attacks on science fiction brought into view the ideological recalcitrance of fantasy in science fiction. With scientist-authors silenced by the noxious political implications of these attacks and minor authors completely disappearing from the scene, science fiction as a genre withered at the end of 1983.

58 Xiao Lei 肖雷, "'Fanrong' de ling yimian" '繁荣' 的另一面, *Wenxue bao* 文学报 16/4/1981; Zhao Shizhou 赵世洲, 'Jingxian kehuan xiaoshuo zhiyi' 惊险科幻小说质疑, *Dushu* 读书 8 (1982): 60–65.

59 Ye Yonglie, 'Jingxian kehuan xiaoshuo dayi' 惊险科幻小说答疑, *Dushu* 读书 1 (1983): 63–69.

60 Liu Lusha 刘路沙, 'Zhongguo kepu chuanguo xiehui zai jing zhaokai zuotanhui tichu qingchu jingshen wuran, baozheng kepu chuanguo jiankang fazhan' 中国科普创作协会在京召开座谈会提出清除精神污染, 保证科普创作健康发展, *Guangming ribao* 光明日报 1/11/1983.

61 Shi Tong 施同, 'Kehuan zuopin zhong de jingshen wuran ye ying qingli' 科幻作品中的精神污染也应清理, *Renmin ribao* 人民日报 5/11/1983. In 1903, Lu Xun published his rather free translation of Jules Verne's *De la terre à la lune* in Japan. His preface to the translation argued that the entertaining power of fiction should be used to disseminate modern scientific knowledge so as to achieve the goals of dispelling superstition, reforming the thought of the Chinese people, and propelling Chinese civilisation forward.

62 Feng Feng 冯凤, 'Kexue huanxiang xiaoshuo chuanguo de qitu' 科学幻想小说创作的歧途, *Wenhui bao* 文汇报 23/11/1983.

Conclusion

The emergence and popularity of pulp science fiction in the early reform era were the result of various forces, including loosened ideological control, the reintroduction of a consumer-oriented market economy, the CCP's ambition of realising national modernisation, and, not least of all, the populace's need to channel its repressed desires and discontents. Like 'lobby literature', pulp science fiction responded to the official call for realising the Four Modernisations. While not attempting to challenge the dominant ideologies of communism, patriotism, and scientific optimism, pulp science fiction, nevertheless, turned out to be ideologically transgressive when its fantastic unconscious spilled over by addressing – through displacement – the repressed desires, discontents, and doubts in Chinese society. As my analysis shows, displacement of fantasy mainly took place in three ways in these texts: first, the construction of negative capitalist Others and a capitalist world on which anxieties and discontents, the negative use of science, and the negative image of the scientist were projected; second, the legitimisation of private desires by displacing them onto the official discourse of national modernisation; and third, the portrayal of positive alien Others and their societies to showcase a desirable future by displacing the temporal distance between the present and the future into the spatial distance between planets.

The fantasy narrative in pulp science fiction has its limitations and fails to provide any alternative historical hypothesis. It does, however, offer social commentary through the defamiliarising effects it creates. Furthermore, pulp science fiction as 'light literature' offered its readers pleasure by inviting them to decode the displaced, latent messages in the texts. Although pulp science fiction was suppressed in the Campaign against Spiritual Pollution, its 'pulp' legacy would re-emerge in the 'new wave' of Chinese science fiction from the 1990s onwards. The desires and discontents it disclosed would become increasingly visible in Chinese society and culture, anticipating further changes.

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