

Capitalist Monster and Bottled Passengers: Political Stakes of Embodiment in *The Reincarnated Giant* and *The Last Subway*



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DURING the Dublin Worldcon in August 2019, I attended a panel discussion entitled “The Global Perspectives on Chinese Science Fiction,” which I had the privilege of transcribing. At this panel, Professor David Der-wei Wang, the Edward C. Henderson Professor of Chinese Literature at Harvard University, once again reiterated his understanding of Chinese SF as a unique approach to engage in the broader domain of cultural politics in contemporary China. While acknowledging that “our [sf] writers are really motivated to create a lot of new and different themes,” he believes the underpinning question still to be answered urgently is: “how much political stake are we taking at this critical moment of Chinese history?”

New Wave, New Themes

Since the 2015 Hugo Award for Best Novel went to Liu Cixin’s *The Three Body Problem*, the last few years have seen a rising dynamism of Chinese SF on the international stage. An increasing number of Chinese SF stories have been systematically translated for non-Chinese-speaking readers. They are collected in anthologies and magazines, introduced at SF conventions and conferences, and discussed in academic journals. Through such a process, an SF renaissance in China famously termed “The Chinese New Wave” by Song Mingwei (*After 1989* 7-8) gradually grew in recognition among the global SF community. The beginning of the Chinese New Wave can be dated back to the year 1989 with Liu Cixin’s novelette *China 2185*, a story still not formally published and only circulated online, that indicates certain literary characteristics that were different from “pre-New Wave” stories (Song, *After 1989* 8). Alternatively, from the perspective of publishing and international promotion, the Chinese New Wave started in 1991 when the magazine *Science Literature and Art* (*Kexue Wenyi*) changed its name to *Science Fiction World* (*SFW, Kehuan Shijie*) to strengthen the *fiction* side of SF. It serves as the most important and most influential platform for Chinese SF publication since the 1990s and embarks “on a solitary quest to establish

the [SF] genre permanently in China” (Huss 95). Fostered by the “transformed” *SFW*, a robust group of “the Newborn” and “Post-Newborn Generation” SF writers (Wu et al. 52) is endeavouring to provide the “new and different themes” concerning the “political state” mentioned by David Der-wei Wang at the 2019 Worldcon panel. In doing so, they challenge the dominant yet misleading expectation of SF stories, by both the public and a large group of elite intellectuals, as an educational medium for the popularisation of science and technology.

Beginning to take shape in either 1989 or 1991, the Chinese New Wave cannot be separated from a series of social and cultural changes towards a “post-socialist” society (Zhang 9-16). This transition from “relying on the state” to “relying on one’s self” resulted from accelerated economic reforms of marketisation and privatisation under Deng Xiaoping’s instruction, a new normative order “for self-promoting subjects to manage their lives through the pursuit of private interest, but within political limits set by authoritarian rule” (Ong and Zhang 15). The competitive market drives and personal responsibility became pivotal in taking care of people’s livelihood, namely education, health, and other forms of social welfare that used to be protected by the state or state-owned enterprises (SOEs). With this, Chinese people could also develop a certain degree of individual autonomy, indicating that the perceived dissolution and degeneration of the totality of a purported socialist reality “open[ed] a narrow gate on a reconfiguration of economic, social, political, and cultural powers” (Zhang 18). The Chinese discourse on privatisation has therefore travelled beyond market activities and been changed into a subjectivising impulse that aims to prime the powers of the private self. In the 1990s, Chinese citizens were urged to “free up” their individual capacities to confront dynamic conditions in all areas of life “without seeking guidance from the state, society, or family” (Ong and Zhang 7). The breaking of the socialist totality, however, has also resulted in the breaking of the ‘iron rice bowl,’ made true via ‘the evisceration of social protections, the imposition of user fees, the creation of a flexible labour market regime, and the privatisation of assets formerly held in common’ (Harvey 150).

Therefore, people in China found themselves in turmoil where the previous living stability projected by the socialist ideology and planned economy had been replaced by the uncertainty and insecurity accompanied with the competitive nature of the free market. The gap between the rich and the poor widened, as well as that of inequality between different social classes. “Someone somewhere and somehow is getting very

rich” (Harvey 142). In this way, the emergence of the Chinese New Wave along with such a profound social transformation would be underestimated if it is merely rendered as a historical coincidence. Instead, the most recent renaissance of Chinese sf since the 1990s should be understood as a literary or cultural response directly to China’s change, an interrogation of the calculative logic in market competition that has been increasingly considered the social norm. Although the “new and different themes” identified in the Chinese New Wave may vary from writer to writer, this essay will concentrate on one of them, i.e. the embodiment of market forces that are thoroughly transforming the current China, in two short stories—Wang Jinkang’s “The Reincarnated Giant” (2005, *Zhuansheng de Juren*) and Han Song’s “The Last Subway” (1998, *Moban Ditie*).

The Reincarnated Capitalist Monster

For anyone interested in the Chinese New Wave, Wang Jinkang is a name that should never be overlooked. He has been commonly known for using “body,” “life,” or “biology” as the central metaphors in many of his works such as “Leopard” (1998, “*Bao*”), “Sowing on Mercury” (2002, “*Shuixing Bozhong*”), *Ant Life* (2007, *Yi Sheng*), and, of course, “The Reincarnated Giant” (“*Zhuansheng de Juren*” 2005) here to be discussed. Included as the cover story in the anthology edited by Song Mingwei published in 2018, RG portrays an eccentric billionaire, Imagai Nashihiko, who hires biologists and doctors to transplant his brain into an infant body and in this way attempts to realise his ambitious reincarnation. His surgery turns out to be successful, but what comes later goes terribly wrong. After his brain transplantation, Mr. Imagai, now an infant with a seventy-year old mind, completely surrenders to his lust and desire. His physical growth, fuelled by unlimited food and resources, “could no longer be described with terms like ‘felt like’ and ‘was like,’ and now, if you stood next to him while he nursed, you could actually see his body inflating like a balloon” (Wang 329). Eventually, his mountain-like yet still “insatiable” (347) body, transforming whatever he has “shovelled into [his] enormous mouth” into “excrement” (348), collapses upon itself, together with his business empire. In such a process, giant Mr. Imagai’s monstrous consumption of matter and bodies fits in Marx’s famous description of capital as “dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (Marx 342).

Further, he can be considered as what Steve Shaviro (281-290) called a “capitalist monster.”

Preying on everything around him, Mr. Imagai is in a constant state of dissatisfaction, always in want of more. No matter how much food he consumes, how much resource invested and how many wet nurses found to feed the giant infant, his thirst for intaking and assimilating the “surplus values” (if put in a Marxist term) of those who work for him can never truly reach an end. These values, in turn, would become “a part of this giant’s body and participate in his ravenous consumption” (350) in further steps. The productivity and productive potentials of other people serving Mr. Imagai’s needs are in this way quantified, measured by, and sold for wages in an economised and commercialised discourse. They are extracted, exploited, and exhausted by Mr. Imagai as the embodiment of capitalist market principles, which in reality, has been significantly changing today’s China. The creativity and spirituality of human beings as social “subjects” are gradually drained out through the competitive logic of capitalist accumulation, whereas the empty bodies with no exploitable values are left over and eventually cast aside, just like the wet nurses who “marched in and out of Mr. Imagai’s room, like images on a revolving lantern” (329). Expanding continuously, the vampiric capitalist monster at last dies upon his own weight and whatever he consumed previously becomes “a mountainous pile of flesh” (351)—lifeless and homogeneous.

As observed by He Xi, another reputable Chinese New Wave SF writer, Wang Jinkang’s stories stand out for two notable characteristics—on the one hand his challenge and interrogation of humanity and ethics, and on the other hand, even more importantly, his emphasis on SF’s retrospection on social and political concerns (69-71). The spectre of such a capitalist monster in RG is in fact far more than a merely science fictional creation, whose realistic connotations should be viewed in line with the pressure, confusion, and uncertainty felt by Chinese people during China’s recent and ongoing transformation. They have increasingly found themselves formulated as “human capital” (Brown 32) or “calculative agencies” (Callon 3) embedded in a marketised social discourse. This is actually a zero-sum game compulsory for everyone, even including the transplantation experts and wet nurses, apart from Mr. Imagai himself. In this story, doctors and wet nurses are provided with two payment methods—“one option involved a high fixed salary, while the other offered instead a low salary with a bonus . . . one year later” (328). Interestingly, most of them would

prefer the second option, which can be connected, in many ways, to the contractual system that has dominated the private sectors in current China, and increasingly in Chinese public institutions such as schools, universities, and hospitals. As the responsibility of welfare and livelihood provision is transferred from the state to individuals, people are incentivised, subjected to a “calculative,” “entrepreneurial,” and “human-capitalised” logic of self-investment and self-appreciation (Feher 21-41), to take risks in exchange for future benefits.

Unfortunately, however, the attempt of doctors and wet nurses to earn their bonus eventually turns out to be vain, since none of them manages to endure until the end of their contracts. Here in such a capitalist game, the winner takes all while others will lose, as their values and productivity are to be stripped away by the competitive market mechanism, integrated into Mr. Imagai’s giant body. The capitalist monster embodied in RG in this way interrogates, from a critical perspective, the current economic and socio-political transition in China towards a discourse guided by market principles where people are rendered as undifferentiated human capital. Such homogeneous nature is also represented in another New Wave story written by Han Song, “The Last Subway.”

The Bottled Passengers

Among all writers of the Chinese New Wave, Han Song stands in a unique position. He is not only well-known for his sf contributions but also can be compared to Lu Xun for his use of cannibalism and his social criticism in a satiric tone (Jia 103-115). Li Guangyi likens his writing to Franz Kafka’s in term of his ambiguous, indeterminant, and absurd writing style: “One can use refined language, magnificent imagination, or any number of other adjectives to describe Han Song’s [stories], but no phrase captures Han Song’s writing better than ‘eerie’” (29). Such a sense of “eeriness”, according to Nathaniel Isaacson, can be considered “the result of an uncanny blend of magical realism and grotesque transformations of the human body with a palpable sense that these are quotidian descriptions of everyday experience” (4). Meanwhile, it is also the “eeriness,” the weird and peculiar phrases, expression, narrations, that makes his stories particularly difficult to translate. Consequently, he can hardly reach the equivalent leading reputation among the English readership as he has in China.

“The Last Subway” (LS) is one of Han Song’s most influential short stories, one

that was originally published in 1998 and later rendered as the first chapter of a novel, *Subway* (2011), in which chapters are loosely connected to each other. However, it has not been printed in English yet and its translation is only available in the online magazine *Pathlight: New Chinese Writing* (2012). Unlike the capitalist monster in RG, LS accommodates a group of “strange people . . . no taller than [a] ten-year-old,” who “worked in pairs to move the sleeping passengers [on the last subway], one dragging the arms, the other carrying the legs,” and stuffed them “into large, fluid-filled glass bottles” (3124, Kindle location). Such a “grotesque transformation of human body” in Isaacson’s words to describe the uncanny dwarves and bottled passengers, can be put in a broader context of China’s social transition. It should be understood as an embodiment of people’s fading sense of security and meaningfulness, as they have been increasingly considered not human agencies, but human capital embedded in a sophisticated social and economic network.

Despite the success of China’s market-oriented reforms in economic terms, an economised cultural discourse based on economic values and calculation has been extended to every dimension of human life—“a process of remaking the knowledge, form, content and conduct appropriate to these [dimensions]” (Brown 31). As the Chinese society becomes more “efficient” than ever, with the state and social units (danwei, 单位) retreating from welfare provision, individuals, though reluctantly, find themselves becoming human capital in a market competition. Here, everything is measured by quantified values. People’s survival is subject to the maintenance or the deterioration of such homogeneous values that would allow for “the conversion of every human need or desire into profitable enterprise” (Brown 28). In this way, their subjectivity is gradually dissolved, assimilated, and eventually consumed by the economised and entrepreneurial social discourse configured by various value symbols rooted in a world of consumerism and commodity fetishism where the neon lights of the “Coca-Cola sign” would constantly blaze (Han 3033, or “C Company” in his other stories). Their jobs, although unique from their own perspective, turns out to be nothing but one of the functional points attached to the entire social network. They are identical to each other as long as they work well.

The sense of homogeneity as such of human capital, the sense of meaninglessness, of nihilism, of repetition, or in Fredric Jameson’s terms, of “pastiche” and “schizophrenia” (1-54), acts as the central metaphor in LS. Here, a train full of passengers “ran through the night without returning to a station” (3205), yet no

one notices, no one cares. The passengers, or more precisely, their social identities, disappearing with the train, will then be perfectly replaced by the “strange people” found by the protagonist Lao Wang in the subway tunnel. They are all “short in stature and wearing grey jump-suits and masks” (3124), looking like the products of the same manufacturing line, and endeavour to seal the passengers in glass bottles. In this way, these bottled bodies are moved “along the rails into the darkness” (3124) and hidden deeply under a seemingly dynamic city. Only their identities, or more importantly, their ID numbers, are left to be occupied by some eerie, homogeneous creatures. Just like what Lao Wang did repetitively for his job “to fill out a pile of forms” (3255), these numbers are being watched and taken by “countless pairs of eyes” (3255) belonging to people trapped in this economised discourse and thus reduced to human capital.

All of sudden, Lao Wang realises that only in his youth did he feel his liveliness and subjectivity in this world, now held only in distant memories of air-defence drills, protest parades, air-raid shelter safaris, etc. It was a time before China’s market-oriented transformation. While the current world is more like “a pot of old soup that [is] now being replaced drop by drop, just as his generation [is] being replaced by a younger one” (3405), people are now quite used to this ruthless process. Therefore, Lao Wang breaks his routine, and tries to do something he has never thought of. He retires from his repetitive, tedious job, giving his social position away to someone to come, and absolves from the discourse made of economised values, symbols, and ID numbers. He searches for his long-lost subjectivity and uniqueness. He discovers that people’s emotions and sensitivity are hidden somewhere underground, embodied by those missing passengers sealed in bottles. He wishes to step further, to embrace such an underworld. “The trip in the tunnel felt like a second birth. A far-off newness welled up in his heart, and in the twinkling of an eye, he felt embarrassed. The world he had clung to for so many years [is] toppling” (3391).

Bit by bit, Lao Wang manages to detach himself from the economised social network, and eventually entraps himself in a bottle he witnessed on that missing train. “The fluid surrounding him [is] particularly full and smooth and seem[s] imbued with endless life. Lao Wang, his face content, look[s] like a fetus sleeping soundly in the womb.”—his “primordial form” (3473). It is at this very moment, among the last few paragraphs of the story, that Lao Wang, the narrator previously known as “he,” found his name. “He” is Lao Wang and should not be called by a random title like

others who have been consumed by the society—namely the “telephone operators,” “wives,” “young women,” “office chiefs,” etc. The world outside the bottles functions just like a capitalist monster embodied in “The Reincarnated Giant,” constantly exploiting and exhausting the values of the homogeneous human capital represented by lifeless ID numbers and symbols.

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The Chinese New Wave was born in an age of change and transition, for which many of the “new themes” noticed by scholars at the Worldcon panel in 2019 have provided a wide range of interrogation and criticism. Here both in “The Reincarnated Giant” and “The Last Subway,” the calculative and competitive logic of market is embodied by a giant infant who can be seen as a capitalist monster and by a group of strange dwarves representing the homogeneous nature of the world dominated by economised values. In either way, the New Wave has indeed provided a new scope that frees Chinese SF from its educational and utilitarian stereotype, to perform not as a vehicle for science population but an important platform for social critique, to respond to the socio-cultural impact of China’s market-oriented reforms to take the requested “political stake” urgently called forth during the 2019 Dublin panel.

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