

## **Waste People and the Vampiric Society: Heterotopia of Migrant Workers in Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide***

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Chen Qiufan's 2013 novel *Waste Tide* has become one of the most popular stories of Chinese New Wave Science Fiction, especially after the publication of its English version in 2019. This essay argues that in addition to the environmental concerns *Waste Tide* brings to the fore, it also calls for a discussion centered on migrant workers in China. Rendered as waste people on Silicon Isle, these migrant workers find themselves trapped in the duality of "economic acceptance" and "social rejection," forming an autonomous community that can be read through Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia. Out of the humiliation imposed by the Silicon Isle natives and the resulting mentality of failure and trauma, the waste people have developed a desire for change and transgression. However, their efforts and sacrifice for self-liberation turn out to be in vain, because in doing so, they would be consumed by the vampiric logic of market competition. Such a competition, in fact, is evident not only in the fictional Silicon Isle, but also in the real cities benefitting from China's market-oriented transition.

### ***Waste Tide: Beyond its Environmental Concerns***

In August 2019, the London Chinese Science Fiction Group (LCSFG) invited Chen Qiufan to speak about his writing career and his debut novel *Waste Tide* (2013), a few months after its English translation was published. During his lecture, titled 'Why Do I Write Science Fiction About E-waste,'<sup>1</sup> Chen Qiufan shared with us his personal trip in 2011 to Guiyu (贵屿, Guīyǔ), a town in Guangdong province situated on the South China Sea coast, the archetype of the highly-polluted Silicon Isle (硅屿, Guīyǔ) in *Waste Tide*. Benefitting from its geographical location and favorable state policies to boost economy and trade after Deng Xiaoping's South Tour,<sup>2</sup> Guiyu flourished as one of the international hubs of e-waste recycling. It had become the world's largest e-waste site by 2013, created double-digit economic growth for the local government. However, as observed by Chen Qiufan himself, behind such an economic prosperity there lay profound social sufferings and ecological crises:

Everything is chaotic and disorganized, and the waste disposal workers are unprotected and directly exposed to this polluted environment. They try to find recyclable metal components containing a certain amount of rare earth among the discarded cables or electronic parts. Such business has caused serious damage to the local environment of Guiyu. Soil, water and even the air are all contaminated and eroded by these electronic wastes, not to mention the unprotected workers who are the most direct victims of environmental pollution. (n.p.)

From here, Chen Qiufan went on to explain that in science fiction stories, especially in his *Waste Tide*, "environmental concerns can be generalized to a broader social context, and readers are more likely to think about how their individual reactions can affect our environment, as well as the lives of those vulnerable waste workers they have never met in person" (n.p.).

Chen Qiufan's own reading of *Waste Tide* as an elaboration of such "environmental concerns" has been widely acknowledged. In the near future, under the manipulation of three local clans (led by the Luo clan) the fictional Silicon Isle develops an economy solely based on the e-waste recycling industry, which has turned this setting that used to be "poor but

lively” (Chen 41) into an ecological dystopia, “a polluted and ruined homeland” (171). The natives of Silicon Isle become rich, taking all the economic benefits through environmental exploitation. However, the migrant workers from other less developed regions are not treated fairly. These “waste people” work directly with the contaminated and toxic electronic scraps, usually without vocational protection, and are not properly compensated for their economic contributions and the health risks they have taken. They are underpaid, undertrained, and overworked. They also suffer from entrenched discrimination from the locals of Silicon Isle, who expel them from the city and ghettoize them into a number of satellite villages. That is, the waste people are rejected by the place which receives their economic contributions. Trapped in such a spatial segregation, the heroine Mimi, one of the “waste girls,” is infected by an artificial virus because of her close contact with the toxic materials in the waste village, developing a second consciousness apart from her original mind. This gives her posthuman powers and allows her to lead all the waste people to launch a war against the local clans, fighting for the equal rights to which they are entitled.

On the back cover of the novel’s British edition, *Waste Tide* is hailed by Liu Cixin as “[the] pinnacle of near-future science fiction” in recent years and by Simon Ings as “a dark mirror held up to our Anthropocene selves” that stands out as an eco-thriller with its “spoiled and toxic beauty.” Along with Liu Cixin’s *The Three-Body Problem* (2008), which won the Hugo Award in 2015, *Waste Tide* is considered another representative of the “Chinese New Wave.” This is the term that Song Mingwei (“After 1989” 7–13) uses to conceptualize the science fiction movement in China since 1989 and to contextualize it as part of the broader and more profound social changes during China’s post-socialist transitions, brought forward by a series of economic and political reforms in favor of privatization and marketization. Drawing on the sophisticated eco-critical concerns of *Waste Tide*, literary and cultural scholars have examined this novel from the perspectives of ecological degradation, the toxic sublime, and posthuman ecocriticism (Li 270–282; Ma 67–80; Healey 1–33). Others have analyzed the uneven global distribution of ecological costs and risks (Sun 289–306) or seen cyborg and human-machine hybridity as a reaction to environmental failures (Song “Representations” 546–565; Xiong 75–89). All of these environmental readings of *Waste Tide*, together with an increasing number of conference papers and roundtable discussions presented in the past few years,<sup>3</sup> have contributed to the scholarship on this novel and on the Chinese New Wave in general.

However, *Waste Tide* is more than an eco-critical narrative. In this article, I will move beyond the well-discussed environmental concerns in the novel and focus on another significant theme, that is the marginalized community of migrant workers represented by the “waste people” on Silicon Isle. In fact, the term “waste people” has been widely cited in previous studies to demonstrate the vulnerability, or “victimhood” (Ma 68), of those migrant workers in face of the lack of health protection against forms of ecological violence. In a way, Chen Qiufan’s description of the wasteland eroded by environmental pollution and un(der)-equipped frontline workers poisoned by toxic e-waste has set the tone for the whole story. But still, what should be asked here is not how and why the waste people are most affected by the eco-degradation on Silicon Isle. We should figure out why there was such a dislocated community in the first place.

While environmental injustice is of course one of the most urgent factors that should be taken into consideration when analyzing the “waste people,” it is still a partial product of a broader capitalist logic that requires market exploitation and capital accumulation. The “environmental concerns” that Chen Qiufan spoke of cannot be detached from the general context where a “waste space” is constructed for economic purposes, a place in which numerous precarious jobs are created, mainly for migrant workers without appropriate occupational training and protection. They are the victims not only of the environmental

crises and pollution but also of their jobs, their dislocation, and the capitalist system, which combine to bring forward all the problems—of which “environmental concerns” is just one of many. I am aware that environmental and capitalist critiques are in many ways interconnected and cannot be discussed separately. What I wish to do here is, while acknowledging previous eco-critical readings, to steer our attentions a bit more towards the specific social group under the most direct exploitation—the waste people—and relate them to other types of migrant labor in contemporary China in other industries.

In this case, we could think about why people like Mimi, the “waste girl,” are willing to leave their inland hometown and flood into coastal cities such as Guiyu and Silicon Isle, to work in an underpaid and unprotected condition. Is the underlying logic of the waste recycling industry—one that leads to such an environmental disaster on Silicon Isle—also evident in other forms of social production? I will interpret literary metaphors in *Waste Tide* such as Silicon Isle and the “waste people” in order to map out a bigger picture of the capitalist nature of the system that produces the need for cheap migrant labor (let alone the need to minimize the cost spent on protecting the workers and reducing ecological risks). As I see it, the highly polluted Silicon Isle transcends its original representation of Guiyu—the waste recycling hub in the real China that has enjoyed its economic boom since after Deng’s 1992 South Tour. Rather, it serves as a reflection of every city or region favored by China’s post-socialist, marketized, competition-initiated transformation. These cities are probably well-known not for waste recycling or the consequential ecological contamination but for other labor-intensive, trade-oriented industries including toy, textile, garment, or machine assembly, etc.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the poor working conditions of the waste people in *Waste Tide*, exacerbated by eco-degradation, are certainly not unique to the waste recycling monopolies. It can generally be considered a labor market response to the developmental unevenness and economic gap between the inland and coastal regions in China (Wang and Cai 30).

I will therefore introduce the community of migrant workers in *Waste Tide* by examining the plight of the “floating population” in China who usually move from rural, inland regions to the more economically developed cities. Forming a large reserve force of precarious labor, these migrant workers make considerable contributions to the cities they live in, which is crucial for China’s manufacturing industries that have gained the country the reputation of a “global factory.” However, they cannot be fully accepted as part of the city, especially because of the Household Registration System (*hukou*) that prevents them from accessing a variety of social welfare benefits, which I will discuss in the light of Kinglun Ngok’s observations of the duality of “economic acceptance” and “social rejection” experienced by Chinese migrant workers (252). I will then draw on the Foucauldian “heterotopia” to conceptualize the “waste villages” in *Waste Tide*, accommodating Silicon Isle’s “waste people,” who are attracted from less-developed areas in China and thus have always faced harsh discriminations from the locals. We can see that a sense of solidarity or victimhood is gradually built within these heterotopic waste villages, which eventually results in a violent protest against the local clans. But even so, the waste people cannot truly liberate themselves from the capitalist or the vampiric society in which they are rendered, together with the environment, as the sacrifice for China’s economic boom.

### **Representing Migrant Workers on Silicon Isle**

As an active polemicist of the Chinese New Wave, Chen Qiufan never shies away from addressing our reality in his science fictional writings, which he usually characterizes as Science Fiction Realism. “During the past few decades,” he pointed out as early as 2007 at the Chengdu International SFF Conference, “reality has surpassed science fiction” (qtd. in Ren 55). Several years later, in 2012, Chen Qiufan further elaborated his idea by claiming

that “science fiction is the greatest realism at the present time [that] provides a window for imagination through its open realism, to delineate a reality no mainstream literature has written about” (55). With this in mind, he reiterates on various occasions that with Science Fiction Realism he intends to cast a profound gaze on the roles that science and technology may play in human life and the influence on people’s perception of the self, the other, and the world as a whole.<sup>5</sup> In a way, Chen Qiufan agrees with Fredric Jameson who proposes the concept of “world reduction,” namely an operation of abstraction that leads to “a kind of surgical excision of empirical reality” (‘World Reduction’ 271). But even more importantly, it is exactly through such a process of “surgical excision” that “[social] custom, human relationships and finally political choices are pared down to the essentials” (‘If I Can’ 410), thus empowering the science fiction narratives to engage with certain social concerns in a much more focused manner. Therefore, the interconnection between reality and science-fictionality, according to Chen Qiufan’s firm belief in Science Fiction Realism, relates his works to the concrete social issues nowadays that urgently require our attention. One of the issues he puts forward in *Waste Tide*, as I mentioned earlier, concerns the large community of migrant workers in contemporary China and their fierce conflict with the native urban residents.

The mistreatment of migrant workers, including unfair payment, wage arrears, unpaid overtime, discrimination in the labor market, etc., have become serious social concerns. The striking number of migrant workers in China has been confirmed by the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics: in 2019 there were approximately 291 million migrant workers in all economic sectors, an increase of nearly 22 million from 2013 when *Waste Tide* was published.<sup>6</sup> “Many migrant workers,” observes Kinglun Ngok, “worked hard for the entire year, and did not even have the money for transport to go back home [...] In order to get back their wage arrears, migrant workers in desperate situations sometimes resorted to *violence*.” (252, my emphasis). This mistreatment and exploitation of migrant workers can even be described in terms of Marx’s “vampiric” logic of capitalist production. In *Capital*, he described the relations of production under capitalism as “vampire-like,” where factory owners, like the three manipulative local clans in *Waste Tide*, live “only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks” (342).<sup>7</sup> Here, I feel necessary to clarify that China, either in reality or embodied in *Waste Tide*, should not be simply categorized as a capitalist state. But even so, certain characteristics such as privatization, deregulation, and the introduction of market competition, are very much evident and economically effective in cities like Guiyu and the fictional Silicon Isle.

In this case, conflicts arise on Silicon Isle, especially between the wealthy natives benefitting from waste processing and the impoverished waste people who have to take all the ecological risks. Likewise, these conflicts may also arise from the real-world flow of the “floating population” from inland China to more economically developed coastal cities and the tense relationship between the “outsiders” and local residents. As indicated above, since the 1990s Chinese migrant workers emerge as a new “underpaid” and “unprivileged” “underclass” (Solinger 177) and are usually treated as “transient guests” (Pun 91). More importantly, they are excluded from the Household Registration System (*hukou*)<sup>8</sup> and are only provided with very limited resources in terms of education, housing, job security, and other types of welfare as a result. They are often attracted by the much higher salaries than in their less-developed hometowns due to China’s worsening developmental unevenness among different regions as well as between urban and rural areas. However, they also find themselves in an awkward situation where they are not recognized by the locals in the city as “part of us” and hence will permanently remain “outsiders.” They are trapped in a process of “double alienation” (Pun et al. 116) where the Marxist sense of alienation of labor in the capitalist mode of production is coupled with an alienation of identity. These migrant

workers would always be “branded as second-class citizens and inferior laborers,” (Pun et al. 116) and thus can in a way be considered a group of “denizens” who have “a more limited range of rights, and weaker entitlement to them” than the native urban residents (Standing 590). Therefore, migrant workers are merely treated as a cheap labor force to be exploited by their employers with no necessary additional responsibilities. They are even expelled to various “densely-populated communities” in suburban areas (Pun 92). These communities are often regarded as the main targets of governmental management and clean-ups, and consequentially appear “to have limited social interaction with locals [who are] displaying subtle discrimination” against them (Frenkel and Yu 272).

Here the conflicting social status of migrant workers is dramatized. They provide an essential labor force during China’s economic boom but are only treated as a second-class group in cities. These migrant workers should be perceived as examples of the duality between “economic acceptance” and “social rejection” proposed by Kinglun Ngok:

“Economic acceptance” meant that local government accepted the influence of market forces which caused rural migration, and migrant workers were treated as a source of cheap labor—although even then, this acceptance had its limitations, as migrant workers were forced into the dirtiest, toughest and most dangerous jobs while receiving minimal wages. “Social rejection” was also a result of the official policy which denied migrant workers various public services. (252)

In this way, the “social rejection” of migrant workers and the “subtle discrimination” from the locals mentioned above can be both considered “the most serious form of social exclusion that exists in China” (Ngok 252). In *Waste Tide*, Chen Qiufan describes the open hostility and violence against the waste people on the fictional Silicon Isle in a more exaggerated manner.

The native downtown residents maintain a deep belief in their superiority over the migrant workers and in their right to obtain all market benefits at the expense of exhaustive environmental damage. Living in the upmarket city center of Silicon Isle, these “nouveaux riches of contemporary China” are surrounded by numerous expensive cars and “boutiques specializing in luxury brands” that can only be seen in China’s largest cities. They are keen to buy “the best material goods the world had to offer and used them to fill their own empty lives” (Chen 29–30). Whereas the waste people, “all of them migrants from elsewhere in China,” are left flitting between the toxic piles of “metal chassis, broken displays, circuit boards, plastic components, and wires” in the neighboring villages, where “everything was shrouded in a leaden miasma, an amalgamation of the white mist [...] and the black smoke from the unceasing burning of PVC, insulation, and circuit boards” (Chen 31). These two disparate versions of Silicon Isle, as well as the resulting geographic and social isolation between the locals and waste people aggravate the already-serious discrimination to a further degree. Not a single Silicon Isle native could claim to be fully innocent:

Everyone had benefitted in some manner by exploiting the blood and sweat of the waste people [...] Everyone had, at one time or another, looked at the waste people with contempt or disgust, or insulted them with a careless or hurtful word. Everyone had had the thought, even if only momentarily, that the waste people were born low and that they were fated to live in the company of trash, destined to be filthy until their deaths. (Chen 263)

Placed in such an unthinkable state, tens of thousands of migrant workers in this doomed land, trapped in a web of local corruption, deadly environmental degradation, and economic exploitation, are turned into waste people just like those recycled wastes with which they have to work and live. Anxious, confused, and futureless, the waste people and their fraught emotions are centered on a single character, Mimi, who “couldn’t control the state of tension life on Silicon Isle had caused in her,” that is the tension from “the unfamiliar surroundings,” “the enmity of the natives,” and “the malicious looks from the local hooligans” (Chen 92).

The waste people are ignored, or even worse, avoided, bullied, and discriminated against by the natives of Silicon Isle, despite the fact that the natives' wealth has been acquired through the physical and mental sacrifice of the migrant population.

### **Heterotopia of Waste People: The Place of Outsiders**

The waste people are driven into specific neighborhoods isolated within an invisible wall, forming a group of "invisible masses" (Song "Representation" 560) in ghettoized waste processing villages carelessly built for the migrant workers. In fact, this invisible wall separating the urban locals and migrant workers can be perceived as the boundary of the "protective shell" introduced by Peter Sloterdijk. In his influential book *In the World Interior of Capital*, he claims that nowadays, "[people's] social life in its entirety would have to be integrated into a *protective shell*," namely "a domestically organized and artificially climatized inner space" that distinguishes the privileged "insider," beneficiaries of market competition, against those disadvantaged "outsiders" trying to break in (Sloterdijk 171, my emphasis).

These "outsiders" represented by the waste people in *Waste Tide*, as noted in Sun Mengtian's essay, echoes Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "human waste" (Sun 296). In Bauman's book *Wasted Lives*, he claims that the production of "human waste" is in fact an inevitable and inescapable side-effect of economic progress, casting "some part of the extant population as 'out of place,' 'unfit,' or 'undesirable'" under the new economic or socio-political order (Bauman 5). The wasted humans or wasted lives would then be considered "excessive" and "redundant," forming a community "of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay" (5). Building upon Bauman's later argument that "immigrants embody—visibly, tangibly, in the flesh—the inarticulate yet hurtful and painful presentiment of [our] own disposability" (56), Sun Mengtian extends this logic to the tension in *Waste Tide* between waste people and urban natives. She believes that the natives' resentment against the waste people comes from their fears. They are afraid that one day they could be replaced by these outsiders, becoming disposable themselves (Sun 296).

Sun Mengtian correctly points out the inevitable conflict and violence between Chinese migrant workers and the "indigenous" urban residents. But I am not convinced by her attempt to analogize the waste people on Silicon Isle as Bauman's "human waste," because they are not at all "excessive" nor "redundant" in nature. In fact, they are indispensable for China's economic development. As Ingrid Nielsen and Russell Smyth observed, "the continued flow of migrant labor to the urban centers is vital to the sustainability of China's rapid economic growth," since "their cheap labor costs have, in-part, underpinned the competitive advantage of operating out of China" (248). Sun Mengtian quotes Mimi's worrying thought in the story—"human lives are so much cheaper than machines" that the price for an equally-functioning machine "was enough to hire a hundred young workers like her" (Chen 70)—to justify the "disposability" of the waste people. However, it can also be read in the opposite way: it is because of their disposability, of the cheap labor they provide, that China has become the "global factory," particularly in cities such as Guiyu in the south-eastern regions well known for labor-intensive industries. As Ngok's work suggests, the waste people on Silicon Isle, although socially rejected by the locals are not "human waste" in Bauman's sense since their economic contribution is accepted. But even so, they are still not permitted to enter the "protective shell," privileging the downtown area of Silicon Isle over the waste villages in the suburbs.

This "shell" is what *Waste Tide* is written to project, to indicate a boundary between the two versions of Silicon Isle discussed above and thus revealing the "heterotopic" nature of those existing in highly polluted waste villages segregated from the prosperous city center—the space of otherness, alternatives, and deviation. In Foucault's "Of Other Spaces,"

heterotopia is differentiated from the conceptually enclosed, unchanging utopias, which are totally isolated from their surrounding contexts and considered “sites with no real place” (24). Instead, a heterotopia should be regarded as a “simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live” (24). Foucault claims that “there is probably not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias” and in so doing, proposes the universality of heterotopia in any given culture or society or political entity (24). In his understanding, there are two types of heterotopia: crisis heterotopia, which are “privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis;” and heterotopia of deviation, “those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (24–25). Although Foucault is convinced that, in modern society, the heterotopia of crisis is increasingly replaced by that of deviation, it is still possible to notice certain spaces that ride the borderline between the two types of heterotopia, where features of both crisis and deviation can be identified in the residents. Examples of heterotopia of such kind, in Foucault’s case, include retirement homes “since, after all, old age is a crisis, but is also a deviation” (24), and in the case of *Waste Tide*, the suburban villages surrounding Silicon Isle, where the migrant workers with a deviant “outsider” identity are endangered by severe environmental crisis as well as their unfortunate social status as an underpaid underclass.

The fictional representation of the relatively enclosed yet approachable communities in Chen Qiufan’s story is, in a way, different from Foucault’s original examples of heterotopia such as prisons, schools, hospitals, etc. that are usually deliberately formed by the state or the dominant social group. In fact, the waste villages for migrant workers are established less “deliberately” and thus developed and expanded more informally. Still, the boundary distinguishing the heterotopic villages at the periphery and the Silicon Isle downtown at the center is also very much evident, though in a less concrete yet more abstract manner. The social stratification that favors the locals of Silicon Isle and the alienation or marginalization of waste people is derived from the inherent differences between the two groups—especially in terms of the sense of belonging to the city, the languages they speak (the Guiyu dialect is unintelligible to outsiders), and the uneven distribution of social protection and welfare (healthcare, education, housing, etc.) In other words, through the “two versions of Silicon Isle” differentiated by the developed city center and the exploited villages of waste people, we can then identify an ambiguous boundary that separates “us” and “them”—ambiguous in that there is neither a solid wall nor border guards policing a divide, nor yet a hard, physical isolation method like a concentration camp. Rather, the boundary appears invisible and intangible. Each of the two versions of Silicon Isle would be, according to Kevin Hetherington’s discussion of heterotopia, “constituted in relation to other sites by their difference” and “[able to] organize a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them” (Hetherington viii). For Hetherington, heterotopia are spaces of “alternative ordering” and “deferral” where “ideas and practices that represent the good life can come into being, from nowhere, even if they never actually achieve what they set out to achieve” (ix), which allows for an impulse of transformation within the heterotopic communities (though the eventual outcome of this pursuit is not always promising).

Such an interpretation is still debatable, since this “transformative potential” or the “transgressive power” should not be self-evidently attributed to the connotation of Foucault’s heterotopia. As David Harvey points out, although heterotopia may enable us “to look upon the multiple forms of transgressive behaviors (usually normalized as ‘deviant’) in urban spaces as important and productive,” it is only “superficially attractive” because in this “banal multiplicity [...] an eclectic mess of heterogeneous and different spaces within which anything ‘different’—however defined—might go on” (537–538). But even so, for the waste

people in *Waste Tide* trapped in the duality of economic acceptance and social rejection, this potential for change and transgression can still provide us with an inspiring way to interrogate their endeavor for resistance and liberation in the place of otherness. Drawing on the boundary between the isolation and penetration of the two versions of Silicon Isle, and between being welcome and being unwelcome, *Waste Tide* manages to establish, to use Slavoj Žižek's words, "a frontier between those who succeeded in remaining 'within' (the 'developed', those to whom the rules of human rights, social security, etc., still apply) and the others, the excluded (the main concern of the 'developed' with regard to them is how to contain their explosive potential, even if the price to be paid is the neglect of elementary democratic principles)" (21). In this way, the impulse of resistance and transgression in this story has indeed been developed within the heterotopic space of the waste people (as "deviant"), which eventually penetrates to the privileged community of the locals (as "insiders") and leads to turbulent violence, a war between *us* and *them* (Chen 153).

This impulse of transgression, in *Waste Tide*, is called forth by the sense of suffering and humiliation that reflects the collective victimhood of the waste people, for which I would like to introduce Jing Tsu's "mentality of failure." Based on Frantz Fanon's understanding of violence that "remains the brooding fantasy of the oppressed," Jing Tsu goes on to investigate the consequential failure of the violence and oppression in Fanon's claim. She believes that "the embrace of failure belies not a mentality of submission but a strategy of negotiation"—an "unexpected solution to prevailing anxieties about national and culture identities" that brings forward "a discursive possibility for considering the value of the struggle for identity" concerning the deprived and marginalized social groups (Tsu 20–21).<sup>9</sup> In this way, the incredibly productive forces embedded in the sense of failure, trauma, and self-doubt provide the waste people with a liberating space where their heterotopic transformation can be realized, and they can escape working under the pressure and humiliation from the locals. From this perspective, the migrant workers on Silicon Isle are subdued by a straightforward hostility that leads to the terror, confusion, and despair that intimidates each waste person, producing a haunting 'state of tension' (Chen 92). For countless times, those waste people [knelt] on the ground, begging for mercy; strong, weak, old, young, dirty, helpless – they knelt before the Silicon Isle natives because they had dirtied his clothing, unintentionally stared at him for too long, touched her child, brushed against his car, or even for no reason at all, *simply because they were waste people*. (Chen 211, my emphasis)

The seemingly reasonless superiority of the natives, as well as their prejudice, encourages them to treat the waste people "as if they belonged to a completely different species whose birth-right was to gaze down upon these people like animals"—the "animals" who have "sacrificed their health and lives in exchange for insignificant scraps to fill their bellies and distant dreams, built up the extravagant prosperity of Silicon Isle, and yet they were seen as only slaves, bugs, disposable trash" (211–212).

Bit by bit, these failures and humiliations accumulate within the heterotopic community of waste people, eventually kindled by the tragic experience of the waste girl Mimi who, like most of the waste people on Silicon Isle, embodies the usual submissiveness and timidity of China's migrant workers. In *Waste Tide*, the son of Luo Jincheng—head of the most powerful clan in Silicon Isle—gets infected with an incurable disease due to the toxic environment in the neighborhood. Helplessly, Luo resorts to a shamanic local faith, one that needs a sacrifice to save his son. Mimi becomes the chosen one here unfortunately, and is mercilessly beaten, abused, raped, and almost buried alive by Luo's hatchet men. Yet it is exactly from such an ignominious tragedy that Mimi embraces her transformation. Because of her instinct for survival, Mimi unconsciously activates the artificial virus with which she has accidentally been infected and creates a new consciousness apart from her original



mindset as a waste girl. “Something had *changed* inside Mimi [...] Her habitual timidity tinged with anxiety was gone, replaced by a calmness that seemed to come from deep inside, the confidence of someone fully in control of the situation” (Chen 200, original emphasis).

The bloody return of Mimi from death is made possible by her new consciousness as Mimi 1, which coexists with Mimi 0, the mind of the waste girl who used to be cautious and guarded against everyone. She soon becomes a torch, a symbol, and a reminder for all waste people that, despite the clannish social power that the Silicon Isle natives might hold, they should not surrender their own dignity and identity to the locals’ oppression and humiliation. The sense of failure and trauma of the fictional Chinese migrant workers throughout the years of being humiliated by local residents who see them as “outsiders” brings about a tremendous transformative impulse of their heterotopic communities within or around economically developed cities. Eventually, under the guidance of the awakened Mimi 1, all the waste people’s virtual consciousnesses “commingled, conversed rapidly, and reached a compromise, coalescing into *a unified force*” (Chen 291, my emphasis)—a collective victimhood enabling them to transcend their terror and uncertainty as “waste people.”

In this way, the segregated “ghettos” for the migrant workers in *Waste Tide* can be seen as Foucauldian heterotopias, sources of transformative impulses which flow from the periphery to the center of mainstream social discourse. The violent transformation of the waste people on Silicon Isle, prompted by their failure and trauma, seems promising as they manage to challenge structural prejudice and discrimination by saving the locals from the flood at the end of story—“we’re going to open the eyes of the souls of the Silicon Isle natives,” showing that “we’re human, the same as them. We laugh, we cry, we pity, we sympathize” (Chen 314). However, is it safe to conclude that the transformed Mimi 1 envisions a different discourse to the one in which the waste people are abused and oppressed? Can these heterotopic and transgressive forces of self-changing really lead to the expected liberation or salvation that frees those partially segregated communities from market exploitation?

### **From Victim to Vampire**

Unfortunately, it would be tricky to say yes to either of the above questions. *Waste Tide*’s waste villages have indeed provided a heterotopic space for the marginalized community of waste people on Silicon Isle to transcend their original peripheral status and in so doing get involved in the mainstream social discourse. But in the process they find themselves trapped in an even more complicated web. This time, what they encounter is no longer the duality of “economic acceptance” and “social rejection,” but rather, borrowing from Robert Wood’s discussion of China Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station*, the “rise of neoliberal capitalism” that results in “the domestication of its resistant heterotopic margins” (75).

To some degree, China’s economic success in recent decades depends on its increasing involvement in the global market and in the process of globalization, and therefore can be connected to a new world order, one that is termed “Empire” by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. In *Waste Tide*—an epitome of contemporary China in this case—the impulse of change developed in heterotopias of both deviation and crisis is therefore subdued under the market-based social structure in which the “penetrability” of heterotopic community of waste people is very often dependent on capital’s capability to “[separate] populations from specifically coded territories and [set] them in motion” (Hardt and Negri 326). As capital usually tends to “reduce all previously established forms of status, title, and privilege to [...] quantitative and commensurable economic terms” (326) and could thus link all these values through money, the transformation of the “heterotopic margin” (in Wood’s words) in *Waste Tide* would “surrender to the laws of the rate of profit, the rate of exploitation, the realization of surplus value, and so forth” (326).

The waste people in this story are usually captivated, or lured from their inland and probably impoverished hometowns with the false promise of Silicon Isle's prosperity. Like the migrant workers in the real cities favored by the state policies, they are confined by exactly such a quantitative logic of money. "Living on the margins of the prosperity that did not belong to them, they toiled day after day in the most mechanical, repetitive, and trivial assembly line work," earning only "a pittance for their labor while they harbored dreams of someday making enough to return home in respectable circumstances" (Chen 224). The "someday" they think of, however, may never come. For most of the wealthy natives, especially the heads of the clannish local waste-processing corporations, the waste people are merely waste, much resembling the messy electronic dump in which they live and work, and therefore should be regarded as disposable sources of capital accumulation. They struggle at the edge of basic living conditions, whose "intellectual values," if any, are to a large degree reduced to money, profit, and commercial leverage, and in this way they are materialized, consumed, and eventually exhausted.

The clan leader Luo Jincheng explains his exploitation of the waste people as "winner takes all" (Chen 251). This, in fact, is also the underpinning logic in which all migrant workers in China are trapped. They flow to these economically developed cities, holding dreams of making some fortune, only to find they are coerced in a market-based discourse with its competitive nature and jungle law. Their individual productive capacity is also reduced into countable and priced commodities. For most native residents of Silicon Isle privileged in the process of capitalist production, such an understanding of their economic structure as a zero-sum competition manages to provide them with a timely justification. They are able to rationalize their "vampiric" efforts in dispossessing and even dehumanizing the waste people as well as the cost of ecological degradation.

In this case, Luo Jincheng could be considered an ideal example. As the head of the largest and most influential of the three clannish corporations in Silicon Isle, Boss Luo has long been bewitched by his perception of the essence of their society—one that is based on "the law of the jungle and survival of the fittest" (Chen 162). Everything he has done and been doing, can be attributed to a rather simple belief—"an animal has to be strong enough to prevent its offspring from being hunted [...] it's the same with mankind" (191). In this spirit, Luo seeks to extract the surplus value from the waste people, minimizing their living costs to control the expense, exploiting them with money as the leverage, casting them aside like the real waste once their "values" are exhausted. In other words, Boss Luo, together with other powerful locals endeavoring to defend the "protective shell" in which they are "insiders," regards Silicon Isle as a hunting ground where his family should be protected, a place in which people are dehumanized by those emotionless symbols of capital, and thus, as in Wendy Brown's explanation of the process of economization, seek to "strengthen its competitive positioning and appreciate its value" (33).

The process of such "dehumanization" and "economization," as well as the "perpetual cycle of looting, exploitation, and forceful extraction" identified on Silicon Isle, which strongly resists "a fair system [where] everyone would benefit" (Chen 45), is called a "disease" in the novel. That is to "think of life as some zero-sum game in which there must be winners and losers, even at the expense of the interests of the others, including their lives" (326). In this case, born from the waste people's heterotopic transgression and their revolt against the sense of failure, bias, and discrimination, Mimi 1 thinks of herself as the antidote to this disease. As the embodiment of the revived subjectivity and self-awareness of the waste people and, in general, the migrant workers in China, she successfully reunites this once fragmented group fighting for their rights to be "human beings" rather than merely waste (Chen 312). Therefore, within the heterotopic waste villages, Mimi 1 is seen as a subversive or revolutionary figure triggering and personally leading their rebellious "war"

against the selfish, money-obsessed locals. In the eyes of the waste people, the image of the girl occupied by Mimi 1's mentality begins "to blur, flicker, as though some invisible outside light source were illuminating her from infinitely far away: warm, serene, and resplendent," who seems to have "grown much taller and acquired an awe-inducing aura that made it impossible to stare at her" (250).

In contrast to her innocent and fragile counterpart Mimi 0, Mimi 1 transcends her original, marginalized identity as an abandoned or used-up "object" isolated in the heterotopic community of waste people, and thus is more powerful, more knowledgeable, and more "connected" to the general discourse in which Silicon Isle is anchored. However, such a transcendence is nothing like a real liberation, but closer to a more profound confinement, through which Mimi 1 is inescapably affiliated to the zero-sum competition in Silicon Isle following the Social Darwinian doctrine "winner takes all." During the upheaval of waste people, Mimi 1 commits violence, murder, and everything she feels necessary to ensure the victory of the war between the waste people and the Silicon Isle locals—just as Boss Luo had done to them. She believes, like every other participant stuck in such a hunting game of market competition and capitalist exploitation, that "human weakness is going to be the death of you someday" (Chen 339). Here the "weakness" refers to the over-consideration for other subjects under capitalist social discourse and the reluctance to take and exploit their surplus values. This may well remind us of Friedrich Engels's classic observation in 'Outlines of a Critique of Political Economy' (1843) of the liberal economic system—a system which "had done its best to universalise enmity, to transform mankind into a horde of ravenous beasts (for what else are competitors?) who devour one another just *because* each has identical interests with all the others" (Engels 423, original emphasis).

Although Mimi 1's appeal to rescue the natives in the eventual fatal flood seems to indicate some benevolence, her point in such an act is never only to save the waste people (Chen 313). Rather it is in this way that they can be "socially accepted" by Silicon Isle, qualified to be involved in the "vampiric" capitalist logic dominating the city no longer as the "victim" but sometimes as the "vampire" itself. "All the costs have been carefully calculated" (178)—through the fictional characters, Chen Qiufan here explicitly demonstrates the truth of Silicon Isle, a truth also applicable to Guiyu, and China.

Therefore, Mimi 1 is not the antidote to that "disease." Instead, she is part of it, embodying and mirroring what the waste people have always wished to be in this market-based hunting ground—educated, canny, resourceful, able to overturn their marginalized social status as the victim of capital exploitation. In this way, *Waste Tide* should not only be read as an eco-critical narrative calling for environmentalist readings. It is, in a way, a "realistic" story that reflects on the suffering and hardship the 291 million migrant workers in China currently endure. It takes place in Silicon Isle and embodies the capitalist features in its archetype Guiyu, as well as in other cities benefitting from China's market-oriented reforms during the post-socialist era. The transgressive forces of the heterotopia formed by the migrant workers in Silicon Isle and various other real Chinese cities, although seemingly enabling those who live in the periphery to be involved in the mainstream discourse, have failed to exterminate the general vampiric logic of capital accumulation. The science fiction realism of Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide* is in many ways connected to the most recent movement of Chinese science fiction. The novel interrogates the severe violence, bias, and discrimination against China's migrant workers. At the same time, even though the waste people can in one way or another penetrate the invisible wall standing between them and the locals, they can never escape from the vampiric capitalism that reduces such heterotopic transformations and the resulting social hybridity into a homogeneous zero-sum competition related to money, capital, and profit.

## Notes

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- 1 This talk was moderated by Angela Chan, co-convenor of LCSFG, and Mia Chen Ma, PhD candidate in the Department of China and Inner Asia at SOAS, and held at Goodenough College in London.
  - 2 Deng Xiaoping's South Tour in 1992 cleared up the hesitations of regional governments by encouraging them to "be bolder than before in conducting reform and opening to the outside" and not to be afraid of "introducing too many elements of capitalism" if they could serve well within the framework of socialist economic reforms (Deng 372). This is commonly considered the turning point moment in China's market-oriented transition.
  - 3 Such as Sarah Dodd's "'Thresholds of Becoming': The Hybrid Body in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction" presented at Lancaster University in Aug. 2019; Ni Fan's "Solastalgia on the Silicon Isle (Guiyu): Visiting the 'Heart of Darkness' of the Technology Empire in Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide* (2013)" and Yang Xiaoli's "Living with/within Waste: Toxic Space and Abject Bodies in Chen Qiufan's *Waste Tide*" presented in Sept. 2020 for the annual conference of the London Science Fiction Research Community (LSFRC).
  - 4 For "post-socialism" or "post-socialist transition", see Zhang Xudong's *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics*, Jason McGrath's *Postsocialist Modernity* and Aihwa Ong's *Neoliberalism as Exception*.
  - 5 See Chen Qiufan "陈楸帆：与其焦虑未知，不如拥抱变化" ["Instead of being Anxious about the Unknown, We should Embrace Change"].
  - 6 See [www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/202004/t20200430\\_1742724.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/202004/t20200430_1742724.html). Accessed 22 Mar. 2021). [www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/202004/t20200430\\_1742724.html](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/zxfb/202004/t20200430_1742724.html)
  - 7 After China's market-oriented reforms in the 1990s (see note 2), certain elements of the capitalist market were introduced to stimulate economic development. It is still problematic to conclude that the coastal cities benefitting from Deng's reforms have fully adopted capitalist principles, but concepts such as Marx's vampire metaphor can now conceivably be used to interrogate various social concerns emerging during the post-Deng era.
  - 8 Under China's population policies, a citizen must be registered with only one specific place, a process usually known as household registration (*hukou*). Generally speaking, people's social welfare resources (medical care, childcare, housing, education, etc.) are directly connected to where they are *registered*, not where they *live*. Switching people's *hukou* is possible, but for that there would be additional requirement according to different places (such as education degree, wage level, personal property, and more). It would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the migrant workers represented by the waste people in *Waste Tide* to get a *hukou* in cities like Beijing and Shanghai. They are usually registered with their under-developed hometown and cannot meet the basic requirement to switch to the city in which they work and live. In this way, they are also excluded from the social protection granted by the *hukou* they can never earn.
  - 9 I owe this insight into Jing Tsu's idea to Mia Chen Ma, who also uses the notion of "failure mentality" to read the waste girl Mimi as a metaphor for Chinese national identity. See Ma Chen, "Waste Workers in *Waste Tide*."