

Subversive Texts:

Illness and Disability in Chinese Contemporary Science Fiction

Haihong Li, Xiamen University Tan Kah Kee College

Abstract: As a growing discipline, disability studies have proven to be a rewarding strategy for rereading cultural texts where more traditional critical approaches fail. Especially in the scholarship surrounding science fiction, disability often offers new possibilities in interpreting texts. Following this trend, this paper will focus on the representations of disability in selected contemporary Chinese SF writings and analyze their implications. Considering the fact that many contemporary Chinese SF writers are gaining international prominence, it is surprising to see how little has been written about them. To contribute to a better understanding of Chinese science fiction, this paper argues that the themes of illness and disability in Chinese contemporary SF narratives can be treated as the writers' strategic use of the genre as social commentary to articulate concerns which would have been otherwise censored. Many SF writers and critics in the West are interested in the great potential and power of technology in relation to illness and disability. In contrast, Chinese SF writers are more concerned with the damages that over-reliance on advanced technology may cause to the underprivileged groups. Therefore, instead of making their protagonists beneficiaries of technological advancement, Chinese SF authors often describe individuals as victims. Furthermore, their stories also challenge the hegemonic narrative of harmony, healthiness, and happiness propagated by the authorities. In the following discussion, I shall focus on Chinese SF writers who were born between the late 1970s and 1980s, including Liu Cixin, Chan Koonchung, Hao Jinfang, Xia Jia, and Ma Boyong.

Keywords: illness, disability, Chinese contemporary literature, science fiction

In response to economic and political changes, the Chinese government constantly adopts new cultural policies in its discourse of nation-building. This has enabled it to maintain a stable ideological transition in the post-Maoist era. In the 1980s, while shifting gear from the planned economy to the free market mode, Deng Xiaoping explained the reason for the economic reform; "The purpose of socialism is to make the country rich and strong" (Meisner, 1982, p.238). Twenty years later, the promotion of the "Harmonious Society" by General Secretary Hu Jintao was a necessary strategy adopted to cope with the increasing social conflicts arising from unbalanced economic growth. In 2012, President Xi came into power and introduced the Chinese dream, promising Chinese citizens material abundance and ultimate happiness. And, in a very short period of four years, this dream seems to already be coming true. *Qiushi journal*, a propaganda magazine owned by China's most powerful state-run

news agency Xinhua, proudly announced, "Never have the Chinese people been so close to realizing their dreams than today" (Xinhua, 2017). Furthermore, even lifting the presidential term limit was related to the happiness of the nation as the *China Daily* interpreted the change as having been made to "ensure people live happier lives" (as cited in Philips, 2018). In such a socio-economic landscape, representations of the nation related to poverty, environmental degradation, suffering, and disease, are often avoided or censored. Take Chinese science fiction stories as an example. Ye Yonglie, one prominent SF writer in the 1980s, wrote a story titled "the Disease of Love," concerning the spreading of AIDS and medical workers' battle against it in China. However, it was rejected for publication due to severe critiques, which asserted that since there was no AIDS in China at the time such a story would only draw unwanted attention from the West and therefore cause trouble (Ye, 2011,p.403). Such

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an absurd dismissal exposes, first of all, the critics' failure to acknowledge that the SF genre is, by nature, an exploration of possibilities in the future rather than a faithful mirroring of the present. Secondly, it gives away the ingrained fear of invoking Western interventions.

Presentation of Illness and Disability in China

Illness and disability in general remain underrepresented in Chinese literature and history for cultural and historical reasons. For instance, Chinese words for illness and disability remind one of defect, limitation, and shame: the characters for illness are *jibing* (疾病) and for disability *canji* (残疾). Such terms contain negative connotations that evoke feelings of shame and disgrace. The meanings of illness and disability in Chinese characters suggest something opposite to the whole, the normal, and the healthy, for the character *ji* (疾) means disease, pain, and suffering while *can* (残) means incomplete and damaged. As a result, literature tends either to not engage fully with such descriptions, or often gives negative representations which convey a sense of disgust, humiliation, guilt, or even hate.

Representation of illness and disability in China is political, national, and transnational in nature. Take disability as an example. Although social awareness has been raised through the efforts of the China Disabled Persons' Federation (CDPF) as well as some grassroots movements in the late 1980s, disability still receives little attention from the public. Part of the reason that disability is underrepresented comes from the lack of a disability identity or a social model of disability. Indeed, who can be defined as disabled? Taking into consideration national pride and international scientific competition, Chinese authorities have their own standards as to who is considered disabled and who is not. Matthew Kohrman examines how China's party-state manipulated data to reflect a healthy proportion of a disability statistic in China's 1987 National Sample Survey of Disable Persons. In his article "Why Am I not Disabled? Making State Subjects, Making Statis-

tics in Post-Mao China," Kohrman concludes, "The ongoing need to demonstrate a high level of ability, to conform to perceived international normalizing benchmarks of scientific competence and national respectability, were important factors in how [people from the government] frame disablement" (Kohrman, 2013, p.19).

The issue of disability in China is not only national and international, but also social and political. In 2008, the Law of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities defined a person with disabilities as "one with visual, or hearing, or speech, or physical, or intellectual, or psychiatric disability, multiple disabilities, and/or other disabilities" (as cited in Fjelde and Sagli, 2011, P.33). In their article, Fjelde and Sagli argue that such an official definition is based not on a social model but a medical model which, as a result, excludes many dysfunctional or disfigured citizens. The traditional medical model regards disability as "an individual deficit to be cured" while the social model views disability as "a culturally and historically specific phenomenon" (Shakespeare, 2011, p.195). When denied access to disability privileges, these people are left on their own, although they sometimes form organizations to help one another. According to Xi Chen and Ping Xu, "Disabled people have traditionally shown a stronger tendency for self-organization than other groups because of a stronger need for mutual help and protection. This is still true in the PRC, even though such organizations are prohibited" (Chen & Xu, 2011, p.663).

One prime example of the dilemma the government policies create for the disabled is the film *Dying to Survive*, released in 2018 and directed by Wen Muye (文牧野). The story is inspired by the true life of Lu Yong (陆勇), a Chinese leukemia patient who took great risks to smuggle generic medicine from India to help his fellow Chinese patients. The Chinese title for the movie is *wobushiyaoshen* (我不是药神), which literally means "I am no god of medicine." In reality, Lu Yong played the role of a hero in that he saved many people's lives by helping them

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purchase foreign anticancer medicine, which was not accessible to them at that time. The reason that these people were caught up in such a dilemma is that Chinese national medical insurance did not cover the treatment of leukemia and medicine in China was way too expensive for average Chinese families. Under such circumstances, patients from families without great financial advantages could not afford the cure and were left with no other choice but to die. In 2015, Lu Yong was arrested and charged with selling counterfeit medicine, but the case was soon dropped as patients he had helped appeared at court to petition for his release. The story, on the one hand, praises the heartwarming heroic act of Lu Yong. On the other hand, it subtly calls into question the legal and medical practice of the government.

It is a rather difficult task to define science fiction due to its complex nature. As many critics have tried to give it a precise description, the most famous probably comes from Darko Suvin who emphasized *novum*, i.e. innovation, in science fiction narratives and concluded that science fiction was “a literary genre whose necessary cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to author’s empirical environment” (Suvin, 1979, p. 8-9). With this in mind, I have chosen Chinese contemporary science fiction stories that are most accessible to the English audience in this paper. Here included for discussion are the following works: Chan Koonchung’s book *The Fat Years*, Ma Boyong’s short novel “The City of Silence,” Hao Jinfang’s “Folding Beijing,” and Xia Jia’s “A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight.” The fact that all these stories take place in the future and that what happens in them is not possible in our world today characterizes them as science fiction according to Suvin’s definition.

China’s reintegration into the world plays an important role in the booming of the SF genre in China. In the late 1970s, as the nation opened up to foreign trade after Deng Xiaoping’s open door policy, Western science fiction was reintroduced to China

after a long ban. Influenced by these stories they read, Chinese writers started to incorporate their own life experience into SF narratives. Furthermore, growing up in a cultural environment different from their parents’, the new generations became more interested in the future and the universe, which also paved ways for the renaissance of science fiction in China. Liu Cixin explains, “As modernization accelerated its pace, the new generation of readers no longer confined their thoughts to the narrow present as their parents did, but were interested in the future and the wide-open cosmos...This is rich soil for the growth and flourishing of science fiction” (Liu, 2016, para.20). Consequently, this renaissance contributes greatly to the rise of Chinese science fiction in the world.

Although for quite a while Chinese SF had been marginalized and neglected, more and more Chinese SF writers have started to gain international recognition in the past decade. For instance, Liu Cixin, who *The New Yorker* calls “China’s Arthur C. Clarke,” won the Hugo Award for his popular work *The Three-Body Problem* in 2015. The book was translated into English by the American Chinese writer Ken Liu who himself is also a prolific SF writer. In 2016, another Chinese SF writer, Hao Jingfang, who is a social entrepreneur as well as an economist, was granted a Hugo Award for her short novel “Folding Beijing,” and became the first Chinese woman to ever have such an honor. In addition, the short story “A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight,” written by Chinese woman writer Xia Jia, got a nomination for the Science Fiction & Fantasy Translation Awards in 2013. Chinese SF is also gaining increasing public esteem in the domestic market as many of the contemporary SF works become big budget movies or TV series.

Science fiction from China shares common traits with its Western counterparts, such as a fascination with technological progress and space, it also has distinct attributes and concerns closely related to the sociopolitical environment of China. For instance, as the host of the 2007 Sino-US Science

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Fiction Summit, Yan Wu points out the influence of the West as well as the Chinese political system on the development of Chinese SF: “there is a particular richness to [Chinese SF], involved as it is with the pursuit of emancipation, the resistance to oppressive systems, and the influence of foreign cultures” (Yan, 2013, p.2). Indeed, artistic freedom has been an unwavering concern for many writers and filmmakers in China. As one of the top SF writers in China, Liu Cixin was first introduced to Jules Verne’s book *Journey to the Center of the Earth* during the Cultural Revolution, when cultural censorship was strictly implemented. In this historical period, Liu’s favorite literary genre, science fiction, was condemned as “spiritual pollution” by the *People’s Daily*, one of the most influential official newspapers of the party (Yin, 2018, para. 6). Such a dilemma is also best summed up by one character in Liu’s well-acclaimed book *The Three Body Problem*; “Without unconstrained spirit there would be no great art, and yet how detained the Chinese spirits of today are” (as cited in Jia, 2018, p. 60).

Nonetheless, being a successful translator and writer, Ken Liu emphasizes a different aspect in Chinese contemporary science fiction. First of all, he acknowledges the common concerns regarding social problems among Chinese contemporary SF works: “Problems of modern development are also addressed, like environmental hazards and the negative effects coming from new technologies. Yet Chinese SF does have its own unique themes as well, such as the attempt to re-deduce and re-display the ancient history of China from an SF angle” (Barnett, 2016). Furthermore, according to Liu, the sense of anxiety and uncertainty, invoked by the reality of unbalanced development in China, dominates today’s Chinese SF works. For instance, Chen Qiufan’s SF novel *The Waste Tide*, translated by Ken Liu and originally published in 2013, chronicles the desperate experience of the underclass working and living on Silicon Isle, where imported electronic waste is recycled. Although it is a fiction, it is based on a real place called *guiyu*, not far away

from where Chen grew up. The author’s detailed descriptions of the severe environmental problems paint a rather grim picture of the future. In Chen’s fictional world, anxiety is widespread as Silicon Isle is a highly toxic site where workers face daily struggle under degrading and harmful conditions while the local gangs exploit them ruthlessly. The strong sense of imbalance lies in the stark contrast between the bleak lives of the workers and the extravagant life style of the rich and powerful who care about nothing but profits.

Chinese SF and Disability

The following analysis has three parts. First, I shall examine Chan Koonchung’s book *The Fat Years* and Ma Boyong’s “The City of Silence” to illustrate the authors’ tactful use of illness and disability to evade censorship while making social commentaries. Second, Hao Jingfang’s “Folding Beijing” addresses emergent issues such as class polarization, social injustice, and rising inequality during China’s rapid economic expansion. Through the main character’s experience of almost losing his leg, the author brings attention to the vulnerability of the body and a prevalent sense of powerlessness and despair. Third, the fear and anxiety over accelerating globalization and growing corporate power are best epitomized in Liu Cixin’s “Taking Care of Humans” and Xia Jia’s “A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight.” Both stories depict a dystopian world in which the impoverished people lose control over their bodies as bodies are commodified, dismembered, and exploited. In spite of the increasing popularity of Chinese science fiction among international audiences, little research or study has been done to further the understanding of the genre in the special cultural and political context of China. To contribute to a better appreciation of Chinese science fiction as well as a greater understanding of contemporary Chinese society, this paper shall focus on the representations of disability in selected Chinese contemporary SF stories to illustrate how these stories function as social commentary and critique and how they embody concerns and deep-seated anxieties

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over social transformations and problems.

I. Illness, Disability, and Totalitarianism

Themes of illness and disability in literature can be powerful tools for social commentary under stringent and omnipresent censorship. Indeed, Chinese people face, arguably, some of the harshest censorship in the world and any disseminated information and private conversations can be recorded, traced, and investigated. According to the book *Internet Freedom and Political Space*, China and Syria are the countries having the most censorship. The authors point out, “[These two countries] have appeared on the top of the ‘Internet Enemies’ list put together by *Reporters Without Borders* and were also ranked in 2012 as ‘not free’ by the Freedom House in its report on the state of Internet freedom” (Tkacheva *et al.*, 2013, p.10). Under such circumstances, representation of disability often gives authors a voice to express themselves about sensitive social issues. For instance, David Der-wei Wang observed the sudden appearance of deformities in Chinese literature in the 1980s and argued that such an atmosphere is a response towards the trauma of the social disorder and upheavals; “The range of characters that emerge from the works of the New Period mainland Chinese writers include: the blind, the mute, the crippled, the humpbacked, the sexually impotent, the bound-feet fetishist, the osteomalacia victim, the “living dead,” not to mention the mentally deranged and the psychotic” (Lau, 1993, p.21). According to Wang, the “Socialist New China,” which had previously been represented as healthy and heroic, abruptly becomes a place populated with various forms of disabilities. The theme of disability is used as a literary tool to convey symbolic meanings commenting on the ongoing repression.

The incorporation of social commentary into science fiction started at the beginning of Chinese SF history. For instance, as one of the most important intellectuals in 20th-century China, Lao She wrote the SF story *Cat Country*. It not only reflects and refracts ills of Chinese society in the Late Qing and the New China, but is also a chilling prophecy about

what was to come at the beginning of the Communist rule. With acute perception, Lao She’s *Cat Country*, published in 1932, is a political satire. In the story, a man pays a visit to the cat country on Mars, in which cat-people are addicted to “reverie leaves,” alluding to Chinese addiction to opium in the late Qing Dynasty, and the ruling elite is cruel and corrupt. Lisa Raphals observes, “We see that Lao She’s cat people are the people of China. They are everything he sees as wrong with the China of his time: they are warlords, drug addicts, and moral and intellectual degenerates. They are passive and bring about their own eventual destruction” (Raphals, 2013, p.81). Lao She’s fictional violence and terror in the story eventually turned into reality in 1966 during the Cultural Revolution and, unable to stand the brutality and torture, the author drowned himself in the Lake of the Great Peace.

The prime example of attack on totalitarian rule and censorship is Ma Boyong’s “The City of Silence” (2005). The fictional world that Ma creates in his story is, ironically, not so fictional when compared with actual life experiences in China where political dissidents are silenced through various means. For instance, both in the story and in the real world online information is censored and manipulated. Any statement that challenges the status quo is to be deleted and anyone who is responsible for such a posting might face legal consequences. Also, Internet data is actively collected and analyzed to pry into netizens’ private lives to ensure a tighter control of civil society. Surveillance cameras and racial recognition technology are deployed everywhere to watch citizens’ every move. Taking the Chinese Internet of 2016 as an example, Lorand Laskai concludes that there is no escape from state control, “it is subject to a regime of ever-stricter control and supervision. A Chinese individual in 2016 has better chance of anonymity offline than online, away from the thousand prying eyes of China’s army of censors” (Laskai, 2017, p.194). Following the example of George Orwell, who warned against a government that will resort to anything to control its people, Ma tells a similar story of the future authoritarian society

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in which advanced technology enables the government to have a tighter grip on what one can or cannot say online and offline.

Ma's strong resentment of censorship is best demonstrated through his very act of writing about silence as a form of resistance itself, a gesture of nonconformity against the attempted control. By doing this, Ma pays tribute to Chinese writer Wang Xiaobo, who was a rebel in the way that he dared to question the absurdity of the Cultural Revolution. In Ma's story, when the male protagonist Arvardan first joins the Talking Club, he names himself "Wang Er" after the male protagonist appearing in several stories of Wang Xiaobo. Ma openly expresses his wish to inherit Wang's legacy of defiance and resistance against the authoritarian rule. As for the character Wang Er in Wang Xiaobo's story "The Golden Age," Sebastian Veg remarks, "the sheer sexual power of Wang Er, the protagonist of 'The Golden Age,' is intrinsically anti-authoritarian and therefore defines a form of resistance to the oppressive and all-encompassing (Maoist) state" (Veg, 2007, p.77). Like Wang Er, Arvardan is desperately looking for an escape from the stifling pressure of an oppressive society, and finds that vitality is closely tied to freedom to speak and free expression of one's sexuality.

Furthermore, the "List of Healthy Words" in Ma's story also resonates with the issue of language control in reality. Over the past decades, the Party-state has been tightening its control over language use online as well as offline. Any word that involves criticism of the government or deviates from the dominant ideology is deemed sensitive and therefore banned to maintain social and political order. Such a policy resulted in a long list which includes everything from "American horror movies, Bon Jovi and April Fool's Day to Muslim names, Pokémon Go, live Internet streams of women wearing stockings and suspenders eating bananas (yes, this is a thing), and some twelve thousand 'sensitive' words" (Golley and Jaivin, 2017, p. xv). Eventually, citizens either comply with such censorship or are forced to use code phrases in an attempt to express themselves freely.

Ma responds to this practice with strong criticism through showing how sick the male character Arvardan becomes under such circumstances. The "appropriate authorities," similar to George Orwell's "thought police," are not appropriate at all in that they violate privacy. Their omnipresent surveillance is highly intrusive and nerve-wrecking. To cover up their goal of control, they choose words such as "healthy" to leave the impression that their method is out of consideration for the common good. For example, as they force people to wear the Listener, a device to filter oral speech in private conversations, their justification is the following: "The appropriate authorities were attempting to gradually unify life on the Web and life in the physical world so that they would be equally healthy" (Ma, 2016, para. 39). However, such a policy only leads to the hopeless degradation of the individual. Arvardan constantly experiences anxiety disorders and even depression. His head feels heavy and slow. His poor health is reflected in the description of the surroundings: miasma, stale air, the "sharp inconsistent" phone ringing sound, the "pale white" computer, and "a leaden, oppressive sky" (Ma, 2016, para. 40). In his eyes, everything is off-balance, dull, and morbid. Additionally, forbidden to express true feelings about his sickness, he loses vitality, his health deteriorates, and minor anxiety attacks turn into serious depression. As the narrator describes, "The appropriate authorities In were like specters that filled the whole room, giving him no space. He was like a man stuck in a quagmire: as soon as he opened his mouth mud flowed in, so he could not even scream for help" (Ma, 2016, para. 35). The omniscience of the authorities and the enforced silence leads to damaging effects. To make it worse, the character is not allowed to talk about his suffering since the authorities deem any negative feelings an unhealthy portrait of the nation, so such vocabulary is therefore forbidden from being used. Yet it creates a vicious cycle in which not allowing the use of negative words generates more negative feelings and emotions.

A disruption that Arvardan witnesses in the street

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embodies civil disobedience taking the guise of a mental breakdown. It is obvious that the stranger named Hiroshi Watanabe has suffered from imposed silence as much as, if not more than, Arvardan does. However, Watanabe decides not to comply any more. One sign of his delirium manifests in his unusual excitement in spotting Arvardan. Watanabe's excitement arises from his imagining Arvardan as his confidant to whom he would reveal everything about himself. Watanabe deliberately breaks every law about silence as a revolt against silence. He refuses to wear the Listener and asks Arvardan for items such as alcohol and cigarettes, which are listed as sensitive. The scene speeds up as the volume of his voice goes up. Watanabe starts yelping and speaking quickly about himself. Then, overwhelmed by this slight taste of freedom, Watanabe's frenzy intensifies and he turns yelping into outright cursing and swearing. Watanabe's intention to rebel is clear as Arvardan continues, "this man was swearing at him in public, as though he wanted to say every single shielded sensitive word in a single breath" (Ma, 2016, para. 53). At the climax of the scene, the author's onslaught on censorship and ubiquitous surveillance becomes evident as Watanabe offers his seemingly illogical but insightful observation of the city and its power structure; "This whole city is an asylum, and in it, the stronger inmates govern the weaker inmates and turn all the sane people into madmen like themselves" (Ma, 2016, para. 51). Through the allegory of madness, Watanabe sharply points out the maddening and destructive effects of authoritarian rule and imposed silence as means of manipulating the population.

Watanabe is soon subdued by the police and order is restored. However, Ma makes an impressive argument that censorship is so violent and destructive that even violence in the arrest scene seems nothing to the character Watanabe. Speaking up against the rules gives Watanabe so much pleasure that he doesn't even mind getting jailed; "Arvardan watched as [Watanabe's] expression turned from madness to a contented smile, as though

he were intoxicated by the pleasure and release brought about by the swearing" (Ma, 2016, para. 55). Watanabe's disruptive act, however short and small, plays an important role in the transformation of Arvardan's character since it awakens the latter's yearning and leads to his own act of rebellion in joining the "Talking Club" later on.

The main characters in Chan Koonchung's book *The Fat Years* (2009) suffer from different kinds of illnesses and disabilities, but, like the characters in Ma's story, also find it difficult to escape from social control in a heavily technologized society. In the story, Chan chronicles the experience of a small group of people who are surrounded by a weird sense of euphoria prevalent in his fictional world. Nonetheless, the sense of euphoria in the story was also felt by many Chinese citizens in real life, especially after the Beijing Olympics in 2008 according to the author's own observations. Chan explains,

I sense the mentality of many Chinese shifting in that eventful year. They would argue China was doing alright after all and even its sometimes repressive system might have merits, while the West was definitely not as attractive as it used to be. Hard-line loyalists became more assertive, trumpeting the achievements of the Communist Party, while those in the know saw no alternative but to become reluctant conformists. (Chan, 2012, para.4)

The story follows the male protagonist Old Chen's pursuit of a woman named Little Xi, a former judge turned Internet activist. Xi's sudden disappearance impels Chen to find her and, in the process, investigate the truth about a mysterious month missing from official records that all Chinese people seem to have forgotten. Representations of characters affected by illness and disability are central to this story and their illnesses and disabilities mark them as misfits and outsiders, in contrast to the rest of the people who seem perfectly content with the status quo.

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Collective amnesia is the engine that drives Chan's story forward. The allusion to the collective amnesia in China's recent history is obvious. Instead of trying to understand the past, they only want to live in the present with the feeling of "small-small high," the feeling of cheerfulness and satisfaction. The nationalist discourse of erasing or rewriting part of the history shows its efforts in making those unpleasant memories disappear in order to protect the one-party system. Eventually, the nation becomes what the mainstream media portrays - a society that stays in cheerful harmony with one-party rule. Julia Lovell points out,

Its central conceit - that collective amnesia overtakes the entire country—is an all-encompassing metaphor for today's looming superpower and the question that lies behind its material renaissance since the 1980s—namely, whether a booming economy and an increasingly free individual society can be contained within the political straitjacket of a one-party system that seeks to retain all the levers of power for itself. (Chan, 2013, preface)

Chan's story is used as an allegory for a nation that loses its memories of the "unpleasant" past as the public, seemingly eager to move forward, conveniently forgets.

In addition to the collective loss of memory, major characters in the story are influenced by illness and disability to some extent and their health conditions further mark them as different. Old Chen's two friends, Fang Lijun and Zhang Dou, have asthma. Based on the fact they both have asthma and neither of them forgets the missing month, Fan Lijun comes to the conclusion that asthma must have something to do with their better memory.

Miao Miao, the former journalist and Zhang Dou's girlfriend, is stoned after she drinks chemically enhanced water. Henceforth, she smiles at everyone but does not talk any more. At the end, she does not even recognize people around her and no lon-

ger works, plays the guitar, or goes out. The aforementioned character, Little Xi, is always cautious and nervous, appearing almost crazy even to those who are close to her. Her own son Wei Guo wishes to confine her to a mental institution, for he sees her as an obstacle to his political career. As an exception, the high-ranking official He Dongsheng, who is the representative of the law, is troubled by insomnia. In the face of omnipresent surveillance and political rivals, he lives in a highly stressful condition and struggles with anxiety for a long time. The only time he has some rest is when he watches old movies in the companionship of his own cousin and Old Chen.

Similar to the addictive "reverie leaves" in Lao She's *Cat Country* and "soma" in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, drinking water in this fictional world is contaminated by drugs which make people forget their troubles and difficulties in life and consequently give in to their fate and stay happy. There is a factory that puts a methamphetamine, MDMA, in drinking water and mixes it with other beverages to keep people happy and influence their feelings about life.

Throughout the story, Old Chen repeatedly mentions that he feels content and everyone else does the same as the narrator describes: "Before he had the reunion with Little Xi, he had felt the harmony of the society, and every day he was touched by his own happiness" (Chan, 2013, p.138). When kidnapped by Old Chen and his friends, He Dongsheng confesses, "We want people to feel love but not aggression...that factory produces things that make people happy, filled with love, with no desire to attack others" (Chan, 2013, p.149).

II. Disability and Social Inequality

Hao Jinfang's *Folding Beijing*, the winner of the 2016 Hugo Award for Best Novelette, is an overt social commentary on a society in which disability can be inflicted as punishment for trespassing across class boundaries. The male protagonist Lao Dao works as a trash man who, in order to save up

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up enough money to send his adopted daughter to a good kindergarten, risks his life and trespasses into other spaces to make extra money. In this fictional world, space is divided into three time slots occupied by different classes of people: 5 million powerful and rich people occupy the first space for 24 hours; 25 million middle-class citizens have 16 hours in the second space; 50 million lower class residents have only 8 hours in the third space. These three parts of Hao's folding city are assigned to different waking hours: three groups of people take turns to stay awake above the ground. As one stays above the ground and enjoys the waking hours the other two have to fold away, go underground, and sleep. Lao Dao, along with millions of others living in the third space, belongs to the lowest class of the society; powerless, marginalized, and voiceless. The insignificance of his position in the social hierarchy is best summed up as Hao describes, "He knew that he was nothing more than a figure. He was but an ordinary person, one out of 51,280,000 others just like him. And if they didn't need that much precision and spoke of only 50 million, he was but a rounding error, the same as if he had never existed. He wasn't even as significant as dust" (Section Five, para. 21). The sad truth about Lao Dao's humble existence is heartbreaking considering the risks he is willing to take simply to send his daughter to school, whereas the rich and powerful in the first space take such opportunities for granted and work is merely a pastime to avoid boredom. In the style of social realism, which offers a realistic representation of the daily struggle of the underclass, the story takes up social problems such as poverty, corruption, and injustice, and successfully uses the division of the space as an allegory for the widening income gap and increasingly rigid class division in today's China.

In the story, for instance, the gap between the rich and the poor is best demonstrated through the different time slots and the space allocated to three groups. The working class, assigned with only eight hours, has to share the same space with the middle

class. The place they dwell in is characterized by chaos: inflation, huge crowds, loud noises, and various smells. However, the rich have First Space all to themselves for twenty four hours and their space is defined by cleanliness, tranquility, wide open views, and absolute order. The idea of boundaries between classes, allegorized by the difference spaces they occupy, is further reinforced through jail sentences and trespassing fines for any attempt to go to another space.

The issue of income disparity resonates with the reality of contemporary Chinese society. During its process of industrialization and urbanization, income disparity in China increased at a staggering pace and it contributes to the rise of conflict intensity. Taking into consideration the widening gap between the rich and the poor, Yongnian Zheng comes to the conclusion that Chinese citizens are getting angry and anxious as a result; "Although the government continued to make great efforts to improve the living standard of the grass roots under the established policy of 'building a harmonious society,' other factors such as high rates of inflation and widening income disparities have worsened people's living conditions, real or perceived" (Zheng, 2012, p.28). As the problem continues to get worse, it hurts the economic prospects of the majority and eventually produces uncertainty and fear. In the article "China's Dirty Little Secret: Its Growing Wealth Gap," Sidney Leng states, "Income inequality worsened for the first time in five years, with the top 1 per cent owning a third of the country's total wealth" (Leng, 2017). The growth of this income gap, if not reduced in time, will probably jeopardize the government's plan to create a harmonious society. The danger of physical impairment that almost costs Lao Dao his legs is symbolic of punishment as an essential means to maintaining class boundaries—any undesirable behavior that threatens to resist or protest the existing power structure will be severely penalized. Before Lao Dao returns to Third Space, a delay in the Change takes place because of a careless mistake made in First Space. In order to retri-

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-eve an important file before the Change, a very powerful man from First Space steals and manipulates time by postponing the Change. Without the least clue as to what is happening, Lao Dao is caught between two spaces. He is left completely trapped in the middle of the Change and loses control over his own life. Hao writes, "One of his lower legs was caught. Although the soil gave enough to not crush his leg or break his bone, it held him fast and he couldn't extricate himself despite several attempts. Sweat beaded on his forehead from terror and pain" (Section Five, para. 19). For his attempts at crossing borders, Lao Dao is placed in a predicament which is threatening to cause punitive physical impairment in order to normalize his deviant behavior. Through the incident, the criticism of the unfairness, injustice, and social inequality is epitomized in presenting the huge gap between two spaces. In contrast to the old man from First Space who steals time from Third Space and postpones the Change as he pleases, Lao Dao is facing grave danger. Hao describes Lao Dao's fears as follows: "He imagined that soon the police would arrive and catch him. They might cut off his leg and toss him in jail with the stump" (Section Five, para. 20). This graphic image of the stump foregrounds Lao Dao's vulnerable body in this poignant moment, and seeing through his eyes, the readers are invited into his world to feel his worst fears and deepest despair.

The excruciating pain that Lao Dao suffers further emphasizes the imposition of penalty and exclusion for his attempt to cross social boundaries. In his journey to First Space and back, Lao Dao constantly faces the risks of either being arrested, or suffering physical impairment. Such a dear price to pay simply to fulfill a basic request to obtain good education for his child again portrays Lao Dao as a victim of social inequality and injustice. Therefore, his pain and suffering symbolizes the social control that limits social mobility in order to maintain the current social hierarchical structure. After the Change is complete and Lao Dao finally walks out of the situation, the after-effects still haunt him. Hao

gives an account of the excruciating pain, "As circulation returned to his numb leg, his calf itched and ached as though he was being bitten by thousands of ants. Several times, he almost fell. The pain was intolerable, and he had to bite his fist to stop from screaming. He fell; he got up; he fell again; he got up again. He struggled with all his strength and skill to maintain his footing over the rotating earth" (Section Five, para. 25). Through Lao Dao's experience, the author arrives at a social commentary indicating that the only way to survive such a hostile environment is to learn to respond quickly to one's surroundings, or one will risk, as the story has suggested, becoming disabled.

III. Disposable Bodies and Place

The exploitation of low-cost labor often implies an unregulated environment, long work-hours, unreasonably low wages, and poor or no social welfare—all of which are concerns relevant to many current Chinese SF writers. The following stories show, in such a context, how bodies are commodified and made disposable, and how the depicted broken bodies reflect a deep-seated fear and anxiety over the dehumanizing effects of global capitalism.

Commodification of the human body can be traced back to the early days of human history and it seems more active in the late capitalist period than ever by taking on new forms. In the book *Bodies for Sale: Ethics and Exploitation in the Human Body Trade*, Stephen Wilkinson examines different practices of commodification of the body and divides them into three categories: the commercialization of physical objects including buying and selling of human organs or body parts, the commercialization of abstract objects such as exploiting images of the body, and bodily services such as commercial surrogacy and DNA patenting (Wilkinson, 2004, p.3). In today's world, new technology makes selling the human body much easier and more efficient than before. This worries some people since it enables the rich to purchase and consume the body parts of the poorer more easily and probably in a larger

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scale (Nahavandi, 2016, p2). Following this thread of thinking, critics such as Melissa W. Wright choose to focus on commodification of the body among specific groups of people. She is interested in the bodies of women and especially the exploitation of women from Third World countries by global capitalism.

Compared with other works of Liu Cixin, the story of "Taking Care of Humans" (2005) might be the most relentless attack on global capitalism and the merciless exploitation of the body. The theme of disposable bodies is manifested at the beginning of the story as the male protagonist Hua Tang, an assassin, refers to his human targets as "processed components," as if they were objects on an assembly line in a factory instead of real human beings with flesh and blood and emotions. Additionally, the story also shows that power is inscribed on the bodies of the most unfortunate in this dystopian world. Hua's old boss Chi has a saw with which he likes to maim human bodies. When a gambler loses a bet to Chi, the gambler offers his hands as stakes. Instead, Chi chops off his legs because in that way the gambler will still have his hands to gamble, such that Chi can make money out of the man. In his early days, Chi used to exploit children with disabilities by making them beggars in the cities. In order to transform one perfectly healthy girl of six years old into an effective beggar, Chi cuts off her leg and starves her. Without enough medication or food, the girl eventually dies under Hua's watch. The tragedy turns Hua's world upside down and makes him a ruthless assassin taking pleasure in killing. Hua's transformation can be viewed as a dehumanization process which results in Hua losing his humanity and becoming a killing machine.

In this story, Liu shows that human bodies are shaped and controlled by capital in a global economic system. In the economic mechanism of globalization, the bodies of these unfortunate people become disposable and power relations are inscribed on the bodies. It is inevitably dis-enabling and dehumanizing. If the body does not generate

profit, it loses its value and is disposed of as if it were waste.

Similarly, Xia Jia's "A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight," translated by Ken Liu, also addresses the exploitation of the body against a capitalist backdrop, but with special attention paid to the increasing power of corporations and their negative impacts on body, community, and place. It is loosely based on a short story from Pu Sunling's ghost novel *Strange Stories from Chinese Studio* in the 18th century. Xia's short story not only appropriates Pu's main characters such as Ning, Xiao Qian, and Chi Lianxia, but also follows Pu's critique of a callous society. Both authors express sympathy towards the underprivileged and criticize the privileged and the powerful.

Body politics play a vital role in Xia's story. Ning's foster mother Xiao Qian used to be a "real" woman who has raised seven children. However, when she cannot pay the medical bills for her children, she literally has to sell her body parts one at a time. Xia describes, "And then her children got sick, one after another. In order to raise the money to pay the doctors, Xiao Qian sold herself off in pieces: teeth, eyes, breasts, heart, liver, lungs, bone marrow, and finally, her soul. Her soul was sold to Ghost Street, where it was sealed inside a female ghost's body. Her children died anyway" (Xia, 2012, para. 27). Ning himself also turns out to be a malfunctioning cyborg that fails to grow after the age of seven.

In the Ghost Street, many residents' deformed bodies are made into spectacles and become part of a show to attract human tourists. For instance, Cyclopes on the parade night carries a palanquin on which Xiao Qian performs. Here, the body is a valuable commodity, but it can quickly turn into a disposable item when it stops making money.

The broken bodies are closely associated with the disintegration of the social and physical environment. Over the past decades, eviction has become familiar to the Chinese masses and the overheated real estate market is often linked with images of

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large-scale demolition and construction. However, complicated and sensitive issues resulting from eviction, such as displacement, replacement, and resettlement are rarely discussed by the state-controlled media. For instance, large numbers of residents were forcibly displaced for the Shanghai World Expo in 2010. Yet the media presented it as a rather positive event and described it as yangguang dongqian, meaning “sunshine displacement and resettlement.” Yunpeng Zhang compares such an experience of forced eviction to the experience of a war and notes, “By appealing to the symbolic meanings of sunlight in expelling darkness and conjuring up feelings of warmth, security, trust and vibrancy, the party-state choreographed itself as a compassionate, caring and paternalistic savior” (Zhang, 2017, p.98). In Xia’s ghost story, forced eviction and demolition is a horrific experience. The Ghost Street, like the bodies of the residents, is torn up piece by piece near the conclusion of the story. When the Thunder Calamity, the name given to the forced demolition by the ghost residents, finally arrives, the residents/ghosts are burnt to ashes. Xia narrates, “The ghosts hiding in the houses are chased into the middle of the street. As they run, they scream and scream, while their skin slowly burns in the faint sunlight. There are no visible flames. But you can see the skin turning black in patches, and the smell of burning plastic is everywhere” (Winter Solstice Section, para. 28). Ning watches the whole place fall into debris and ruins and describes the loss of a symbol of the once cohesive community as follows: “The great and beautiful main hall is torn apart bit by bit, collapses, turns into a pile of rubble: shingles, bricks, wood, and mud. Nothing is whole” (Winter Solstice Section, para. 26).

Furthermore, the image of broken bodies constantly intersects with the broken place and community in the last scene. When Xiao Qian’s lover Yan Chixia tries to resist the eviction and demolition process with his sword, his head is chopped off by robot spiders. When Ning comes to avenge Yan and takes over his sword, Ning’s head also separated from his body. Finally coming to terms with his true identity

as cyborg, Ning smiles and recollects memories of the place as it perishes before his eyes; “I grew up on this street; I ran along this street. Now I’m finally going to die on this street, just like a real person” (Winter Solstice Section, para. 50). In Xia’s story, the dismemberment of bodies and communities proves to be emotional, violent, and damaging. The bodies, like the Street itself, are repeatedly exploited, torn apart, and rebuilt, all towards the goal of profit maximization in a consumer society.

Conclusion

Because of the limited space here, this paper only includes a small number of Chinese contemporary SF novels. However, as suggested in this paper, the themes of illness and disability in Chinese contemporary SF works offer new insights into the understanding of contemporary social reality. By writing about themes of illness and disability, these novels resist the hegemonic narrative of “healthy,” “strong,” and “clean” promoted by the government. The descriptions of illness and disability in Chinese SF writing reveal the social commitment of the writers. The fact that these writers chose these subjects is itself meaningful.

However, within these stories there is no proposal for solutions that would allow people to escape their gloomy future. As a matter of fact, they are depicted as passive and subdued as they do not challenge the status quo but continue to suffer. The characters eventually yield to their fates; they either barely survive or simply perish. For the battles between the subjects and the system, there is no hope of winning: in *The Fat Years*, Chen and his friends migrate to the south to run away from the fake “small-small high” feelings, whereas Arvardan in “the City of Silence” continues his lifeless and empty existence after losing the last chance to speak. Lao Dao in “Folding Beijing” returns to where he comes from—Third Space—with his hard-earned money in hope of raising his daughter to be like a young woman from First Space. The fate of humans is no better than that of cyborgs in Xia Jia’s “Ghosts Parade Tonight,” as human bodies are commodified and sold



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part by part until they are all gone. Driven by the same logic of capitalism, Hua Tang in Liu Cixin's "Raising Humans" has to kill the poor in spite of his feelings for them. Nonetheless, in spite of the problems presented in these stories, the people still manage to survive, albeit not in a very graceful or dignified manner.

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