A Beautiful Future? Environment, Aesthetics, and Inequality in Chinese Science Fiction

Melissa A. Hosek

Abstract: How does contemporary Chinese science fiction respond to the current environmental crisis? This essay uses eco-criticism to analyze Hao Jingfang's "Folding Beijing" (2012) and Chen Qiufan's "The Fish of Lijiang" (2006). I investigate how these two stories describe the relationship between protagonists and their natural surroundings. I argue that "Folding Beijing" and "The Fish of Lijiang" can shed light on the challenges that economic development poses to ecological aesthetics.

摘要： 当代中国科幻小说如何应对目前的环境危机？本文从生态批评的角度来分析郝景芳的"北京折叠"(2012)和陈楸帆的"丽江的鱼儿们"(2006),通过观察这两个短篇小说的主人公与其自然环境的关系,本文认为它们显示了经济发展对生态审美带来的挑战。

Key words: Chinese science fiction; aesthetics; ecocriticism

关键词： 中国科幻小说;美学;生态批评

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Introduction

The world is not always what it seems to be. Indeed, this is the case for contemporary science fiction short stories such as "Folding Beijing" ("北京折叠", 2012) by Hao Jingfang (郝景芳) and "The Fish of Lijiang" ("丽江的鱼儿们", 2006) by Chen Qiufan (陈楸帆), where characters gradually discover that their beautiful, utopia-like surroundings are merely facades disguising more grim realities. These two Chinese science fiction narratives are set in near-future versions of Beijing and Lijiang, iconic and familiar places that are transformed through the power of science fiction imagination. Both stories feature objects and characteristics that are commonly associated with visions of an improved, more desirable future, such as beautiful buildings, ubiquitous technology, lush greenery, and clear skies. Utopia, it would seem, is the perfect balance of technological convenience and natural beauty. While protagonists of both stories are

awed by such beauty, they come to realize that everything they interact with is in fact part of a greater social system built upon coercion, alienation, and oppression. The veil is torn back to reveal the realities of an unjust and undesirable world, begging the question of whether or not our idea of beauty is inherently riddled with social ills.

Like other science fiction works, "Folding Beijing" and "The Fish of Lijiang" offer critical commentaries on the real world of the authors. Through shifting between utopia and dystopia, these stories voice concerns about development, equality, and human dignity. Integral to these criticisms are the depictions of physical settings and the aesthetic experiences they engender. Through portraying the world as luxurious or edgy, organic or artificial, both texts use setting to illustrate social differences felt by characters as the world around them develops into a more beautiful, prosperous place. But these representations are more than metaphorical or symbolic. The interactions between characters and their physical surroundings contribute to a critique regarding the materiality of inequality in modern development. By analyzing the aesthetic and material experiences of protagonists in "Folding Beijing" and "The Fish of Lijiang," this article reveals how the narratives shed light on role of aesthetics and materiality in constructing and perpetuating social difference. Specifically, I explore what these stories expose regarding how the human-nature relationship is impacted and manipulated in these settings. I ask: since beautiful nature is such an important part of these two false utopias, then what are these narratives asking us to reexamine regarding our aspirations towards environment and development?

There is perhaps no more pressing a time to explore ideas about the human-nature relationship than now. As environmental degradation compounds, societies around the world must find ways to adapt to the limitations of the ecosystem and cope with the impending disasters of climate change and the collapse of biodiversity. We as a species are encountering a great shift in our relationship to the environment. While political and popular discourse about sustainability tend to focus on energy production and reduction of pollution, they also often include comments on the type of natural and aesthetic lifeworld that people desire, including clean air, clean water, and beautiful landscapes. It is therefore important to critically examine the idealistic aspirations surrounding discourse of sustainable development. Are the beautiful futures we desire actually ecological? We must reflect on whether our pursuit of aesthetic beauty is consistent with our pursuit of a reframed and revised relationship to the environment. "Folding Beijing" and "The Fish of Lijiang" are already engaged in this critical reflection.

I begin by first establishing that contemporary science fiction is not only critically reflexive regarding social realities, but also works to mediate the perceived

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gaps between national discourse and individual experiences. Next, I reason that, since healthy human-nature relationships are an integral part of the vision of a thriving society, representations of beauty, aesthetics, and ugliness can be read as in dialogue with political discourse relating to sustainability and development. The following two sections then read "Folding Beijing" and "The Fish of Lijiang" through this lens. In my close reading of "Folding Beijing," I explore how natural materials are unequally allocated across the three Spaces of Beijing to perpetuate the domination and alienation of others. In my reading of "The Fish of Lijiang," I analyze the human-nonhuman interactions of the protagonist to explore why artificial replicas of beautiful nature fail to satisfy humanity's need for ecological connections. Together, these two stories critically reflect on the impact of natural aesthetics and materiality on individuals' wellbeing and happiness. They reveal how our physical surroundings shape our understanding of what makes a good and desirable lifeworld. Furthermore, they inspire us to speculate how even the most idealized places are, in fact, frustrating and alienating.

I Science Fiction and Contemporary Society

Ever since Darko Suvin famously defined science fiction as a "literature of cognitive estrangement," scholars have contended with the critical reflexivity of this genre form (15). Suvin draws upon Ernest Bloch's concept of the "novum" (a strange, new dimension) and Bertolt Brecht's concept of "estrangement" to argue that science fiction is a critical genre because authors construct imaginative yet plausible futures through presenting aspects of our present reality in unfamiliar ways (Suvin 15-19; Bloch 6-9). By parsing out the familiar and unfamiliar within a narrative, the reader is compelled to use a new perspective to reexamine society. The novum, which Bloch describes as the "Not Yet," or the thing "beyond," is born from an attempt to overcome and transform the shortcomings of present society (9-10). The process of imagining a novum is, according to Carl Freedman, both normative and reflexive as it broadens readers' horizons concerning what is possible in society (64-72). In this way, scholars engaged with critical theory like Suvin, Bloch, and Freedman, have paved the way for understanding science fiction — in all its imaginative strangeness — as a narrative mode of communicating social criticism. To extrapolate from the present and imagine the future, moreover, gives science fiction writers the dual ability to critique both our present society as well as our perceptions of progress.

While these theories were developed based on the Western and Russian science fiction literary traditions, they are nonetheless still productive in our examination of contemporary science fiction from China. Suvin's and Bloch's theories

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have permeated science fiction writing circles and influence how writers approach the genre today. One would be hard-pressed to find a serious science fiction writer who does not regard their own work as a form of social criticism. As such, these perspectives on science fiction pervade the modern genre's characteristics. Additionally, the works that inspired these theories — works by canonical writers such as Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and Yevgeny Zamyatin — also shaped the development of the genre form, influencing the likes of George Orwell, Isaac Asimov and Arthur C. Clarke, whose works in turn have influenced Chinese science fiction writers. While science fiction from China certainly has its own particularities, many cornerstone genre characteristics continue to be relevant, especially its posture as a critically reflexive genre. Both Chen Qiufan and Hao Jingfang draw from and push the boundaries of these characteristics to create narratives of social criticism.

It might seem easy to dismiss technological spectacles of science fiction such as robots, spaceships, and lasers as indulgent or frivolous, but Ursula Heise reminds us that envisioning new technology and how it will change society offers valuable reflections on the material organization of the world (2). In the early 20th century, Western literary critics such as Hugo Gernsback believed that science fiction serves to acclimatize people to the oncoming new technologies that will inevitably change or disrupt modern daily life. While this motivated the creation of early Western science fiction magazines such as *Amazing Travels*, Heise does not find this reasoning relative to contemporary narratives. Agreeing with writer William Gibson, she asserts that science fiction reacts to our current reality wherein the future "is already here — it's just not evenly distributed" (Heise 3-4). Depicting how new technologies emerge and get unevenly distributed is not an imaginary vision of "beyond" in a Blochian sense, but rather one that highlights the real and present material inequalities in current society. As such, these narratives work to awaken audiences to the disparities of technology, as well as the technologies of disparity. When it comes to stories like "Folding Beijing" and "The Fish of Lijiang," which feature near-future settings that shift between utopian and dystopian outlooks, Heise's perspective highlights their critical reflection on the uneven material experiences of modernity. In this way, the stories warn readers of how problems may worsen in the future if they go unaddressed.

I understand science fiction as a critical, reflexive genre based on the three qualities described above: its criticism of the present, its relationship to ideas about the future, and its capacity to address both social and material matters. "Folding Beijing" and "The Fish of Lijiang" make use of all these characteristics, creating insightful social commentary. Yet, these stories also serve an important emotional function in the form of mediation. Paola Iovene, in her study of lit-

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erature from the 1970s and '80s, argues that Chinese science fiction is a genre of mediation. As China entered a new era of reform and development, science fiction writers imagined the various new potential futures that seemed possible. In doing so, Iovene argues, this literature mediated feelings of anxiety and anticipation that were broadly felt among common people (19-20, 29-35, 45-49). It did so by making new and desired visions visible, and also by ideating the extent of social change that such visions give rise to. Contemporary science fiction is more socially critical than that of the 1970s and '80s, but it maintains an element of mediation. For instance, Chen Qiufan suggests that contemporary Chinese science fiction serves as a literature of social mediation that addresses the various divisive elements in Chinese society today. A generational gap between those born before and after 1978, growing disillusionment with science, and dramatic differences in lifestyles are all factors that contribute to the "rips and tears" that disrupt social cohesion (Chen 2016b:371-373). These factors can contribute to the "unbridgeable gap" that divides people socially (373). Science fiction, Chen posits, is a genre that can facilitate this healing by "allow[ing] different visions and imagined future Chinas to coexist in peace, to listen to each other, to reach consensus, and to proceed with each other" (374-375). In other words, contemporary science fiction also serves an emotional function of mediating desires and anxieties among people during this time of rapid economic and technological change.

This mediation is facilitated through narratives' varied and diverse portrayals of the future of society. These need not be cheery or optimistic imaginaries. Indeed, Chen and his contemporaries rarely present unadulterated utopias for readers to rally around. Rather, this mediation occurs through the laying bare of critical reflections on society and progress. Science fiction is thus simultaneously a genre of social critique and social healing. In light of this, it should come as no surprise that contemporary Chinese science fiction often finds itself in conversation with topics like social welfare, development, and sustainability. The genre's employment of aesthetics, I argue, is a central means through which authors work towards these ends.

Ⅱ Beauty and the Ecological Civilization

The portrayal of the human-nature relationship in contemporary Chinese science fiction, should be read as an engagement with political discourse. The human-nature relationship is (or ought to be) integral to the imagination of a more ideal society. As such, aesthetic descriptions of humanity's relationship with the external world contribute to the public imagining of what kind of lifestyle an improved environmental future may represent. The aspired ends of sustainable devel-

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opment are more than just the achievement of carbon neutrality or the restructuring of the energy sector. Instead, they are articulated in language that often encompasses the overall improvement of the quality of life. Beautiful surroundings, plenty of greenery, and a stable climate have become part-and-parcel of this vision. This is in part the result of China's recent political history of environmental discourse.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China and through the Socialist Era (1949–1976), a national ideology has been mobilized around pursuing a socialist future, one defined by egalitarianism and dignity of laborers (Cai 307–310). With the Reform Era (1978–1989), the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) continued promising to strive for these values inpursuit of the "*xiaokang*" society, a term used by Deng Xiaoping and his successors meaning "well-off" or "moderately well off" (Smith 65–66). The term *xiaokang* comes from the Confucian classic *The Book of Rites* and refers to the stage of social development immediately preceding *datong* (大同, "great community"), the utopian end of history — the ultimately perfect society (64). Drawing upon this classical concept, the use of *xiaokang* since the Reform Era connotes a modern future shaped by socialist values and attained by developmentalist policies (65). The values of egalitarianism and human dignity continue to remain central to socialist ideological goals.

In the new millennium, *xiaokang* takes on an environmental connotation. When Hu Jintao in 2007 addressed the 17th National People's Congress, he suggested that development should strive towards an "Ecological Civilization," marking the first use of this slogan (Zhang and Barr 120). Within popular discourse, this somewhat vague vision of sustainability quickly became associated with the vision of the *xiaokang* society. The connection is evidenced by a reaction from the *China Daily* which proclaimed: "the authorities have come to realize that development [...] [must include] the right relationship between man and nature" (Zhang and Barr 120–121). This association grew stronger over the next decade and eventually became codified through Xi Jinping's address to the 19th National People's Congress in October of 2017.

Since then, "Ecological Civilization" discourse has become increasingly associated with aesthetic dimensions of the human-nature relationship, including having an aspiration for procuring and protecting natural beauty. As such, imagining and questioning the future of natural aesthetics is important when considering the environmental future because they determine how people perceive the betterment of their lives. While nearly all modern countries rely on narratives of progress to garner political legitimacy, the means and results of progress are especially important in the Chinese context where the Ecological Civilization is now at the

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forefront of the collective vision for the future. With this perspective, we can turn to "Folding Beijing" and "The Fish of Lijiang" and explore how their depictions of the human-nature relationship offer valuable insight regarding modern treatment of the environment in development and how it should be changed in order to nourish a better future.

Ⅲ　"Folding Beijing" and the Allocation of Nature by Class

Hao Jingfang's "Folding Beijing," is deeply concerned with the involvement of natural materials and aesthetics in urban development and class inequality. The story's novum, the "folding city," imagines a world where the most vulnerable populations are dehumanized through their alienation from nature. In contrast, the most pleasant and beautiful surroundings are afforded to the upper class, naturalizing an ideology of hierarchy and class immobility. I further argue that the text portrays humans as inherently yearning for aesthetic connections with natural beauty, building a case for viewing natural aesthetics as a matter of environmental justice. As a whole, "Folding Beijing" reflects upon the implication of natural aesthetics in urban development, warning against its potential to undermine the goals of development and exacerbate class difference.

"Folding Beijing" follows the journey of Lao Dao, a Beijing waste worker who is commissioned to deliver a love letter across the city between two people from different classes. The quest is more treacherous than one might expect. Because Beijing's population and size have grown so much, the city is reengineered Beijing into a "folding city" — a colossal engineering feat that permits people to live on both sides of the ground. Traversing the city is nearly impossible. At the beginning of each day, buildings on the up-right side of the ground fold in on themselves, the people fall asleep, and the ground turns over to allow buildings on the other side to unfold and the other half of the population to go about their business. This process repeats every twenty-four hours. The urban space is divided into three spaces, each dedicated to a specific economic class. The upper class inhabits First Space, which takes up one side of the city. The other side jointly belongs to Second Space (the middle class) and Third Space (the lower class), which are separated temporally. Second Space unfolds during the daytime (6:00 am to 10:00 pm), while Third Space (the largest portion of the population) only unfolds at night (10:00 pm to 6:00 am). Thanks to this geographic and temporal separation, class becomes the primary determining influence in individuals' lives.

The description of the folding city's physical infrastructure alerts readers to the coerced and artificial constructedness of this social organization, as well as the forms of domination required to sustain it. The folding city is a truly promethean

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achievement that has transformed the Earth beyond recognition. Its completion apparently represents the pinnacle of modernization, the overcoming of physical limitation to make way for humanity's prosperity. If the goal of the enlightenment project is, as David Harvey summarizes, liberation from our natural restrains and self-actualization then the folding city is what we might imagine the end goal of this project to be (23–125). From another perspective, if we believe aesthetician Li Zehou's theory that humanity and nature are engaged in a great struggle with each other, then we might see the achievement of the folding city as the sublime success of humanizing the environment to meet human need (Wang 58–59). From both perspectives, an uncritical standpoint might view this as a desire vision of our own future — a sociotechnical imaginary of what humanity might achieve if we continue to progress in science and technology. ① But Hao Jingfang is far from uncritical. Early in the narrative, the reader is given reason to suspect this "masterpiece" of modernism to be merely a façade: truckers beyond the city limits are described as admiring the spectacle of the city, but this is juxtaposed with descriptions of construction workers who react to the city by "scattering in terror as though they had given birth to a monster" (Hao 231). Their responses prompt readers to begin questioning: is the folding city a masterpiece or a monster? "Folding Beijing" thus begins to speculate that commonplace visions of progress and development are not all that they seem. As the plot unfolds, we are given more reasons to see this city as a monster — especially as the human-nature relationship is pushed further out of balance.

Looking inside the city, we begin to see how the folding city does not promote human-nature harmony within its boundaries, but rather is designed to control humans and alienate them. This is evident in the city's physical barriers and infrastructure that keep each class of people confined to their own time and space. A city-wide chemical dispensing system releases sleeping gas into homes at the end of the "day" to ensure that people will hibernate when it is their time to be "folded." While residents of First and Second Space have enough time in their day to fall asleep naturally, the city relies upon this system to force Third Spacers into hibernation at the end of their six-hour nocturnal work-"day." They are denied the ability to live and work according to their circadian rhythms, alienating them from their natural physiological functions. This experience is portrayed as dehumanizing to the people of Third Space. Indeed, the narrative even uses bug related rhetoric to suggest that inhabitants of Third Space are less than human. Third Spacers are described as doomed to "eke out a living by performing the repetitive drudgery as fast as possible, to toil hour after hour for rewards as thin as

① For more on socio-technical imaginaries, see Sheila Jasanoff and San-Yun Kim.

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cicada wings," performing such tasks as would have them "[labor] away in the acidic rotten fetor of garbage and crowding for twenty years" (Hao 231-232). Lao Dao's father is even explicitly characterized as a "decomposer" (231-232). These dehumanized members of the lowest class are regarded as nothing more than an undesired element in the greater social and environmental ecosystem — a sentiment later echoed by city leaders and decision makers. This description of Third Space inhabitants thus demonstrates how the folding city is designed to control and dominate the lowest class, dispossessing them of their human dignity.

This systematic construction of difference is what ultimately makes the world of "Folding Beijing" dystopian. The story opens in Third Space, which is organized around the presence of the city's massive waste management industry. Rot and decay infiltrate nearly every aspect of this setting, permeating it with a "pungent" and "fermented" aroma. Moreover, because it is only occupied in the evening, its only lighting comes from the gaudy glow of neon signs. Additionally, as the space with the highest population density, it is described as being crammed with apartments which are "noisy and chaotic, filled [...] [with] commotion [...] [and] disheveled hair and half-dressed bodies" (Hao 261). Third Space is where materials that are unwanted, decomposing, deteriorating, and used up are relegated, making only unsettling and abject aesthetic experiences possible there.

Second Space, by contrast, is described as more aesthetically balanced, neither abject nor gorgeous. It resembles a middle-class urban setting. Its juxtaposition with Third Class alerts readers to its relative abundance of aesthetically pleasing natural materials. Second Space is crowded and bustling, and has tall buildings and busy intersections, but it also has relatively spacious dwellings, fresher air, blue skies, and even regular, natural sunshine. In the real world, these natural elements are often taken for granted until they are limited or inhibited by an external factor, like urban pollution. Having never experienced deprivation from such materials, Second Spacers appear to be different from Third Spacers. The narrator notes:

> Lao Dao's last memory of Second Space was of the refined air with which everyone conducted themselves before the change [...] everything seemed so orderly that he felt a hint of envy. Starting at a quarter past nine, the stores along the street turned off their lights one after another; groups of friends, their faces red with drink, said goodbye in front of restaurants. Young couples kissed next to taxicabs. And then returned to their homes and the world went to sleep. (237-238)

Not only are these residents afforded the dignity of being described like peo-

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ple (as opposed to insects), but they also enjoy friendship and affection — forms of congenial interactions that are absent from the public in Third Space. Most interestingly, however, is the narrator's attention to time: residents' day ends with the setting sun, and they fall asleep on their own accord without the coercion of sleeping gas. They are able to live according to the body's natural rhythms, experience interpersonal connections, and enjoy a relatively pleasant living environment. All these factors demonstrate how Second Space is less alienating and demeaning than Third Space.

First Space, which is full of abundant, beautiful city nature, is a misleading example of an environmentally balanced urban utopia. When Lao Dao initially beholds First Space, he sees wide lawns and rows of tall trees — materials which were imported to cultivate aesthetic pleasure. Indeed, the natural materials in First Space are all cultivated to create an entirely beautiful setting. There is a conspicuous absence of decay, deterioration, dirt, and laborers (who are replaced by robots). Residents here are proud, refined, and enjoy all the trappings of a good life. Their pride and dignity suggest that such pleasant surroundings — the utopia of technological convenience and natural beauty combined in one setting — beneficially contribute to residents' sense of self. It is within these surroundings that alienation and limitation are all but eliminated, affording the residents a great sense of dignity. What is at stake in the aesthetic construction of these three settings, organized through the uneven distribution of natural materials, is human dignity — for whom it is nurtured, from whom it is dispossessed.

The pristine beauty of First Space is made possible only through the expulsion of all unwanted and abject elements to Third Space. Knowing this, the reader is positioned to see through the façade of utopia in First Space. First Space may indeed be luxurious, genteel, modern, and sophisticated, but this is constructed in equal part by the importation of pleasant, cultivated objects as well as the exportation of unwanted objects. In this way, the allocation of natural materials in First space resembles Theodore Adorno's critique of the creation of natural beauty in landscape portraits. Adorno posits that nature in and of itself is not necessarily beautiful. When painters create landscapes of natural beauty, they do so by hiding or eliminating aspects which remind humans of our physical vulnerability and terrify us (Adorno 66-70). Natural beauty, thus, is cloaked in the myth that the material world is already tamed and mastered by humans. Ugliness — the traces that remind us of the still unreconciled conflict between humans and nature — is hidden elsewhere (46-51). Likewise, "Folding Beijing" describes how the terrifying, untamed objects of nature (waste and decomposition) are banished to Third Space in order to sustain the myth of human-nature harmony in First Space. By making this process known to the reader, "Folding Beijing" serves to "rub against

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the wound" concerning the myth of natural beauty by inviting readers to look past the charade of beauty to see the domination and coercion which construct it (Adorno 61–62).

The story goes further to demonstrate how aesthetics of natural materials works to reproduce and maintain an ideology of class difference. Terry Eagleton explains that all aesthetic artifacts are inseparable from the ideologies that control and maintain social order (3). Indeed, materials are rarely devoid of any ideological significance, and they can be highly effective as tools to support the dominant ideological order. In "Folding Beijing" we can see how even basic natural materials are endowed with ideological significance, especially in relation to class identity and hierarchy. Take the soil and ballast of First Space for example. The abundance of this material has a practical purpose: to balance the weight difference between First Space and the remainder of the population. However, these materials have also become a point of pride for residents who take it as "[a] natural emblem of their possession of a richer, deeper heritage" (Hao 230). The presence of this material is used by residents to naturalize their claim to superiority over Second and Third Spacers. In another example, the unpleasant material artifacts of Third Space contribute to their sense of social inferiority and justify their fate of being trapped in the Third Space. In Lao Dao's reflection on his association with waste, dirt, and the aesthetically unpleasant, the narrator notes:

> Lao Dao didn't despise his work. But when he had gone to Second Space, he had been terrified of being despised [...] he wasn't anxious, he only worried about the rotting smell on him [...] Lao Dao had never taken a bath in [...] [a Second Space] bathroom, and he really wanted to soak for a while and get rid of the smell on his body. But he was afraid of getting the bathtub dirty and didn't dare rub his skin too hard with his washcloth. (232–233)

This quote demonstrates how the materials of decay, decomposition, and dirt buttress an internalized ideology of social hierarchy that works to deter class and spatial mobility.

The narrative further develops the theme of inequality and aesthetics by asserting that all humans have an immutable and inherent yearning for profound aesthetic connections with nature. This innate desire can be observed through Lao Dao's reaction to seeing his first sunrise, a moment which demonstrates his visceral and desperate need for a beautiful connection with nature: "As the sun continued to rise, the blue of the sky faded a little but seemed even more tranquil and clear. Lao Dao stood up and ran at the sun: he wanted to catch a trace of that fading golden color. Silhouettes of waving tree branches broke up the sky. His heart

leapt wildly. He had never imagined that a sunrise could be so moving" (Hao 238). The impact is so profound that Lao Dao is spurred to physical action without clear, rational purpose. A suppressed, primordial inclination within him is finally released. Even a lifetime of nocturnal labor cannot diminish the human need to seek out and connect with natural beauty. Unlike Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* (1951), or even later books of Liu Cixin's *Remembrances of Earths Past* trilogy, which both anticipated that prolonged alienation from Earth's nature would cause people to forget and even fear their primordial roots, "Folding Beijing" affirms that the human yearning for an aesthetic relationship with nature cannot be extinguished.① It is inherently a part of us, and therefore to deny any person from interacting with and beholding the beautiful, as is done to the people of Third Space, is unjust.

In light of this assertion regarding human nature and our need for organic, ecological connection, the problems outlined throughout this section are elevated from mere social ills to matters of distributive injustice. "Folding Beijing" is a dystopia wherein natural aesthetics are implicated in development to entrench class inequality. Through their allocation and manipulation, beautiful natural objects are provided to the most privileged of citizens, and ugly materials are thrust upon the least privileged. Human dignity and egalitarianism are undermined through the alienation of the lowest class from nature and the naturalization of class-based ideologies of hierarchy. All humans, the narrative asserts, yearn for aesthetically meaningful experiences with nature, yet the folding city was not developed to meet the needs and desires of all people. The narrative thus frames natural aesthetics as something that must be made equally accessible to all citizens in order to achieve a genuine Ecological Civilization. To continue development in pursuit of wealth rather than socialist values, the narrative warns, will lead to more alienation and injustice, similar to that suffered by Lao Dao.

Ⅳ "The Fish of Lijiang" and Fake Beauty

Chen Qiufan's "The Fish of Lijiang" zooms in deeper on the human-nature relationship to explore how technologies disrupt individuals' aesthetic experiences. In this story, a frustrated office worker goes on vacation to recover from a mysterious biorhythm illness. He goes to Lijiang, a picturesque village and famous va-

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① In *Foundation*, citizens of the highly industrialized planet of Trantor, who are accustomed to living indoors and never see the sun, are encouraged to reconnect with the outdoor environment during annual school trips to observation deck. When students first see the sun, they typically react by "scream [ing] themselves into hysterics" (Asimov 12).

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cation spot, where his electronic devices are removed, and he spends time with a woman who is a fellow patient. Although he begins to feel better, he eventually realizes that the once enchanting qualities of Lijiang are, in fact, replaced or enhanced by technology. To add insult to injury, he also learns that the woman has no genuine romantic interest in him and is using him for her own purposes. Miserable, he concludes that he cannot form an authentic connection with anyone or anything in Lijiang and returns to the city more frustrated than before. This narrative raises the question: if everything around the protagonist is aesthetically pleasing, why does he fail to have meaningful experiences, like Lao Dao's encounter with the sun? Through analyzing "The Fish of Lijiang," this section discusses humanity's inherent need for a sensuous ecological connection and how technology can, and often is designed to, disrupt such connections. In doing so, I shed light on the potential reasons why attempts to artificially recreate the natural world actually drive us deeper into our alienation from nature.

There are three instances in which the protagonist tries (and fails) to connect with nature in Lijiang. In the first instance, he admires the stunning blue sky, but then loses interest in it after learning that a computer maintains its "optimal" shade of blue. Next, he becomes disinterested with the view of the grand Jade Dragon Snow Mountain after discovering that it is used as a backdrop for an evening laser show. Finally, the protagonist spends some time and takes pleasure in sitting with a school of fish. But when he discovers that they are merely holograms, he walks away in grim disappointment. All three natural objects — the sky, mountain, and school of fish — are technologically enhanced to please human senses, yet the protagonist is repeatedly frustrated by them. They fail to satisfy the innate human need for aesthetic, ecological connection.

The problem is not the protagonist's attitude but rather characteristics of the objects themselves, which are tainted by instrumental rationale and mechanical enhancement. Instrumentalism induced by the logic of capital is a key condition that has come to define all of Lijiang. Even though it is far from the urban hub of commerce, this village has not escaped from the far-reaching arm of capitalism. Indeed, the story describes how Lijiang has come under the management of a major corporation. The once quaint, provincial village was then transformed into a luxurious getaway for burnt-out office workers. Nothing that remained in Lijiang existed for its own sake anymore, not even the sky. Materials came under monitoring and management for the instrumental purpose of enhancing patients' experience and facilitating their convalescence. While this process resembles the real and familiar experience of curating ecotourist sites, the novum of this story points to something more sinister: Lijiang is a space of biological manipulation.

Lijiang is just one part of a larger system of human domination and control.

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It is revealed that the company uses cutting-edge technology to alter the biological rhythms of its workers so as to squeeze out as much labor as possible from them. The protagonist himself is a victim of this manipulation. His biorhythms were sped up in order to increase his work output in a standard eight-hour day. The harmful side effects of this biological manipulation require extensive sensory treatment, so workers are sent to Lijiang where every environmental detail is designed to facilitate workers' recuperation effectively and efficiently. In this light, it becomes clear that the material composition of Lijiang is designed to hijack the most intimate of human aesthetic experiences in order to control the human body in the service of profit. The manipulation of natural materials as commodities in Lijiang is not merely intended to attract consumers, but to control consumers' bodies.

"The Fish of Lijiang" thus creates a dystopian setting in which the oppression of labor and the instrumental use of nature go hand-in-hand. David Harvey has argued that, in the real world, the two are inextricably linked under the philosophy of liberalism. Harvey explains that the concept of profit-driven production and self-realization through consumption, in addition to the separation of the self from natural objects are all ideas developed by liberal thinkers to justify the impetus to master and monetize natural materials and interpellate them into a system of production. Humans, whose labor is a resource as necessary as raw materials, are also subjected to instrumental evaluation and subjugation by this system (Harvey 123-125). Thus, according to Harvey, workers and nature alike fall victim to instrumentalism in the theoretical underpinning of the capitalist system; their only *raison d'etre* exists in the exchanges of monetary value (124). However, in "The Fish of Lijiang," we see a more tangible phenomenon in which the domination of one is leveraged as a mechanism to dominate the other: every one of the natural objects the protagonist tries to interact with is designed with utilitarian intent — the sky, mountain and school of fish are there for the singular purpose of manipulating visitors' senses for their recovery. In the world of Lijiang, there is no rationale for interaction beyond instrumental use and manipulation.

In contrast, the type of genuine interactions that the protagonist yearns for are those which seem to only be possible in nostalgic memory — the kind of romantic interactions he had in the past. His yearning mirrors the type of sentiment described by Walter Benjamin in his review of Leskov's "The Alexandrite":

> [It was in] that old time when the stones in the womb of the earth and the planets at celestial heights were still concerned with the fate of men, and not today when both in the heavens and beneath the earth everything has grown indifferent to the fates of sons of men and no voice speaks to them from anywhere, let alone does their bidding. None of the undiscovered planets play

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> any part in horoscopes anymore, and there are a lot of new stones all measured and weighed and examined for their specific weight and their density, but they no longer proclaim anything to us, nor do they bring us any benefit. Their time for speaking with men is past. (1968a: 96)

The kind of human-nature relationship Benjamin laments for here is enchanted by the primordial quality which the stones possess. The value of objects used to be in their ability to "speak" to humanity which came from their connection to the web of life and dynamic history. The objects' rationale to exist was simply to bear witness to, and carry on, the unfolding of time — the movement of life through history. In this ideal state, the object has aura and draws the observer into an exchange of the gaze in a moment of mutual recognition. In "The Fish of Lijiang," the protagonist yearns for precisely this kind of relationship, hoping that he will find a connection that transforms into a meaningful, spiritual experience. Yet despite his personal disposition, he still cannot escape the system of instrumental rationality which permeates Lijiang. It is the systematic subjugation and bestowing of utilitarian value that impedes aesthetic experience.

Indeed, the work of Friedrich Nietzsche helps explain the mechanism by which instrumental rationality disrupts aesthetic reasoning altogether. He reflects on the apparent incompatibility of the two:

> [...] An essentially mechanical world would be an essentially meaningless world! Suppose that one assessed the value of a piece of music according to how much of it could be counted, calculated, put into formulas; how absurd such a "scientific" assessment of music would be! What would one have comprehended, understood, known about it? Nothing, absolutely nothing of what is really "music" in it! (Nietzsche 239)

Music is an aesthetic form, which means that it appeals to an "inferior" logic that can be understood through the sensuous world of the body, lying "beyond cognition" (Eagleton 15-16). As such, using cognitive logic to analyze music is "absurd" because music operates at an essentially different level of human comprehension. To calculate music rationally requires fragmenting it into bits of information which neither satisfy the ear nor satiate the desire for comprehension. Like Benjamin's example of measuring and cataloguing stones, "rational" analysis may produce data about the anatomy of objects, but it dissevers them from that which endows them with profound meaning. Likewise, the instrumental reasoning which permeates Lijiang breaks all agents down into only their utilitarian function, a process that drains them of their aura.

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Reflecting on the broken and drained aura of both subjects and objects in Lijiang leads us to consider the other characteristic which disrupts aesthetic encounters for the protagonist: the mechanical enhancement of natural objects. The sky, the mountain, and the fish are all manipulated or enhanced by state-of-the-art technology. These enhancements frustrate the protagonist rather than engage or attract him because they disrupt the objects' authenticity. In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin describes authenticity as an object's unique placement in history, which can be evidenced by the traces of human labor and wear and tear that it accumulates overtime (1968b: 220). Authenticity is, for Benjamin, what distinguishes a replica of a work of art from its original — the replica has never born witness to the unique historical context from which its form originally emerged (1968b: 222-223). In "The Fish of Lijiang," it is precisely this authenticity that the protagonist seeks but cannot find. The objects in Lijiang, even those that are not technically replicas, all lack authenticity.

The protagonist's desire for authenticity is conveyed through his search for the "real" Lijiang. His encounter with the sky prompts him to lament: "Darn it. I feel sad. Even the sky, so beautiful it's like the pristine sky present at creation, is fake [...] 'can you tell me if anything here is real?'" (Chen 2016a: 59-60). And yet the sky is not a replica. One might assume that the sky (and the mountain as well) could still "speak" to the protagonist since it *has* born witness to the history of Lijiang. What then makes this one "fake" and "not real"? Because of their technological enhancements, both the sky and the mountain no longer have the same sensuous, physical interactions with the world as they once did. Moreover, their modifications, designed to perfect the object, have removed the traces of their endurance through history. As such, all the physical evidence of their authenticity has been wiped away, causing them to no longer impart authentic, aesthetic experiences. This is why the sky and the mountain have little aura remaining in the eyes of the protagonist.

Yet the protagonist's encounter with holographic fish appears to be less consistent with Benjamin's theory of mechanization and authenticity. The fish *are* replicas and yet the protagonist *nearly* has a moment of aesthetic connection with them. Does this mean that sufficiently advanced technology may one day fool us and our senses by perfectly replicating all the signs of authenticity? If so, how will we ever know the difference between an auratic original and its replica? These speculative questions are left open ended by the narrative, but we still witness the process by which his aesthetic connections are formed and disrupted. First, the protagonist reflects on the fishes' behavior in relation to the nature of life. Second, he nostalgically recalls his memories besides the fish in Lijiang. Third and finally, he is open to the possibility that, through being with the fish, he can

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make sense of his own predicament. These behaviors suggest that the protagonist is prepared to enter into a dialogue with the web of life through interacting with the fish, but these are merely his cognitive approaches to the situation. Ultimately, he does not achieve the true aesthetic connection he seeks.

By comparing the events of this sequence to the proverbial passage from the *Zhuangzi* about Lord Zhuangzi's own encounter with fish, it becomes clear that the protagonist lacks the ineffable, guttural connection that one achieves through genuine aesthetic connection. In the Daoist story, Zhuangzi experiences a resonance with a school of minnows near the Hao River instantaneously. He does this not by exerting any cognitive effort, but merely by intuitively feeling of the fish by just "standing here besides the Hao" (Zhuangzi 188-189). It is a connection that is facilitated by physical proximity and intuition — a "natural" phenomenon in the sense in that it appears to be an innate human capability. In "The Fish of Lijiang," while the protagonist may have *thought* he achieved some level of real aesthetic experience, he lacked this true connection — he learned nothing of the fishes' interiority or their connection to the world, and therefore was meaningless. This understanding helps explain why, despite being surrounded by so many sensuously pleasant objects, the protagonist leaves Lijiang feeling more alienated from nature than he did when he arrived. Instances that feel like aesthetic connection but lack authenticity do not make any substantive impact on the subject, failing to impart the ecological connection humans need.

In summary, this reading of "The Fish of Lijiang" reveals a strong critique of the commodification of natural materials and capitalist development. It explores how replicas and enhanced objects do not improve the experience of aesthetic pleasure, but rather deplete human-object interactions from their restorative meaning. This is because their instrumental rationale and lack of authenticity drain natural materials of their aura, reducing them to merely objects of exchange. The protagonist's growing frustration points to the universal human yearning for aesthetic reconnection with nature, and the alienation that this treatment of objects causes. "The Fish of Lijiang" is dystopian because it describes how under the auspices of capitalism, individuals neither have the opportunity nor the means to make such genuine connections with nature and the external world. A corporation expands its power of exploitation over workers by mastering and manipulating their need for aesthetic connection; simulacra in the attempt to satiate individuals' needs just enough to reproduce their labor, but ultimately fails. The story warns readers to be wary of pleasant commodities and their paucity of authenticity. As such, "The Fish of Lijiang" uses an aesthetic take on the human-nature relationship to critique development, suggesting that a genuine Ecological Civilization should avoid these practices in order to satisfy all individuals' needs to authentically con-

nect with nature.

Conclusion

Together, Hao Jingfang's "Folding Beijing" and Chen Qiufan's "The Fish of Lijiang" offer a rich exploration of the ways aesthetics and nature are implicated in the problems of development. In a critique of class inequality, "Folding Beijing" makes a case for viewing alienation from nature and the concentration of "ugly" materials around poverty as an afront to human dignity. Then, in speculating whether commodities could ameliorate the gap between the haves and have-nots, "The Fish of Lijiang" puts forward that replicas and enhanced products not only fail to assuage the common people's alienation from nature, but are also used by higher powers to keep people unaware of their exploitation. Although they take two different perspectives, both stories offer an examination of problems which arouse anxiety in the face of "progress." They reveal how the socialist goals of egalitarianism and human dignity cannot be fully realized so far as development continues to rely upon structures of inequality and alienation — structures in which beauty and nature play an integral role in sustaining. These stories therefore encourage readers to consider nature and beauty as matters of environmental and social justice.

Against the backdrop of the Ecological Civilization, it is more important than ever to listen to the ideas expressed through Chinese science fiction. "Folding Beijing" and "The Fish of Lijiang" mediate popular anxieties which emerge from material circumstances surrounding everyday people, doing the foundational work needed to determine what sustainable development should mean at the grassroots level. Indeed, these texts reveal that the interrogation of progress inevitably must turn to the matter of aesthetics. Closely reading "Folding Beijing" and "The Fish of Lijiang" thus inspire us to envision how improving the future of the environment will (and must) transform how people organize and interact with natural materials.

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