

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sven C V E K (University of Zagreb)

scvek@ffzg.hr

ON THE POST-SOCIALIST UTOPIANISM OF LIU CIXIN

Accepted: 27 January 2026

UDK 821.581.09Cixin, L.

82-311.9

82:316.7

82:141.7

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22210/ur.2025.070.1/08>

Since the 1980s, contemporary culture, in which U.S. hegemony remains deeply inscribed, has been portrayed in terms of a crisis of historical or utopian imagination. Notions such as capitalist realism, presentism, or immediacy have been employed in subsequent cultural diagnoses that, despite their different emphases, register a dramatic change in our sense or experience of time. In it, to the extent that it appears at all, the future figures only marginally, and certainly not in any utopian form. This development may be understood as the mark of a global post-socialist condition. In this paper we will offer a reading of Liu Cixin's brand of SF, which appears as a utopian exception in the context of a global post-socialism and the simultaneous integration of China into the capitalist world-system.

Keywords: Liu Cixin, post-socialism, utopia, science fiction

169

INTRODUCTION

One way of evaluating the present-day "rise of China" might be by looking at the export rates in its literary industry, specifically in the English translations of Chinese science fiction. In a recent report on the matter we read that "before the year 2000, there were only 9 English translations of Chinese science fiction. During the period of 2000 to 2015, a total of 72 translations of Chinese science fiction into English were published, which is eight times more translations in this genre compared to before the 21st century" (Xuan 2024: 38). While these numbers might not appear as striking as other, more narrowly economic indicators of China's breakneck development, they certainly do speak of a certain affinity

between Chinese SF and the country's ongoing transformation: the labor-intensive Sinicization of the world of commodities in the last couple of decades has now been expanded by an increased cultural presence of China globally, a presence in which one literary genre plays a prominent role. This much has been noted by Chinese writers themselves. As Han Song put it, "[s]cience fiction is now the label for China's economic miracle" (Han 2013: 11).

But science fiction is about more than sheer numbers, providing us, as it does, with a view of what Mingwei Song calls "the unknown abysmal deep beneath the accustomed, familiar surface reality" (Song 2023: 11). There is no doubt that this body of literature, as a fictional contribution to reflections on China's present moment, is characterized by a certain mimetic quality. Along with its interest in the lived experience of China's modernization, the so-called new wave of Chinese SF also speaks of the constitution of a cultural imaginary, one equally rooted in the particularities of local histories—which include a socialist revolution of world-historical relevance—and in the objectivity of the movements of capital in its global form. What is at stake in the present discussion is precisely the globalization of the contemporary Chinese cultural imaginary, or at least one of its important aspects. We will start from the assumption that its status as a global phenomenon is to a significant extent based on the popularity of a particular literary form, and on the work of one particular author.

It is no exaggeration to say that a crucial moment in the rising global visibility of Chinese culture has been the spectacular appearance of Liu Cixin's translated work in the U.S. literary field. Born in 1963, Liu grew up during the turmoils of the Cultural Revolution, the memory of which plays an important part in his massive *Remembrance of the Earth's Past*, more commonly known as the *Three Body* trilogy (2006-2010). After achieving significant success in China, the first novel in the series was translated into English in 2014 and won the Hugo Award the following year. Praised by Barack Obama, Mark Zuckerberg, and George R. R. Martin (among many others), the critically acclaimed trilogy has sold tens of millions of copies worldwide and has been made into a Netflix series, all of which made it into a veritably global cultural phenomenon. Liu's success has certainly contributed to the Western interest in Chinese SF more generally, as is evidenced by the publication in English of such authors as Han Song, Hao Jingfang, Chen Qiufan, or Wang Jinkang. None of them, however, managed to excite the imagination of Western readers as much as Liu Cixin.

What is the reason behind such popularity of this particular author (out of so many contemporary Chinese SF writers), particularly in the West? Taking the commonsensical perspective—that it has something to do with the current status

of China, both globally and within the U.S. specifically, as an object of both fascination and anxiety—seems a necessary first step, but can hardly provide an entirely satisfactory explanation. In the existing scholarship on Liu, one recurring point does suggest a possible direction for pondering this question. Telescopic visions of the future—in fact almost endlessly proliferating futures—multi-dimensional cosmic plots that span millions of years, reality-transforming technologies: these widely recognized features of Liu's brand of science fiction seem to open a space for imagining radically different possibilities or new forms of future being. It is therefore not surprising that Liu's fiction has been recognized as inherently and pervasively, although inconclusively utopian. This utopianism has then been identified as the key for understanding Liu's popularity in the West, its manifest presence fulfilling something like a compensatory function in now predominantly post-utopian Western cultures. One such view is expressed by Will Peyton: "the [*Three Body*] trilogy revivifies formulations of utopianism, however useful or problematic, that Westerners themselves have neglected to openly deliberate during the post-Cold-War period" (Peyton 2021: 142). Similarly, Li Guangyi turns to Liu's essays in order to unearth explicit articulations of a utopianism that, although rooted in national history, builds its futuristic visions on a fundamentally supranational, universalist imaginary (Li 2019). Mingwei Song has characterized the new wave of Chinese science fiction in general as being beyond any "easy categorization as either utopian or dystopian" (Song 2013: 99). However, when it comes to Liu Cixin, "[a]bove the enormous darkness of an amoral universe, there is indeed a light of utopian vision that transcends the interests of nations and peoples" and "thrives on unpredictably infinite possibilities", writes Song (Song 2018: 122). Some readings of Liu's fiction argue that, despite the author's critique of the Cultural Revolution, his work builds on and revives the utopianism of Maoist revolution by insisting on the historical character of capitalism as a mode of production and by criticizing the growing economic inequalities and harsh exploitation of labor in contemporary China (Thieret 2015). Others, looking more closely at the politics of Liu's domestic reception, remain wary of his relentless futuristic drive, and point out the heteroglossia of social positions reflected in his narratives, be it by focusing on his popularity among the Chinese "Prometheanists", a "right-wing cultural movement" that celebrates China's "industrial capacities" and its "technoscientific elite" as instruments of achieving a "Sinocentric future world order" (Karsavina), or by emphasizing that the support Liu has received from the Chinese government might represent an attempt of the party bureaucracy "politically to appropriate the author and his trilogy", as Gaffric and Peyton put it (2019: 31–32). It would then appear useful to try and

make sense of this bewildering ability of Liu Cixin to summon such multiplicity of utopian projections.

POST-SOCIALISM: GLOBAL CONDITION, LOCAL SITUATION

We may begin our elaboration of this problem by considering the familiar diagnosis about a certain paralysis of the contemporary historical imaginary in the West. One of the more dramatic formulations of this position comes from Cornelius Castoriadis, whose work revolves around the problem of "the emergence of the radically new". For Castoriadis, "the creation of new forms of being" is "immanent to human collectivities" (Castoriadis 2007: 125). However, in the present moment, or what is variously termed postmodernity or (too) late capitalism, this imaginative potential is "in the process of wearing out": "this drop in creativity, goes hand in hand with the triumph [...] of the capitalist imaginary" (Castoriadis 2007: 138). This understanding of the contemporary moment is a variation on a theme that has been expressed by others; the claims that the times are "capitalist realist" (Fisher), "presentist" (Hartog), or marked by an "immediacy style" (Kornbluh) all imply that the imaginative horizon that would allow for some notion of a world different from the one that exists has at best shrunk, if not disappeared entirely. An early, and probably the most influential formulation of this position comes from Fredric Jameson's work on postmodernism. For our present purpose, the important point to be emphasized about Jameson's take concerns the spatial aspect of this development or, in other words, its relationship to the dynamics of the uneven and combined development of the capitalist world-system. We should remember that in Jameson's formulation post-utopianism represents an aspect of postmodernism, itself understood as "the first really global style developed by America" (Buchanan 2007: 208). But the meaning of "global" was explicitly qualified by Jameson in 1991:

Yet the totalizing account of the postmodern always included a space for various forms of oppositional culture: those of marginal groups, those of radically distinct residual or emergent cultural languages, their existence being already predicated by the necessarily uneven development of late capitalism, whose First World produces a Third World within itself by its own inner dynamic. In this sense postmodernism is "merely" a cultural dominant. To describe it in terms of cultural hegemony is not to suggest some massive and uniform cultural homogeneity of the social field

but very precisely to imply its coexistence with other resistant and heterogeneous forces which it has a vocation to subdue and incorporate. (Jameson 1991: 159)

In fact, the 1980s, the decade when Jameson developed his theory of postmodernism—partly during his stay in China in 1985—was also the time when he wrote about alternative imaginaries in the global postmodern moment, namely those pertaining to the Third and Second Worlds, or the periphery and the semi-periphery of the world-system (cf. Jameson 1986 and Jameson 1994). The emergence of utopia in the work of a Chinese author might then represent the advent of precisely such an alternative “cultural language”, one taking hold in the “incompletely commodified” space of the People’s Republic (Buchanan 2007: 166). Keeping in mind that for Jameson “alternative” means simply “socialist”, the question that we are forced to confront, nearly four decades after Jameson’s original formulation, is the question of Chinese socialism today. Is the utopianism of Liu Cixin basically the literary expression of a socialist (modernist?) culture that managed to survive in the midst of a near-total postmodernity? It is hardly necessary to stress that after 1989, in China and elsewhere, things are bound to be more complicated. Namely, if post-utopianism appears with full force after the “fall of socialism” or the “end of history”, that is, after a systemic change within the bipolar configuration of the world-system as a whole, then it cannot be merely a Western matter, but the mark of a *global* post-socialist condition. In which case the problem of Liu Cixin’s utopianism requires additional explanation, since now it appears as a development within a global post-socialism.

The above suggests that it is possible to distinguish between two uses of the term “post-socialism”, both of them analytically useful. In one sense, post-socialism refers to a global condition, the state of the world after either the explicit dismantling of existing state socialist projects, or radical reformist turns in former socialist countries. The disappearance of “actually existing” alternatives inaugurated not only the universalization of capitalism, but also the domination of the post-utopian, “there-is-no-alternative” disposition evoked above. On the other hand, post-socialism also refers to local situations of former socialist countries after their abandonment of the historical goal of building communism. While all local post-socialisms are bound to be shaped by historical and cultural specificities, they obviously must all differ from those societies that have never experienced socialism at all; if nothing else, then by virtue of the persistence in them of residual traces of socialist social and cultural forms.

Contemporary Chinese SF might be understood as a post-socialist development. In the words of Mingwei Song, the “post-1989 social and cultural contexts”

relevant for the emergence of the new wave of Chinese SF include: "the abrupt end of the 1980s democratic movement, China's rapid marketization, the boom of new sciences and technologies, the rise of the internet, the maturing markets for genre fiction, and the flourishing of the netizen communities from where new wave SF lifted off" (2023: 9). No matter whether we locate the beginning of China's post-socialism in the post-1978 or the post-1989 period, the ongoing revival of science fiction in China has its roots in the realities of the progressive integration of China into the capitalist world-system under the label of "modernization". The exact nature of this process has been a matter of some debate: is China using the market economy tactically in order to build an alternative to capitalism? Or does reliance on markets inevitably lead to the generalization of the commodity form, that is, the appearance of a full-blown capitalism in a more or less familiar form? A "reformed socialism" or "some variant of capitalism" (Arrighi 2007: 355)? The answers to these questions vary, no doubt because the process in question is in progress. Reflecting on the possibility of a global Chinese future in her book *After the Post-Cold War: The Future of Chinese History*, Dai Jinhua asks: "How is the world led by China different from where it is heading anyway?", only to offer the following answer: "If a Chinese model exists, then it seems to be inevitably a capitalist model and not an alternative to capitalism" (Dai 2018: 20). Similarly, in *The Question Concerning Technology in China*, Yuk Hui has described present-day "sinofuturism" as "an acceleration of the European modern project" (Hui 2016: 297). A somewhat different account is to be found in Minqi Li's attempt to lay out the possibilities implicit in the global rise of China. For him, the integration of China into the capitalist world economy implies the disappearance of the last remaining significant reserves, in terms of human labor and natural resources, needed for the accumulation of capital to continue on a global scale. Chinese rise therefore marks the beginning of the terminal phase in the development of the capitalist world economy (cf. Li Minqi 2008: 13). What will follow?

[W]ill the historical phenomenon of the rise of China simply prove to be one of the successive cyclical movements of the existing world-system (as happened to the United Provinces of Holland, the United Kingdom, and the United States) through which the system has renewed and reproduced itself on increasingly larger scales, though with different appearances and under different leaderships? Or, could this time be different? Could the rise of China signal something fundamentally new in the history of the modern world-system? ... These are not merely academic questions. Instead, these are "meaningful" and "important" questions as the answers help to decide the dimensions and parameters within which the

current and future generations will make “world history.” Do we live in a world where “there is no alternative”? Or, do we live in a world where “another world is possible”? Or, could it be that we actually live in a world where “change” is inevitable? (Li Minqi 1)

Following this line of thought, the present moment, although characterized by an impending ecological disaster brought about by the unyielding demand of capitalist production for energy (cf. Li Minqi 2008: 17–20, 139–173), might still be understood in terms of openness and possibility—but with no guarantees that the transition will result in the arrival of a truly socialist alternative.

If the outcome of the integration of China into global capitalism is unclear, the particular form it takes is more readily observable. The ongoing process of “modernization” is based on commodity production and the rapid and expansive development of productive forces, of which technological advancement is perhaps the most conspicuous sign. At the same time, this process of dramatic social transformation is justified in terms of socialist development. Despite the fact that this may be seen as a turn towards capitalism, or a counter-revolutionary “reversal of the reversal” (Dai 2018: 144), it remains a fact that the current “rise of China”, understood in the sense outlined above, goes hand in hand with the process of ideological legitimization on socialist grounds and remains inseparable from a socialist language and conceptual universe. This uneasy combination has been the mark of Chinese development at least since Deng Xiaoping, whose reformist turn is commonly considered to have established its current shape. For some, such as Kang Liu, this results in an outright contradiction: “Deng Xiaoping theory or ‘socialism with Chinese characteristics’ is a discourse that legitimates a project of modernity fundamentally at odds with its revolutionary legacy, from which Deng theory derives ideological and political legitimization” (Liu 2024: 121).

For the purpose of this essay, this contradiction might be grasped in terms proposed by the Warwick Research Collective, that is, as an instance of the “socio-historical logic of combination”, one of the “multiple forms of appearance of unevenness” characterizing the experience of modernity on the (semi-)periphery of the capitalist world-system (Warwick Research Collective 2015: 12). In cases such as the Chinese one, the post-socialist process of modernization, driven by the accumulation of capital, encounters and incorporates existing, residual elements of a previous modernizing project, the socialist one (as well as a host of other social and cultural forms and tendencies beyond the scope of this article). Here we should remember that in any local post-socialist situation, the older socialist language—say, of the reformists within party bureaucracy—can be remade or

recoded in line with all sorts of ends, including quite non-socialist ones, as when "the goals of socialism become relegated to an increasingly vague and indefinite future", and become "ritualized ideological slogans invoked to spur production and to provide a spurious political legitimacy", as one commentator puts it (Meisner 1982: 215). Conversely, the continuing presence of the socialist legacy, be it in material or ideological forms, may serve "to contest or negotiate the state's corrupt or inequalitarian marketization procedures" (Wang Hui qtd. in Arrighi 368). This situation, characterized precisely by the logic of combination and hybridity, leads to significant discursive complexities and ideological palimpsests, which include the option of entirely bypassing the language of socialism while not necessarily abandoning its ideals.

There are certainly many cultural particularities to the Chinese variant of the post-socialist condition, which has been described precisely in terms of "a bewildering overlap of modes of production, social systems, and symbolic orders, all of which lay claim to a fledgling world of life" (Zhang 2008: 10). Out of the "phenomenological richness of Chinese post-socialism" (Zhang 1999: 104), we will focus on the one aspect relevant for the present discussion: the ambiguous survival of a socialist or Marxian imaginary, one simultaneously bound to the productivist ideology of capital-based development and—at least speculatively—open to the possibility of overcoming capitalism as a mode of production.

176

UTOPIANISM: DEVELOPMENT AND BEYOND

Despite the often spectacularly futuristic imagery pervading Liu Cixin's stories, there is something (for lack of a better word) untimely about them. The reference here is not to those aspects of his work that appear to come from a time before (or apart from) political correctness, nor to his indifference to the ideology of individualism, both of which point to the glaring absence of a liberal imagination in his work. Rather, what is at issue is Liu's insistent focus on humanity as the collective protagonist of history, a history at once national and cosmic, his unwavering belief in science, and his fascination with the possibilities of evolution and progress—all of which seem somehow out of place (too traditionally modernist, perhaps) in a cynical postmodern age. To a contemporary Western reader, not necessarily familiar with the Chinese variant of utopianism as articulated in the *datong* tradition (Hua 2009: 17–21, Peyton 2021: 123), there is something intriguing in Liu's dedication to radically universalist ideals, or to something akin to

an unreformed, although certainly qualified version of Enlightenment rationality. It should be added that such futuristic imaginary is articulated in Liu's fiction in a multiplicity of plot driven narratives, which appear as the formal expression of the logic of incessant evolution (progress) and dramatic transformation. Indeed, a narratological reading of Liu's stories would show that everything in his writing seems to be in the function of the unfolding of the plot: perpetual action, a forward movement that does not stop, or stops very little for description or introspection, as if the social logic of development shaped the narrative form itself. The only interruptions that appear in such steady narrative flows are the adjective-laden descriptions of cosmic settings, whose sublimity seems to signal the presence of a utopian excess both within and beyond the linear movement of the story.

The issue of utopian excess in Liu's fiction will be returned to anon. For now, let us proceed with the following general proposition: These distinctive features of Liu's work might be said to be rooted in two grand narratives underpinning his fictional universe. One (provisionally termed emancipatory) is the narrative of humanity's struggle with the laws of nature, or of the expansion of knowledge with the aim of transforming nature and, ultimately, humanity's destiny. It is worth noting that the science of Liu's hard SF is above all physics, a science that, no matter how speculative in some of its theories, deals with the material determination of being. Often focused on fundamental physics and the realm of subatomic particles, Liu's narratives revolve around more or less successful attempts to intervene in the material structure of reality (e.g. by manipulating space and time), and thus to transcend determination itself (but, equally importantly, only to encounter it again in another instance). In other words, these narratives represent reflections on the problem of determination and the possibility of overcoming it. This means that this version of the modernist "master narrative of progress" (McGrath 2008: 204) implies the possibility of a movement from the "realm of necessity" to the "realm of freedom" (Marx 1991: 958–959). For Liu, however, this emancipatory movement is contingent on the development of the productive powers of society. That is, the emancipatory strain of Liu's fiction is inseparable from another grand narrative (provisionally characterized as developmental or productivist): the narrative of a virtually limitless development of the forces of production, i.e. technology, which for Liu stands as the single means for pushing the limits of the possible. (Liu has stated that he believes that "technology can solve every problem" [Peyton 2012: 52]).¹

¹ The diachronic dimension of the entanglement of these grand narratives in Liu's work goes beyond the scope of this paper. Such undertaking, which would need to include a discussion of

As Mingwei Song notes, developmental thinking in Chinese culture has its roots in the late period of the Qing dynasty (Song 2013: 91–92). But its insistent presence and well-nigh techno-fetishistic form in Liu Cixin's work at the turn of the twenty-first century seems more obviously related to the domination of the ideology of development, or developmentalism, implicit in the current rise of China. If Chinese developmentalism is wed to "the GDP fetish, coupled with a 'get-rich' mentality, an unbridled pursuit of individual desires, and material wealth" as Kang Liu puts it (2012: 116), it also draws its legitimation from the productivist strain of Marxism as evidenced in the thought of Deng Xiaoping, arguably the first Chinese post-socialist leader and "the greatest accelerationist of the socialist camp" (Hui 2016: 291–292). Deng's proclamations, such as that "[t]he development of the productive forces ... is the most fundamental revolution from the viewpoint of historical development", show a peculiar affinity with Liu's science-fictional imagination.

178

This is not to say that Liu is unaware of the problems of developmentalism, or incapable of taking a critical stance towards the implications of the productivist imperative. In the developmental-emancipatory pursuit that shapes Liu's stories, costs are always explicitly involved, sometimes purely financial (such as the often discussed funding for scientific research) but always, and more centrally, human costs. As Liu's fiction quite unsobly insists, development of the means of production rests on the expenditure of human labor, a point which in his stories takes the form of often massive sacrifice of human (as well as non-human) life. In that sense, for Liu, unlike for Marx, "the shortening of the working-day" (Marx 1991: 959) is not at all the prerequisite for achieving "the realm of freedom"; rather, the utopian horizon seems to present humanity with the imperative of an interminable dedication to work. This is a point of major poetic and political difference between Liu Cixin and Han Song: starting from the insight about the critical role of living labor in the process of China's modernization, the latter takes the ideologies of development and production as much more explicit targets of criticism and satire, most notably in his novella "My Country Does Not Dream" (Han Song 2020).

Consequently, and interestingly, for Liu Cixin the need for living labor persists even in situations of fantastically advanced technological development. For instance, in the first part of the *Three Body* trilogy, the technologically superdeveloped Trisolaran civilization still relies on the work of the so-called

Liu's socialist literary influences (namely Soviet and Chinese SF), would surely shed additional light on the vicissitudes of China's development in its cultural articulations.

"listeners" in order to find signs of intelligent life in the universe. One of these workers, exhausted by his work and worried about the possible loss of his job, complains that on Trisolaris "[e]verything is devoted to survival [...] Someone who can no longer work is put to death", since "Trisolaris did not keep the idle around" (Liu 2014). Whereas the quoted lines play a relatively minor role in the massive narrative web of the trilogy, the same problem appears in more central ways in Liu's other works.

Supernova Era, his first published novel (2004), is a case in point. The novel, which Liu began writing in the aftermath of the 1989 Tienanmen protests, elaborates on a familiar premise: what would happen if children ruled the world? After an apocalyptic event that spares only those under the age of 13, children need to survive without the help of adults, who have nevertheless managed to prepare, to a certain extent, both the children and the world (more specifically China) for the transition into the unprecedented social experiment. After a period of shock followed by relative stability, troubles begin: the work required for the basic reproduction of the new society is too hard and tedious, so children decide simply to stop working. In a situation in which society can still rely on the resources accumulated before the apocalypse, this results in turning "the entire country [...] into a pleasure garden of juvenile overindulgence" (Liu 2019). The apparent arrival of utopia is commented upon in the following exchange between the country's leaders:

"All of a sudden we're in a state of primitive communism."

Xiaomeng said, "So we're in the future, ahead of schedule?"

Specs shook his head. "This is just a temporary illusion, without a corresponding productive foundation". (Liu 2019)

Indeed, this utopia-as-pure-fancy, as opposed to the evoked utopia-with-a-material-base, does not last. The issue is eventually resolved, or so it seems, after the country's leaders decide to organize the new society around play instead of work (in a move reminiscent of Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, where the language of the utopian society of Anarres knows only one word for both):

It's simple, really. The adults' society was an economic one. People labored to obtain economic compensation. The child society is a play society. People labor to receive play compensation. [...] For society as a whole, when the principles of play replace the principles of economics in determining the operation of society, it might produce tremendous innovation, releasing the human potential that was constrained under the former economic principles. (Liu 2019)

Nevertheless, substituting play for work does not provide a solution, as "tremendous innovation" turns into sheer destruction when children decide to organize something akin to Olympic war games on a global scale.

One thing to be noted at this point concerns Liu's interest in the problem of determination, which, in the first passage quoted above, resurfaces by way of the distinction between the fanciful and the scientific utopia. Importantly, the problem is here articulated in explicitly Marxist terms, that is, through what is essentially a reformulation of the base/superstructure metaphor. By stating that utopia cannot exist without an actual engagement with the very material demands of social reproduction, Liu echoes the famous remark by Engels that "the ultimately determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life" (Engels 1972: 294). What makes itself visible here, and elsewhere in Liu's fiction, is a Marxist or historical materialist undercurrent, appearing not as a sign of a conscious political position, but rather as a trace of a historical socialist imaginary. We might be reminded here of something that Fredric Jameson wrote in his essay on Andrey Platonov's *Chevengur*, namely that

180

people formed in a nonmarket non-consumer-consumptive society do not think like we do. Indeed, if we resist the temptation (now everywhere resurgent) to attribute such differences to the old stereotypes of nationalism and ethnic peculiarity [...] we may well even discover the rudiments and the nascent forms of a new form of socialist culture that is utterly unlike "socialist realism" and intimates some far future of human history the rest of us are not in a position to anticipate. (Jameson 1994: 74)

In the quoted passage from *Supernova Era*, diffuse Marxist concepts seep through Liu's fiction: forces of production, determination, base and superstructure seem to represent the fundamental categories Liu thinks and writes with. This is so both because of and in spite of the present-day pragmatic political uses of a Marxian discourse on the part of the Chinese party bureaucracy: the ideological work of legitimating development in socialist terms reproduces, and therefore keeps alive, a conceptual universe that simply does not function (or, for that matter, does not exist) in the same way in capitalist societies. This is not to argue that China is unambiguously on its way to realizing full communism, or that Liu Cixin subscribes to a revolutionary Marxist philosophy. Rather, it must be stressed that any socialist society and socialist culture (or socialist hegemony) cannot but produce socialist subjects. Certainly, such hegemony is never complete, and certainly not in a post-socialist moment marked precisely by the domination of the market imperative and a concomitant consumerist spirit. That is, there are

always challenges, contentions, ideological intrusions of various kinds. (It should be noted that there is a generational aspect to this development: people such as Liu Cixin, who underwent socialization before the post-socialist transformations are bound to have interiorized some fundamental socialist ideologemes, even if they oppose them.) Briefly, in a post-socialist situation, such imaginary survives, moving between dominant and residual positions.

The other important ideological element at work in *Supernova Era* speaks further to the complexity of the present moment, and illustrates once more the logic of combination characteristic of cultural forms that articulate the experience of modernity in the semi-periphery of the capitalist world-economy. Here we have in mind Liu's obvious suspicion towards what Suvin calls "plebeian democracy" (Suvin 2016). In *Supernova Era*, as in Liu's fiction more generally, "the people" are commonly represented through the figure of children (for example in his stories "Village Teacher" and "Wandering Earth"). While as a literary figure children carry clear connotations of some future transformation and possibility, in Liu's works they are also always a figure of recklessness and immaturity, and therefore require guidance by a knowledgeable authority. That is, the perceived or assumed excesses of "plebeian democracy" can only be controlled by a technocratic elite.

The same logic is at work in the passages on the Cultural Revolution in the *Three Body* trilogy. The depictions of "the madness years", as Liu calls the period of Cultural Revolution in the trilogy's first volume, show that the author's pronounced suspicion of the masses rests upon a historical referent which at the same time functions as a foundational event for the unfolding of the novel's epic plot. Specifically, Ye Wenjie's decision to contact the Trisolarans (which sets the plot in motion) is motivated by her conviction that humanity is beyond salvation, a conviction based on the traumatic experience of witnessing her father's death at the hands of the Red Guards. Reanimated by ecological concerns about the use of pesticides—described as "indistinguishable from the Cultural Revolution, and equally destructive to our world"—that conviction leads her to the conclusion that "[t]o achieve moral awakening required a force outside the human race" (Liu 2014). In other words, these pronouncements show how, as the collective protagonist of Liu's fiction, humanity itself requires guidance by (and subjection to) those possessing some kind of higher knowledge (in the case of Trisolaris an unmistakably technological one). Yet, as the open ending of the trilogy suggests, this power dynamic does not preclude the potentially emancipatory movement of humanity as the subject of a cosmic history.

The preceding discussion indicates that Liu's fiction moves, ambivalently and simultaneously, between a "utopian content" and an "ideological content"

(Jameson 1994: 75), without providing the readers with any clear resolution to this apparent contradiction. Still, this ambivalence—which may be understood as grounded in the ambivalent status of the Marxian imaginary in contemporary China alluded to above—remains marked by a semantic excess, which, while starting from the determinations of material being, opens an imaginative space for moving beyond them.

Liu's short story "Sun of China", first published in 2002, offers what is perhaps the most explicit expression of this dynamic. The story follows the life of a rural migrant worker who, thanks to a series of accidents and one technological invention (a giant solar mirror used for climate control), ends up working as an astronaut onboard an interstellar spaceship heading into cosmic depths, "with no possibility of return", in order to "glimpse something humanity has never seen before" (Liu 2017). The story includes a somewhat sentimental SF social commentary, a "Chinese Dream" narrative of upward social mobility of sorts, and consists of the following chapters:

- Prologue
- Life goal #1: Drink some water that is not bitter, make some money.
- Life goal #2: Go to a city with more lights and sweeter water, make more money.
- Life goal #3: Go to a bigger city, see more of the world, make even more money.
- Life goal #4: Become a Beijinger.
- Life goal #5: Fly to space, clean the China Sun.
- Mirror Farmers
- Life goal #6: Fly to the stars, draw humanity's gaze back to the depths of the cosmos. (Liu 2017)

This outline is meant to illustrate how what we have termed the narrative of emancipation ("fly to the stars") and the narrative of (economic) development ("make money") are interwoven and in fact inseparable throughout the plot. This fact is only reinforced in a key moment in the story, when we find out that the whole nationally-themed solar mirror project (the titular "Sun of China") is "run as a quasi-commercial operation" (Liu 2017). What a character terms "the efficiency of the economic principle" is obviously indispensable for the movement of the story's plot beyond the boundaries of the known. In fact, the migrant worker's destiny in deep space is determined by the need of the China Sun project to cut labor costs: he gets to "glimpse something humanity has never seen before" only because, as labor power, he is cheaper than a qualified astronaut. So, it would appear that in this realistic take on the costs of development, not only new technology, but even more crucially, commodified living labor functions as

an essential part of the material infrastructure of humanity's (and China's) leap into the unknown. Now, it is important to add that this movement beyond the familiar reality takes place after the solar mirror has fulfilled its earthly function of turning what was "once-barren" into "fertile land" and consequently transforming "once-backbreaking" lives into "satisfying" existence. The fact that "survival", as the Trisolaran listener puts it, or the currently available idea of "good life" is *not* enough, and does not represent the end goal of the narrative's unfolding, points precisely to the presence of that utopian excess that we find to be central to Liu's work. But for this excess to appear, capital-based development, which involves exhaustive expenditures of living labor, must first take place.

CONCLUSION

While the utopian element in Liu's fiction is not reducible to the traces of a Marxian imaginary in his texts, it is also not imaginable without them. We could argue that the vast multiplicity of futures in Liu's post-socialist SF might be said to function as a series of stand-ins for the original post-socialist future imagined by historical socialisms, namely communism. But at the same time, the utopian opening to future possibilities is impossible to understand without taking into account the developmental drive suffusing Liu's work. As argued above, the ambivalences inherent in Liu's utopianism—in short, the suspended question: development for what?—have to do with the ambiguities and contradictions of China's own capital-based model of socialist development at the moment of its integration into global capitalism.

Liu Cixin's popularity, particularly in the post-utopian West, may then be explained by his ability to at once incorporate and point beyond the empirical material of the concrete historical situation in which he writes. Whereas the figures of dramatic, often catastrophic social transformation appear with no guarantees that they will result in anything more concrete than strange new beginnings, they do remain interpolated into narratives in which humanity appears as the agent of a collective project in an open-ended movement of history (with all the qualifications previously mentioned). It is above all this intentional directionality, we would like to argue, underlined by the purposeful movement of the human collective, that represents the distinctive mark of and the point of fascination with Liu Cixin's science fiction. From this point, we may proceed to some concluding remarks.

In her *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, Susan Buck-Morss argues that “mass utopia was the dream of the twentieth century”, “the driving ideological force of industrial modernization in both its capitalist and socialist forms” (Buck-Morss 2000: ix). It is tempting to expand on Buck-Morss’s basic argument, and state that, since the restructuring of capitalist and socialist economies in the West and the concomitant eastward relocation of “industrial modernization” through offshoring, conditions have been created for the potential appearance of mass utopia elsewhere, wherever “industrially produced objects and built environments” might be invested “with collective, political desire” (Buck-Morss 2000: ix). If we accept this statement as a valid one, then the difference between China and the West—the difference that creates the space for the enthusiastic Western reception of Liu Cixin with which we began—might be understood in terms of the distinction between growth and development, as it was formulated by Robert Flammang: “economic growth is a process of simple increase, implying more of the same, while economic development is a process of structural change, implying something different if not something more” (Flammang 1979: 50). In other words, in the sense in which the distinction between growth and development is understood here, development is future oriented, and implies the possibility of “something different” coming into being, whereas growth basically implies a movement that reproduces the status quo. While it is undeniable that Chinese social development depends on growth (GDP growth and economic growth), it is important to point out its distinctive feature in relation to, say, economic growth of the United States, not in a quantitative, but in a qualitative sense. It is probably not necessary to elaborate at length that the social reality of the capitalist West is subjected to the imperative of (now diminishing) economic growth—a brief look at daily news about the economy would suffice. But this growth is fundamentally aimless, in the sense that capitalist societies have abandoned the need to justify economic growth in any but the most self-reflexive manner: it is about growth for growth’s sake, without any explicit relation to some collective social purpose outside of the movement of capital (Buck-Morss notes that “the overcoming of scarcity for all” used to represent such a goal under conditions of industrial modernization [2000: ix]). On the other hand, Chinese growth is tied up with the long-term developmental goals and plans for the society as a whole.

While such framing might help historicize the work of Liu Cixin, it does not quite grasp the utopian excesses and ambiguities discussed above. Is Liu’s utopianism merely a cover for the development of productive forces in line with the logic of capital accumulation? Or is such development an unavoidable means for the realization of utopian desire, after which it may be replaced by some more

perfect and advanced, unknown entity? Is the problem of determination (and the possibility of overcoming it), which pervades Liu's narratives, simply a way of dealing with obstacles to the further development of productive forces? Or is it an attempt to deal with the problem of transcending "the realm of necessity" and moving beyond history itself, into some unimaginable, and therefore constantly re-imagined, alternative social condition?

Perhaps the ability of Liu's fiction to make such questions possible, or even necessary, might be the reason why his work manages to articulate a genuinely popular utopianism. This popular utopianism, too, could be appraised: if developmentalism is indeed at its root, then Liu's popularity in the West has to do primarily with the absence of development itself, and with a nostalgia for a historical movement towards some more or less defined collective goal. Instead, what characterizes the general social condition in the West is the logic of growth, which has no teleology, no end cause, but is based on an expansive and perpetual reproduction of the same. This stagnant imaginary is then the fertile soil on which the post-socialist utopianism of Liu Cixin can productively fall.²

WORKS CITED

- Arrighi, Giovanni. 2007. *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the Twenty-First Century*. London: Verso.
- Buchanan, Ian. 2007. *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism*. Durham & New York: Duke UP.
- Buck-Morss, Susan. 2000. *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge, MA & London: MIT Press.
- Castoriadis, Cornelius. 2007. *Figures of the Thinkable*. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- Dai, Jinhua. 2018. *After the Post-Cold War: The Future of Chinese History*. Durham and London: Duke UP.
- Deng, Xiaoping. "To Build Socialism We Must First Develop the Productive Forces". *Marxists Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/deng-xiaoping/1980/101.htm>. Accessed: 16 October 2025.
- Engels, Friedrich. 1972. "Engels to J. Bloch In Königsberg". In: Marx, Engels, Lenin, *On Historical Materialism: A Collection*. Moscow: Progress Publishers: 294–296.

² This article is part of the institutional research project "Theory of value and the production of culture" ("Teorija vrijednosti i proizvodnja kulture", TVPK 581-990-1006) of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU.

- Flammang, Robert A. 1979. “Economic Growth and Economic Development: Counterparts or Competitors?”. In: *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 28, 1: 47–61, <https://doi.org/10.1086/451152>
- Gaffric, Gwennaël and Will Peyton. 2019. “Liu Cixin’s *Three-Body Trilogy* and the Status of Science Fiction in Contemporary China”. In: *Science Fiction Studies* 46, 1: 21–38, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sfs.2019.0009>
- Han, Song. 2013. “Chinese Science Fiction: A Response to Modernization”. In: *Science Fiction Studies* 40, 1: 15–21, <https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.40.1.0015>
- Han, Song. 2020. “My Country Does Not Dream”. In: *Exploring Dark Short Fiction #5: A Primer to Han Song*. Ed. Eric J. Guignard. Los Angeles: Dark Moon Books. Epub.
- Hartog, François. 2015. *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hua, Shiping. 2009. *Chinese Utopianism: A comparative study of reformist thought with Japan and Russia, 1898–1997*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hui, Yuk. 2016. *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotronics*. Falmouth: Urbanomic.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1986. “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”. In: *Social Text* 15: 65–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466493>
- Jameson, Fredric. 1991. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London & New York: Verso.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1994. *The Seeds of Time*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jameson, Fredric. 2005. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London & New York: Verso.
- Karsavina, Sasha. 2024. “The Dark Shadow of the Chinese Dream”. In: *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 26 September 2024, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-dark-shadow-of-the-chinese-dream/> Accessed 1 September 2025.
- Li, Guangyi and Nathaniel Isaacson. 2019. “China Turns Outward: On the Literary Significance of Liu Cixin’s Science Fiction”. In: *Science Fiction Studies* 46, 1: 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sfs.2019.0010>
- Li, Minqi. 2008. *The Rise of China and the Demise of the Capitalist World-Economy*. London: Pluto Press.
- Liu, Cixin. 2014. *The Three-Body Problem*. New York: Tor Books. Epub.
- Liu, Cixin. 2017. “Sun of China.” In: *The Wandering Earth*. New York: Tor Books. Epub.
- Liu, Cixin. 2019. *The Supernova Era*. London: Head of Zeus. Epub.
- Liu, Kang. 2012. “‘Dinner Party of Discourse Owners’: China’s Intellectual Scene Today”. *Minnesota Review* 79: 113–136, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00265667-1708295>
- Liu, Kang. 2024. “Chinese Exceptionalism: Linguistic Construction of a Superpower”. In: *The Routledge Handbook of Chinese Language and Culture*. Ed. Liwei Jiao. New York: Routledge: 113–125.
- Marx, Karl. 1991. *Capital, Volume III*. London: Penguin.
- McGrath, Jason. 2008. *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- Meisner, Maurice. 1982. *Marxism, Maoism, and Utopianism: Eight Essays*. University of Wisconsin Press.

- Peyton, Will. 2021. *Chinese and Western Literary Influence in Liu Cixin's Three Body Trilogy*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Song, Mingwei. 2013. “Variations on Utopia in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction”. In: *Science Fiction Studies* 40, 1: 86–102, <https://doi.org/10.5621/sciefictstud.40.1.0086>
- Song, Mingwei. 2018. “Liu Cixin's Three-Body Trilogy: Between the Sublime Cosmos and the Micro Era”. In: *Lingua Cosmica: Science Fiction from around the World*. Ed. Dale Knickerbocker. Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press.
- Song, Mingwei. 2023. *Fear of Seeing: A Poetics of Chinese Science Fiction*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Suvin, Darko. 2016. “Communism Can Only Be Radical Plebeian Democracy: Remarks on the Experience of S.F.R. Yugoslavia and on Civil Society”. In: *International Critical Thought* 6, 2: 165–189, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21598282.2016.1172695>
- Thieret, Adrian. 2015. “Society and Utopia in Liu Cixin”. In: *China Perspectives* 2015/1, <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinaperspectives.6643>
- Warwick Research Collective. 2015. *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. (2015)
- Zhang, Xudong. 1999. “Postmodernism and Post-Socialist Society: Cultural Politics in China After the ‘New Era’”. In: *New Left Review* 1/237: 77–105, <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.64590/155>
- Zhang, Xudong. 2008. *Postsocialism and Cultural Politics: China in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

S a ž e t a k

O POSTSOCIJALISTIČKOM UTOPIZMU LIU CIXINA

U suvremenoj se kulturi, obilježenoj globalnom hegemonijom SAD-a, od 1980-ih počela detektirati određena kriza historijske ili utopijske svijesti. Od toga trenutka pojmovi poput “kapitalističkoga realizma”, “prezentizma” ili “neposrednosti” (*immediacy*) pojavili su se u kulturnim dijagnozama koje registriraju dramatičnu promjenu u našem poimanju i iskustvu vremena. Unatoč različitim naglascima, tim je dijagnozama zajedničko da ističu slabljenje budućnosne orijentacije, odnosno nestanak utopijske imaginacije u suvremenim kulturnim praksama. U ovom radu takvu situaciju razumijemo kao simptom globalnoga postsocijalističkoga stanja. U radu nudimo čitanje odabranih tekstova kineskoga pisca znanstvene fantastike Liu Cixina, čiji se opus doima kao utopijska iznimka u kontekstu globalnoga postsocijalizma i u trenutku integracije Kine u kapitalistički svjetski sistem.

Ključne riječi: Liu Cixin, postsocijalizam, utopija, znanstvena fantastika