Unveiling the Invisible

A Review of *Fear of Seeing: A Poetics of Chinese Science Fiction* by Song Mingwei

LIN Hsin-Hui

AS an engaging contributor to modern Chinese literature, both in creative and academic writing, Song Mingwei has long anticipated the immense potential of contemporary Chinese science fiction (SF). Song has dedicated himself to SF from China and beyond; he has authored a book in Chinese, *New Wave in Chinese Science Fiction: History, Poetics, Text*（《中國科幻新浪潮：歷史・詩學・文本》）, and has edited and co-edited several anthologies introducing Chinese SF into the West. His exploration of SF over a decade is evident in his most recently published monograph, *Fear of Seeing: A Poetics of Chinese Science Fiction.* Speaking timely to the recent surge of Chinese SF, *Fear of Seeing* unveils aspects often overlooked beneath this flourishing trend. The book offers comprehensive and interdisciplinary research that extends beyond Chinese SF, encompassing the cultural, social, and scientific underpinnings. In this book, Song traces the prehistory of SF and its development in both the West and China. He delineates the rise of Chinese SF since the beginning of the twenty-first century, terming it the "Chinese new wave." Rising from the marginalized position within China's literary field, traditionally

§ **LIN Hsin-Hui** is a Ph.D. Candidate at the Institute of Taiwanese Literature, National Chengchi University.

dominated by mimetic realism, the Chinese new wave illuminates the invisible reality hidden beneath China's rapid growth and expansion of economy and technology. By interweaving the history and philosophy of quantum physics with its core idea of how Chinese SF illuminates the invisible in reality, *Fear of Seeing* lays the groundwork for future studies seeking to delineate the comparative framework for SF within the Sinophone literary world or beyond.

Fear of Seeing contains nine main chapters, accompanied by four interludes titled prologue, excursus I, excursus II, and epilogue. These four shorter chapters introduce the trajectory of SF's introduction to China and its development across different historical periods. The nine main chapters begin with the rise of the Chinese new wave (chapter one), a reconsideration of SF as a method (chapter two), and an exploration of how this method leads to a reevaluation of texts that have long been considered mimetic realism (chapter three). After establishing the research method, the book proceeds to investigate the writers of the Chinese new wave and their works, including Liu Cixin（劉慈欣）in chapter four, Hang Song（韓松）in chapter five, and the mutual comparison among Liu, Hang, and Wang Jinkang（王晉康）in chapter six. In the last three chapters, the narrative broadens its scope by comparing SF from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (chapter seven), reaching the realm of world literature (chapter eight), and offering a comprehensive review of the younger generations of the Chinese new wave (chapter nine).

Song's main argument, encapsulated in the title of this book, "Fear of Seeing," draws inspiration from the eponymous story by Hang Song. The story tells of a baby born with ten eyes on its forehead, who is believed to perceive the world's truth that turned out to be "some contiguous gray foggy mass" as mediated and imaged by medical technology. This "true" image of this world exposes the illusionary nature of what we perceive as real. Drawing on the metaphors of this story, Song contends that the Chinese new wave delves into the profound truth of contemporary China's reality. It achieves this by representing what is epistemologically and politically invisible while engaging in self-reflexive interrogation of truth production through political and technological apparatuses.

In chapter one, Song posits that the rise of Chinese sci-fi is intricately linked to the technological and economic ascents of China since the millennium. While dominant discourses shape China's future under the banner of the "Chinese dream," SF, as speculative literature, delves into the invisible anxieties and uncertainties accompanying rapid societal transformations. Song characterizes the rising trend of Chinese SF as a "new wave"（新浪潮）, drawing parallels to the paradigm shift in Anglo-American SF during the 1960s and 1970s. In the context of Anglo-American SF, the new wave challenges the technological optimism of its precedent generations, the "Golden Age," and turns to literary and experimental forms. Unlike its Western counterpart, however, the Chinese new wave challenges not only conventional literary approaches but also destabilizes the hierarchical structures in literary production. Song thus affirms that the unique strength of Chinese SF lies in its potential to illuminate the invisible, which could fundamentally restructure epistemological frameworks and subvert established notions of truth and knowledge validity.

For Song, SF transcends from merely a rising genre in the Chinese literary field and becomes a "method" for unraveling the intrinsic entanglement of politics, technology, and knowledge. Beyond investigating SF in the Chinese literary milieu, therefore, *Fear of Seeing* also aims to reconceptualize the genre as a method for questioning the world represented by realism and inspiring us to explore myriad other worlds. In chapter two, Song points out that in the Chinese literary field, where realism has long been the dominant discourse, SF has long been marginalized as a variant of critical realism. However, Song differentiates SF from realism as a different mode of representation. For Song, realism relies on the belief in a factual reality, and literature serves to evoke that reality through figuration and metaphors. In contrast, SF does not presume an a priori reality. It depicts counterintuitive truth with semantic literalness. Scientific discourses in SF, thus, do not serve as a reflection or prediction of real-world scientific development but function as a scientifically and semantically logical way of storytelling. By describing phenomena with literalness instead of metaphors, SF estranges the

reader while revealing truths often muted in metaphorical language. In short, SF is precisely a method that allows us to see the truth, much like scientific apparatuses enable us to understand quantum or cosmic phenomena.

Considering SF as a method rather than merely a genre paves the way for a distinctive reinterpretation of literary canons, such as works by Lu Xun（魯迅）. In chapter three, Song poses the question: "Can we read 'A Madman's Diary' as science fiction?" This question serves not so much as an argument that Lu Xun's "A Madman's Diary"（〈狂人日記〉）should be included in the SF genre, but rather as a thought experiment that evokes uncertainties within the literary field, akin to how Heisenberg's uncertainty principle has impacted the physical world. Song affirms that Lu Xun's story adheres to the principle of counterintuitive literalness, which is at the core of SF as a method. It creates a sense of estrangement by not treating cannibalism as a metaphor but as its literal meaning. In this way, the madman discovers the terrifying truth of the world. "A Madman's Diary," with its estranging vernacular language and semantic literalness, leaves a lasting legacy in terms of the invisible poetics and subverting literary experiments to which the Chinese new wave is greatly indebted.

Reconceptualizing SF as a method allows Song to depart from the ongoing debate around what qualifies as SF and to root Chinese SF in the literary legacy since Lu Xun. Subsequently, *Fear of Seeing* unfolds the narratives by investigating how SF is employed as a method by writers and works of the Chinese new wave. In chapter four, Song delves into the sublime universe crafted by Liu Cixin. As one of the early contributors to the Chinese new wave, Liu diverges from the implicit scientific optimism prevalent in the tradition of Chinese hard SF. The world Liu creates is more speculative than experiential, aligning with the spirits of new hard sciences introduced to China in the 1980s. These sciences believe in the world's unknowability and invisibility. Liu employs SF as a method when narrating speculative changes to cosmic physical rules with scientific literalness, thereby bringing the invisible magnitude and sublimity of the universe into the visible realm.

In its exploration of individual authors and works in each chapter, *Fear of Seeing* avoids isolating case studies from each other and instead builds organic correlations among them. After the chapter about Liu Cixin's works, in chapter five, Song discusses SF by Hang Song. Here, Song offers a succinct comparison between Liu's and Hang's approaches to narrating the invisible. For Song, Liu approaches the invisible by describing the scientific details of the hyperdimensional universe, whereas Hang reaches the chthonic abyss through "anatomical aesthetics," which describes abysmal details by figuratively referring to body parts or internal organs. In chapter six, following the two previous chapters, the journey turns to the Chinese new wave's variations of utopia/dystopia by mutually comparing the works of Hang Song, Liu Cixin, and Wang Jinkang. These works revolve around the Panglossian idea and practices of technological and economic surges in China.

In chapter seven, the analysis of the variations of utopia/dystopia is succeeded by an interrogation of the idea of "Sinotopia." Here, Song asserts that the Chinese new wave addresses the invisible hidden under the dominant discourse of "Sinotopia." This discourse is manufactured by the ideological state apparatuses and invested in a one-state utopia. Furthermore, Song interprets the SF by authors in other areas of the Sinophone literary world as an elaboration of Foucault's heterotopia. Writers such as Dung Kai-Cheung（董啟章）from Hong Kong and Lo Yichun（駱以軍）from Taiwan employ SF as a method to create a hetero-chronotope that collapses the past and future into storytelling. Together, the alternative Sinotopia by the Chinese new wave and the heterotopia by authors in Hong Kong and Taiwan not only challenge the mainstream discourse about "a Chinese dream" but also create multiple futures unfolding in what Song considers a "neo-Baroque" way.

Starting from "Worlding the Genre" (the subtitle of chapter two), *Fear of Seeing* concludes its journey by bridging the Chinese new wave and its adjacent writers to world literature. In chapters eight and nine, Song explores works by the younger generation of the Chinese new wave and contemporary writers from Hong

Kong and Taiwan other than Dung Kai-Cheung and Lo Yichun. Observing their posthuman and postcolonial attributes, Song envisions the future of Chinese SF as a Möbius continuum. This continuum does not direct the future toward a progressive technological end; instead, it creates a ceaseless flow of time-space structure that subverts the stereotyped otherness (in terms of race and gender) inherent in the Western-centric SF while maintaining its self-reflexiveness on the production of knowledge and power.

Delving into both SF as a genre and SF as a method, *Fear of Seeing* demonstrates rigorous research intersecting history, science, and literature. By tracing the trajectory of the Chinese new wave and its profound impact on the literary landscape, Song not only sheds light on the genre's historical roots but also explores its transformative potential as a method for unraveling complex intersections of politics, technology, and knowledge. As the monograph seamlessly weaves together the threads of individual author analyses, utopian explorations, and a broader engagement with world literature, it paints a vivid picture of a dynamic and evolving field. *Fear of Seeing* not only enriches our comprehension of Chinese science fiction but also invites readers to reflect on the genre's capacity to illuminate the unseen and challenge established literary paradigms. With its compelling insights and expansive scope, *Fear of Seeing* leads the way for those eager to delve into the rich tapestry of speculative literature from China and beyond.