

Steampunk, Zombie Apocalypse, and Homoerotic Romance: Rewriting Revolution Plus Love in Contemporary China

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Introduction

What if the industrial revolution had first taken place in late imperial China, which had taken the lead in technological innovations but suffered a severe shortage of fossil fuels and clashed with the equally energy-hungry West? What if, fast forward to 2012, global warming had released a fatal virus and unleashed a zombie pandemic threatening to terminate the human civilization and transform the entire planet? These are some of speculative scenarios enacted in contemporary Chinese popular novels. To one's surprise, these novels are not associated with the relatively more established field of science fiction, but consumed and produced as *danmei*, that is, homoerotic romance featuring love affairs of male characters primarily but not exclusively for the entertainment of young women.¹

During a devastating Sino-European war reminiscent of China's encounter with European colonial powers in the nineteenth century, it is thanks to the leadership of two homosexual lovers, one a liberal-minded prince pushing forward social, economic, and political reforms, the other a military leader wearing an Iron Man style super armor to fight against invaders, that the fictional Chinese empire escaped the downfall of the Qing dynasty. It triumphed over the West to assert global hegemony. Likewise, in the wake of a zombie outbreak, it is again a pair of homosexual lovers, a recently discharged young soldier and a master's student in mechanical

¹ For scholarship on Chinese *danmei* fiction, see Feng, Jin. *Romancing the Internet: Producing and Consuming Chinese Web Romance*. Brill, 2013. Feng, Jin. "'Addicted to Beauty': Consuming and Producing Web-Based Chinese 'Danmei' Fiction at Jinjiang." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2009, pp. 1–41. Tian, Xiaofei. "Slashing Three Kingdoms: A Case Study in Fan Production on the Chinese Web." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2015, pp. 224–277. Zheng Xiqing, "Danmei" in Shao Yanjun ed., *Pobishu: Wangluo wenhua guanjianci*. Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2018, 173–181.

engineering, who fought for their own survival, the livelihoods of the Chinese nation, and the redemption of our planet. What dawned after the zombie apocalypse was a new world order valuing ecological sustainability rather than capitalist expansion.

The two stories summarized above, Priest's steampunk *Shapolang* (*Stars of Chaos*, 2015. Hereafter *SoC*) and Feitian Yexiang's zombie apocalypse *Erlingyisan/Mori shuguang* (*Twenty Thirteen*, or *Dawn of the World*, 2011. Hereafter *DoW*), are both *danmei* novels serialized at Jinjiang, an online literary portal specializing in romance, both heterosexual and homosexual.² Unlike *danmei* fiction of the earlier years, both novels deprive their protagonists the luxury of indulging in romantic love. Instead, the homosexual lovers must fight side by side for national salvation. The paradigm of revolution plus love that waxed and waned in the twentieth century has reemerged.

Love, the pursuit of sexual pleasure and personal happiness, stands for the quest for individual autonomy and other Enlightenment ideals. Revolution, collective striving for freedom, equality, and social progress, is couched in terms of national salvation, given China's history as a semi-colony. Among scholars of modern Chinese literature, Liu Jianmei has studied how these two tropes of modernity, love of the individual and revolution for the collective, interacted with and constitute each other in different historical periods.³ She believed that the postsocialist generation had lost interest in this old formula. However, the old themes of romantic individualism and revolutionary collectivism do have new iterations in the twenty-first century.

² *SoC*, 600k words in length, was serialized at Jinjiang from Jan. 23 to June 8, 2015. <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=2322969>; *DoW*, 400k, serialized from Aug. 3 to Oct. 23, 2011. <http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=1205245>. English translation of *DoW* produced by fans is available at <http://bltranslation.blogspot.com/2018/03/2013-by-feitian-yexiang.html>. For the history and current status of Jinjiang, see <http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/n1/2018/0727/c404024-30174366.html>

³ Liu, Jianmei. *Revolution Plus Love: Literary History, Women's Bodies, and Thematic Repetition in Twentieth-Century Chinese Fiction*. University of Hawaii Press, 2003. For discussion of the individual and the collective in modern Chinese literature, see Denton, Kirk A. *The Problematic of Self in Modern Chinese Literature: Hu Feng and Lu Ling*. Stanford University Press, 1998.

In what follows, through reading Priest's *SoC* and Feitian Yexiang's *DoW*, I explain the unexpected reconvergence of the collective and the individual and explore the significance of the new revolution plus love narratives. The first section will survey the struggle of *danmei* authors under the dual pressure of the moral censorship of the state and the monetary extraction of media capital. To survive and thrive, they have ventured outside the comfort zone of *danmei* and hybridize it with other popular genres, including those newly imported into China, such as steampunk and zombie apocalypse. When *danmei* meets science fiction in contemporary China, homosexual love deemed "illegitimate" by the government seeks to hide behind stories of collective striving. Moreover, the *danmei* community consisting of both writers and readers, in discussing topics beyond love, especially imagined crises extrapolated from realities, pursue social engagement and political debates.

The second and third sections will introduce the two sf genres and study their Chinese inflections in *SoC* and *DoW* respectively. It is to be highlighted at the outset that the new revolution plus love stories not only continue the legacy of modern Chinese literature but also participate in global popular culture. Steampunk and zombie apocalypse may seem worlds apart, but they both endeavor to examine and refigure the social order connecting the individual and the collective. They are also planetary fictions engaging with global issues such as energy crisis and environmental devastation from a Chinese perspective.

The last two sections will read the two novels as well as their reader discussion columns against the background of China's rise on the global stage in early twenty-first century and the rise of the individual in contemporary China. These *danmei*-sf crossovers reimagine the entanglement of the collective and the individual. The new collective, although identified with the national community, gestures toward a broader configuration that retrieves the Confucian

vision of *tianxia* (all under heaven) to challenge the current nation-state system. The new individual, a product of marketization since the 1980s, strives to assert her autonomy and rebuild social relationships that neoliberal policy and globalized economy have been destroying.

Danmei in the 2010s: “Purification” and Hybridization

A genre of popular romance that features the homosexual relationships between male characters, *danmei* was first imported from Japan into mainland China in the 1990s, rapidly developed in the first decade of the twenty-first century as part and parcel of China’s flourishing Internet literature, and entered a new phase in the 2010s. During this period, Priest and Feitian Yexiang are among the most popular *danmei* writers. Their writings represent the new trends in the field, that is, the rise of *yuanchuang* (original) novels, the practice of self-censorship, and the endeavor to incorporate other genres.

Priest is the penname of a young woman whose fans report that she was educated in Shanghai and Hong Kong and has a career in finance. Feitian, defying the stereotype of *danmei* writers as heterosexual girls, is allegedly a professional screenwriter who does not attempt to conceal his gay identity. Highly prolific, they have each published more than ten novels at Jinjiang since 2010. Almost all of these novels are *yuanchuang* (original creations) rather than *tongren* (slash fiction based on some existing works). Both authors have published quite a few “*danmei*” novels in print. Purged of homosexual contents, these novels came out from official presses. They have also succeeded in selling the adaptation rights of their novels, at the price of at least several million yuan per work, to media corporations.⁴ *SoC* and *DoW* have already been

⁴ For their publication records, see <https://baike.baidu.com/item/Priest/7730677>;
<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E9%9D%9E%E5%A4%A9%E5%A4%9C%E7%BF%94>.

adapted into audio dramas, the latter, an anime series too, while fans have been eagerly awaiting live-action TV series and films based on their novels.⁵

One prominent feature of *danmei* in the 2010s is the rise of *yuanchuang* that parallels or even eclipses the tradition of fan fiction. The new generation of *yuanchuang* authors as represented by Priest and Feitian no longer depend on pre-existing source texts, that is, “canons,” to spin homoerotic tales. They pursue canon making in that they produce original novels covering a dazzling array of styles, themes, and genres. These new canons generate their own fan communities that in turn produce fan arts in various media forms and pave the way for media capital to step in and make profits.

Chinese *danmei*, *yuanchuang* and *tongren*, has been nourished by popular culture in China and worldwide. Predominantly influenced by Japanese manga, anime, and games in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Chinese *danmei* has already turned to Chinese films, TV shows, literary works, and historical records for inspiration. Now there is a new wave of interest in American literature and culture, such as superhero movies based on Marvel and DC comics. In addition to Jinjiang, *danmei* writers/readers have also been active at the American fanfiction site AO3 (Archive of Our Own) and Suiyuanju, a Chinese site specializing in slash fiction based on American movies and TV dramas.

Steampunk and zombie apocalypse are both popular genres of an American origin. When Feitian began to serialize *DoW*, AMC’s TV drama *The Walking Dead* (2010-) was a hit in China like the rest of the world, while Max Brooks’ book *Zombie Survival Guide* (2003) was also available in Chinese translation (2011). Before Priest worked on *SoC*, in 2012, two Hong Kong

⁵ The first season of *SoC* (audio drama): <http://www.missevan.com/mdrama/drama/9888#t=0&e=1>. The first season of *DoW* (audio drama): http://www.missevan.com/mdrama/drama/15273?pay_type=2#t=0&e=1. *DoW* (anime): <https://v.qq.com/x/cover/w6ra1s1f8j69icf/f002639e6zj.html>.

steampunk movies, *Taichi Zero* and *Taichi Hero* (directed by Stephen Fung), were commercial successes. One year later, two steampunk classics, William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Machine* (1990) and Scott Westerfeld's YA series the *Leviathan* trilogy (2009-2011), were translated into China.

Unlike *tongren* writers who always have the canons to fall back on, *yuanchuang* authors take pains to design elaborate setting, intricate plotlines, sophisticated narrative structure, and a whole range of characters. Their ambition exceeds practicing textual poaching, that is, adding homoerotic stories to pre-existing texts. They embark on world-making that transcends the boundaries of media, themes, and genres.⁶ Their fiction writing is influenced by other media and aimed at being adapted into other media. Exposed to the globally circulating cultural trends, *danmei* novels explore a wide spectrum of social issues that may be described as “anything plus love.” The small world of homoerotic romance can no longer restrain the ambition of the writers or satisfy the curiosity of the readers. Love stories are grafted unto other popular genres such as *wuxia* (martial arts), *xiuzhen* (immortality cultivation), *wangyou* (web games), *xingzhen* (crime and investigation), *lingyi* (supernatural horror), and, the focus of this article, *kehuan* (science fiction). Although these genres have always been present within the *danmei* tradition, they used to serve as the borrowed background for homoerotic romance but now are pushed to the foreground so that *danmei* can hide behind a fascinating smokescreen.

Why smokescreen? Time to consider state censorship and commercialization. First of all, homoerotic romance has been targeted by the ever-tightening state censorship. With portrayal of homosexuality banned in printed literature and other media, the web-based *danmei* is apparently an off-limit genre whose very existence is in peril. It is undeniable that *danmei* in the 2000s was

⁶ Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. NYU press, 2006.
Wolf, Mark JP. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. Routledge, 2014.

more or less a wild genre, waving between erotica and romance while flaunting alternative sexualities and moral ambiguities.⁷ No wonder it attracted the attention of the state that has been implementing a series of puritanical policies to monitor public morality and making strenuous efforts to control printed as well as online materials.⁸

In May 2014, a *danmei* author named *Zhangzhe chibang de dahuilang* (Winged Wolf) in Nantong was arrested for circulating erotic and obscene materials via Jinjiang.⁹ The knee-jerk response of Jinjiang was to rename the entire *danmei* section *chun'ai* (pure love). And, the readers were shocked to find that, in already completed novels (including Feitian's *DoW*) and still being serialized works, chapters with sexual contents had been locked overnight. Needless to say the *chun'ai* novels produced in the post-2014 era can no longer follow the old path to feed the readers graphic descriptions of sexual fantasies. Instead, their depiction of love must be "pure," with homoerotic romance transfigured into homoplatic tales. This explains Priest's "fleshless" style and Feitian's de-sexualization after 2014.

The self-purification practiced by the entire *danmei* field is still on-going. Jinjiang is currently recruiting and training a new team of editors who will be responsible for online publications the same way traditional editors work on printed materials at official presses. Staying away from sex, writers also tend to avoid depicting complicated relationships that stage conflicts between the lovers and/or involve more than two characters. The ideal love the readers take delight in reading about is characterized by mutual trust and care, with the lovers staying

⁷ Chao, Shih-Chen. "Grotesque eroticism in the Danmei genre: the case of Lucifer's Club in Chinese cyberspace." *Porn Studies* 3.1 (2016): 65-76.

⁸ "China has launched another crackdown on the internet — but it's different this time" <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/10/26/china-internet-censorship-new-crackdowns-and-rules-are-here-to-stay.html>. Major literary websites such as Qidian and Jinjiang punished by the government: <https://www.yicai.com/news/5432029.html>.

⁹ https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1366172_1

loyal to each other and hardly seeking to bend or break established or conservative moral norms and political rules. Within this environment, the merge of romantic love and nationalist sentiments is more than welcome. A Chinese version of homonationalism has emerged.¹⁰

Despite the puritanical milieu described above, the creative flame of *danmei* has not been put down. On the contrary, the new *chun'ai* novels have achieved unprecedented commercial success despite the purging of sexuality. Unlike *danmei* writers of the earlier decade who mostly wrote out of personal interests and for interpersonal communications, the new generation is fortunate to have been able to make money by clicks, prints, and, most significantly, selling copyrights. However, in contrast to the mainstream of Internet literature, *danmei* is relatively less profit-driven and more rooted in the entire community's desire for self-expression and socialization. In a most ironic sense, state censorship works as a control valve against the complete commercialization of *danmei* and creates a quasi-underground field of limited aesthetic autonomy. Likewise, it is media capital that challenges the tight grip of censorship and pushes *danmei* writers to eke out a living in the gaps and fissures of state power.

Starting at 2008, popular authors (VIP) sign contracts with Jinjiang, which charges readers a subscription fee to access their novels chapter by chapter. The author-site split is sixty-fourty for computer user subscriptions, fifty-fifty for smart-phone subscriptions.¹¹ For a novel of about half a million words, the author may earn a few thousands to several hundred thousands *yuan*. Since regular presses are not allowed to publish *danmei* fiction, Jinjiang once provided an “illegal” channel. It helped authors to solicit pre-orders and publish their *gerenzhi* (personal

¹⁰ Puar, Jasbir K. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Duke University Press, 2017. Treat, John Whittier. "The rise and fall of homonationalism in Singapore." *positions: east asia cultures critique* 23.2 (2015): 349-365. Is there homonationalism in China? If yes, what is it?

¹¹ Qidian started this business model. See Hockx, Michel. *Internet literature in China*. Columbia University Press, 2015. For the business history of Jinjiang, see <https://baike.baidu.com/tashuo/browse/content?id=7225f0f4a729283da39a7382&lemmaId=&fromLemmaModule=pBottom>. More info.

volumes) specifically tailored to readers' demand as underground books without *shuhao* (registration numbers). The site took twenty percent of the revenue and left eighty to the authors, who could also choose to publish their personal volumes in Taiwan or take care of production and distribution all by themselves. Jinjiang discontinued its *gerenzhi* service in 2014, the same time when it renamed *danmei chun'ai*. In 2017, another danmei author, *Shenhai xiansheng* (Mr. Deep Sea) based in Wuhan, was arrested for printing and selling a large quantity of *danmei* books.¹² This time Jinjiang was not involved at all, but the *gerenzhi* business run by individual authors came to an end as well.

Having gathered its own fan community online, Feitian's *DoW* was picked by Hunan Renmin Press in 2013, thanks to the popularity of zombie stories, and published as a two-volume novel purged of homosexuality. On October 10, 2015, Priest's *SoC* was available at Jinjiang for pre-order, although the site claimed not to provide *gerenzhi* service any more. 2500 copies, priced at 180 *yuan* each, were sold out in three minutes. In 2016, the novel was published in Taiwan again, this time in traditional-character rather than simplified format. Despite the commercial success of a few elite writers, *danmei/chun'ai* remains marginalized and does not guarantee its authors a profitable career, especially when compared with other popular genres, such as Qidian sf and fantasy and Jinjiang heterosexual romance. However, the influx of media capital has changed the game at least for a handful of elite writers and ignited hope among many others.

The worst time is also the best time. The slim sum made by electronic and print publications is eclipsed by the huge amount paid to top-ranking authors to adapt their works into TV series, web drama, audio drama, animations, and videogames. The "IP" (intellectual

¹² http://www.sohu.com/a/213468035_159592.

property) era of China's entertainment industry has come to rescue the repressed *danmei/chun'ai*. Although "illegitimate" and marginalized, *danmei* over the years has acquired putatively forty million fans who are avid readers and aspiring writers. The sheer size of the *danmei* producer/prosumer community makes it a labor reserve and niche market that media corporations cannot afford to overlook. They are eager to lure this army of prosumers in with various techniques of queer-baiting and willing to risk testing the bottom line of state toleration. Hence when *danmei* novels are adapted into other media forms, homosexual attachment is carefully concealed but never completely cut off. What is needed is a thick smokescreen that renders the invisible even more desirable, and, in worst case scenario, stands alone to attract consumers when the original text is "castrated."¹³

Such a smokescreen happens to overlap with what the *danmei/chun'ai* community has been building in the genre's growth into maturity. In her groundbreaking research on *danmei* fiction, Feng Jin demonstrated that *danmei* fans sought excitement in transgressing the boundaries of conventional heterosexual romance and undermining established gender and sexual norms. One decade later, *chun'ai* fans, forbidden by the label "pure love" to play with sex, turn their attention toward many other topics. They are no longer contented with consuming and producing romance alone, heterosexual or homosexual. There are so many questions that pique their interest, as they have been trying to reckon with China's new position as a new global power and quest for their own position as individuals in this brave new world. In their explorations, science fiction comes in handy as a springboard.

¹³ The *danmei* story line, although crucial for plot progression and character development, can be easily remolded into asexual bromance predicated upon homosociality, or heterosexual romance by inserting female characters or turning one of the male lovers into a woman. (Nirvana in Fire, King of Fire)

In the words of Song Mingwei, “deeply entangled with the politics of a changing China,” science fiction “mingles nationalism with utopianism/dystopianism, mixes sharp social criticism with an acute awareness of China’s potential for further reform, and wraps political consciousness in scientific discourses about the powers of technology and the technologies of power.”¹⁴ When science fiction encounters *danmei*, a platform on which young women (and men) construct personal identities beyond existing social norms, form affective communities in a highly participatory space, and pursue alternative visions of the world, the two genres in tandem to bring back revolution and love. There may not be a better hiding place for homoerotic romance than narratives of national salvation, arguably the central theme of modern Chinese literature.

SoC and *DoW* are *danmei*-sf crossover novels that intertwine homosexual love affairs with China’s fate in the estranging space of science fiction that paradoxically does more justice to social realities than the already domesticated realist form. Although Chinese science fiction has developed into a quasi-mainstream in and of itself, no attention has been paid to the foray into its territories made by *danmei* authors. Similarly, existing scholarship on *danmei* fiction has not yet paid attention to its engagement with social issues other than and still intertwined with gender and sexuality. Scholarship has lagged behind the rapid transformations of popular literature and culture, as *danmei* writers have begun to participate in and reappropriate the grand narratives they used to twist, unravel, or ignore, in and through experimenting with new genres such as steampunk and zombie apocalypse.

Stars of Chaos, *Steampunk, and Alternate History*

¹⁴ Song, Mingwei. "Variations on Utopia in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction." *Science Fiction Studies* 40.1 (2013): 86-102.??

Known as a literary genre of alternate history, steampunk first emerged in America in the late 1960s and early 1970s and has developed into a subcultural movement covering various art forms. In 1987, American science fiction writer K. W. Jeter (1950-) coined “steampunk” to name fantasy texts of a Victorian setting. This neologism is a combination of steam engine, a symbol of the industrial revolution and modern technologies, and punk, a contemporary youth culture known for its rebellious gesture.¹⁵ In contrast to its generic siblings such as cyberpunk that presents the reader with futuristic scenarios complete with futuristic technologies, steampunk fixes its attention on the past, especially the Victorian era (1837-1901). Unlike time-travel narratives that transport the individual (mind and/or body) between two different historical periods, steampunk reenacts the nineteenth century as a fantastic playground in which markers of different historical periods, more often than not technologies, can be isolated from their original contexts and presented as simultaneous.

Steampunk is also different from hardcore science fiction that sticks to the rational extrapolation from existing and feasible technoscientific advancements. It does not shy away from scientific romance or even unscientific fantasy, fusing technologies from various historical periods or even inventing alternative technologies that bend the laws of nature, in other words, defying the rules of linear time and technological singularity. Since technology is not just actual machines, technical procedures, or the practical appliance of science but an index of social and political relations, one particular ambition of the genre, as scholars have pointed out, is to reconfigure cultural memory and collective identity through reimagining the past, present, and

¹⁵ Bowser, Rachel A., and Brian Croxall. "Introduction: Industrial Evolution, the Steampunk Special Issue." *Neo-Victorian Studies* 3.1 (2010): 1-45. Bowser, Rachel A., and Brian Croxall. *Like Clockwork: Steampunk Pasts, Presents, and Futures*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016. Danahay, Martin. "Steampunk as a Postindustrial Aesthetic:" All that is solid melts in air". *Neo-Victorian Studies* 8.2 (2016). Schillace, Brandy. *Clockwork Futures: The Science of Steampunk and the Reinvention of the Modern World*. Pegasus Books, 2017.

future as conflated in fictional technologies.¹⁶ The fantastic nineteenth century in steampunk is a magic mirror held up to capture present concerns.

The appeal of *SoC*, which adopts the genre of steampunk, to Chinese readers cannot be overexaggerated.¹⁷ What fictional imagination encapsulates is China's efforts to come to terms with its own historical legacy and revamp the existing geopolitical order. *Liang* is China of the past, present, and future. *SoC* captures aspirations and anxieties in the present to rewrite history of the nineteenth century and envision future changes. For steampunk fans in the West, the nineteenth century is an era of scientific breakthroughs, artistic flourishing, rapid industrialization, global expansion of colonialism, and the domination of the British Empire over the world. In Chinese memory, it is within the same period that China suffered a series of defeats in the hands of the European powers and was forced into the global system of nation-states and capitalist market. Revisiting the nineteenth century, steampunk writers explore the contingent trajectories of Western modernity and challenge established norms and authorities. Compared with its Western predecessors, *SoC* seems more radical in its punk attitude. It dares to transport Western technologies into imperial China and then release them from state monopoly into the hands of the masses. Practicing anachronism and anachronism, it has China and Europe swap

¹⁶ Mielke, Tammy, and Jeanne LaHaie. 2015. "Theorizing Steampunk in Scott Westerfeld's YA Series *Leviathan*." *Children's Literature In Education* 46, no. 3: 242-256. Pho, Diana. "Punking the Other: On the Performance of Racial and National Identities in Steampunk." *Like Clockwork: Steampunk Pasts, Presents, and Futures*: 127-149.

¹⁷ A new sci-fi genre, steampunk has already made discernible impact on Chinese games, films, and novels. Role-playing games such as *Xuan-yuan Sword: Dance of the Maple Banners* (1995), *Xuan-yuan Sword: Billows of the Bleak* (2004), and *Marvelous Tales of Ancient Swords 2* (2013) enacted highly sophisticated machines in ancient settings. In 2012, two steampunk movies, *Taichi Zero* and *Taichi Hero* (directed by Stephen Fung) fused the training of a young Taichi master in late Qing with a Chinese village's fight against monsters of Western modernity, locomotives and railways. In 2016, SF writer Liang Qingsan published his novel *From the New Daily News: Mechanical Wonders*, which, also set in late Qing, follows the adventures of an inventor and a reporter, who—representatives of new technologies—had to struggle with old bureaucrats, defenders of the repressive political status quo.

places and turns China's century of humiliation into the dawn of an alternative modern world, that is, a China-dominated global network of energy flow and commodity circulation.

Although technologically advanced, Liang does not produce the precious *ziliujin* (purple fluid gold), a fictional fossil fuel that steam engines run on, and must import it from abroad. It is an empire of machines--*huoji* (vehicles of production and transportation), *kuilei* (robots and other automatic systems), and *gangjia* (exoskeleton suits)—all powered by the burning of *ziliujin* and maintained by professionals called *changbi shi* (masters of long arms). The explosive development of technologies results in a severe energy shortage, which exacerbates Liang's conflicts with its close neighbors and distant competitors and the internal tension between the imperial state and its new military-industrial complex.

Unfortunate for the *sijing manzu* ("barbarians" on the four frontiers) that surround Liang, especially the northern and western barbarians, the world's major *ziliujin* reserves are discovered in their lands (which resemble Central Asia, a strategic area in China's 'One Belt, One Road' initiatives). They have to navigate themselves between the Scylla of an increasingly aggressive China and the Charybdis of the no less avaricious Europe, designated as *xiyang fanbang* (foreign countries across the Western ocean) and united under the sacred canopy of a fictional Catholic Church.

To tame the barbarians and compete with Europe, Liang builds new apparatuses of state violence. Confucian scholars who pass the civil service exams may choose to enter the traditional Hanlin Academy or the newly founded Lingshu Academy (literary, the Academy of Smart Devices). The latter is a state bureau for talented "masters of long arms" specializing in developing mechanical technologies for the military. Added to the Liang army, which has already been equipped with steam weapons and vehicles of various sorts, is a new special force

named *xuantie ying* (Battalion of Dark Metals), whose soldiers wear exoskeleton armors and are an army of Iron Men. However, the imperial state is increasingly unable to satisfy the needs of its own technologies, which pose an imminent threat to the absolute power of the emperor. It is a time of chaos, or, trials and tribulations that the old empire has to go through to gain a new life.

Moreover, a homoerotic romance, *SoC* brings into the world of steampunk the topic of love and highlights the struggles of individual figures for a happy, fulfilling life against the background of social chaos unleashed by the excavation *ziliujin* and technological innovations. This novel is the bildungsroman of its main protagonist, Chang Geng,¹⁸ who, a taciturn and stubborn teenager at the beginning of the story, grows into the young emperor of Liang. In this process, he pursues and protects the object of his romantic interest, an older man by the name of Gu Yun who serves as his mentor. This novel is again unashamedly punk in celebrating romantic love as the salvific force that pulls Liang out of a national crisis and catapults it into a golden era of capitalist economy and liberal democracy. Its two protagonists, Chang Geng and Gu Yun, are victims of *ziliujin* who seek consolation in each other and in so doing carry out the project of national salvation.

The two protagonists embody the Liang-barbarian and the imperial-military conflict respectively. Chang Geng is a mixed-blood prince born to the old emperor by the priestess of the northern barbarians, who was captured and forced to marry the emperor after the Liang army brutally conquered her tribes to gain access to their *ziliujin* mines. Gu Yun is the *yuanshuai* (Marshal, the highest commander) of the empire's armed forces and the commander of *xuantie ying*. His best friend Shen Yi is a Confucian technician representing the Lingshu Academy. No

¹⁸ Chang Geng is the name of Planet Venus in Chinese. It is the star of nightfall and daybreak, signifying warfare, chaos, and dawning of a new order. In the novel, it is the nickname of Li Wen, the mixed-blood prince, who is referred to as Chang Geng.

wonder Gu's relationship with the emperor (first Chang Geng's father and then his elder brother) is strained, to say the very least.

After his mother committed suicide, Chang Geng was taken out of the palace by his aunt, the priestess's sister, who escaped into the northwestern border with the baby and brought him up with hatred and curses. It is Gu Yun who finds the lost prince, saves him from his abusive aunt, and takes him back to the dying emperor, who longs to see his lost son. However, the invincible warrior the boy looks up to turns out half blind and almost deaf, having been poisoned by the same emperor whom he fights for. His disabled body depends on prosthetic technology to function properly.¹⁹ The prince and the Marshall fall in love. Chang Geng sees an ideal father figure in Gu Yun; Gu Yun cares for Chang Geng to recover his lost childhood and become human again, not just a war machine. However, they are too busy to stay together when Liang is plagued by conflicts from within and without.

The new emperor, Chang Geng's elder brother, issues two laws to curb the expanding power of the engineers and the military. The first law requires all civilian engineers to register with the imperial state. They are not allowed to maintain machines beyond their assigned rank and must stay away from military technologies. The second law transfers the power of the Marshall into the hands of the emperor, ordering the former to get the latter's approval before any major maneuver. The emperor even has the already disempowered Gu Yun imprisoned. These laws strengthen the absolute power of the emperor at the expense of the empire, which is seriously weakened. Seizing this opportunity, the northern-western barbarians and the Europeans

¹⁹ Gu Yun always wears a high-tech monocle, which is a variation of goggles in the steampunk genre. See Kathryn Crowther, "From Steam Arms to Brass Goggles: Steampunk, Prostheses, and Disability." *Like Clockwork: Steampunk Pasts, Presents, and Futures*: ??-96.

launch their joint attack. The Europeans travel to China in gigantic submachines (that act as aircraft carriers once rise above the water) and occupy the prosperous Jiangnan area, Liang's heartland. Then they push all the way to the imperial city.

The novel reenacts the siege of Peking by the Eight-Nation Alliance in late Qing. In its alternate history, the Liang army, commanded by the two lovers who boldly kiss each other in front of the whole world, successfully defends the capital with airships and super armors. The tide begins to turn. The emperor repents. Gu Yun is reinstated. Chang Geng implements a series of reforms. He sells national debt to rich entrepreneurs to raise money, invites engineers all over the country to design new machines, starts to build a national railway system, and sets up camps where war refugees fleeing the occupied area receive financial support and work to produce military supplies in return. Under their leadership, Liang drives away the Europeans, tames the unruly barbarians, and establishes its global hegemony. The novel ends with Chang Geng's ascension to the throne, China's transformation into a constitutional democracy, and the new trend to pursue technological developments for the benefits of the masses. Having fought for national salvation and China's triumphant rise, the lovers happily step down and retreat into the hustle and bustle of ordinary people's daily life.²⁰

Dawn of the World, Zombie Apocalypse, and Environmental Utopia

Another new sci-fi genre recently introduced into China, zombie apocalypse quickly infected major literary websites such as Qidian and Jinjiang. Feitian's *DoW*, a *danmei*-sf crossover, brings the nightmare of zombie apocalypse to bear on the utopian vision of social

²⁰ **Loose ends of the novel.** Chang Geng cursed by his aunt, haunted by his barbarian self, and doomed to go insane. Gu Yun's poisoned senses beyond cure. The potential conflict between Chang Geng the modern reformer and Gu Yun the Confucian loyalist. Both protagonists miraculously restored (sanity and senses) in the end. The author abandoned the questions she had raised.

progress and stands in contrast to Priest's *SoC* that rather uncritically celebrates nationalism, advanced technologies, capitalist economy, and the exploitation of nature. The legend of the zombie originated in Haitian plantations where slaves from Africa toiled for Western colonizers and was brought into American popular imagination by William Seabrook's (1884-1945) travelogue *The Magic Island* (1929). Originally a few dead bodies reanimated by magical practices, the zombie evolved in the twentieth century through a process of medicalization and massification. Now the zombies are explained as humans (in some cases, other life-forms as well) infected by some vicious virus, which kills its hosts and takes over their mechanisms to reproduce itself.²¹ When infectious diseases are projected onto the zombies, zombie stories have become epidemic narratives which usually depict how a zombie pandemic breaks out, takes advantage of existing global networks to spread, and brings down human civilization.²²

Strictly speaking, zombie apocalypse as a genre did not reach maturity until the 1990s and became wildly popular in global culture as late as the twenty-first century. Apocalypse, a term lifted from the biblical tradition, is understood as the total collapse of human civilization. It also means revelation. Zombie apocalypse is a revelation that unveils the blurred boundaries between life and nonlife, the interconnectivity of human and nonhuman lives, and the fragility of global ecology. This revelation further sheds light on the very processes in which our social order is produced, maintained, and reinforced, with the zombie signifying either the laboring body under capitalism or the mythical other whose exclusion foundations human civilization.²³

²¹Christie, Deborah, and Sarah Juliet Lauro, eds. *Better off dead: the evolution of the zombie as post-human*. Fordham Univ Press, 2011. Luckhurst, Roger. *Zombies: a cultural history*. Reaktion Books, 2015. McNally, David. *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism*. Brill, 2011.

²² Wald, Priscilla. *Contagious: cultures, carriers, and the outbreak narrative*. Duke University Press, 2008.

²³ Roger. *Zombies: a cultural history*. 182-3.

The same way in which steampunk experiments with existing and alternative social orders, zombie apocalypse is an experimental site for world-revealing as well as world-making. At this site, authors explore the formation of local, national, and planetary communities that struggle with the zombie hordes and compel their readers to rethink and relearn how to live ethically in what sociologist Ulrich Beck called the global risk society, in which a permanent state of emergency has become the new norm.²⁴

In *DoW*, a zombie pandemic breaks out in August 2012, exactly one year ahead of the serialization of the novel, which began in August 2011. While *SoC* rewrites China's transformation from an empire into a nation-state by adding fantastic machines as a game changer, *DoW* is a story of state (re)building and nation (re) making after the cataclysm inflicted upon the world by the monstrous zombies. The novel is divided into three volumes: *Xianxue huanghun* (Bloody Twilight), *Huijin changye* (Ashy Long Night), and *Guanghui liming* (Glorious Daybreak), which deal with community building, nation/state making, and planetary salvation consecutively. The thread running throughout the entire book is the love story of the two protagonists, one that is intricately intertwined with the making of various collectives.

Volume One begins to unfold in a university somewhere in Guangdong, where the SARS epidemic first broke out in 2003 and still haunted people's memory. Unlike many other zombie apocalypse stories that posit the heterosexual nuclear family as the foundational social unit,²⁵ *DoW* zooms in on a university, where students away from families begin to build their own social identities and networks. The two protagonists, Meng Feng and Liu Yan, are two childhood friends growing into homosexual lovers. When Meng joined the military, Liu went to college to

²⁴ Beck, Ulrich. *World at risk*. Polity, 2009.

²⁵ Cady, Kathryn A. and Thomas Oates. "Family Splatters: Rescuing Heteronormativity from the Zombie Apocalypse." *Women's Studies in Communication*, vol. 39, no. 3, July 2016, pp. 308-325.

study mechanical engineering. Meng, unable to find a job after he was discharged, visited Liu, who was a master's student at a top-notch university. Their relationship did not work due to their diverging life trajectories. However, although they rather reluctantly broke up, they were forced to stick together by an unexpected zombie outbreak. Together with other students, they fled the densely populated Southeastern coastal area and travelled northwest, where cold weather might partially incapacitate the zombies.

The young lovers are zombie-prepared, having grown up playing video games such as the *Resident Evil* series and *Plants vs. Zombies*. Liu even has a copy of Max Brooks' *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003), although in the novel it is referred to as an official manual issued by the American government. Another major influence on Feitian's writing is *The Walking Dead* (2010-). The experience of the protagonists in the first volume of *DoW* clearly takes after Rick Grimes and his cohort's journey in post-apocalyptic America.

However, instead of showcasing a variety of survivor communities like what *TWD* did, each embodying a social vision, the first volume of *DoW* focuses on the power struggle within one community. Initially headed by a group of gangsters whose dictionary contains only one term: self-preservation, the community is gradually taken over by students. They try to save every survivor they meet along the way and are capable of doing so thanks to their education. Liu is able to build tesla coils to fight off zombies with high-voltage electricity, his boyfriend a well-trained veteran. The students keep a post-apocalyptic society running, with agriculture majors responsible for food, management majors in charge of personnel, while philosophers taking care of the human soul.²⁶ Toward the end of volume one, this utopian community settles

²⁶ When the survivor community was still controlled by the gangsters, they demanded that everyone who wanted to stay to report a useful skill. A young man claiming to be a poet said he could tell stories. He was kicked out. The students silently watched him walk toward the zombie horde with a book of poetry in hand. Later, Liu started to keep a diary and tell stories to the future generations. This may be his way of keeping the exiled poet alive.

down somewhere near Xi'an (one of China's ancient capitals), in a small village named Yongwang (eternal hope).

Zombie apocalypse begins to take on a Chinese twist when Lieutenant Lai Jie arrives. That happens in the early spring of 2013. The original title of the novel when it was serialized is *2013*, although 2012 is the year of apocalypse. One explanation is that the American disaster movie *2012* (2009) had already claimed the title. Another interpretation is that it is at the very beginning of the year 2013 that the post-apocalyptic Chinese state begins to broadcast to survivors and send special force to eliminate zombies and evacuate humans to the safe zone, an undersea resistance and refugee center located in international waters (very likely the much-disputed South China Sea).

Representing the Chinese state, Lieutenant Lai persuades Meng to join Team Hurricane, his special force unit. To protect his lover, Meng again breaks up with Liu so that the latter could be airlifted to the refugee center with the other civilians. Refusing to be separated from his lover, Liu volunteers to work as Team Hurricane's mechanic and rejoins Meng on the contingent. In the second and third volumes, the protagonists fight on behalf of the Chinese state to find survivor communities scattered across China and bring them to the refugee center, where the nation is remade. *DoW* radically deviates from *TWD*, which does not bother to bring back the already collapsed nation-state. *DoW* also stands in sharp contrast to Brooks' 2006 novel *World War Z: An Oral History*, which actually has never been translated into China due to its explicit hostility toward the Chinese party-state.²⁷ Resembling the warrior-engineer combination in *SoC*

²⁷The movie adaptation of *WWZ* did not come out until 2013 and, as expected, was not screened in China. In *WWZ*, the Chinese party-state exacerbates the spread of infection because it hides information from national and international communities and is overthrown by PLA deserters who later found a new confederation. By contrast, the Chinese state in *DoW* is savvy enough to build the undersea base right after the Fukuyama disasters in 2011 and collaborates with other states to save the planet.

(Gu Yun and Shen Yi), Meng Feng and Liu Yan correspond to the military and research branches of the post-apocalyptic state, which is a major player in the global anti-zombie war.

However, at the undersea base, the military and the scientists are in conflict: The military intend to bomb the entire mainland with nuclear warheads to wipe off the zombies before they can send the Chinese nation back. The scientists strongly oppose this plan, arguing that humans would not survive should the nonhuman environment and other life forms be destroyed. When the debate between the anthropocentric military and the environmentalists runs into a dead-lock, Team Hurricane and other units bring back the bad news: The pandemic has spread from humans to animals, plants, and bacteria. The newly turned zombies seem to have maintained part of their original consciousness and are collectively controlled by some mysterious force from the outside. Even more mysteriously, it has been spotted that blue lights appear all over the world to gather zombies into huge giants that walk into the oceans and disappear for good in underwater volcanoes.

Volume Three unveils the secret of the zombie virus. It is an alien life form from a planet already destroyed by the civilizations it had bred. While the alien virus sets out to hijack life forms on earth and transform it into its home planet, the earth fights back by clearing the zombies and is about to purge the trouble-making humans, like what it did to the infected dinosaurs, victims of a previous zombie apocalypse six million years ago. Although the earth had everything under control after the previous mass extinction, human-induced global warming melts the Antarctic ice in 2012, sending a plesiosaurus fossil that contains the virus into the ocean currents and initiating another zombie apocalypse.

The last volume features the cosmic battle between two planets with humans caught up in between, or, two futures for our planet: total destruction or a stable and sustainable ecology.

Inspired by James Lovelock's Gaia theory that sees the earth as a complex system, if not a living being embracing all living organisms and their inorganic environments, Feitian envisions our planet as a cosmic living body, whose planetary consciousness is called the earth-string. The term string, borrowed from theoretical physics, refers to one-dimensional objects whose vibration make fundamental particles to generate the world. In Feitian's reinterpretation, the string is the unique consciousness of each planet and a god-like existence that creates, sustains, and destroys life. Like the sovereignty of a state, the string is the supreme power of each planet. Moreover, it resembles the Confucian notion of *tian* (heaven) that would miraculously respond to human morality.²⁸

While the survivor community in volume one merges into the Chinese nation in volume two, various nations merge into a planetary community in the last volume. The modern nation-states overcome their differences and collaborate to save themselves and the earth. American labs create bacteria that work as an antidote against the alien virus; Russian scientists experiment with controlling the alienation process; the Chinese learn to communicate with the earth-string, which is particularly impressed by the protagonists' selfless love toward each other and devotion to larger collectives. In the end, the humans help the earth to defeat the alien-string. In return, the earth-string miraculously restores the broken bodies of the protagonists who have willingly sacrificed themselves. The global anti-zombie war is over, the remaining states sign a treaty of disarmament and merge into a world institution whose main task is environmental protection. The era of unchecked development and cutthroat competition is over. The maddening vibration of the alien-string is replaced by the soothing rhythm of the earth-string. All under heaven, there

²⁸ Chinese concept of the world "all under heaven" is based on belief in the nature-people correlation. Wang, Q. Edward. "History, space, and ethnicity: The Chinese worldview." *Journal of World History* (1999): 285-305. Chau, Adam Yuet. *Miraculous response: Doing popular religion in contemporary China*. Stanford University Press, 2008.

emerges a planetary community, with the humans learning to live with and take care of the nonhuman peoples.

The Rise of China and the Quest for Chinese Orders of the World

Both *SoC* and *DoW* are stories of national salvation, one featuring the collective fight to push China toward a dominant position in the global network of capitalist expansion, the other, to pull China out of the gnaws and claws of swarming zombies which appropriate the same network to destroy the world. The immediate milieu for both novels is the rise of China as a new global power after the 2008-09 financial crisis. While the Chinese government has been making plans for “national rejuvenation” and claiming leadership in regional and global governance, popular literature, among many other platforms, provides itself as a realm of thought experiments centered upon pressing questions such as China’s cultural identity, its location in the existing power structure, and visions for an alternative world order. In short, the question of the collective has resurfaced.

The fictional scenarios of *DoW* and *SoC* are based on contemporary issues, which the readers duly brought up in their online discussions. In March 2011, the Fukushima city of Japan was hit by the triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident. On May 16, the American Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) posted the article “Preparedness 101: Zombie Apocalypse” at its website, one that was confused with Brooks’ *Survival Guide* in *DoW*. As mentioned earlier, China’s resistance and refugee center, built right after the Fukushima disasters, is located in international waters, most likely the South China Sea, an area rich in oil and natural gas, *ziliujin* in the real world, and over which China was embroiled in

disputes with several Asian and Southeast Asian states in the early 2010s.²⁹ The real-world Chinese state built military outposts on some of the contested islands and quite a few artificial islands so that missiles could be launched from there. The fictional Chinese state in *DoW* also built a series of islands as well as the infrastructure above and underneath the sea surface, all guarded by aircraft carriers, the first of which is named Varyag.³⁰

It is also in the year 2011 that China refit the ex-Varyag, a former Soviet aircraft carrier bought from Ukraine, into its type 001 aircraft carrier, which started its service in 2012. The real-world Chinese state acquired a “sea monster” that the West built ahead of the fictional Liang Empire and has been building more. In October 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping, while visiting Kazakhstan and Indonesia, outlined the plans for the so-called “Silk Road Economic Belt” and “Maritime Silk Road of the Twenty-First Century,” contemporary reiteration of the historic Silk Road, a network of land and maritime routes for trade, communication, and cultural exchanges.³¹ It is no coincidence that the fictional Liang Empire in *SoC* works hard to maintain a Eurasian Silk Road and a maritime trade route, which correspond to the “One Belt, One Road” map. The novel opens with the two protagonists’ meeting on the northwestern border of the empire, that is, along the Silk Road, and reaches its climax when the Chinese navy defeats the Europeans on the sea to reclaim its lost territories and routes.

China has risen. Hence *SoC* dares to rewrite the century of humiliation and turn it into a story of triumph, while *DoW* boldly imagines a post-apocalyptic planetary utopia with Chinese characteristics. Both novels engage in world-(re)making and explore China’s position in their

²⁹ Zhao, Suisheng. "China and the South China Sea Arbitration: Geopolitics Versus International Law." *Journal of Contemporary China* 27.109 (2018): 1-15.

³⁰ However, this safe zone later falls to the attack of octopus-zombies.

³¹ Yu, Hong. "Motivation behind China’s ‘One Belt, One Road’ initiatives and establishment of the Asian infrastructure investment bank." *Journal of Contemporary China* 26.105 (2017): 353-368.

brave new worlds. Their agenda overlaps with the trend to retrieve the Confucian political concept of *tianxia* in contemporary China. Actually this term appears frequently within the novels and reader discussions. Translated as “all under heaven,” *tianxia* “refers to a system of governance held together by a regime of culture and values that transcends racial and geographical boundaries.”³² Semantically unstable and historically fluid, this term can be used to refer to either the Chinese Empire in a narrow sense, or the entire world broadly speaking, and has always been wavering between cosmopolitan ideal and realpolitik ideology. Given the imperial setting of *SoC*, *tianxia* in this novel primarily refers to the Liang Empire, whereas the *tianxia* of *DoW* exceeds the boundaries of China and is literally all under heaven, that is, our planet earth. Before I examine how *SoC* embodies the ambiguity of *tianxia* as both liberatory and hegemonic and how *DoW* explores the utopian potential of *tianxia*, a closer look at the genealogy of the term, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, is in order.

In the Confucian tradition, the self, family, state, and *tianxia* were conceptualized as a series of concentric circles. The famous dictum “*xiushen, qijia, zhiguo, pingtianxia*” (one must first cultivate oneself morally before proceeding to establish order within the family, the state, and thereafter all under heaven) can be traced to the Neo-Confucian thinker Zhu Xi (1130-1200), who summarized this notion of *jia-guo-tianxia* out of the classic *Great Learning*.³³ In modern history, the discussion of *tianxia* would inevitably invoke two new terms, *minzu* (nation) and *guojia* (state). The traditional *tianxia* worldview collapsed in the second half of the nineteenth century, as China went into contact with European colonial powers and suffered a series of humiliating defeats. What replaced *tianxia*, a Sino-centric concept and practice of an

³² Wang, Ban, ed. *Chinese Visions of World Order: Tianxia, Culture, and World Politics*. Duke University Press, 2017.1.

³³ Gloria Davies, *Worrying about China: The Language of Chinese Critical Inquiry* P. 58. Anthony, C. Yu. *State and religion in China: historical and textual perspectives*. Chicago: Open Court, 2005.

international order, was the European concepts of nation and state that entered the Chinese mind and occupied a central place in major political campaigns in the century to come.

Introduced into China in the late nineteenth century, the nation is “understood as a normative political idea that is characterized by the congruence of people (*renmin*), territory (*tudi*) and national sovereignty (*zhuquan*).”³⁴ The state is the political institution that represents the interests of the nation. In modern European history, nation was formed when a population emancipated itself from a ruling class, while the state was conceived as a necessary evil because it protects and restrains the individual. By contrast, in modern Chinese history, intellectuals developed an ethnical nationalism that worked to homogenize the inside rather than free the masses from the ruling elites and delineate the outside, since China was struggling against Western colonization. They also stressed the task to strengthen the state, especially the military, which was perceived as an indispensable instrument that guaranteed the survival and independence of the nation.

The above survey explains why *minzu* (nation) and *guojia* (state) are closely entangled, if not conflated and confused, in the Chinese mind. Moreover, the positive image of the military, the state apparatus of violence, in both novels (Gu Yun and Meng Feng are both soldiers), is rooted in China’s recent history as one of former (semi)colonies. Meanwhile, the Confucian *jia-guo-tianxia* has never ceased haunting. In modern Chinese, the compound *guojia* consists of two characters, *guo* (state) and *jia* (family). Somehow both the nation and the state are still figured as family. How to interpret *jia* becomes key to understanding *guojia* and *tianxia*, as we will see in both novels.

³⁴ Marc A. Matten, “China is the China of the Chinese”: The Concept of Nation and Its Impact on Political Thinking in Modern China.” *Oriens Extremus*, vol. 51 (2012), pp. 63-106. 65. More research.

In the twenty-first century, attempts have been made to revive *tianxia* as interests and confidence in China's own cultural tradition surge and, more significantly, discontents of the nation-state system irrupt in the era of economic globalization and ecological crises. The state, pressured by the expansion of capitalism that seeks profit on the global scale, has been retreating from providing public services to its nation and instead aligning itself with transnational interests. It is also because no national government is able to cope with the ecological calamities exacerbated by the global expansion of capitalism alone.³⁵

Among contemporary scholars who reinvent *tianxia*, Zhao Tingyang has specified the three meanings of the term: the land that extends to cover the whole world, the hearts and minds of all the peoples in the world, and a world government that maintains universal order by appealing to culture.³⁶ Advocators of *tianxia* proclaim this Chinese vision to critique the expansionist nation-states and their antagonistic relations. They call for a universal community that pursues common good beyond national interests and wins the supports of all the people regardless of their ethnicities and geopolitical locations.³⁷ Critics of *tianxia* see it as a new hegemony fueled by nationalist hubris and worry about its approach to the Other, that is, an approach that endeavors to convert difference, if not to conquest it.³⁸

The visions of *tianxia* in *SoC* and *DoW* are worthy of our critical attention. Thanks to the fantastic genre of steampunk, *SoC* revisits China's entrance into the modern international system and tells the story of an empire's transformation into a nation-state. What gets conflated is not just technologies from different historical periods but also political visions. In the novel's

³⁵ Prasenjit Duara, "The Chinese World Order and Planetary Sustainability," in *Chinese Visions of World Order*, 65-83.

³⁶ Tingyang, Zhao. "A Political World Philosophy in terms of All-under-heaven (Tian-xia)." *Diogenes* 56.1 (2009): 5-18.

³⁷ *Chinese Visions of the World*.

³⁸ Callahan, William A. "Chinese Visions of World Order: Post-Hegemonic or A New Hegemony?." *International Studies Review* 10.4 (2008): 749-761. Wang Ban book. 5.

alternate history, *tianxia*, which essentially overlaps with the empire, does not collapse but successfully transforms itself into a Confucian democracy, which is simultaneously a Sino-centric hegemony. The Liang Empire, the fictional counterpart of Victorian England, is a Confucian polity and the place of origin for steam technology, capitalism, and the constitutional state. While *SoC* endorses rather than challenge the existing world order, with China's position moved from the peripheral to the center, *DoW* envisions the total collapse of global capitalism and the system of nation-states. Its post-apocalyptic *tianxia* is even more radical than Zhao's conceptualization, consisting of the entire planet, the interconnected human and nonhuman peoples, and the Earth Rescue Alliance, a world institution that transcends the boundaries of the nations and their states.

In the online discussion boards attached to both novels, *jia*, *guo*, *guojia*, and *tianxia* are heatedly debated topics. Readers of *SoC* praised the novel for its portrayal of *guojia* (which is coterminous with *tianxia*).³⁹ They noticed that *guojia* was not to be confused with the royal family or the aristocratic clans. The *guojia* that Gu Yun fights for consists of the myriad individuals and their tiny wishes for a peaceful life, for whom Chang Geng strives to revamp the political institution. The Liang Empire is a *guo* headed by a particular *jia*, the royal family. Chang Geng's father and elder brother protect the interests of their own family at the expense of other families of the lower social strata and the strength of the nation as a whole. They are afraid of steam technologies that represent the new social and political relationships. Steam power challenges the emperor and royal family's *tianxia* and creates tension between above and below, inside and outside. Internally, the ordinary people call for the popularization of steam

³⁹ DoW Reviews: <http://www.jjwxc.net/comment.php?novelid=1205245&wonderful=1>. Topics: <http://www.jjwxc.net/comment.php?novelid=1205245&huati=1>. SoC reviews <http://www.jjwxc.net/comment.php?novelid=2322969&wonderful=1>; topics <http://www.jjwxc.net/comment.php?novelid=2322969&huati=1>.

technologies beyond state monopoly. Externally, to keep its steam machines running, China has to clash with its “barbarian” neighbors and compete with the West over the limited resources of *ziliujin*.

The old imperial system and the two protagonists who side with new technologies are in conflict. For the former, *tianxia* belongs to the rulers, whereas the latter identifies *tianxia* with the people. The punk spirit of steampunk, that is, to emancipate technologies as well as the masses, dovetails with the democratic tendencies within the Confucian tradition. In late imperial china, Confucian thinkers such as Huang Zongxi (1610-1695) and Gu Yanwu (1613-1682) made a distinction between *tianxia* of the rulers or officials and that of the ordinary people. Huang critiqued rulers who placed their own interests above the people’s wellbeing; Gu argued that the common people’s *tianxia* was not to be confused with the imperial state and that the fall of the state was to be distinguished from the fall of *tianxia*.⁴⁰ *SoC* carries forward these Confucian democratic visions. Thanks to his half-barbarian origin and close contact with the lower classes, Chang Geng aligns himself with the interests of the people and turns the imperial state into an ideal state of the people (Huang and Gu’s *tianxia*). Likewise, Gu Yun, an embodiment of the military prowess of steam technologies, despite the fact that he has been ill treated by the Liang emperors, never thinks about rebellion and devotes himself to defending the land and people of Liang.

At the end of the novel, Chang Geng goes beyond strengthening the state as it is to embark on a constitutional reform to secure the rights of the individual citizen. Readers raved about his punk declaration:

⁴⁰ Daniel A. Bell, “Realizing Tianxia: Traditional Values and China’s Foreign Policy,” in *Chinese Visions of World Order*, 129-146. 132. More research.

我想有一天国家昌明，百姓人人有事可做，四海安定，我的将军不必死守边关，想……解开皇权与紫流金之间的死结，想让那些地上跑的火机都在田间地头，天上飞的长鸢中坐满了拖家带口回老家探亲的寻常旅人……每个人都可以有尊严地活。

I have a dream. One day, my state is strong and liberal; my people are all employed; my territories are free from warfare while my generals are relieved of their duty to guard the frontiers. I will untie the deadly knot between the imperial power and *ziliujin*. I want steam machines to cultivate the fields, air-borne ships to carry families on their journeys. My dream is that everyone can and will with dignity.

However, the novel leaves “everyone” an empty slogan and does not indicate how Chang Geng would treat the “barbarians,” his own people on the maternal side. On the one hand, the novel, ostensibly a Confucian *jiaohua* (that is, transformation of the self and other through education) story, embraces cultural universalism and celebrates Chang Geng’s assimilation into the Han civilization via homosexual desire. In other words, it celebrates *tianxia*’s openness toward the noble barbarian who is even allowed to grow into a sage emperor. On the other hand, however, the Liang Empire imposes unequal treaties onto the northern and western “barbarians” and turns them into semi-colonies. One reader raised this poignant question: I condemn the European invasion of Liang, but what about Liang’s invasion of the “barbarians”?

Quite a few readers found the novel’s depiction of Chang Geng’s “evil” aunt disturbing and pointed out that this woman was a functional character meant to cut off the tie between Chang Geng and his barbarian heritage and gear him toward homosexual desire for Gu Yun, a Confucian gentleman and high-tech Iron Man. The narrative shows little sympathy for the aunt, not to mention the dead mother, gendered and ethnic others who suffered the violence of Liang’s aggressions. To make things worse, the aunt’s name *Huge'er* is explained as the very term for

ziliujin in the barbarian language. Does it imply that the global hegemony of the Liang Empire, a new *tianxia* allegedly for the people, is built upon the anguish of the internal and external others and the exploitation of nature? Who is excluded from the enlightened citizenry designated as “everyone?” What about the exploitation of the burnout human laborers and the polluted extrahuman nature? Where would the fictional Liang’s insatiable quest for power lead us? A technological paradise or zombie apocalypse?

Discussion triggered by *DoW* also focused on *guojia/tianxia*. No less interesting than Chang Geng’s declaration is Lieutenant Lai’s speech. Arriving at Yongwang village, Lieutenant Lai orders that the survivor community give all their resources to the state, the former military and law enforcement officers report for duty, and all civilians get ready for evacuation. Liu Yan refuses to obey and demands Lieutenant Lai to explain what rights the survivors hold before they fulfill their obligations to the state. Meng Feng also says no, claiming that he, a loser who cannot secure a job after leaving the military, has nothing to do with the state, which is an empty slogan (not unlike Chang Geng’s “everyone”). Bypassing the issue of rights, Lai gives a brief speech on what the state (*guojia*) is, although what he actually talks about is the nation (*minzu*):

“国家在哪里？它不是一个虚幻的名词。”赖杰漠然道，“蒙烽中士，它是这个农场，农场里的所有人，也包括你的爱人。南到南沙群岛，北到漠河，你所站的地方，你在逃亡里走过的每一寸土地，满目疮痍的故乡，变成废墟的城市，就是你的祖国。”“Where is *guojia*? It is not a fictional term.” Lai Jie said solemnly, “Sergeant Meng Feng, it is this farm and all the people here, including your lover. Spratly Islands in the south, Mohe County in the north, the very place you are standing, each inch of the

land you have walked to escape the zombies, destroyed hometowns, cities fallen into ruins—these constitute your ancestral land.”

Responding to the passage quoted above, readers passionately discussed what *guojia* is. They invoked the liberal theory of the state that prioritizes the interests of the individual, the Marxist understanding that the state is an apparatus of violence wielded by the ruling class, and the Confucian axioms *xiushen, qijia, zhiguo, ping tianxia*. While some reader proposed to read Yongwang village as a nascent civil society, others argued that it was more like a family and would naturally merge into the bigger family of the post-apocalyptic state. The former worried that Lieutenant Lai might be a fascist embodying the excess of state violence; the latter predicted that the protagonists would join him to fight for the state/nation. As the story unfolded, the protagonists did choose to work for the post-apocalyptic state, which was revealed as a utopia, not the dystopia in most of the zombie stories.

The post-apocalyptic Chinese state is the ideal institution defending the nation, that is, the land the survivors have travelled and the people they have lived with. It is worth highlighting that the Communist Party and its Poliburo have never been mentioned in the novel and that Lieutenant Lai does not introduce himself as a PLA (People’s Liberation Army) soldier but a member of ERA (Earth Rescue Alliance). The post-apocalyptic Chinese state, which may not be confused with the current party-state, is a branch of ERA, a new world institution built upon the ruins of the modern nation-states, including China. In this light, the new Chinese state is the Chinese section of *tianxia*, which consists of the lands (and oceans) of the entire planet, humans and other life forms, and a human government in communion with the earth-string. Like the Yongwang village, a small family that merges into the larger family of the Chinese nation/state, which would be subsumed into the still larger family called the earth.

The earth-string is the sovereignty of this planetary community. The divine consciousness of Gaia, the mysterious string is also the Heaven in relation to *tianxia* (all under heaven), one that is believed in the Confucian tradition to be able to respond to human morality miraculously. Some readers questioned the author why he resorted to *deus ex machina* and had the earth-string—which could have been portrayed as more indifferent toward human desires—abandon her human elimination plan and revive the protagonists after their heroic self-sacrifice at the end of the novel. Feitian responded: Because we, little selves, are *both* ready to devote ourselves to the greater self, *guojia* (the state/nation) or *tianxia* (the planet), *and* expect the greater self to love us in return. It is along the same line that Liu Yan demands the state to honor the rights of the individual rather than simply demand the individual to fulfill her obligations, and that the author depicts the planetary sovereign, greater than the human collective, as ready to punish human depravity as well as reward the virtuous. Put bluntly, the collective is demanded by the individual to protect and respect its human and nonhuman peoples. The *tianxia* of *DoW* coincides with Timothy Morton's vision of subsistence, that is, the whole does not transcend its constituent parts but is always smaller than all the individuals put together.⁴¹

The Rise of the Individual and the Reinvention of Tradition

At this point, we are to be reminded that the two novels under analysis are *danmei*. Their exploration of the collective named *tianxia* is intertwined with the quest for the love of the individual. Purged of sexual contents and preoccupied with national and planetary campaigns, how can these novels still claim to be homoerotic romance? To make things worse, the physical, not to mention sexual, contact of the lovers is very limited, because they are constantly on the

⁴¹ Morton, Timothy. *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-Human People*. Verso Books, 2017.

move and oftentimes separated, thanks to China's national transportation system that is duly reflected in the fictional space. How to tell a love story when the lovers don't even get to see each other? What fills up the empty space of sexuality is sentimentality. Both novels, "pure love" (that is, no sex) indeed, are narrated from the perspective of one protagonist—Chang Geng in *SoC* and Liu Yan in *DoW*—who, resembling the heroines in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries European sentimental literature, writes letters and diaries to reveal their inner feelings.⁴² Although *SoC* and *DoW* are not epistolary novels strictly speaking, the insertion of letters and diaries helps to create a double narrative, that is, the main plot of national salvation and the parallel plot of romantic affair.

During the Sino-European war, Chang Geng, the one based in the capital, writes letters to Gu Yun, who rushes from one conflict zone to another, to discuss war strategies as well as express yearning for his mentor/lover. Gu Yun sends back short poems and a twig of blooming plum once. Similarly, Liu Yan keeps a diary to record their zombie-fighting experiences and reflect on his relationship with Meng Feng, who makes several attempts to steal it so as to take a peek at Liu Yan's heart. The main characters, with Chang Geng and Liu Yan casted as writers while Gu Yun and Meng Feng readers, are portrayed as sensitive, empathetic, and self-reflexive. They are the emotive selves with carefully constructed interiority and in pursuit of individual autonomy, although in the main plot, they are the heroic selves engaged in endless action and adventure.⁴³ The former is partly produced by the absence of sex under state censorship, the latter, courted by the media capital.

⁴² Campbell, Elizabeth. "Re-visions, re-reflections, re-creations: Epistolary in novels by contemporary women." *Twentieth Century Literature* 41.3 (1995): 332-348.

⁴³ Charles Taylor makes a distinction between the premodern heroic self and the modern emotive self. Alan Kirby argues that in the age of new media, the repressed the heroic stories, such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, have resurfaced. The two types of narratives and selves actually intertwine in the Chinese danmei-sf crossover novels. Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University

In her book on contemporary Chinese web romance, Feng Jin invoked Haiyan Lee's work on the evolution from a Confucian to an Enlightenment and then a Revolutionary structure of feelings in modern China and argued that the Enlightenment structure of feelings and the modern emotive self may be absent in contemporary web romance, because it is plot-driven and focuses on the type of the self lacking in interiority and defined by social roles and heroic deeds. This resonates with Liu's observation that the postsocialist generation has lost interest in the revolution plus love paradigm.⁴⁴ However, *SoC* and *DoW* are counter examples. They are double narratives, or, the new revolution plus love stories in which the emotive self is the foundation for the heroic self. The individual has become the point of reference for the collective. In the shifting relationship, harmonious or not, of the individual and the collective in twentieth century, the minor self, although differentiated from the greater self, was fixed in her role in the collective project of nation-building. In the twenty-first century, in the field of Internet-based popular literature, although the individual is still endowed with the same task, it is the individual that is foregrounded as providing foundation, energy, and legitimacy for the collective, which may or may not overlap with the existing nation-state. The individual has risen.

The protagonists of *SoC* and *DoW* are individuals in love. They are "selfish" in their quest for romantic love and an enjoyable life free from strenuous struggles. Caught up in crises that unravel the social fabric, they become, rather reluctantly, fighters committed to national salvation. Chang Geng has no political ambition whatsoever. He starts self-training, seizes power in the capital, and pursues economic and political reforms only to force himself into Gu Yun's life trajectory and keep his lover away from danger. Likewise, although Gu Yun is celebrated as

Press, 1989. Kirby, Alan. *Digimodernism: How new technologies dismantle the postmodern and reconfigure our culture*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2009.

⁴⁴ Lee, Haiyan. *Revolution of the heart: A genealogy of love in China, 1900-1950*. Stanford University Press, 2006. Feng. *Romancing the Net*.

a moral-political exemplar with “blind” loyalty to the empire, he is also depicted as a highly-refined aesthete whose dream is to retire from public service and seek pleasure in poetry and the arts. Meng Feng and Liu Yan are no less self-indulgent. Having settled down in Yongwang village, a tiny oasis in the desert of zombie apocalypse, they have no intention to venture out other than finding resources. Meng is not interested in fighting for the state to save the nation. It is only when Lieutenant Lai reinterprets the mission as his duty to save the loved ones, first and foremost Liu, that Meng decides to go. Liu then follows suit because he worries about Meng’s safety. When Liu volunteers to work for the military, he cites the Confucian *xiushen, qijia, zhiguo, ping tianxia*, claiming that he is willing to sacrifice himself for a zombie-free all-under-heaven for the little selves and small families.

These novels’ preference for the individual, who “shamelessly” pursues personal wellbeing and interpersonal intimacy, captures the rise of the individual in contemporary China. Back in the twentieth century, the Enlightenment structure of feelings centered upon the autonomy-seeking individual was subsumed into the revolutionary structure of feelings in the 1930s and 40s. However, the thwarted processes of individualization resumed in late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as one of the many consequences of marketization since the 1980s, the era in which *danmei* writers and readers were born and raised. They are among the individuals making claims for autonomy in social, economic, and political senses. Hence *danmei* novels such as *SoC* and *DoW* give articulation to the demands of the individual for material wealth, political rights, and romantic love.

Studying individualization in contemporary Europe, Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim saw it as caused by the application of labor market flexibility and the dismantlement of the welfare state. The individual is required by various institutions to depend on his/her own

capacities and can no longer rely on established relationships, which have been reversed by neoliberal social policy and economic globalization. Although their theorization may not be directly applied to the Chinese context, sociologists observe that the individual has indeed become a basic social category in postsocialist China. They also highlight the Chinese characteristics of individualization: Cultural democratization has been conspicuously absent; the individual is not primarily conceptualized as a right holder in a Western-style welfare state; collectives such as the family and the state remain particularly relevant.⁴⁵ Taking a step further, Jack Barbalet questions Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's categories of individualization—that is, de-traditionalization, disembedding, and reembedding—and calls our attention to the specificities of the Chinese society at given historical moments. He proposes that we pay attention to the continued relevance of tradition and examine the changes in how individuals relate with others in pre-existing institutions and organizations, especially the family and the state, which provide social existence to those individuals. That is to say, the processes of individualization have been unfolding along the pre-existing trajectories of Chinese society and hence reinscribing instead of undermining the role of the family and the state.⁴⁶

In light of the scholarship surveyed above, the reconvergence of the collective and the individual as encapsulated in these new stories of revolution plus love is a distinctive feature of Chinese individualization. The individual that rises in the fictional space is not exactly the neoliberal individual cut off from collective relations and forced to rely on his/her own capacities to survive and thrive in the world at risk. Homoerotic romance and science fiction work in

⁴⁵ Yan, Yunxiang. *The Individualization of Chinese Society*. Oxford ; New York: Berg, 2009.
Halskov Hansen, Mette, and Rune Svarverud. *iChina: The rise of the individual in modern Chinese society*. NIAS Press, 2010.

⁴⁶ Barbalet, Jack. "Chinese individualization, revisited." *Journal of Sociology* 52.1 (2016): 9-23.

tandem to bring forth this imagined individual that does not enjoy an imposed freedom and has been struggling toward rebuilding the collective by remodeling the traditions of the modern and premodern China. It is the Enlightenment self formerly repressed in modern Chinese literature and culture and currently resurfacing to proclaim liberal visions still unfulfilled. It is also the Confucian self supposedly displaced by modern models and seeking to reinventing the Confucian tradition in a world where risk scenarios and hostile forces are rampant.

Both steampunk and zombie apocalypse are allegories of global capitalism, the burning of *ziliujin* and the growling of zombies dissolving existing social relationships and power hierarchy and inflicting self-reliance on the protagonists, who are young individuals of about the same age as the majority of the community producing and consuming homoerotic romance. It is true the protagonists must rely on themselves to survive the national and global warfare, however, their homosexual relationship imagined by a community of young people, male and female, is a foundational sociality. These fictional characters care about each other and the others and work hard to rebuild the collective, although the dignity of “everyone” is an open-ended question, with *SoC* envisioning converting/conquering the other, while *DoW*, with a sleight of hand, pushing the other onto another planet.

The protagonists of the novels resume the project of May Fourth movement, the Chinese Enlightenment, to call for democracy. They further endeavor to reconcile Confucian virtues and democratic values. Out of his love for Gu Yun, Chang Geng resonates with the other individuals who long for personal development, affective ties, as well as political rights. To protect the individual’s inalienable rights, toward the end of the novel, he starts to work on a constitution that places the people above the emperor, in light of Huang and Gu’s discussion of *tianxia*, and explains that it is his homosexuality, a non-reproductive queer power as it were, that puts an end

to the perpetuation of the imperial system.⁴⁷ Likewise, the equality between the individuals and the state is what Liu Yan has in mind when he steps forward to challenge Lieutenant Lai and critique the excess of state power. Later in the novel, Lieutenant Lai tells Liu that Yongwang community is the toughest nut to crack, because should the post-apocalyptic state resort to violence to force it to merge into the Chinese nation, the new state would lose its legitimacy altogether. Moreover, Lieutenant Lai is there only with two other ERA soldiers, it is Yongwang community that could have killed them all and announced independence. Luckily, the individuals of Yongwang choose not to break away, because they share Lieutenant Lai's commitment to pre-existing institutions such as the family and the state.

In both novels, the Chinese nation/state, inseparable from the nation, is imagined as an idealized family-like new collective formed by the individuals, one that may or may not transcend the latter. This new collective claims to prioritize the dignity of the individual, as long as she is not the other. Correspondingly, the new individual does not disembody herself from tradition. Instead, she experiments with tradition, which is not a set of tenets frozen in the past but a repository of resources to be creatively selected, adapted, and reformulated into new syntheses. Confucianism was not completely disabled and replaced by the Enlightenment structure of feeling and then the revolutionary one. In postsocialist China, thanks to the *guoxue* (national studies) fever, the Confucian tradition is very much alive and perhaps still evolving. And, it has been oscillating between the grasp of the state and its elites on the one hand, and the creativity of grassroots activists and artists on the other.

⁴⁷ Reproductive futurism defeated. Edelman, Lee. *No future: Queer theory and the death drive*. Duke University Press, 2004.

To conclude, I return to the digital literary platform of Jinjiang, where writers and readers of *danmei* gather to form an affective community or intimate public space.⁴⁸ I have demonstrated how the writers actively engage political issues in their romantic stories and how the readers enthusiastically debated these political visions, despite the tightening control of the state and greedy capture of the market. These young people have been labeled either as a hedonistic generation that is self-obsessed and politically apathetic or the “little pink,” mindless nationalists echoing official discourses. Although media scholars attempted to debunk the myth of the “little pink,” arguing that it was invented in social media to stigmatize women involved in politics, they presented homoerotic romance as an apolitical genre whereas the Jinjiang community as having nothing to do with politics.⁴⁹ The value of the new revolution plus love stories, in this light, is for the misrepresented and misunderstood young women and men to assert themselves, the *tianxia*-minded new individuals.

⁴⁸ Berlant, Lauren. *The female complaint: The unfinished business of sentimentality in American culture*. Duke University Press, 2008. Kong, Shuyu. “The ‘Affective Alliance’: ‘Undercover’, Internet Media Fandom, and the Sociality of Cultural Consumption in Postsocialist China.” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1–47. Kong, Shuyu. *Popular Media, Social Emotion and Public Discourse in Contemporary China*. vol. 117, Routledge, London;New York, NY;, 2014,

⁴⁹ Fang, Kecheng, and Maria Repnikova. "Demystifying “Little Pink”: The creation and evolution of a gendered label for nationalistic activists in China." *New Media & Society* (2017): 1461444817731923.