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Questioning Scientism and Chinese Postsocialist Secular Theodicy in Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem*

In "Star Trekking in China," Eriberto P. Lozada explains that science fiction (SF) primarily functions as imaginative secular theodicy in contemporary postsocialist China, providing striking narratives that accomplish at least two key cultural goals: 1) offering rational explanations for the failures of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century China to resist and defeat Western imperialism, including the expansionist agenda of Japan fueled by appropriations of Western industrial capitalism and imperialist ideologies, and 2) charting a future for Chinese nationalism in which China establishes and secures strength and respectability on the global socio-economic, scientific, and military stage. Through literary expression, SF provides a cultural foundation for scientism as the primary ideology informing the Chinese contemporary worldview which locates hope for a bright Chinese future in scientific materialism and technological positivism.

Although several Chinese SF writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries indeed exemplify this secular theodical framework, Liu Cixin, a celebrated contemporary Chinese SF author, represents a vanguard of self-reflexive change in contemporary Chinese SF. Liu explains, "Contemporary [Chinese] science fiction reflects much suspicion and anxiety about technological progress, and the futures portrayed in these works are dark and uncertain. Even if a bright future appears occasionally, it comes only after much suffering and a tortuous path" (365). In this paper, I will explore ways in which Liu complicates Chinese cultural faith in scientism and its ideological commitments to positivism in his Hugo Award winning *The Three-Body Problem*. I plan to sustain this thesis by discussing such questions as the following:

- How does Liu critique the Cultural Revolution, revealing its role in reducing free scientific inquiry to a means of ideological conformity and oppression, thus undermining the efficacy of science to follow empirical evidence wherever it leads in the name of unhindered knowledge construction?
- How does the novel raise serious doubts about the epistemological superiority and comprehensiveness of science?
- How does science in the novel function as a manipulative ideology that, ironically, undermines humanity's very faith in scientism, and can such manipulation ultimately lead to a restoration of pure science or simply a deeper rejection of science as an incomplete epistemology?
- How do the character arcs of key scientists in the novel reveal the existential bankruptcy of scientism?

Indeed, Liu does offer readers some characteristic elements of contemporary Chinese SF, namely advocating Chinese nationalism and advancing confidence in China's central role as "the Middle Kingdom" or "the Central Kingdom" in current global realities. More importantly, though, he provides a wonderfully imaginative and philosophically complex literary work that takes Chinese SF in new directions, challenging the very scientism at the foundation of SF's function in contemporary Chinese culture.

Works Cited

Liu, Cixin. "The Worst of All Possible Universes and the Best of All Possible Earths: *Three-Body* and Chinese Science Fiction." *Invisible Planets: An Anthology of Contemporary Science Fiction in Translation*, edited and translated by Ken Liu, Tor, 2016, pp. 361-67.

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