

Crossing the Boundaries: An Interview with Chinese SF Writer Xia Jia^①

Chiara Cigarini, Xia Jia

Abstract: The science fiction writer Xia Jia (autonym Wang Yao), is also a researcher and actress, and currently an associate professor at Xi'an Jiaotong University. Her production, well-known as “porridge science fiction”, softer than the “soft” one, is marked by a continuous boundary-crossing, which leads reality and fiction to chase each other and mingle together. This interview is conducted to shed lights on this prominent Chinese science fiction writer, and to better understand Chinese science fiction in a global setting. In the interview, the interviewer and interviewee address the problem of crossing the boundary between the sentimental and technological, reason and magic, history and future, international approach and Chinese roots, mainstream and marginalization, writing and translation, science fiction and life.

Key Words: Chinese science fiction; Xia Jia; crossing the boundaries

跨 界：中国科幻作家夏笳专访

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摘 要：科幻作家夏笳（本名王瑶）也是一名研究者和演员，目前在西安交通大学任职副教授。她的创作被称为“稀饭科幻”——比“软科幻”更软的科幻，也有着跨界流动的特征，其间现实与虚构相互追逐混融。本采访旨在进一步了解这位重要的中国科幻

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□ 探索与批评（第二辑）

作家，并在全球背景下更好地理解中国科幻。在本次采访中，采访者和受访者主要讨论了诸多跨界问题：情感与技术，理性与魔法，历史与未来，国际化手段与中国根源，主流与边缘，科幻写作、翻译与生活。

关键词：中国科幻 夏笳 跨界

Wang Yao(王瑶), known widely by her penname Xia Jia(夏笳), belongs to the *balinghou* generation of young writers—those who born in the 1980s. Celebrated for her “porridge science fiction”, Xia Jia addresses issues of traditional ethics and society through the sentimental and the technological. She is currently an associate professor at Xi’an Jiaotong University, having studied Physics at Beijing University, but getting a Ph. D. degree in Comparative Literature under the guidance of “academic star” Dai Jinhua (戴锦华). Domestically, Xia Jia has published science fiction collections such as *The Demon-Enslaving Flask* (《关妖精的瓶子》, 2012) and *A Time beyond Your Reach* (《你无法抵达的时间》, 2017), and many others published in Western venues including *Clarkesworld* and *Invisible Planets*. Beyond academia and publishing, her work has earned prestigious recognition, winning seven Galaxy Awards for Chinese Science Fiction (中国科幻银河奖) as well as six Nebula Awards for Science Fiction and Fantasy in Chinese (全球华语星云奖), which currently are the two most important literary prizes for science fiction in China. Xia Jia also wrote the screen for the science fiction short film *Parapax* (2007), in which she herself starred as a protagonist who bears three distinct identities across parallel universes.

On one of her recent visits to Italy in 2019, we had the opportunity to discuss some of her works and the world between life and magic, the past and the future, life and science fiction.

Chiara Cigarini: Many of your stories have been translated into English and your anthology has just been published in Italy (*Festa di Primavera* edited by Future Fiction). The American author Ken Liu, the first translator you worked with, once said “science fiction is the literature of dreams, and dreams always say something about the dreamer, and the dream interpreter”.

In your experience, what's the role played by the interaction between "the dreamer" and "the dream interpreter"?

Xia Jia: The collaboration between the writer and the translator is very important. Ken Liu and I translated each other's works and we corresponded a lot to discuss all the details and strategies during such works. We understand and respect each other's cultures; we appreciate each other's writings and capture the voices and connotations in those writings well; most importantly and luckily, we are both good enough writers in our own languages to interpret each other's dreams loyally and beautifully. Such collaboration is kind of most challenging and fascinating intercultural communication.

When translating my story, "A Retrospect to Remember a Spring Festival in 2044" (《2044 年春节纪事》), Ken brilliantly captured the delicate, bittersweet vibe of Chinese Spring Festival. He also chose a plain, humorous narrative style, which sounded like sharing stories happening to your own relatives and neighbors. Besides, as an experienced writer, Ken considered the target market and the interest of English readership as well. The original version is consisted of six flash stories. Worrying it might be too long to be published in a normal magazine, he suggested to prune one story to better fit the medium. As for the title, he suggested not to be so numerically accurate, since the year 2044 implied a predication of the future, which was not the purpose of the story. The final title is "Spring Festival: Happiness, Anger, Love, Sorrow, Joy", which I think fits better than the original one.

Chiara Cigarini: Han Song (韩松, b. 1965), one of the most famous Chinese science fiction writers, permeates his writing with ghastly atmospheres infused with the supernatural. Also other young writers like Fei Dao (飞刀, b.1983), whose style often reminds of fantastic stories, or Chen Qiufan (陈楸帆, b.1981), an author exploring the border between magic and religion, produce, like you, works with magical elements not explainable by reason. Why? Should we talk about science-fantasy or magical realism?

Xia Jia: Science-fantasy and magical realism are tricky terms. Science fiction readers mention them with a feeling like, they may be well-written stories, but not "hard" enough to be regarded as "proper" SF (very

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problematic criteria, which I would not argue about here). Meanwhile, critics praise the best works of such category as “metaphoric representation of reality”, implying that realism is supreme for literary writing, which is problematic as well. What I believe is that all speculative writings, no matter scientific, fantastic or magical realistic, provide us an estranged point of view to reflect on, rather than to reflect, the so-called “reality”, which is substantially the dominating ideology shared by the majority.

I’m basically materialistic. I don’t believe in gods, ghosts or supernatural things. I believe science has its boundaries, though. It’s both challenging and attracting for me to imagine how scientific and non-scientific elements encounter and interact with each other on the boundaries. I don’t write fantasy stories where people just use white magic to fulfill their wishes; I write narratives that have real technology in it, to explore how we could use it to improve people’s lives. At the same time, I’m always wondering how to explore the alternative possibilities outside the world governed by reason and technology, to envision how the cold rules can be broken by certain unimaginable power. In such stories, the magical elements, like ghosts or monsters, function as symbols of the repressed alterity, which contains the revolutionary potential.

Chiara Cigarini: *A Time beyond Your Reach* is the title of your latest collection of short stories, and as we can assume from the title, time is central not just for science fiction, but for your specific writings. What’s the role played by time in your stories?

Xia Jia: Let’s answer this question through three of my short stories included in that collection: the first one, “Eternal Summer Dream” (《永夏之梦》), follows a male immortal and a female time traveler meeting at various moments in history. It’s basically a romantic story, while what I try to explore is how these two radically different individuals comes to understand each other.

The second story “A Time Beyond Your Reach” concerns an innately tardy girl attracted by an innately swift boy, and her painful efforts to transcend the invisible boundary to get access to him, to become visible in his view. A story is kind of like “The Little Mermaid” or “Letter from an

Unknown Women” with science fiction elements.

Last but not least, my story “On Milo River” (《汨罗江上》), is a narrative centered around T-mail, a technology similar to E-mail, allowing users to send messages to the past and the future. This story is dedicated to my friend and fellow writer Liu Wenyang (柳文扬, b. 1970), who passed away in 2007. To relieve myself from the sadness, I imagined how things would be if I finally get a chance to correspond with him in my twilight years, talking about SF writing, life and death, time and possibilities.

In all the three stories, people live in different dimensions of time, experience their worlds diversely, and try to find ways to cross the boundaries of time. I’ve always been fascinated with the themes of “crossing the boundaries”, boundaries between different worlds, different cultures and different heterotopias.

Chiara Cigarini: You’re one of the most interesting young Chinese science fiction writers of a genre whose estranging “new setting” and “new things” are often set in the future. If in an history-oriented country like Italy, this dimension is sometimes perceived as an empty political slogan or as a distant imagination associated with SF movies rather than something approaching and real. The future in China is said to coincide with the present. Can you tell us what do you think about the future? Is it something you can build with your own hands, a place to maximize the space for free expression, or a long endless path toward Communism?

Xia Jia: As William Gibson said, “The future is already here—it’s just not very evenly distributed”. Look at, for example, the new app-based technologies such as *waimai* (affordable delivery food) and *taobao* (massive online retail). On one side they are very charming and convenient; on the other, they cause even more damage to the environment and push more workers to be controlled and exploited by global capitalism. When we complain about the looming prospects like air pollution, political changes, global warfare and the uneven distribution of resources, few of us know what responsibilities we should take for that, neither what plan we could follow to change that.

The difficulty is that there is no prepared answer. A better world would

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not come by itself. We cannot go back to the pre-modern time, and it's time to imagine different ways to live, to imagine some sustainable alternatives to our modern civilization, not only set in space, but here on Earth.

As a teacher and a science fiction writer, I feel it's my duty to encourage my readers and my students to think differently. For this purpose, many of my stories are developed from real questions which keep perplexing me and I try to give possible solutions. One such story is "Waiting for the Cloud" (《等云来》) (not published into English yet), a story based on my own experience as a volunteer teacher in a village school in Yunnan Province. Life there seems so incredibly remote from science fiction, while change seems so unthinkable. Dwelling on this topic for seven years, I finally came up with a solution, based on an imagined technology called LINGcloud, made up of components made from nano carbon and water molecules, allowing LINGcloud to float in the air like real clouds. This technology could store and transmit data, and it could change its shape, colour and texture at will to create a fantasy-like simulation by emulating all sorts of three-dimensional visual, auditory, olfactory and even tactile or sensory signals. In my story, a young female volunteer teacher brought a small piece of LINGcloud with her and traveled all the way to a village school to conduct a pedagogical experiment, to change the pupils' study environment. What is crucial here is not only the imagined technology itself but also how people make use of it. Such solution requires real imagination.

Chiara Cigarini: Your stories are imbued with elements taken from ancient Chinese philosophy, traditional customs and old tales; these fragments of the past appear here and there in your production, as the set of things that a grandfather could have passed down to her granddaughter. To say it briefly, another common theme of your stories is tradition. Is that right? What can you tell us about this?

Xia Jia: As Frederic Jameson puts it, "Science Fiction is generally understood as the attempt to imagine unimaginable futures. But its deepest subject may in fact be our own historical present". What happened in the past never die out, but keep haunting around as specters. Once we lose our understanding of the richness and the complexity of the history, our

imagination of the future would have no way to go but to shrink into the oversimplified, one-dimensional versions.

In my own writing, though most of the stories happen in the future, they are focused on the relationship between the old and the young, the future and the past, which is also a kind of “crossing the boundaries of time”. One approach, as I mentioned, is to introduce fantastic elements like ghosts and monsters into science fiction narratives, to call back the repelled, to revive the repressed. Another one I adopted more in recent years, is to span the intergenerational boundaries, to reevaluate the potentials hidden in the old.

My story “Tongtong’s Summer” (《童童的夏天》) was a contribution to *Upgraded*, a cyborg theme anthology edited by Neil Clarke. The story happened in a near future Chinese family, mainly between the grandfather and the granddaughter, depicting how the former became a cyborg whilst transforming the future of the humanity in a positive way. The inspiration came from my own grandparents as well as other old people I knew. They experienced wars and revolutions; they never lost hope even in their declining years. They were not old wastes to be eliminated, but real heroes in my view.

Chiara Cigarini: In your stories, China’s transformation into a futuristic country has been connected with the modernization process. Can you tell us more about it and how it is depicted in your writing?

Xia Jia: Science fiction in China started to develop in the early 20th century, energized by the hopes and the fears in the process of modernization. The first science fiction novel, *A Future of New China* (《新中国未来记》), was serialized in 1902. This work used a retrospective “future perfect” mode to sketch out how China had been metamorphosed from an ancient empire into a modern nation-state, through a series of political and economic reforms since 1902 to 1962. “To imagine an unimaginable future” is deeply rooted in the cultural-political practice of Chinese people, which requires not only new science and technology, but also the change of bodies and minds of citizens.

The biggest challenge today, as I mentioned, is to imagine alternatives to the real to write about possible solutions to problems brought about by modern civilization. I explored this topic in my “Chinese Encyclopedia” (《中

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国百科全书》) series, which depicted technological and social changes in near future China, such as future education in “Waiting for the Cloud”.

Chiara Cigarini: Science fiction writing has a long tradition of male domination. As we know, the majority masters in the Western science fiction are male, even if there was the prominent feminist science fiction writing emerging in the 1960s. And it is the same in China, as we see most of the post-80’s young science fiction writers are male too, not to mention the older generation. So, how does it feel to be a female writer in a male-dominated field? How do you envision the future of female Chinese science fiction?

Xia Jia: “Female science fiction” is another tricky term. Since the “great tradition” of science fiction is notoriously masculine, being tagged as “female” always implies discrimination and marginalization, which is even more true for the works being appraised as either “so hard and grand that doesn’t feel like by a woman’s hands” or “with outstanding female characteristics”. I used to reject to be emphasized as a female writer for this reason, but my mind changed in recent years. Your identity as a marginalized group of gender (or age, culture, social class or whatsoever) could be taken as an advantage to reflect on “the normal”, to embrace differences and to imagine alternatives. That is what I learned from the female masters like Ursula K. Le Guin and Octavia E. Butler.

The number of female science fiction writers in China has been dramatically increasing in the past three decades. What I’m happy to say is that their concerns and styles are more and more diverse, and it’s more and more difficult to conclude stereotyped “female characteristics” from their works. Female figures also play leading roles in publishing, cultural industry, academics research and fan community. I hope all of their contributions could be evaluated rightly without any gender discrimination. I also hope one day people would stop asking me questions like “how could a girl read/write science fiction?”

Chiara Cigarini: The title of your short story “If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler” (《寒冬夜行人》) reminds me of a story of the same name from the author Italo Calvino. What’s the role played by this writer in your writing?

Xia Jia: Calvino has influenced more than one generation of Chinese

literary youth. He let me know the power of human imagination, the charm of storytelling, as well as the playfulness of intertextuality. Many years ago I wrote a story entitled “Maka” (《马卡》), which adopted the similar structure of Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*. The main character sells stories for a living, who shows seven beginnings of different stories to his guests, but without any ending. It was actually a lazy way to make use of my unfinished stories, and I had fun from doing this.

As for my story “If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler”, it used to be part of a longer story “Crossing the River” (《涉江》), which puts together a series of online posts involving a fictional technology named “LINGmemorial”, and its main topic is how to remember the deceased in the digital age. The narrator in “If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler”, a librarian, tells an extremely strange method that a group of readers chose to commemorate an unfamed poet. So you may agree that not only this story but also “Crossing the River” itself is of a very Calvino style.

Chiara Cigarini: You’re not only a science fiction author, but also a professor, a Ph. D. graduated in Comparative Literature from Beijing University with a dissertation on Chinese science fiction since 1990s, and you’re recently spending a year as a visiting scholar in the U.S. at University of California, Riverside. Can you tell us something about your most recent research there? How does it feel to be the subject and object of the same research analysis?

Xia Jia: Basically I have been following an approach of Marxism science fiction studies and cultural materialism to inspect Chinese science fiction, to interpret its historical condition as well as its cultural-political potentials. Recently I’m trying to learn more about science fiction from cultures other than WASP tradition in order to put Chinese science fiction in a bigger picture. Meanwhile I’m preparing for my science fiction curriculum in China.

I’ve been using my penname Xia Jia for my science fiction publication, as well as my autonym Wang Yao for academic publication. But sometimes these two identities are not easy to be distinguished clearly. Last summer I was invited to be the discussant at a panel on Chinese science fiction, where one paper by an American researcher was on my works. It was a bit embarrassing

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but also interesting to respond to such discussion. Such process provided me another point of view to reexamine my own works, both broadening and deepening my own understanding of certain topics.

Chiara Cigarini: In the present commercial world, literary production is closely intermingled with the market in many facets. With the help of media development, some Chinese writers have made a big money with their writings. In your opinion, what's the current relationship between the market and science fiction writing? Has the market demand impacted upon your production?

Xia Jia: Science fiction market in China has been exploding. With multiple platforms and medias, new modes of production of science fiction are emerging, while the old ones shaped in the 1990s, primarily centered around the only science fiction magazine *Science Fiction World* (《科幻世界》), are declining. Some people believe that Chinese science fiction is stepping into “the multimedia age” from “the magazine age”, just like what American science fiction has undergone in the past decades. In that case, the forms and even the concepts of “science fiction writing” will dramatically transform.

Right now personally I don't feel too much pressure from the market. Science fiction for me is more like a way of life rather than a way for a living.

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