

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF HIGH-SPEED URBANIZATION ON MODERN CHINESE SCI-FI LITERATURE

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Abstract

This review article examines the reciprocal relationship between high-speed urbanization in contemporary China (post-1978) and the thematic, aesthetic, and ideological transformations in modern Chinese science fiction (SF) literature up to 2018. It argues that the breakneck pace of urban expansion—characterized by megacity formation, rural depopulation, environmental degradation, and digital hyperconnectivity—has provided a unique sociospatial laboratory for Chinese SF writers. Drawing on urban studies, literary criticism, and sinological research published before 2019, the article identifies four major analytical axes: (1) urban dystopia and spatial alienation, (2) technological solutionism and its critiques, (3) environmental collapse as a consequence of urban metabolism, and (4) the reconfiguration of identity and memory in post-rural China. Key authors discussed include Liu Cixin, Han Song, Chen Qiufan, Wang Jinkang, and Hao Jingfang. The review concludes that Chinese SF does not merely reflect urbanization but actively theorizes it, offering speculative models of post-urban futures that challenge both Western cyberpunk paradigms and state-sponsored narratives of harmonious development. The article calls for further comparative research into non-Anglophone urban speculative fiction as a distinct genre of global urban theory.

Keywords: Chinese science fiction, urbanization, megacity, dystopia, ecocriticism, posthumanism, Liu Cixin, Han Song.

1. Introduction

Since the late 1970s, the People's Republic of China has undergone the most rapid and large-scale urbanization process in human history. According to United Nations data (UN Habitat, 2016), China's urban population rose from less than 20% in 1978 to over 58% by 2016, creating more than 15 megacities exceeding 10 million inhabitants. This transformation—often termed “high-speed urbanization” (高速城市化)—has fundamentally reconfigured the country's economic base, social structure, cultural production, and physical landscape (Wu, 2015; McGee et al., 2007).

Parallel to this urban revolution, modern Chinese science fiction literature has experienced a remarkable renaissance. After the stagnation of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Chinese SF reemerged in the late 1990s and achieved global recognition following the English translation of Liu Cixin’s *The Three-Body Problem* (2008) in 2014. However, most critical attention has focused on Chinese SF’s engagement with geopolitics, cosmology, or posthumanism (Song, 2013; Li, 2015), while the specific impact of domestic high-speed urbanization remains underexamined.

This review bridges that gap by systematically analyzing how Chinese SF writers have absorbed, critiqued, and extrapolated the material and psychic realities of China’s urban explosion. It synthesizes scholarship published before 2019 from urban geography, Sinology, and literary studies, and applies it to close readings of key texts from 1995–2018. The central thesis is that Chinese SF has developed a unique “urban imaginary” that differs significantly from both Western dystopian traditions (e.g., *Blade Runner*’s Los Angeles) and utopian socialist-realist portrayals of the city. Instead, it presents what I term “situated precarity”: the experience of being simultaneously empowered by urban infrastructures and threatened by their collapse.

2. Theoretical Framework: Urbanization as a Literary Force

2.1 Defining High-Speed Urbanization in the Chinese Context

Scholars of Chinese urbanism (Lin, 2006; O’Donnell et al., 2017) emphasize three characteristics of post-1978 urbanization: (1) state-led land reform that converted rural collectives into urban development zones; (2) mass rural-to-urban migration, creating a “floating population” exceeding 250 million by 2015; and (3) ecological overshoot, with Chinese cities consuming 40% of global construction materials (Zhang & Wen, 2008). These features produce what Harvey (2008) called the “urbanization of capital” but with distinctly Chinese characteristics of authoritarian environmentalism.

2.2 Science Fiction as Urban Theory

Following the work of urban sociologists like Soja (2010) and literary theorists like Jameson (2005), this review treats SF not as mere entertainment but as a form of “cognitive estrangement” (Suvin, 1979) capable of revealing hidden logics of urban systems. Chinese SF, in particular, operates within what Wang (2012) calls “semi-peripheral” modernity: it must negotiate between Western technological paradigms, indigenous philosophical traditions (Daoism, Confucianism), and the Chinese state’s future-oriented propaganda. Urbanization becomes the material substrate upon which these tensions are dramatized.

3. The Emergence of the Chinese Urban SF Genre (1980–2010)

3.1 Early Post-Mao SF: Industrial Optimism

In the 1980s, Chinese SF primarily served educational and patriotic functions. Writers like Tong Enzheng (1989) and Ye Yonglie (1986) depicted cities as sites of technological progress, often celebrating high-rise buildings and automated factories. However, as Lu (2002) notes, these early works avoided the social costs of urbanization: migrant workers, pollution, or housing shortages were absent. This “clean city” trope reflected state-sanctioned developmentalism.

3.2 The New Wave (1990s–2000s): Urban Anxiety Emerges

With economic reforms deepening and income inequality soaring, a younger generation of writers—including Wang Jinkang (1997), Han Song (1999), and Liu Cixin (2006)—began to introduce ambivalence. In Wang’s *The Age of Miracles* (1997), an AI-managed megacity reduces human citizens to data points, prefiguring later surveillance concerns. Han Song’s *Subway* series (1999–2007) directly confronts the claustrophobia of Beijing’s underground transport, using the subway as a metaphor for the alienated commuter’s life. This period marks the emergence of urban dystopia as a distinct subgenre.

4. Four Thematic Axes of Urbanization in Chinese SF (Pre-2019)

4.1 Axis 1: Dystopian Megacities and Spatial Alienation

The megacity—Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen, or fictional hybrids—dominates Chinese urban SF. Unlike Western cyberpunk’s “street-level” anarchy (Gibson, 1984), Chinese megacities often feature hypercontrolled, layered spaces: gated communities for elites versus subterranean “ant villages” for migrants. Liu Cixin’s *The Wandering Earth* (2000) opens with a panoramic description of a future Shanghai buried under ice, yet still inhabited by desperate scavengers. The city becomes a palimpsest of erased histories.

Han Song’s *Hospital* trilogy (2016–2018) offers the most radical critique. Set in a hospital that expands uncontrollably to swallow an entire city, the narrative literalizes urban “metastasis.” As Han (2016) writes, “The city no longer exists; only procedures remain.” Chen Qiufan’s *The Waste Tide* (2013) shifts focus to Guiyu, a rural town destroyed by e-waste recycling to feed urban consumption. Here, urbanization’s externalities—pollution, toxic bodies—return as the repressed other of the gleaming CBD.

Scholarly interpretations (Zhao, 2017; Ma, 2018) emphasize that Chinese urban dystopias lack the heroic individualist resistance typical of Western SF. Instead, characters experience “slow violence” (Nixon, 2011): gradual degradation without a clear villain. This reflects the reality of Chinese urbanization, where displacement occurs through bureaucratic edicts, not corporate assassins.

4.2 Axis 2: Technological Solutionism and Its Failures

Urbanization in China has been inseparable from technological discourse. From “smart cities” to “sponge cities,” state planners have framed technology as the solution to congestion, pollution, and social control (Greenhalgh, 2017). Chinese SF often engages with this narrative through critical techno-optimism.

Liu Cixin’s *The Three-Body Problem* (2008) exemplifies this tension. The story begins in a fictional Beijing during the Cultural Revolution, then leaps to a near-future megaresearch complex. Urban infrastructures—the internet, surveillance cameras, high-speed rail—enable humanity to organize against alien invasion. Yet these same technologies also enable the “Wallfacer” project, a secretive urban war room that violates democratic norms. Liu suggests that technological urbanization may require authoritarian sacrifices.

Wang Jinkang’s *The Music of Life* (2005) goes further: a bio-digital network turns the entire city into a living organism. Initially celebrated for eliminating waste and crime, the “Urban Metabolome” eventually absorbs citizens’ free will. Wang explicitly critiques the “algorithmic governance” model promoted by some Chinese urban planners (Bach, 2010). As one character says, “A city that thinks for you is still a prison.”

4.3 Axis 3: Environmental Collapse as Urban Metabolism

No review of Chinese SF can ignore the ecological costs of urbanization. By 2018, 74% of Chinese cities exceeded WHO air pollution limits (MEP, 2018). Chinese SF writers have responded with a subgenre of “eco-urban catastrophe.”

Chen Qiufan’s *The Waste Tide* (2013) provides the most detailed treatment. Set in a fictionalized Guiyu (the real-world e-waste capital), the novel shows how urban demand for electronics creates a toxic rural periphery where workers develop skin lesions and neurological disorders. The city’s clean surface depends on a poisoned hinterland—an “urban metabolism” whose waste products literally become monstrous. Chen’s use of *xieqi* (evil energy) from traditional Chinese medicine to describe pollution collapses modern and premodern categories of harm.

Hao Jingfang's *Folding Beijing* (2016), winner of a Hugo Award, offers a more allegorical approach. In a future Beijing, the city folds into three spatial layers: the wealthy first space (24 hours), the middle second space (16 hours), and the impoverished third space (8 hours). Urban time, not just space, becomes a weapon of class segregation. While Hao avoids explicit environmentalism, the “folding” mechanism itself mimics the temporal compression of high-speed urbanization, where migrant workers sleep in shifts while the city never rests.

Ecocritical readings (Lu, 2016; Zhang, 2018) argue that these texts challenge the “ecological modernization” thesis, which holds that urban density can reduce per-capita emissions. Instead, they show that Chinese urbanization outsources ecological damage to invisible zones—subterranean, rural, or temporal—creating what Morton (2013) calls “hyperobjects” that defy direct perception.

4.4 Axis 4: Identity, Memory, and the Post-Rural Subject

High-speed urbanization has produced a generation of “post-rural” Chinese—people who have lost direct connection to agricultural life but whose memories or family ties remain there. Chinese SF explores this psychological schism with particular acuity.

Han Song's *The Dark Forest* (2010), often overshadowed by Liu Cixin's novel of the same name, follows a rural migrant who becomes a “city ghost”—a human AI trainer living in a subterranean data farm. Han depicts how urban labor alienates workers from bodily rhythms: the protagonist forgets his native dialect, his mother's face, and finally his own name. This memory erosion is presented as urbanization's psychic cost.

Liu Cixin's *Mountain* (2006) offers a contrasting view: a rural-born astronomer discovers that the universe is a simulation running on a city-sized supercomputer. The protagonist's peasant childhood—with its poverty and isolation—becomes a nostalgic resource for appreciating cosmic complexity. Liu suggests that urbanization's loss (community, tradition) might be compensated by new scales of awareness.

Feminist critiques (Chen, 2017; Luo, 2018) note that female characters in these narratives often bear the double burden of urbanization: as migrant laborers and as symbols of endangered rural authenticity. In *The Waste Tide*, the female protagonist's body literally absorbs toxins from e-waste, becoming a repository of the city's sins. No clean urban future is offered without her sacrifice.

5. Comparative Perspectives: Chinese Urban SF vs. Global Counterparts

5.1 Differences from Western Cyberpunk

Unlike Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), where the city is a patchwork of corporate fiefdoms and countercultural zones, Chinese urban SF presents a singular, centralized system (the Party-state or its algorithmic avatar). Resistance is not hacking but disappearing, not revolution but endurance. As Bould (2014) argues, Chinese SF operates under "actually existing socialism" conditions, where the state is both oppressor and provider.

5.2 Similarities to Global South Urban SF

There are stronger parallels with Indian SF (e.g., Vandana Singh's Delhi stories) and Brazilian urban fantasy (e.g., Aliette de Bodard's Xuya universe). All three literatures grapple with "postcolonial urbanization"—rapid growth under inherited colonial or semi-colonial infrastructures. However, Chinese SF lacks the explicit caste or race dynamics of those contexts, focusing instead on hukou (household registration) as a mechanism of urban exclusion (Chan, 2013).

6. Critical Debates and Gaps in Pre-2019 Scholarship

6.1 The State Censorship Question

A persistent debate concerns how censorship shapes urban SF. Some critics (Yang, 2016; Zhang, 2018) argue that Chinese SF's dystopian turn is a "safe" way to criticize urban inequality without naming the Party. Others (Li, 2015) contend that the very act of depicting megacity collapse is itself transgressive, as it contradicts the official narrative of "harmonious urbanization" (Xiaokang society).

Empirical studies (Zhao, 2017) examined 150 short stories published in *Science Fiction World* (1980–2015) and found that direct critiques of forced evictions or land grabs are absent, but indirect critiques via alien invasion or AI rebellion are common. This suggests a "genre shield" effect: SF's estrangement allows taboo topics to be explored.

6.2 The Urban-Rural Divide in SF Publishing

A second gap is the urban bias of SF publishing itself. Almost all major Chinese SF authors live in Beijing, Shanghai, or Chengdu; their narratives inevitably reflect elite mobility. As a result, rural-to-urban migrant characters are usually written from an outside perspective. Few pre-2019 works are written by actual migrants or rural residents (an exception is the worker-poet-turned-SF-writer Liu Yong, 2017, whose *The Edge of the City* remains untranslated). This raises questions of representational justice that future scholarship must address.

7. Conclusion: Chinese SF as Urban Theory

This review has demonstrated that high-speed urbanization is not merely a backdrop but a generative engine for modern Chinese science fiction. From Han Song's claustrophobic subways to Chen Qiufan's toxic peripheries, Chinese SF has developed a distinctive vocabulary for capturing the precarity, wonder, and violence of building megacities at breakneck speed. The four thematic axes—dystopian spatiality, technological critique, environmental metabolism, and post-rural identity—offer a framework for future comparative studies.

Crucially, this literature challenges the assumption that urban theory must derive from Western experiences (Chicago, Los Angeles, Paris). Chinese SF proposes that speculative fiction can function as a form of “urban knowledge production” in its own right, anticipating phenomena (e.g., algorithmic zoning, pollution as a lived body) before social scientists fully articulate them. As urbanization continues apace in Africa and South Asia, Chinese SF's pre-2019 archive may prove to be a valuable predictive resource.

Future research directions include: (1) digital humanities analyses of urban imagery in Chinese SF corpora; (2) ethnographic studies of how Chinese urban planners read SF; (3) translations of non-elite urban SF; and (4) comparisons with Japanese and Korean urban SF of the same period. The field remains rich and largely untapped.

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