FAFNIR – NORDIC JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY RESEARCH
JOURNAL.FINFAR.ORG

# Time Travel, Alternate History, and Chronopolitics in the "The New Wave" of Chinese Science Fiction

*Erik Mo Welin*

*Abstract:* The focus of this article is a small body of texts within "The New Wave" of Chinese science fiction, which emerged in the 1990s and 2000s. More specifically, I discuss two texts which can be regarded as variations of time travel and alternate history, and which challenge the still hegemonic, unilinear, teleological time of the Chinese nation through time travel and the construction of multiple historical timelines. Through analysing the alternate histories and time travel stories "Watching the Boat at the South Lake Together" and "Shanghai 1938 – a Memory" by contemporary writers Baoshu and Han Song respectively, I explore how fictional texts can challenge the homogenous unidirectional temporality of national teleological time by introducing a contingent temporality into historical metanarratives.

*Keywords:* alternate history, chronopolitics, Chinese science fiction, time travel, Han Song, Baoshu

## 1. Introduction

In Baoshu's "Watching the Boat at South Lake Together" (2011), a time traveller from the year 2051 travels back to the year 1921 to witness the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in Jiaxing, outside of Shanghai. During his visit, however, he unexpectedly runs into another time traveller from a parallel universe, whose timeline contains a different history: it is revealed to the reader that the protagonist is, in fact, travelling from a timeline in which Mao Zedong never became the founder of New China.

 ISSN 2342-2009. *Fafnir*, vol. 9, iss. 2, 2022, pp. 82–97. 

Although such variations of time travel narratives featuring alternate histories and timelines are common in Anglo-Saxon science fiction, in the Chinese SF-tradition, known examples are relatively few and they have not had a prominent presence in the genre until quite recently. In fact, even though time and temporality were significant elements during the genre's emergence in the early 20th century[1], often featuring future narratives of a stronger and more prosperous China (D. Wang, "Fin-De-Siècle" 301–12), SF engaging with historical difference almost completely disappeared during the Maoist period (1949–1976) (Baoshu, "Foreign Lands" 135–37). Likewise, although the brief boom of science fiction during the "Post Mao Thaw" (1976–1983) included some examples of time travel,[2] the SF published during this period mostly featured stories focused on development of new technology in near-future settings (Li 127), and more radical experimentation with temporality was not a significant feature (Baoshu, "Foreign Lands" 135–38).

The fact that time travel narratives and narratives of radically other futures (or pasts) are relatively underrepresented in much of the Chinese SF-tradition can be explained by the close relationship between time and politics in 20th century China. During the Late Qing-period (1849–1911), the old cyclical notion of time represented by the dynastic histories was challenged and eventually replaced by a dominantly linear conception of time (Kwong 157–90). This teleological notion of historical time was tied to the nation building project of catapulting China into a utopian future (Duara 4). As Wang Fansen has shown, "the future" (weilai) emerged as a dominant temporal concept in Chinese political discourse and became increasingly politicised during the first decades of the 20th century (64–71). During the Maoist period, teleological time was represented by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the future was monopolised. In practice, the CCP enforced a time regime on its citizens by cultivating a "time-consciousness", where the value of time derived solely from devotion to the revolutionary enterprise (Kan 556), and by imposing teleological time through chronopolitical campaigns, such as "The Great Leap Forward", where China was to "surpass England within fifteen years and to catch up with America within twenty years" (Y. Wang 28). In this context, visits to alternate futures (or pasts) become politically problematic, since they risk destabilising the already determined future (Baoshu, "Foreign lands" 136–37).

Although Chinese politics began loosening up after Mao's death in 1976 and during the period of reform and opening up in the 1980s, it was not until the 1990s that Chinese science fiction began yet again experimenting more widely with radically different temporalities. Time travel narratives became a prominent feature of the genre, including Liu Xingshi's ground-breaking "Wuzhongshan chuanqi" ("The Legend of Wuzhong Mountain", 1991), in which an archeologist travels back to the premodern past and directly interacts with various historical personages, leaving his mark on the historical records

[1] During this period, works of SF were labelled "science novels" (kexue xiaoshuo). For a discussion on the genre in the context of Late Qing China, see Isaacsson, *Celestial Empire: The Emergence of Chinese Science Fiction* (2017).

[2] For example, Zheng Wenguang's 1983 novel *Zhanshen de houyi* ("The Descendants of Mars", 1983) included time travel from the future year of 2083 back to the present of 1983. For a discussion on the time travel aspect of this novel, see Li (44–53). See also: Baoshu, "Foreign Lands" (137–38), which argues that the novel, while employing time travel as a narrative device, still registers little historical difference between "the future" of 2083 and the present of 1983.

(Baoshu, "Foreign lands" 139). Most significantly, there was the emergence of what Mingwei Song has called "The New Wave" of Chinese science fiction, which included writers such as Liu Cixin, Han Song, Wang Jinkang, and Baoshu, among others (Song 8).[3] Time travel, future histories, and apocalyptic narratives are common in this body of work, and authors also began experimenting with alternate histories and counterfactuals. Particularly the latter form had attracted little (if any) previous attention in China, including in the Late Qing period (D. Wang, "When History Declines" 8).

The re-emergence of this multiplicity of temporalities in the science fiction of the 1990s can be explained by a variety of cultural and political factors. Although Mao died in 1976, it was not until the crackdown on Tiananmen Square in 1989 that the legitimacy of state-sponsored socialist utopianism was more widely questioned (Song 8). Following Deng Xiaoping's "Southern Tour" in 1992, the economic reforms initiated in the 1980s were more widely and thoroughly implemented across all strata of society, which cultural theorist Jason McGrath points to as a major turning point (ch. 1). In particular, the emergence of entertainment media contributed to the emergence of private temporalities in general discourse, "thus fragmenting and dispersing the national space and time created by the official media" (Sun 26). These changes also opened for wider political and ideological debates from the 1990s (Huters 23–24), which continued throughout the 2000s.[4] The emergence of the internet, importantly, allowed for more spaces of publication and circulation of texts (Feng).

In such a "post-socialist" context (McGrath ch. 1),[5] the CCP could no longer completely dominate the field of temporal discourse. However, the CCP continued to enforce its hegemonic temporal order of linear teleological time, which remained the source of its legitimacy, and continued to police temporal discourses through an immense propaganda apparatus.[6] Above all, the regime has kept imposing teleological time in the form of narratives of national modernisation, which "assume … unshakable authority and subsume … all rhythms of the society into one uniform pace and tempo" (Y. Wang 35). In other words, also in the post-socialist context, as Kehoe notes, temporality in the form of teleological narratives still "represents a powerful political resource that reduces heterogeneous temporal experiences to a single, shared trajectory of unilinear progress in order to consolidate order and control" (1135). The official narrative of Chinese modern history and the history of the CCP have been laid out in a political document from 1981, which remains a central and unquestionable version of history (Barme 31). More recently, propaganda films

[3] Song writes: "I have borrowed the concept of the "new wave" from Anglo-American SF history to point to the subversive, cutting-edge literary experiment that characterises the works of those new authors who have become the main voices in Chinese science fiction since the beginning of the twenty-first century" (8).

[4] For an overview of the ideological debates inside China during this period, see Cheek et al., *Voices from the Chinese Century: Public Intellectual Debate from Contemporary China* (2019).

[5] Post-socialism is the term McGrath employs to describe the transition from state socialism to a market society. To McGrath, this transition is characterised by the processes of shichanghua (marketisation), duoyuanhua (pluralisation), gerenhua (individualisation), and fenhua (division, differentiation, disaggregation) (ch. 1).

[6] For an overview of the Chinese propaganda apparatus, see David Shambaugh, "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy."

like *Jian guo da ye* (*The Founding of a Republic,* 2009) and *Jian dang wei ye* (*Beginning of the Great Revival,* 2011) continued to enforce this version of history (Veg 42) and its underlying conception of teleological time. Notably, the sensitive nature of time travel narratives and the political importance of maintaining control over temporal discourse became explicitly clear when China's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) decided to ban the popular time travel sub-genre "chuanyue"[7] from television, after a surge of such dramas during the 2000s (Rojas 1). In brief, the Chinese case aptly illustrates Helge Jordheim's claim that "time is also a question of power, the power to control movements, to decide about beginnings and endings, to set the pace, to give the rhythm. In other words, how to organise time … is intrinsically linked to questions of power and government" (510).

In this context, time travel and alternate histories can be regarded as potentially chronopolitically subversive. The presence of alternate histories and counterfactuals are perhaps the most radical element. Above all, as Elana Gomel notes, alternate history narrates a contingent temporality, "which presupposes the endless malleability of history, the radical distinction between the future and the past, and the unlimited human agency to effect change" (17; cf. Older's prefatory in this issue). Rather than a unilinear, homogenous temporality, the contingent temporality of the alternate history tends to narrate a plural, multidirectional temporality, which is in direct opposition to the unilinear (highly deterministic), teleological temporal order. Moreover, alternate histories are also genetic in the sense that they tend to gravitate towards the genesis of history (Hellekson, "Introduction"), often depart from a "moment of divergence", and explore an alternate historical trajectory that stems from this origin (Duncan).

Alternate history is often combined with time travel; however, in the cases of these texts, time travel is not merely a means for the characters to access alternative pasts or timelines, but it also functions as a narrative strategy. In *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative*, David Wittenberg notes that although narrative jumps in time occur in all kinds of narratives, time travel manages to bring these jumps to the reader's attention by literalising them, making them into a machine or a device (9–10). For the purposes of the present investigation, this is particularly important in terms of how time travel is related to the past and pre-existing metanarratives; more specifically, time travel narratives can bring attention to the way the past is reconstructed and manipulated from the present. Wittenberg points out that "In time travel fiction, the fundamental historiographical question – how is the past reconstructed by or within the present? – becomes a literal topos, is told as a tale, or is enacted by a real person seated in a vehicle or machine" (18). Although these observations might first and foremost seem to be of interest to narrative theorists, they become highly political when applied in the Chinese context where historical narratives are tightly controlled and manipulated by the political regime. In addition, time travel as a narrative strategy is significant in the sense that it reveals how an individual subject relates to collective temporalities. Fredric Jameson has noted science fiction's tendency to explore tensions between collective and individual temporalities, which he calls "existential time" and "historical time" (7). As already noted, in the period

[7] Literally: "crossing over" (Rojas 1).

following 1989, the private sphere and individual temporalities have re-emerged in the Chinese cultural sphere. Considering that "contingency is central to the way we understand our own life-choices" (Gomel 83), I am also interested in exploring not merely the collective temporalities in these texts, but also the ways individual subjects relate to these temporalities in the post-1989 context.

In the following, I will engage in the close-reading of two texts, both of which feature variations of time travel and alternate history. They are authored by the writers Han Song and Baoshu respectively. Han Song is a journalist by trade, and employed at China's central news agency *Xinhua* (Isaacson, "Han Song" 4). He has made himself known for writing "intensely political" dystopian allegories of Chinese contemporary reality (Liu, "Han Song" 111–12), as in his novel *Ditie* (*Subway*, 2011). Although he has gained plenty of attention from critics (Song; Healey), less attention has been paid to the way his texts engage with temporality, in particular through his use of time travel and alternate history. Baoshu belongs to a younger generation of writers that emerged in the late 2000s and early 2010s. After gaining his breakthrough with the fan fiction novel *Santi X* (*The Redemption of Time,* 2010),[8] Baoshu has written numerous works in the time travel and alternate history sub-genres. In 2014, he won the Chinese *Xingyun Award* for his *Shijian zhi xu (Ruins of Time)* (Liu, "Baoshu" 149), in which the whole world is caught in a twenty-hour time-loop (Baoshu, *Ruins*). Although Baoshu has sometimes denied that his writings have any political intention ("Author's Note" 222), some of his best works, as the present investigation will show, traverse (chrono)political terrain.

In the subsequent analysis, I will read Baoshu's short story "Yiqi qu kan nanhu chuan" ("Watching the Boat at South Lake Together"), which was originally published in the online magazine *Xinhuanjie* ("New Magic World") in 2011 and has never been published in print. Next, I will read Han Song's "Shanghai yijiusanba de jiyi" ("Shanghai 1938 – a Memory"), which was originally published online on the author's own social media platform and later published in print in 2017 (Baoshu, "Essential", 402–4).[9]

## 2. Time travel, narrativity, and narrative manipulation in Baoshu's "Watching the Boat at South Lake Together"

Published shortly after the release of the propaganda film *Beginning of the Great Revival* in 2011, Baoshu's "Watching the Boat at South Lake Together" centres on the protagonist Lu Ming, who travels from the year 2051 back to 1921 to witness the founding of the Communist Party in Jiaxing, outside of Shanghai. During the trip, he unexpectedly runs into another time traveller, a young woman named Xiaoyou, who has come to witness the event from the year 2081. Although the two time-travellers initially assume that they are coming from the same timeline, it is eventually revealed that they are from different timelines. Whereas Xiaoyou comes from the implied reader's timeline, the protagonist Lu Ming comes from a timeline with a different historical trajectory. Most

[8] This novel was written as a sequel to Liu Cixin's *Three Body Problem* trilogy (2008–2010) and originally published online.

[9] All quotations from the two texts in this article are my own translations.

importantly, in Lu Ming's timeline, "the great founder of our republic" (2) is not Mao Zedong, but the less known Communist leader Zhang Guotao.

To begin with, the story employs time travel to illuminate how the teleological temporal order is imposed by narratives. As noted, David Wittenberg points to how time travel narratives tend to literalise narrative devices and plots that normally reorder the storyline only in terms of its narrative structure. Baoshu's text employs this strategy to bring attention to the regulation of historical narratives by pointing to the "regulation" of time travel within the narrative. In the story, different "points in time" (shidiandian) in the history of China become a literal topos, which the characters are able to "visit" (zaofang). In the story, the protagonist Lu Ming has been granted the opportunity to travel back in time, to the founding of the Communist Party outside of Shanghai in 1921 since "the nation had a favourable policy, a few outstanding students are selected to travel in time free of charge, as a special encouragement" (1). However, significantly, the time-travellers are only allowed to travel to destinations that serve the purpose of "nationalistic education" (aiguo jiaoyu*)*, including, for instance, "the heroic undertaking of our nation's taikonauts when they first put the national flag on the moon", "the unification of China by Qin Shihuang", or "the founding ceremony of the State" (kaiguo dadian) (1). These references to both factual and fictional national glories and feats are a reference to the glorification of the nation in historical narratives, official discourse, and education. The story brings attention not only to how historical narratives are employed to enhance nationalist sentiments, but also to how certain historical events and periods are excluded from such narratives in official discourse. As the narrator-protagonist points out,

> The early history of the Party and the Republic had a large number of restricted zones. The Department for Management of Time exercised strict control over it, and even used methods from physics to close off certain contact points in time. The places ordinary people like us were allowed to visit were certain to be without any political problems. (6)

As we can see from the quote above, politically sensitive periods in the Chinese history are here literalised and made into actual topoi that time travellers are stopped from visiting by a government authority; the access is literally manipulated by political actors. Wittenberg suggests that time travel can be regarded as a "narratological laboratory", in which narrative configurations are literalised and made visible (9–10). Baoshu's story is an example of how such literalisation can take on a political dimension in the Chinese context; in other words, it points to the way "the past is reconstructed by or within the present" (18) and serves to expose the use of narrative practices and manipulation for political ends.

## 3. Contingency and national teleological time in "Watching the Boat at South Lake Together"

Baoshu's text not only reveals how narratives are manipulated for political reasons, it also subverts the teleological time of the nation by introducing contingency. As noted, alternate history gravitates towards the origin of history,

and the text utilises this to challenge the temporal order by exposing and subverting the relationship between telos and origin. Qingxin Lin has pointed to the relationship between origin and telos in the imposition of teleological time in 20th century China. As the author points out, in this context, "the construction of the myth of origin and the myth of telos is essential. A lofty origin justifies the beauty of the telos and a beautiful telos, in turn, justifies the loftiness of the origin" (102). In this way, a dialectic between the origin and telos is constructed: the origin inaugurates a "new time" whose complete significance will be fulfilled in the future, as one approaches the telos.

Baoshu's story also repeats this scheme. In the story, as noted, Lu Ming travels back in time to witness the founding of the Communist Party in Jiaxing, outside of Shanghai, in 1921. The overlapping of the narrative of the CCP and the teleological time of the nation is evident from the fact that the narrative makes clear the protagonist has returned not only to the founding of the CCP but also to the origin of "modern China". This was the time when the "ancient dynasty had already been completely shattered by modernity" and when "the iron heel of great powers constantly tread[ed] on this ancient Eastern nation"(1), and China was plagued by famine, warlords, and disunity. It was also a time when "all kinds of new ideas and political campaigns were coming from the West, providing this ancient nation new hope" (1). To finally connect the origin of the CCP to the origin of modern China, the narrator points out that "this little lake was the *birth-place of new hope*" (1, emphasis added). The fact that the narrator here points to the event of the founding of the CCP as the "birth-place of new hope" clearly suggests that this is not merely the birthplace of the CCP, but also the beginning of the national teleological time. In sum, by allowing the protagonist to return to the origin of the national teleological time, as conceived by the revolutionary narrative in the official discourse, the story positions itself firmly within the teleological time of the nation.

Nonetheless, the narrative subverts this teleological time by configuring an alternate timeline and introducing contingency. The "moment of divergence" turns out to be when Mao Zedong is captured by a local militia in the Chinese countryside in the late 1920s and killed while attempting to escape; as a consequence, Zhang Guotao rises to prominence within the Communist Party in Lu Ming's timeline and becomes the founder of the "Chinese Socialist Republic", instead of the "People's Republic of China" (14). To explain the presence of the alternate timeline, the narrator-protagonist builds on the "many worlds hypothesis" in quantum physics and concludes that "because of the uncertainty of quantum particles, the occurrence of one event could produce many different results, and all possible results would form its own universe" (14). This notion of contingency changes Lu Ming's perspective on the historical event. Lu Ming realises that even though the founders of the Communist Party are right before their eyes, "they [the founders of the CCP] *could have not been here*" (15, emphasis added); in other words, the sacred "origin" in the scheme of the configuration of teleological time dissolves. In the newly introduced contingent temporality, time appears as a "never ending network of branches" with "an unlimited number of directions and points of divergence to choose from" (17). For these reasons, "there was actually no such thing as a fixed fate" and in fact, for these individuals, "there was still an infinite amount of possibilities … the future was open for them" (17). Hence, Lu Ming also sees a "tragic element" in the Communist leaders' commitment to teleological time.

Indeed, they still firmly believed that there was "only one future of the world … one direction" and were convinced that they "already grasped the direction history had taken – society evolves along a single line of progression, through millions of years, from one stage to another, while finally inevitably reaching Communism" (17). In this way, the story narrates a conflict between a contingent temporality and the teleological time of the nation, where the unilinear, teleological time is undermined by the introduction of a contingent timescape.

However, the narrative not only subverts teleological time through its introduction of an alternate timeline; it also serves to re-negotiate the individual subject's relationship to historical time after the teleological temporal order has been undermined. In fact, Lu Ming is initially a staunch subscriber to the revolutionary narrative and the teleological temporal order. The protagonist's attachment to the temporal order is, first and foremost, visible from how excited he is about being able go back to the founding of the CCP and the origin of the teleological time. Lu Ming describes himself as a "hobby historian" (lishi aihaozhe) (2), and he takes great pleasure in spotting the different historical figures on the boat. Among the students granted the time-travel grant, he is the only one who has chosen this event to travel to, and his excitement over returning to the origin of the teleological time is explicitly pointed to as he exclaims how "history would be changed by them, would be changed by what happened on this boat. And history had proven them right, *I thought with great excitement"* (5, emphasis added). Even more significantly, Lu Ming's attachment to the teleological time is also evident from the fact that as soon as it is revealed that there is not just one History, but innumerable *histories*, his interest in history, initially, completely evaporates. He feels that his profound interest in history has become "utterly meaningless" in the context of the plurality of historical times because "from the point of view of the universe, there was no such thing as a single History" (14). Suddenly, all the "sacred grand narratives" are no longer part of a greater plan but merely "products of accident" (14). As a result, the disillusioned Lu Ming concludes that "what we call history does not exist" (15); instead, time and history are nothing but "rootless change, from nothingness to nothingness" (15). In other words, as the teleological temporal order is replaced by the plurality of historical times, history dissolves into nothingness for the narrator-protagonist. Significantly, he uses the word "rootless" (wugen), which again points to the dialectic between the telos and the origin in the construction of teleological time, and in this case, to the individual subject's own psychological need to return to the origin. The protagonist's attachment to the revolutionary narrative points to the "abiding allure" (Barme 40) that the narrative and its version of teleological time still hold in contemporary China.

Nonetheless, Lu Ming is eventually transformed from a staunch subscriber to the teleological temporal order to someone who embraces the multiplicity of times. In the story, the motif of romance clearly plays a significant role in negotiating the protagonist's loss of faith in teleological time. After the young woman argues that the plurality of historical times does not extinguish all meaning, Lu Ming changes his mind. As he puts it, "happiness is still happiness, suffering is suffering, and choices are still choices" (15). In fact, Lu Ming starts considering whether the reason he could not accept the existence of more than one history perhaps had less to do with the pursuit of truth and

more to do with the "masculine desire for power", since by "possessing history, we could possess time, and in turn possess the future" (15). In this way, the narrator-protagonist's initially quite innocent interest in history as a "hobby historian" and his desire to go back to the genesis of modern Chinese history is linked to the darker motive of "possessing" history and also, explicitly, to masculine desire. Indeed, it is notable that much of the narrative consists of Lu Ming lecturing the much less historically knowledgeable woman about the various historical personages on the boat, and he is seemingly deriving great pleasure from "possessing" the narrative. As the story develops into a budding romance between the two time-travellers and ends in a climactic embrace seconds before they are sent back to their own times, it could be argued that Lu Ming's supposed masculine desire to "possess" is transferred from history to his romantic interest in the young woman.

The fact that it is the young woman Xiaoyou who helps Lu Ming to re-negotiate his relationship to historical time points to cultural and political developments in post-1989 China. In a thought-provoking essay on the most famous novel of the Maoist era, *Qingchun zhi ge* (*Song of Youth,* 1958), literary scholar Ban Wang notes that the novel's romantic motif and its depiction of private dreams and desires are sublimated into the love of the revolution. As Wang argues, the novel engages the reader in "a process of rechanneling one's desire, impulse and affection into politically acceptable outlets". Ultimately, it "shows how crucial it is to get involved in history and how one can, in [the] process, transform oneself into the 'subject of history'" (241). In Baoshu's text, we see this process reversed, as Lu Ming's initial commitment to the revolutionary narrative and its notion of teleological time is rechannelled back into private dreams and desires. This corresponds to McGrath's observation that "after the merging of the public and private spheres under the totalising ideology of communism", the post-socialist context has witnessed the return of private subjectivity in cultural representation and "the rise of romantic love to, in a sense, replace the political in popular cultural representations" (ch. 1). In brief, Baoshu's story reveals how individual subjectivity remains in tension with the national teleological time also in the post-socialist context, and here, contingency functions to liberate the individual subject from "the burden of history".[10] At the same time, the romantic motif and its focus on private desires also risks reproducing the status quo, as the shift from teleological history to individual romance might entail abandoning commitments in the dimension of historical time altogether.

## 4. National teleological time, contingency, and nostalgia in Han Song's "Shanghai 1938 – a Memory"

In Baoshu's story, the introduction of an alternate history and the contingent idea of time is ultimately a liberating experience for the protagonist. But is the subversion of the teleological order always liberating for the individual subject in the context of post-1989 China? In Han Song's "Shanghai 1938 – a Memory", the relationship between the individual subject and the teleological time of the

[10] I borrow this phrase from Hayden White's essay "The Burden of History." *History and theory*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1966.

nation is problematised further. Originally published on the author's social media platform and later published in print in 2017, the story is set in the Sino-Japanese War, in Shanghai of 1938, and focuses on an unnamed student who frequents a shop that sells "video-discs". Following his lover Xiaoping's disappearance, the student is acquainted with the shop-owner, who introduces him to a mysterious "time-disc", with which one can turn back time and begin again in another timeline.

Much like in the previous story, contingency is introduced into a linear, national metanarrative, but this time through the novum of the time-disc. As the owner explains the function of the time-disc, she points out that the time-disc is not an ordinary video-disc; "it [is] a disc that could make time flow backwards, as well as make time start all over again" (350). Applying the disc to a projector, the shop-owner shows the narrator how the disc works by displaying the flow of Suzhou river on a screen, and "every time, the newly formed paths of the river were different, the scenery at the banks of the river changing, new worlds were born and paraded before my eyes one after another" (350).

However, despite seemingly providing a way out from the dire historical situation, contingency is not depicted as liberating in the story and is, instead, associated with uncertainty and instability. The application of the time-disc does not guarantee one finds oneself in a more auspicious position in historical time. Rather, it is only an "opportunity" (351). Furthermore, it is compared to the act of "throwing a die" (356); it all depends on "luck" (355). Possibly, one will find oneself in an even worse "period of disruption" (luanshi) (351). The contingent idea of time – of "throwing a die" – is further consolidated by linking it to the motif of gambling. The inventor of the time-disc is repeatedly referred to as "that mysterious gambler" (355, 358); it is revealed that he gambles away his fortune (made on selling time-discs) in various casinos in Macao and Las Vegas. In other words, while the motif of romance made contingency a liberating idea in Baoshu's story, the motif of gambling makes it more threatening.

In fact, rather than taking a chance on another timeline, the narrator clings to the original timeline all the way till the end of the narrative. His choice of doing so is clearly rooted in his aversion to contingency and his attachment to the teleological time of the nation. As he himself puts it,

> I was still stubbornly hoping that the place where I would meet Xiaoping again someday – in life or in death – would be of this world. In the only possible future. Not in innumerable, intangible pasts. *I also believed that the war would end one day, and that we Chinese people could survive, following an already fixed path ahead, and out of the ruins begin life anew*" (352, emphasis added).

To further consolidate his determination to stick to the original timeline, the protagonist has a vision of a future, prosperous Shanghai, which is reminiscent of the contemporary Shanghai. He narrates: "On the eastern side of the Huangpu River, there appeared what seemed like a mirage", and he sees "tall, tower-like buildings that did not really exist, reaching for the sky"; these buildings "seemed like ancient fortresses haunted by ghosts, but yet they overflowed with colours while beautifully reflecting the moonlight. They were

magnificent and dazzling to the eye" (363–64). Baffled by the vision, he asks himself: "Could this be China after its destruction?" (364). Needless to say, the implied reader knows that this is, in fact, the future of China; it is quite clearly the contemporary Shanghai intruding into the narrative, and the vision of its splendour serves to consolidate the narrator's temporal commitment to the linear, teleological time of the nation, despite the chance to "begin anew" in another timeline. Hence, the narrator-protagonist concludes that "no matter what, the people with time-discs left too early. After all, even though it was at death's door, the nation was still struggling – and could perhaps even survive for another 5,000 years, just in one stretch" (364).

The protagonist's commitment to his timeline and the national teleological time can be understood in relation to discourses of nationalism and nostalgia in the post-socialist context. By setting the story in the Sino-Japanese war, the story evokes national trauma and the legacy of colonialism; in fact, the shop-owner tells the protagonist that the time-disc was originally invented to "save China" but was rejected by the nationalist government. The time-disc is sold to "nations with no hope for the future", considering that "the distance between them and the first-rate countries was just growing bigger and bigger, and these countries had absolutely no way of catching up" (359). In this context, abandoning the timeline would also mean abandoning a particular narrative of national trauma and the subsequent liberation. In fact, at one point the narrator-protagonist even muses on what it would be like if all Chinese people employed the time-disc and disappeared from the timeline, except for himself and the shop-owner (358).

Perhaps even more significant in problematising the relationship to national teleological time is the spatiotemporal setting of pre-revolutionary Shanghai. The setting imbues the story with a kind of nostalgic gaze that cultural critic Dai Jinhua identifies as a cultural tendency in post-socialist China (206), and in it, Shanghai plays a central role (217–218). Indeed, Han Song's short story is replete with a sense of nostalgia for the "old Shanghai". The famous 1930s singer Zhou Xuan's "Si ji ge" ("Song of the Four Seasons") is played, and there are multiple references to well-known films of this period, including *Mulan congjun* (*Mulan Joins the Army,* 1939) and *Luanshi fengguang* ("Heroes in the Turbulent Days"). Dai notes that nostalgia is not a re-creation of the past as it was, but rather a selective reminiscence from the perspective of the present (207). Indeed, in Han Song's story, the nostalgic vibe is enhanced by the fact that the historical narrative is not entirely reliable. In fact, as the title suggests, it is merely "a memory" (jiyi), and the story also contains multiple anachronisms: the latter film, for instance, was not released until 1941, and the presence of a shop selling "video-discs" can, of course, not be regarded as a natural part of the temporality of 1938's Shanghai; it belongs more to the Shanghai of the 1990s or 2000s, when the story was written. The protagonist's vision of a future, prosperous Shanghai, reminiscent of the contemporary Shanghai, further enhances this entanglement of past and present and the importance of the spatial category of Shanghai for the protagonist's commitment to linear, teleological time.

To further argue the point of the importance of nostalgia for the "old Shanghai" in the story, the shop-owner even points to some individuals who returned to the original timeline after having used the time-disc to begin anew in other timelines. She muses that even though their reappearance in the

timeline could have been unintentional, she also speculates that "perhaps they regretted [choosing to use the time-disc]?" and that they had, in fact, returned because they were "nostalgic" (liulian) "about the glorious Shanghai of the past" (354). In this way, Han Song cleverly constructs a narrative that undermines the linear, teleological time of the nation by introducing a contingent notion of time while at the same time problematising the very same deconstruction of the national teleological time and the idea of contingency and multiple timelines. In other words, the narrative suggests – by its unfolding in the pre-revolutionary Shanghai and allusions to national humiliation and nostalgia for the Shanghai of the past – that for the individual subject, the teleological time of the nation might not be so easy to give up after all.

## 5. Conclusion

In her study of temporality in Western science fiction and postmodernism, Elana Gomel writes: "As the dream of progress is being buried deeper and deeper in the rubble of World War II, the Holocaust, the collapse of Communism and 9/11, time becomes an enemy" (2). However, what Gomel leaves out from her account is that China – despite the crackdown at Tiananmen Square in 1989 and the end of the Cold War – has remained dominated by an unwavering notion of progress in the form of the national teleological time. Hence, in 2021, at the centennial of the founding of the CCP and ten years after the publication of "Watching the Boat at South Lake Together", the chairman of the CCP and the president of China, Xi Jinping, could speak with confidence when he encouraged the Chinese people to "put conscious effort into learning from history to create a bright future". Moreover, he reminded the population of 1.4 billion people that "the 100-year-long history of the Party, and the more than 70-year-long history of the People's Republic of China all provide ample evidence that without the Communist Party of China, there would be no new China" (6).

The Chinese case encourages us to move away from merely focusing on "agentless processes of change" (Clark 35), and to acknowledge that "time is also a question of power, the power to control movements, to decide about beginnings and endings, to set the pace, to give the rhythm" (Jordheim 510). However, as this analysis has shown, there are many forms of time present in the post-socialist context. These texts both probe the national teleological order by exposing its reliance on narrative, and challenge it by introducing conflicting temporalities, both collective and individual, which reveal a temporal flux and tension beneath the official discourse. The presence of a contingent chronoscape in post-1989 Chinese science fiction – a chronoscape where historical time in the form of alternate histories branches into multiple timelines – indicates that collective temporalities can no longer be entirely contained within the unilinear teleological time of the nation. "The New Wave" of Chinese science fiction has been praised for its subversive qualities (Song 8), and as this analysis has shown, much of its subversive potential lies in its engagement with temporality and temporal regimes. Whether it can remain vital in this respect in the present age of Xi Jinping is for the Chinese writers, and SFF researchers, to find out.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Mingwei Song for generously helping me to access the original manuscript of "Watching the Boat at South Lake Together", as well as Baoshu, for kindly allowing me to use the manuscript in my scholarly research.

*Biography:* Erik Mo Welin received his Master's degree in Chinese studies from Stockholm and Zhejiang University in 2017, and is currently a PhD candidate in sinology at Uppsala University. His dissertation project focuses on the relationship between temporality and politics in contemporary Chinese science fiction. Contact: Erik.welin@lingfil.uu.se

## Works Cited

Baoshu. "Authors Note." Translated by Ken Liu. *Broken Stars*, edited by Ken Liu, Head of Zeus Ltd., 2019, pp. 222.

---. *Shijian Zhi Xu* 时间之墟 *[Ruins of Time]*. Changjiang wenyi chubashe 长江文艺出版社 [Changjiang culture publishing], 2013.

---. (Li Jun 李俊)."Yiyu, Guxiang Yu Miguan: Dangdai Zhongguo Kehuan de Lishi Zhuti" 异域，故乡与谜官: 当代中国科幻的历史主体 ["Foreign lands, Homelands, and Labyrinths: The Historical Theme in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction"]. *Zhongguo Kehuan Wenxue Zai Chufa* 中国科幻文学再出发 *[Chinese Science Fiction: A New Beginning]*, edited by Li Guangyi 李广益, Chongqing Daxue Chubanshe 重庆大学出版社 [Chongqing UP], 2016, pp. 133–51.

---. "Yiqi Qu Kan Nanhu Chuan" 一起去看南湖船 ["Watching the Boat at the South Lake Together"]. 2011. Microsoft Word file.

---. "Zhongguo Lishi Kehuan Xiaoshuo Yaomu" 中国历史科幻小说要目 ["Essential Chinese Historical Science Fiction Stories"]. *Kehuan Zhong de Zhongguo Lishi* 科幻中的中国历史 [*Chinese History in Science Fiction*], edited by Baoshu 宝树, Sanlian shudian 三联书店 [Sanlian books], 2017, pp. 402–4.

Barme, Geremie R. "Red Allure and the Crimson Blindfold." *China perspectives*, vol. 90, no. 2, 2012, pp. 29–40. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24055460. Accessed 18 October, 2022.

Cheek, Timothy, David Ownby, and Joshua A. Fogel. *Voices from the Chinese Century: Public Intellectual Debate from Contemporary China*. Columbia UP, 2020.

Clark, Christopher M. *Time and Power: Visions of History in German Politics, from the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2019.

Dai, Jinhua. "Imagined Nostalgia." *Postmodernism and China*, edited by Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang, Duke UP, 2000, pp. 205–21.

Duara, Prasenjit. *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China*. U of Chicago P, 1995. *ProQuest*, ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uu/detail.action?docID=471849.

Duncan, Andy. "Alternate History." *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction, Cambridge*, edited by Edward James. Cambridge UP, 2003, pp. 209–18. *ProQuest*, ezproxy.its.uu.se/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/publication/2050373?accountid=14715. Accessed 19 July, 2022.

Feng, Emily. "How China Became a Sci-Fi Powerhouse." *Foreign Policy*, 24 Feb. 2017. foreignpolicy.com/2017/02/24/how-china-became-a-sci-fi-powerhouse/. Accessed 27 October, 2022.

Gomel, Elana. *Postmodern Science Fiction and Temporal Imagination*. Continuum, 2010.

Han, Song (韩松). "Yijiu Sanba Nian Shanghai Jiyi"一九三八年上海记忆 ["Shanghai 1938 – a Memory"]. *Kehuan Zhong De Zhongguo Lishi* 科幻中的中国历史 *[Chinese History in Science Fiction]*, edited by Baoshu 宝树, Sanlian shudian 三联书店 [Sanlian books], 2017, pp. 348–69.

Healey, Cara. "Madmen and Iron Houses: Lu Xun, Information Degradation, and Generic Hybridity in Contemporary Chinese Sf." *Science Fiction Studies,* vol. 46, no. 3, 2019, pp. 511–24.

Hellekson, Karen. *The Alternate History: Reconfiguring Historical Time*. Kindle ed., Kent State UP, 2000.

Huters, Theodore. "Introduction." *China's New Order: Society, Politics, and Economy in Transition*, by Wang Hui, edited by Theodore Huters. Harvard UP, 2003, pp. 3–39.

Isaacson, Nathaniel. *Celestial Empire: The Emergence of Chinese Science Fiction*. Wesleyan UP, 2017.

---. "Han Song." *Chinese Literature Today*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2018, pp. 4–5.

Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. Verso, 2005.

Jordheim, Helge. "Introduction: Multiple Times and the Work of Synchronization." *History and Theory*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2014, pp. 498–518. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/24543056. Accessed 19 July, 2022.

Kan, Har Ye. "A New Time Consciousness: The Great Leap Forward." *A New Literary History of Modern China*, edited by David Der-wei Wang, The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2017, pp. 550–56.

Kehoe, Séagh. "Regimes of Temporality: China, Tibet and the Politics of Time in the Post-2008 Era." *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 42, no. 7–8, 2020, pp. 1133–52. go.exlibris.link/7NrQ7Xml. Accessed 19 July, 2022.

Kwong, Luke S. K. "The Rise of the Linear Perspective on History and Time in Late Qing China C.1860-1911." *Past & Present*, vol. 173, no. 1, 2001, pp. 157–90. doi-org.ezproxy.its.uu.se/10.1093/past/173.1.157. Accessed 19 July, 2022.

Li, Hua. *Chinese Science Fiction During the Post-Mao Cultural Thaw*. U of Toronto P, 2021.

Lin, Qingxin. *Brushing History against the Grain: Reading the Chinese New Historical Fiction (1986-1999)*. Hong Kong UP, HKU, 2005. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jc56c.6. Accessed May 20, 2020.

Liu, Ken. "Baoshu." *Broken Stars*, edited by Ken Liu. London: Head of Zeus Ltd, 2019, pp. 149–50.

---. "Han Song." *Broken Stars*, edited by Ken Liu. London: Head of Zeus Ltd, 2019, pp. 111–12.

Luanshi Fengguang *乱世风光* [*Heroes of the Turbulent Days*]. *Douban 豆瓣*, movie.douban.com/subject/4166453/. Accessed 27 October, 2022.

McGrath, Jason. *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*. Kindle ed., Stanford UP, 2008.

Rojas, Carlos. "Queering Time: Disjunctive Temporalities in Modern China." *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1–8.

Shambaugh, David. "China's Propaganda System: Institutions, Processes and Efficacy." *The China Journal* (Canberra, A.C.T.), vol. 57, 2007, pp. 25–58. JSTOR, https://go.exlibris.link/20J5wbsz. Accessed 20 July, 2022.

Song, Mingwei. "After 1989: The New Wave of Chinese Science Fiction." *China Perspectives*, vol. 101, no. 1, 2015, pp. 7–13. journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/6618. Accessed 19 July, 2022.

Sun, Wanning. "Media Events or Media Stories? Time, Space and Chinese (Trans)Nationalism." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2001, pp. 25–43. go.exlibris.link/5Wmsk4zx. Accessed 20 July, 2022.

Veg, Sebastian. "Propaganda and Pastiche: Visions of Mao in Founding of a Republic, Beginning of the Great Revival, and Let the Bullets Fly." *China Perspectives*, vol. 90, no. 2, 2012, pp. 41–53. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24055461. Accessed 18 October, 2022.

Wang, Ban. "Revolutionary Realism and Revolutionary Romanticism: Song of Youth." *The Columbia Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*. Kindle ed., edited by Kirk A. Denton, Columbia UP, 2016, pp. 237–43.

Wang, David Der-wei. *Fin-De-Siècle Splendor: Repressed Modernities of Late Qing Fiction, 1849-1911*. Stanford UP, 1997.

--- (*王德威*). "Shi Tong San, Xiaoshuo Xing" *史統散，小說興* ["When History Declines, Fiction Prospers"]. *Jianfeng Er Nian 建豐二年* [*The Second Year of Jianfeng*], by Chen Guanzhong *陳光中* Readmoo ed., Maitian chuban *麥田出版*, 2015, pp. 1–17.

Wang, Fansen *王汎森*. "Zhongguo Jindai Sixiang Zhong De 'Weilai'" *中国近代思想中的'未来'* ["The Future' in Chinese Modern Thought"]. *Tansuo yu Zhengming 探索与证明* [*Exploration and Free Views*], vol. 9, 2015, pp. 64–71. China Academic Journals, doi:CNKI:SUN:TSZM.0.2015-09-019. Accessed 19 July, 2022.

Wang, Yanjie. "Heterogeneous Time and Space: Han Shaogong's Rethinking of Chinese Modernity." *KronoScope: Journal for the Study of Time*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2015, pp. 26–42. go.exlibris.link/D4j47yRM. Accessed 19 July, 2022.

Wittenberg, David. *Time Travel: The Popular Philosophy of Narrative*. Fordham UP, 2012. *ProQuest*, www-proquest-com.ezproxy.its.uu.se/legacydocview/EBC/3239791?accountid=14715. Accessed 19 July, 2022.

White, Hayden V. "The Burden of History." *History and Theory*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1966, pp. 111–34. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2504510. Accessed 21 July, 2022.

Xi, Jinping. "Speech at a Ceremony Marking the Centenary of the Communist Party of China." *Xinhuanet*, www.xinhuanet.com/english/special/2021-07/01/c_1310038244.htm. Accessed 19 July, 2022.