

Technology, Ethics and Human Values in Contemporary Chinese Science Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the interrelationship between science, ethics, and spirituality as reflected in contemporary Chinese science fiction novels. It explores how scientific and technological advancement influences human existence, social development, and moral values while revealing Chinese science fiction writers' perspectives on maintaining a balance between scientific innovation and ethical responsibility. Drawing upon representative works of contemporary Chinese science fiction, the study demonstrates that this literary tradition has developed a distinctive artistic paradigm in which scientific imagination is inseparably connected with ethical reflection and spiritual inquiry. The findings suggest that contemporary Chinese science fiction serves not merely as a medium for envisioning technological futures but also as a philosophical space for rethinking the moral responsibilities accompanying scientific progress.

Keywords: Chinese science fiction, science and technology, spirituality, bioethics, technological progress, ethical responsibility, artistic paradigm.

INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that the rapid development of modern science and technology has profoundly influenced the evolution of science fiction as a literary genre, while the concept of modernity has become one of its defining characteristics. As scientific knowledge and technological innovation have advanced, people's understanding of technology has undergone significant transformation. During the late Qing Dynasty (晚清), modern scientific ideas were introduced into China, where technology was widely regarded as a potential remedy for the nation's political and social crises. Consequently, the emergence of scientific consciousness in China coincided with a period of profound national upheaval, making it natural for technology to be perceived as a force capable of national salvation and an essential component of modern rational thought.

During this period, technology gradually acquired an almost salvific status, becoming one of the highest

expressions of social progress. Wu Jianren's novel *The New Story of the Stone* (Xin Shitou Ji, 《新石头记》) vividly illustrates this perspective through its depiction of the "Frontier of Civilization," a technologically advanced society. In this imagined world, the author expresses his belief that China's future prosperity could be achieved through scientific innovation and advanced technological systems, which would create unprecedented opportunities for national development.

The May Fourth Movement of 1919 (五四运动) further elevated the significance of science within modern Chinese intellectual history. During the movement, "science" (科学) and "democracy" (民主) were promoted as its two fundamental ideals. It was in this historical context that modern scientific thought gained widespread public recognition, while the May Fourth generation viewed the integration of science and democracy as the foundation for China's intellectual enlightenment and national

rejuvenation. Science was no longer regarded solely as a means of technological advancement but also as an ethical instrument capable of transforming public consciousness and promoting social progress.

Following the founding of the People's Republic of China, science became an essential component of the country's revolutionary development strategy. Although natural sciences themselves were considered ideologically neutral, their application and interpretation were understood to be shaped by social and political forces. Consequently, scientific progress became closely associated with national modernization, democratic transformation, and the moral reconstruction of society. Particularly after the end of the Cultural Revolution, science and technology attained unprecedented prestige in China's national discourse, culminating in Deng Xiaoping's influential proposition that "science and technology constitute the primary productive force."

However, technological anxiety extends beyond concerns over uncontrollable technological systems and their potential risks. It also stems from the growing influence of technology on the very meaning of human existence. In contemporary society, technology has become deeply embedded in everyday life, fundamentally reshaping patterns of human behavior and social interaction. While technological innovations undoubtedly provide unprecedented convenience, they simultaneously intensify human dependence upon technological systems. Technology represents one of the highest expressions of human creativity and intellectual achievement; paradoxically, however, it may also weaken human autonomy, diminish creativity, and restrict individual agency. Consequently, concerns regarding technological alienation have evolved into one of the central themes of contemporary global thought.

METHOD

Technological anxiety is not merely associated with the uncontrollable nature of technological systems and their hidden risks; it also arises from technology's growing capacity to reshape the very meaning of human existence. In contemporary society, technology has permeated virtually every aspect of everyday life, becoming an inseparable component of modern civilization. Although technological innovations have significantly improved human living standards, they have simultaneously intensified people's dependence on technology. Thus,

technology embodies a profound paradox: while it represents the limitless creativity and ingenuity of humankind, it may also diminish human autonomy, weaken creativity, and constrain individual potential. Consequently, technological alienation has become one of the defining concerns of contemporary civilization.

As one scholar observes, "Like ideology, new technologies attempt to construct citizens' experiences through their own power and mechanical influence, ultimately transforming the human body into an object of control and surveillance." This observation highlights the increasingly complex relationship between technological progress and human freedom, a relationship that has become a central theme in contemporary Chinese science fiction.

A representative example is He Xi's (何夕) social-philosophical science fiction novel *Alien Realm* (Yiyu, 《异域》). Although the novel initially appears to be a conventional work of science fiction, it ultimately raises profound philosophical questions concerning modern humanity, ethical responsibility, and the future of civilization.

In the novel, humanity attempts to solve the global food crisis through an artificial ecosystem known as Ximai (西麦), created according to the principle of temporal dimensional preservation. Within this experimental environment, time passes approximately 40,000 times faster than in the human world, enabling the continuous production of food for human civilization. However, the accelerated passage of time also dramatically hastens biological evolution, eventually giving rise to intelligent "wild beings" possessing cognitive abilities comparable to those of humans.

Rather than celebrating scientific achievement, the novel emphasizes the unforeseen ethical dilemmas generated by technological advancement. He Xi argues that although technology is fundamentally intended to promote human progress and improve living conditions, its consequences may gradually escape human control. This concern raises a series of fundamental philosophical questions: Does scientific exploration possess ethical boundaries? If such boundaries exist, where should they be drawn? To what extent may technological innovation challenge humanity's moral principles and spiritual values?

These questions are explicitly articulated through the

character Lan Jiangshui (藍江水), who reflects upon the limits of scientific inquiry:

"Why has nature concealed its deepest secrets so carefully? Why does nuclear fusion occur only at temperatures of millions of degrees? Why do elementary particles reveal their internal structure only under collisions involving hundreds of billions or even trillions of electron volts? Imagine if these reactions could occur under ordinary conditions. Human beings in the Stone Age—or even primitive apes playing with fire—might already have destroyed the world. Even today, who can confidently guarantee that humanity is capable of controlling everything with absolute safety?"

This passage illustrates one of the novel's central philosophical arguments: nature itself appears to impose limits upon scientific power in order to prevent humanity from acquiring destructive capabilities prematurely. Scientific progress therefore demands not only intellectual achievement but also ethical maturity.

Our analysis indicates that throughout He Xi's fiction, technological development is consistently accompanied by skepticism regarding its influence on human identity and moral integrity. Scientific advancement undoubtedly expands humanity's physical and intellectual capacities and serves as a powerful driving force behind social development. Nevertheless, the same scientific achievements possess the potential to become instruments capable of undermining humanity's spiritual values and ethical foundations. Consequently, contemporary Chinese science fiction does not reject technological progress; rather, it questions whether human civilization possesses sufficient moral wisdom to govern the immense power that science has created.

He Xi further encapsulates this concern in one of the novel's most thought-provoking observations:

"When everything is determined by the system, human beings become nothing more than carefully positioned variables. Technology has not saved humanity; it has merely abolished the meaning of human existence."

This statement reveals the author's philosophical critique of technological determinism. Technology is portrayed not as an inherently evil force but as a system capable of replacing human subjectivity whenever individuals relinquish moral responsibility and independent judgment.

In this sense, the true danger lies not within technology itself, but within humanity's willingness to surrender ethical agency to technological systems.

Another significant work by He Xi (何夕) is the social-philosophical dystopian novella *The Silent City* (Jijing zhi Cheng, 《寂静之城》). Although relatively concise in length, the work presents a profound philosophical exploration of the relationship between technology, political power, and human freedom.

The novel depicts a futuristic city in which silence has become the highest social value. Loud speech, emotional expression, disagreement, and public debate are strictly prohibited. In the name of maintaining social harmony and stability, the entire city operates under a sophisticated technological system designed to enforce absolute silence. Citizens communicate without spoken language, suppress their emotions, and carefully conform to behavioral norms established by technological governance.

In this imagined society, advanced technologies function not merely as instruments of convenience but as mechanisms of ideological regulation. Freedom of thought is gradually restricted, while technological systems facilitate increasingly sophisticated forms of authoritarian control. Technology thus becomes inseparable from political power, creating a new social order in which surveillance and regulation are normalized rather than imposed through overt violence.

Although technology is originally presented as a product of human creativity, He Xi demonstrates how individuals gradually become regulated by the very systems they have created. Without recognizing the transformation, people lose their autonomy, moral consciousness, and ultimately their sense of personal identity. In this context, technology threatens not only human freedom but also the spiritual values that define humanity itself, functioning as an invisible ideology that quietly reshapes human existence.

The central metaphor of the novel is silence. Silence symbolizes far more than the absence of sound; it signifies the disappearance of independent thought, critical reflection, and personal identity. The seemingly perfect society portrayed in the novel ultimately reveals itself to be a false utopia—externally orderly and peaceful, yet internally devoid of authentic human emotions and intellectual vitality.

The novel therefore raises a fundamental philosophical question: Can human beings truly exist without the freedom to express themselves? Or is the ability to speak an essential condition of human existence?

This concern is vividly expressed in one of the novel's most memorable passages:

"When the city lost its voice, conflicts disappeared as well. No one argued anymore, because there was no longer any need to do so."

Rather than representing genuine social harmony, silence here symbolizes the elimination of dissent. From the perspective of contemporary society, this literary image closely resembles current debates surrounding digital censorship, algorithmic content moderation, and the suppression of controversial opinions on online platforms. The silence depicted in *The Silent City* may therefore be interpreted as a literary metaphor for the invisible forms of control that increasingly characterize today's digital environment.

Another significant observation made by the author states:

"Technology does not need to issue commands; it merely requires people to become accustomed to it."

This statement encapsulates one of the novel's principal philosophical arguments. Modern systems of control no longer rely primarily upon coercion; instead, they operate through convenience, routine, and voluntary adaptation. Individuals gradually surrender their autonomy because technological dependence becomes habitual rather than compulsory.

This insight resonates strongly with contemporary technological realities. Voluntary acceptance of continuous smartphone surveillance, widespread reliance on facial recognition technologies under the justification of public security, and the increasing influence of artificial intelligence over every day decision-making all demonstrate how technological authority is often internalized rather than externally imposed. In other words, people are rarely forced to obey technology; instead, they unconsciously adapt themselves to technological systems until dependence appears entirely natural.

The emergence of the Internet undoubtedly represents one of the greatest technological achievements of the late

twentieth century, fundamentally transforming patterns of communication, knowledge production, and social interaction. At the same time, however, the digital environment has generated new ethical and psychological challenges. Virtual reality increasingly competes with lived reality, while excessive dependence on online networks risks weakening independent thought and diminishing moral autonomy. Individuals may gradually become immersed in technologically constructed realities, thereby losing the capacity for critical reflection and authentic spiritual experience.

Within this context, He Xi invites readers to contemplate a profound philosophical dilemma: What becomes of humanity if human consciousness, free will, and moral judgment themselves become subject to technological manipulation? Rather than providing definitive answers, the author deliberately leaves this question unresolved, encouraging readers to reflect critically upon the ethical implications of future technological development.

From the perspective of this study, *The Silent City* should not be interpreted merely as a dystopian narrative. Rather, it represents a philosophical critique of technological rationality, emphasizing that the greatest threat posed by advanced technologies lies not in their destructive capacity but in their subtle ability to reshape human consciousness, moral responsibility, and the very foundations of human existence.

Since the emergence of modern science, technological progress has generally been associated with development, efficiency, and human advancement. Nearly every major scientific breakthrough has been perceived as a milestone capable of transforming civilization. Nevertheless, beginning in the mid-twentieth century, growing concerns over nuclear warfare, environmental degradation, and the unintended consequences of advanced technologies gradually weakened the optimistic belief that scientific progress inevitably leads to a better future.

Against this historical background, a new generation of Chinese science fiction writers adopted a more critical perspective toward science and technology. Rather than celebrating scientific achievements unconditionally, their works increasingly explore the hidden risks of technological development and its ethical, philosophical, and spiritual consequences. Contemporary Chinese science fiction therefore encourages readers not only to admire technological innovation but also to critically evaluate its

influence on human values and the future of civilization.

One of the most representative examples is Wang Jinkang's (王晋康) novel *In the Name of Heaven* (Titian Xingdao, 《替天行道》), published in 2001. The novel centers on the ethical dilemmas surrounding genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and examines the broader moral implications of genetic engineering. Although some of the author's assumptions may appear scientifically simplistic from today's perspective, Wang Jinkang demonstrated remarkable foresight by recognizing the ethical controversies associated with biotechnology long before they became subjects of widespread public debate.

Rather than focusing exclusively on scientific innovation, the novel investigates the complex relationship between science, religion, morality, humanity, and responsibility. It may therefore be regarded as one of the earliest Chinese science fiction works to present biotechnology not merely as a scientific issue but also as a profound philosophical and ethical challenge.

At the center of the novel lies a fundamental question:

If science assumes the role traditionally occupied by Heaven—that is, the ultimate source of order, justice, and truth—how should human beings determine what is morally right?

Within the philosophical framework of the novel:

Heaven (天) symbolizes absolute order and universal truth;

Dao (道) represents moral principles and the ethical order governing society;

Following Heaven (替天) implies acting in accordance with an apparently objective higher law;

Practicing Dao (行道) signifies translating those principles into concrete human action.

The novel ultimately reveals a profound tension between obedience to objective scientific laws and personal moral responsibility.

This dilemma is clearly expressed in one of the novel's most significant passages:

"If the so-called 'Way of Heaven' is nothing more than a

cold and perfectly precise natural law, does following it necessarily mean abandoning human conscience?"

In this statement, "Heaven" no longer refers to a religious or metaphysical authority; instead, it functions as a metaphor for the objectivity of scientific laws. Wang Jinkang therefore argues that scientific rationality should never be equated with moral righteousness. Scientific knowledge may explain how the world functions, but it cannot determine what human beings ought to do.

Another revealing passage states:

"They called it the most scientific decision, yet no one asked whether it was still a human decision."

This concise observation captures one of the novel's central philosophical concerns. Decisions justified solely by scientific calculation may gradually eliminate compassion, empathy, and moral reflection. When efficiency becomes the only criterion of judgment, human agency risks being replaced by technical rationality.

Consequently, *In the Name of Heaven* portrays science not as an unquestionable source of truth but as a profound test of human responsibility. Ethical judgment cannot simply be delegated to scientific expertise or technological systems. Instead, the novel warns that excessive reliance on technical rationality may transform human beings from independent moral decision-makers into passive executors of technologically determined outcomes.

From the perspective of bioethics, Wang Jinkang's work anticipates many of the ethical debates that have become increasingly relevant in the twenty-first century, including genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, human enhancement technologies, and the limits of scientific intervention in nature. His fiction suggests that technological progress should always remain subject to ethical scrutiny and humanitarian values, regardless of its scientific legitimacy.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary Chinese science fiction has evolved far beyond its traditional function of imagining future technologies. As demonstrated in the works of He Xi and Wang Jinkang, scientific imagination serves as a vehicle for exploring fundamental questions concerning human dignity, ethical responsibility, and spiritual identity in an

age of rapid technological transformation. Rather than portraying science as an autonomous force, these writers consistently emphasize that scientific advancement must remain subject to moral reflection and humanitarian values.

This study demonstrates that contemporary Chinese science fiction constructs a distinctive literary paradigm in which technological innovation, ethical consciousness, and spiritual inquiry are closely interconnected. By integrating speculative imagination with philosophical reflection, these works challenge readers to reconsider the complex relationship between scientific progress and human existence. Consequently, Chinese science fiction should be understood not only as an important literary genre but also as a significant intellectual discourse contributing to contemporary debates on technology, bioethics, and the future of humanity.

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