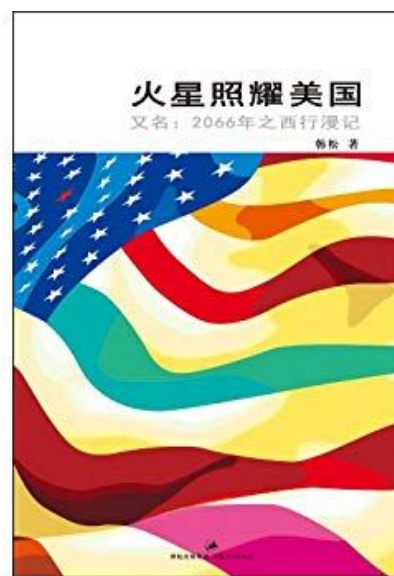


Social criticism in Han Song's science fiction:

Fire Star over America



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Table of contents

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview	2
1.2 Goals and Outline	3
1.3 Notes and Limitations	4

2. About the work

2.1 Science fiction in China	6
2.2 About Han Song	8
2.3 <i>Fire star over America</i>	11
2.4 乱 : The future history of America	17
2.5 治 : The future history of China	20

3. The background of social criticism in *Fire Star over America*

3.1 Criticizing America: Chinese Nationalism in the 1980s and 1990s	22
3.1.1 <i>China can say no</i>	25
3.1.2 <i>The background of the demonization of China</i>	27
3.2 Criticizing China: The protagonist and 'Demon China'	31

4. Discussion: *Fire star over America* today

5. Conclusion

6. Bibliography

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Overview

The subject of this thesis is the book *Fire star over America (aka 2066: Random sketches of a journey to the West)* 火星照耀美国 (又名 : 2066年之西行漫记)¹ by Han Song 韩松. Written twenty years ago in 1998-99 and first published in 2000, it speculates of a future in which the United States of America is no longer the main hegemony. The book piqued people's interest because of its apparent prophetic capabilities in writing of an attack that destroyed the Twin Towers, and of a global financial crisis resembling the one that happened in 2008. In 2018, the book still proves to be farsighted: During the 21st century America slowly isolates itself from the rest of the world. Nepotism and corruption cause an increasingly unstable and autocratic leadership. America's protectionist policies slow down the economy, and development in science and technology stagnates. Social problems in America become more pressing during the years of stagnation, and ultimately lead to the racially charged chaos and violence of the second American Civil War in the year 2066. China in the meantime continues its now characteristic development. The economy keeps growing, science and technology keeps progressing. This creates ever more sophisticated Artificial Intelligence (AI). Management of society keeps gaining in efficiency. Crime and dissent are eradicated, and everybody lives a fulfilling life. During the 21st century AI becomes sophisticated to the point where it develops consciousness. The central server that holds the AI merges with the internet, creating a virtual world. People in 2066 live most of their lives in this virtual, sentient AI-network. The country is harmonious and prosperous, its subjects happy and fulfilled. Because everything is optimised, there is no need for a police state left.

Fire star over America is a highly political work of fiction. It reverses the positions of China

¹ Throughout this thesis, I provide Chinese characters with certain Chinese names and concepts. In cases where I think there is added value in knowing the pronunciation for non-Chinese speakers, I used the *Hanyu Pinyin* system without tones. In the bibliography, I also use the *Hanyu Pinyin* system for Chinese language sources.

and America on the world stage and attacks American history and culture, while praising China's rise and the vision of a communist utopia. However, it takes technological development to an extreme, and presents fragments of China's future as an algorithm-based totalitarian system that rules the conforming and gentrified masses. In Han Song's vision of the future, America represents the Confucian concept of 乱 *luan* 'chaos, confusion, disorder', and China represents 治 *zhi* 'to manage, control'. This dark juxtaposition is set in a world that suffers the consequences of global warming. The looming shadow of environmental issues is in turn overshadowed by Han's chaotic, avant-garde narrative style that questions the nature of reality. Han delivers his image of a chaotic future America through the eyes of a subject of a Chinese utopia; a weak and useless protagonist as a representative of the post-2050 generation Chinese.

1.2 Goals and Outline

The main goal of this thesis is to provide insight into one of Han Song's longer novels, which has not been translated. This thesis builds and expands on the existing scholarship around Han Song, and offers a first-hand reading of the novel. The limited existing scholarship, most notably by Mingwei Song and Jia Liyuan, focuses mainly on Han's philosophy and experimental style, and merely asks the question of whether there is social criticism.

I aim to remove the smoke and mirrors of the many themes and symbols, the avant-garde writing style and the deeper philosophical themes so as to answer the question of what the social criticism is. I will do this through an analysis of the circumstances in which the book came about. In order to do this, I will first provide a short history of science fiction as a literary genre in China. Second, I will provide a short biography of Han Song. A description of his unique position as a science fiction author in China will provide the reader with a framework to appreciate the summary of the events in *Fire Star over America* that follows. From here on

out, the thesis examines the novel's apparent criticism of America, for which I will provide a short overview of America's history and future history as portrayed in the book.

Then I will discuss the political climate in China after its engagement with the international community, and how it created a nationalist movement in China. I will show how sentiments shifted during the 1990s and how this led to the publication of several nationalist books. Two collections of essays published in 1996 reflect this nationalist sentiment during that time. Han Song was a co-author for one of these publications. An analysis of a selection of these critical essays will show how they served as a basis for Han's speculations about the chaos (亂) in the novel's future America. Next, I will discuss Han Song's vision of China in 2066. Alongside the apparent radical nationalist sentiment and anti-American message in the book, it is possible that Han uses satire to criticize the Chinese government's tendencies to exert complete control (治) in society.

Han Song's characteristic, strange narrative style may in itself serve as a tool for social criticism on a deeper level. His worlds questions truth and the nature of reality, and his stories are often inexplicable. This may also serve as a tool to obfuscate social criticism. I will attempt to answer the question of the relationship between his style and his essays, and whether the strangeness is merely the product of chaotic writing, or can be interpreted as a purposeful sophisticated design.

Lastly, I discuss the novel twenty years after it was written by connecting it to recent social, political and technological developments, and attempt to assess its relevance today.

1.3 Notes and Limitations

Fire star over America was first published in 2000. In this thesis I refer to the second publication of 2012. The reason for this is that the earlier publication was not available to me. According to the author, there have only been small revisions.

The background of the demonization of China was first published in 1996 on mainland China. This version was not available to me. I have instead used the Taiwanese version from 1997. This publication is part of the 'Understanding China' 认识中国 series, and does not state to have any revisions apart from the use of traditional Chinese characters and the addition of the word 'mainland' 大陆 after 'China' 中国², although only on the cover. As this series treats China as a research object, it is in the publisher's interest to keep to the original text.

The flood of themes and symbols are characteristic of the book. In order to keep this thesis as coherent as possible, I chose to address only the themes and messages in the book that I am able to corroborate. I occasionally provide footnotes in order to show that I am aware of the potential symbolism. In the course of my analysis I provide summaries that are based on my own translations. As the original story contains plot elements that do not return in any significant way, the summaries inevitably do so too. I have tried to keep the summaries clear but also close to the original. As I will show later on in this thesis, such a narrative style is characteristic of Han Song's science fiction, and as I discuss the potential social commentary present in Han Song's strange style, I speculate about what in my opinion are the most important themes to help appreciate the work in today's reality, and thereby gloss over others.

The complete title of this novel is 火星照耀美国 (又名：2066年之西行漫记) Huoxing zhaoyao Meiguo (youming: 2066 nian zhi xixing manji) *Fire star over America (aka 2066: Random sketches of a journey to the West)*. 火星 huoxing, literally means 'Fire star'. As a proper noun it means 'spark'. Next to that it is also the name for the planet Mars. Additionally, 照耀 zhaoyao means 'to shine, to illuminate'. Alternative translations of the title therefore are '*Mars over America*', '*Fire Star illuminates America*', '*Mars illuminates America*', '*A comet illuminates America*' (Clarkesworld, 2015). Because of the reference to Edgar Snow's 1937 *Red Star over China*, which was published in China as both '西行漫记' Xixingmanji *A journey*

² This reflects the claim of the Republic of China 中华民国 on Taiwan to be the sole legitimate government of China instead of the People's Republic of China 中华人民共和国, which controls the mainland.

to the West and ‘红星照耀中国’ Hongxing zhaoyao Zhongguo, literally ‘Red star illuminates China’, Wu (2013, p. 4) translated the novel that we discuss here as ‘Red Star over America’. Even though the American flag on the cover of the book features one red star instead of a white one, 火星 huoxing does not mean ‘red star’. The reference to Edgar Snow’s report on the rise of communism is very clear, however. I therefore chose not to translate the word 照耀 zhaoyao ‘illuminate’. Because it is not made explicit in my view that that which does the illuminating is the actual planet Mars, I chose to translate 火星 huoxing as ‘fire star’ rather than ‘Mars’.

Chapter 2 : About the work

2.1 Science fiction in China

Chinese science fiction emerged with Liang Qichao’s 梁啟超 1902 novel *A Future for a New China* 新中国未来纪. Based on Western advancement as well as science fiction from Western countries, Liang advocated political reforms and scientific modernisation. His story portrays a utopian China, the world’s most developed country by the year 1962 (Song, 2013, p. 86). The theme of national development would remain a constant throughout twentieth-century Chinese science fiction. The development of the literary genre itself is on the other hand fragmented and usually divided in three brief booms. The first boom occurred during the late Qing 清 era of 1902-1911, and was cut short by the political unrest that followed the fall of the imperial government. The May Fourth Movement 五四运动 of 1919 further conceptualized modern Chinese literature almost completely in terms of realism, pushing out science fiction (Song, 2015, p. 548). During the three following decades, there were almost no notable science fiction publications, Lao She’s 1932 *Cat Country* 猫城记 being the exception. With the foundation of the People’s Republic of China 中华人民共和国 in 1949, Marxism became the guiding philosophy for all aspects of society. Science fiction should describe the imaginative

processes that would lead to technoscientific development. This demand for realism made it difficult for Chinese science fiction authors to write stories, because they themselves were not scientists. Next to that, science fiction literature was to portray a utopian communist society that was free of class struggle. This restricted the authors further in using complex interpersonal relations that make for a good narrative drama (Wu, 2013, p. 3). Logically, this environment did not lead to a new boom in Chinese science fiction. Science fiction stories written between 1949 and 1966 were children's stories aimed at sparking interest for science in the future generation. In 1966 the Cultural Revolution 文化大革命 started, and in the ten years of chaos that followed no science fiction was published. After its long dormancy, science fiction re-emerged during the years after the reforms and opening up 改革开放 of 1978. This second boom of Chinese science fiction was in turn short-lived because of the 1983 Elimination of Spiritual Pollution 清除精神污染 campaign, which sought to limit westernization of Chinese society. With the memory of the Cultural Revolution still fresh, the impact of this campaign that in itself only lasted for six weeks lingered, and the third boom did not occur until the 1990s. Dubbed 'new wave' 新浪潮 science fiction, this boom continues to this day. When the translation of the first part of Liu Cixin's 刘慈欣 *Remembrance of Earth's past* 地球往事 won the Hugo Award³ for best science fiction novel in 2015, it gained worldwide critical acclaim. Today, many young authors successfully enter the field, and many of their stories are translated to English.⁴ National development is still an important theme in Chinese science fiction. However, today it does not serve as a means of promotion of scientific development or a communist utopia. Today's science fiction has a darker tone that echoes the anxieties and feelings of estrangement that came along with China's unprecedented rapid modernisation. Because developments in China today can sometimes

³ Starting in 1953, the Hugo Awards are annually presented for outstanding contributions to science fiction literature, based on votes from members of the World Science Fiction Convention. It is generally regarded as the world's most prestigious science fiction award.

⁴ See for example *Invisible planets: An anthology of contemporary Chinese science fiction*, a collection of 13 short stories, among which Hugo Award-winning 'Folding Beijing' 北京折叠, by Hao Jingfang 郝景芳.

feel like science fiction, new-wave science fiction authors often question concepts such as technological progress, materialism and identity (Song, 2017, p. 952). According to Liu Cixin, new wave science fiction distances itself from and operates separately from mainstream literature. It lets go of an anthropocentric worldview and adopts a universal perspective that questions humanity's relation to nature, reality and the universe rather than focusing on interpersonal relations (Liu, 2013, p. 27).

Han Song's stories are what Mingwei Song (2015, p. 550) describes as new-wave science fiction at its most radical, which thrives on an avant-garde cultural spirit that urges the audience to think beyond the conventional ways of perceiving reality. This lets them challenge the commonly accepted ideas about what constitutes existence and self-identity of a person surrounded by technologies of self, society and governance.

As for the question of a definition of Chinese science fiction, I share Ken Liu's (2016, p. 14) view. He argues that, since many different authors represent the new wave in Chinese science fiction, the term 'Chinese science fiction' is hard to define because the individual stories are different from one another. Instead of defining a characteristic 'Chinese science fiction' as different from a non-existing baseline of 'non-Chinese science fiction', it is only useful to study an individual author and how his or her stories came about, which is what we will do here.

2.2 About Han Song

Born in 1965 in Chongqing 重庆, Han Song started writing science fiction during the post-1978 boom of science fiction. While he was in middle school he wrote his first short story, 'Panda Universe' 熊猫宇宙, in which China sends pandas to the moon (Han, 2018). Today he works as a journalist at the cultural department of Xinhua 新华通讯社, China's state news agency (Han, 2013). Next to writing his dark science fiction at night, he writes essays, blog posts and poetry (Jia, 2017, p. 114). His daytime job at the other side of China's

ensorships influences his science fiction, but not so much as his inability to understand the rapid changes in contemporary Chinese society. Han himself claimed not to write for money or fame, nor that he attempts to please his audience (Chen, 2007). He writes in order to educate, although he himself stated that “[W]hen some things are written down, readers will say that they are too obscure, or they don't understand - I'm sorry, but I can't provide readers with the background to my stories” (idem). His works show the hopelessness and anxiety of a despairing insomniac. Contemporary developments in China, trends in science and technology, environmental problems; the chaos and absurdity that he sees around him in real life find their way to his stories and narrative style. The front cover of one of his novels, *Ditie* 地铁, describes it as “Kafka in an electric prison”. *Ditie* 'Subway', is a collection of short stories that share the common theme of a subway. In the first story, people are trapped in the Beijing subway. The subway keeps riding in an endless circle, with all the passengers but the protagonist in a dead-like state, “sitting motionless, breathless, and with beastly expressions” (Song 2015, p. 553). When the protagonist gathers the courage to try and wake one of the passengers, it appears he is trapped in a subway with ghosts. Dwarves enter the train, put the ghost-passengers in green bottles and take them further underground. In the end the train does stop. The protagonist is the only person to get off the train, but before he tells anyone about his nightmarish experience, he realises people will not believe him. This leads him to doubt his recollection of the events, as well as the reality in which he continues to live the rest of his life. At some point, he himself is packed into a green bottle. With that, the first story ends. Neither this story nor the other four in this collection explain what happened. The bizarre and inexplicable invades a reality that seemed familiar to the reader at first. Han Song makes this reality unreliable and alienating. His stories usually feature a weak protagonist with distorted desires and a strong sense of shame, who is unable to make sense of the unfolding events. His type of protagonist presents the reader with a fragmented image of the world. Dialogues are often unnatural and illogical, and are meant to obscure rather than

explain. Jia (2013, p. 111) describes Han Song's literary style in *Ditie* as "marked by a flood of adjectives, inflexibility in plot and pacing, stagnant characterisation, and a monotonous atmosphere of hopelessness". He occasionally lets go of plot development and consistency, favouring narration that resembles poetry but lacks any concrete meaning.

Opinions among the general public vary. On Douban 豆瓣 — a Chinese website for buying and reviewing books, movies and music — comments on Han Song's books focus on either the torment of reading this dark, strange and clumsily written narrative, or laud the significance of the work as a social commentary or philosophical thought experiment. Han's unique take on philosophy, his experimental writing style and their contributions to Chinese science fiction make it that he is one of the 'Three Generals of Chinese Science Fiction' (Zhao, 2012).

Han Song has won several prizes in mainland China, most recently the 2017 Xingyun Award for Global Chinese Science Fiction 全球华语科幻星云奖. The jury comment reads:

"Han Song's *Exorcism* 驱魔 is part two of the *Hospital* 医院 trilogy. In part one of these series the Medicine Age started. In part two it developed into the Medicine War. Artificial Intelligence can make everybody a patient... what separates this future world from today's reality? Han Song's fiction comes closer to the inexplicable reality of the present than his non-fiction does. The language labyrinth allows the reader to experience a blurred version of the future. Behind the pretty imagery an unclear reality is leaking. *Exorcism* is yet another great new-wave work by Han Song. (Xingyun, 2017)

The reason that Han Song's fiction comes closer to the inexplicable reality of the present also lies in the fact that his fiction itself is inexplicable. The 'language labyrinth' that the jury describes is due to what Fei Dao 飞氲⁵ calls 'Demon China' 鬼魔中国. Fei Dao perceives the

⁵Fei Dao 飞氲 is the pen-name of Jia Liyuan, under which he usually writes his own science fiction. Jia Liyuan is also referenced this thesis under his own name. The article that was

universal vagueness that is present in all Han Song's stories as a form of world building. In the world of Han Song's fiction, nothing is a given. Everything is distorted, and even language is not language as we know it, even though it does appear so on the outset. Han's biggest and most notable novel, *Red Ocean* 红色海洋, has not been completely analysed to this date. Jia Liyuan (2013, p. 113) summarises it like this:

It tells of a present in which the survivors of nuclear war consume each other, while in the future, China's great navigator Zheng He reaches Europe but is unable to alter the fate of Asian peoples, who are doomed to defeat at the hands of white Westerners. Past, present, and future are deliberately inverted and the history of China—indeed, of all humanity—is twisted around itself and open to many divergent interpretations.

2.3 Fire Star over America

At the fortnight of the end of the Internet age, the great flood ushered in disaster. The New Humanity quietly stalks between the ruins, hauling their tails and lifting their mechanical heads. A Spirit Staff, Kennedybirds, acid-spitting chess-pieces, and pet demons gather beneath the Bodhi tree. There is also a dark, universal language that combines computer language, English and ancient Tibetan. Infrasonic wave guns explode with the sound of wailing ghosts and howling wolves. We're all joking and talking cheerfully, but the shimmering lights in the night sky make the people taciturn. The prosperity that once was will never return. What does complete the cycle? For what is the journey not perilous? The weapons during that time have already turned to rust, making us use our hands and feet and once more take up tools made of stone! (Han, 2012, p. 0)

published under Jia Liyuan's own name is an adaptation of the one that was published under his pen name. The Jia Liyuan article was translated by Joel Martinsen.

The story takes place in the year 2066. America has deteriorated to the point of becoming a failed state due to its closed-door policies of the 21st century. China has become the world's sole superpower and cultural hegemony. In China, an Artificial Intelligence called Armando 阿曼多 controls all aspects of society. Armando is a conscious AI-internet hybrid and the main driving force in the rise to prosperity of the world as a whole. People in China have all been dealt one specific purpose in life. The people live these lives mainly in the virtual world that is also Armando, and only take trips in the real world for leisure. Despite Armando's near-perfect management of the world, sea levels have risen to the point where all the major cities were forced to build dams to prevent flooding.

The story tells of the protagonist's experience in the real world. The protagonist is the fictional author, writing 60 years after the events took place. His name is Tang Long 唐龙⁶. He is 16 years old, and based on his DNA Armando has decided his sole purpose in life is to play the game of Go 围棋⁷. He is part of a team of 30 people to represent China in the World Championship in Washington DC. With China's rise, Go replaced soccer to become the world's most popular sport. Because of separatist unrest in Washington, the championship is moved to the New York World Trade Centre. The team gets a tour of New York and visits famous American museums, the Harlem District and a toppled Statue of Liberty. On their tour they encounter clones and results of genetic experiments such as the Kennedybirds 肯尼迪鸟. During the championship Tang gets a stomachache that prevents him from playing to his full potential. Later on, the dam that protects New York breaks, flooding the city and trapping the team inside the World Trade Centre. At the same time, Armando malfunctions, leaving the team unable to communicate with the outside world. Terrorists attack and destroy the World

⁶The name Tang Long 唐龙 symbolizes China. The Tang dynasty (618-907) is a period of Chinese greatness. Long 'Dragon' is China's most well-known mythical creature. Tang Long is also the name of the main character and hero in the 1972 martial arts movie Way of the Dragon 猛龙过江, portrayed by Bruce Lee 李小龙. Lastly, it is the name of Donald Duck 唐龙鸭

⁷Go 围棋 is a game played with black and white stones on a 19x19 square board. The goal is to capture as much territory as possible. It resembles chess in terms of abstract strategy.

Trade Centre, but Tang narrowly escapes by being pushed in the water just before the explosion. He floats around, meets a dog and after a while loses consciousness.

When he comes to he finds himself in the company of Suzuki's Army on a boat called Noah's Ark. Suzuki's Army is a group of Asian-American teenagers. They were all orphaned due to the anti-Asian wave that swept across America during the twenty-first century. They hate and fear white people, and their goal is to kill as many as possible. Their other goal is to sail to Boston and find the so-called 'Spirit Staff' 灵杖, a device developed in America that can predict the future. The crew welcomes Tang to sail with them because he is Chinese. The only other Chinese person is Susan 苏珊, a girl whom Tang Long eventually falls in love with. After the crew refuses help from another boat filled with white people, Tang calls out to the boat to take him with them. Suzuki orders to sink the boat and to take Tang prisoner. Suzuki punishes Tang for his actions in a Qing-court style until Susan intervenes. The crew locks up Tang and later forces him to join their army. Suzuki holds a monopoly on information. Through a chip in his head, he is able to communicate with what is left of Armando. He holds press conferences to inform the rest of the crew.

When the boat docks in Boston, Tang is determined to escape. He sets out during the first night, but when he runs into some strange, taciturn people, he gets scared and turns back. He spends the following days looking for contact lenses for Suzuki, who is very shortsighted. The rest of the crew looks for the Spirit Staff, and they eventually find it with the help of Tang's dog. They then want to celebrate finding the Spirit Staff by eating Tang's dog, but Tang intervenes.

No one knows how to use the Spirit Staff. They suspect that it needs Armando in order to work, or that it is a fake. Armando has by this time completely collapsed. Disappointed, the crew sits around in a building in Boston. Tang keeps looking for contact lenses. He runs into the Korean of the crew, and finds out that he too can play Go. They sit on the dam that protects Boston and talk about Go. A boat appears in the distance, and they discuss if they

should hail it. Suzuki approaches, states that there is no boat and forbids anyone from talking about it. Two of the crew members are found murdered. African children attack the crew, and it turns into a small war. The leader of the African children is captured, and it becomes clear that their quarrel is based on a misunderstanding where both sides thought they were fighting whites. A few days later, Tang escapes Boston with the help of Susan, who gives him a map and a compass.

Tang travels to Albany, New York State. There he meets Newman 纽曼, and the two become quick friends. Newman is a teenager from Australia and a gifted Go player. He has a bionic kangaroo tail that his father grafted on. This is where his Go skills come from. Besides that, the tail contains the complete history of America. People can plug in to the tail to relive the glory days of America and once more have a sense of pride and identity. Tang and Newman travel westward in Newman's car. Along the way they make money by playing Go and offering the abilities of Newman's tail in exchange for money. In Casper, Wyoming, people attack Newman. He is saved by someone called Gates 盖茨, a descendent of Bill Gates. Gates lives alone in the mountains in what he calls 'Utopia Village' 乌托村. Tang and Newman stay in Utopia Village for two weeks. While there, Newman shares his knowledge about the history of America. After they both have a dream they realise they can't stay in Utopia Village. Newman decides he wants to find his father to help him get rid of his tail, Tang is still searching for Chinese people. Gates has information that Newman's father is in Oklahoma. Tang and Newman arrive in Oklahoma, which is cluttered with dead bodies. Newman's absence, meanwhile, turned him into a mythical figure, 'The Inheritor of American Culture' 美国文明的继承者. His picture is sold everywhere as a good luck charm. Next to these pictures, there are also government-issued wanted posters with Newman's face on them. Newman fears the government wants to cut off his tail because he knows too much about American history, or that the UN will conduct experiments on him. Newman stays indoors in a shabby tavern filled with bioengineered people while Tang goes out to find Newman's father. Tang

gathers information that Newman's father went to the capital. However, he learns that terrorists destroyed Washington by triggering an earthquake. They decide to go to Gettysburg, America's substitute capital and the city where the Union won victory over the Confederacy. On their third day there, they witness the public trial of America's president, Emily 艾米丽, whom Tang met when he first arrived in America. Emily is publicly executed and the new president, Bigot 比格特, is installed. Then, Native American freedom fighters arrive, demanding '5 Emptyism' or Wuwu-ism 五无主义, and a battle breaks out. Tang and Newman escape, only to be apprehended by a group of dwarves that they first encountered in Oklahoma. The dwarves want Newman to be their spiritual leader. Newman refuses and the dwarves lock them up. The wall of their cell is blown apart, and Newman's father appears. He tells them to go to a place near Houston, Texas, called the City of Light 光明城, and to wait for him there. The City of Light, also called Biosphere 7, is a self-sustaining ecosystem that houses 5500 people and is unaffected by the disasters that struck the rest of America. On their first night, Newman and Tang sneak out of the dome to sit in the desert and talk. Suddenly the horned Iranian from Suzuki's army appears and shoots Newman dead. Tang wrestles him in a lost battle, until they both fall unconscious when a red light illuminates the sky. When they come to, the City of Light is on fire.

President Bigot introduces reforms and urges diplomacy. However, there are voices for 'revolution, not reform', and both sides are secretly preparing for battle. On the Fourth of July, America's second civil war breaks out⁸. Tang is quickly captured by the North. Because he looks Asian, they suspect him of being a spy for the Southern Army. They force him to join the Northern Army. Here he meets Sam 山姆⁹. Sam is his commander and the inventor of the new language Aikemaik 艾克麦克语¹⁰. Sam envisions Aikemaik as the universal language

⁸ Independence Day in the United States of America.

⁹ The name Sam refers to Uncle Sam, the personification of the U.S. government.

¹⁰ The characters for Aikemaik 艾克麦克 do not translate to anything meaningful. Yu 语 means language.

of the Post-mechanization era. Because Tang is Chinese, Sam sees the new Walter Lin in him. Walter Lin was a reincarnation of Lei Feng 雷锋¹¹, and a legend in America. Tang does not have to fight in the army, but his reputation spreads quickly because of his nationality and his Go skills. He serves as a lucky charm in Sam's army unit, lifting the spirits of the soldiers. One day, Sam puts him out in the battlefield, tied to a totem. As soon as the Southerners see him, they retreat. The next day, Tang finds that he has lost his ability to play Go. Instead, he finds that he has gained fighting skills. He starts participating in the fights. He kills and enjoys it, and his name is changed to Black Tang 布莱克 唐¹². One day he spots members of Suzuki's Army among the Southerners. He takes them prisoner and they join the North under his command. When Suzuki performs poorly on the battlefield, Tang cuts off his ears and plans to kill him as punishment, but lets him go eventually. Tang's unit is the most splendid on the battlefield, but after a while they too start to suffer losses. On October 1st¹³, the war ends when 10 nuclear missiles are launched.

In the aftermath, Sam declares himself president. He is assassinated soon after. In his dying moments, he asks Tang to play Go with him. He then tells Tang that there are 500 more nuclear warheads hidden throughout the world, and that he can access the information of their whereabouts if he finds the under-officer called Plant 植物. Plant disappeared however, and Sam tells Tang that Plant was the one to launch the nuclear strike. After revealing this information, Sam dies and his body disappears.

UN forces arrive. Tang Long and Susan are transported to China through a Sino-New Soviet constructed undersea train. They stop halfway in an undersea city that also came about through cooperation between China and the New Soviet Union. They arrive in Shanghai, where Tang Long's family is waiting for him to welcome him back. They are all dressed up as

¹¹Lei Feng 雷锋 was a model soldier and citizen in China's propaganda campaigns during the 1960s (Landsberger, 2016).

¹² 布莱克 bulaike does not mean black, but sounds similar. These characters are also used to translate the name 'Blake', but I see no reason for that here.

¹³National Day of the People's Republic of China.

Native Americans. Tang introduces Susan to his family. He has learned to speak the Aikemaik language, learned how to use weapons, and how to kill people. "Can you do this?" Tang asks the reader. Tang and Susan take the dog out for a walk. Susan eagerly takes in all the technology that surrounds them and asks Tang about it. Tang suspects that she is so curious because she plans to leave him. He is reminded of their time in Boston, and suddenly has a vision in which America is not destroyed at all, and that makes the six months he spent there unreal:

I never went anywhere at all. No. Not even this is an illusion. But I already forgot what actually happened. I kept quiet while having my misgivings. (p. 418)

At the Bund they look at the now outdated buildings on the other side of the river. Everything is illuminated in the bright red colour of the fire star. On the opposite side tens of thousands of people from all over the world gather together. They all wear traditional Native American clothing, and while looking up at the copper-coloured sky they chant in unison: "Paradise! Paradise!" The people are tense and longing, their eyes empty and dauntless. The fire star suddenly disappears into the sky. Tang tries to kiss Susan, but does not notice the UFO behind them casting a shadow, only the frightful barking of the dog.

This is the end of the book. What happens in the sixty years that follow remains a mystery until the point where Tang is writing the story. The only information about what follows is at the start of the book, where Tang, as the fictional author, explains that he is no longer Chinese and that the earth has turned into a paradise.

2.4 乱: The future history of America

During their time in Gates' Utopia Village, Newman shares his knowledge of American history. He talks about the state of affairs in the world during the end of the twentieth century.

He describes how the multipolarity in international relations is an unstable social construct without any particular meaning. He takes the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia as an example of America's unchecked power¹⁴ (Han, 2012, p. 234). Newman starts his recounting of history with an energy crisis that occurred in 2015. Everywhere in the Middle East war broke out. These wars were about water, but also halted oil exports. Central Asia froze its oil exports as well, and the world was left with a supply of seven years. This crisis hit Western powers like Japan, America and the EU the hardest. In 2023 the financial system collapsed, bankrupting the institutions that guided the value of Western currencies and dropping the value of the dollar to an all-time low. This is when America lost its position as a world leader.

In 2029, the 'case of the Thought Poisoning' 思想毒事 occurred. This is a poison 毒 invented by a South American named Di Lasso. It is able to enter and spread through any given organism's nervous system and strengthen specific neurological signals. In this way it is able to change an individual's views so as to influence ideology, values and moral concepts. During that time, America relied heaviest on Armando. The Thought poison entered the brains of American people, spreading rapidly and destroying their basic beliefs and convictions. Americans started to doubt the purpose of the founding of their country. They stopped reading their classics, not believing it included or ever had included any truth. This led to a hollow education system that left the new generation less informed than the former. People went crazy, but America's disease of self-affection only grew stronger. According to America, they were not the problem, but the victim. The whole world was making America out to be the enemy. In 2030 there was a great crop failure that led to racial unrest. A wave of campaigns to crowd out and persecute scapegoats mainly focused on Asian people. White people in America believed that Asians had taken away their jobs and brought about the

¹⁴ This incident caused the death of three Chinese journalists and was a very sensitive issue in China that led to demonstrations and attacks on American diplomatic buildings. Both sides accused each other's media of biased coverage (Gries, 2001, p. 26).

recent misfortune. Two million Chinese people left America, taking their capital and technological skills with them. This was a great loss to America, and led to the bankruptcy of two hundred factories that made up the backbone of what was left of the American economy. Around this time there was an end to America's two-party system when the Republican Party was disbanded. However, as both parties just represented the interests of the bureaucratic capital, it did not matter much. Livelihood rapidly declined, and the education system broke down. People stopped sending their children to school because they could not afford it, and the ones that did graduate were not able to find a job. The American people stopped believing in studying and hard work as means to change their destiny. Unsure about whether they would have food the next day, people lost the inclination to innovate. In 2032 the new president Parker cut the country off from foreign contact completely, with unexpected general approval. He stated that the current crisis that America was in was caused by Asians, Africans, and Hispanics. It resembled the 1930s in Germany, Spain and Japan in that extremists were in control. Later it became clear that president Parker was a demagogue. He had used claptrap to gain the popular vote, and through dealings with enemy powers had gained the presidential seat. He assembled a small circle of sycophants around him and became a dictator. He did not offer solutions to the problems that he had addressed during his election, but instead only enriched himself and his closest relations. A little over 30 years later the country was in chaos and had stopped developing in general. When president Emily took up office she started to implement reforms, but the country was already devoid of its former vitality. To add insult to injury, the disaster with the flood occurred.

Newman continues his recollection of American history by going further back in time. He talks about the Great Depression of the 1930s, WWII, and McCarthyism, and then goes even further back to the founding of the United States of America. He describes how white people exterminated the native Americans, and how native Americans were essentially Asian peoples who had crossed the Bering Strait in ancient times. He gives a detailed account

about the cruelty of the whites, how they were the ones to introduce the techniques of scalping and cutting off private parts of the natives. He also discusses the Founding Fathers, and how Abraham Lincoln, now regarded as the man responsible for abolishing slavery, was also responsible for the largest massacre on American land in history that led to the near extinction of the native Dakota Sioux people. Newman explains that this is the part of American history that he usually does not show to people that are looking to relive the glory days of America.

2.5 治: The future history of China

Throughout the book, the reader gets glimpses of China when the protagonist thinks of his native country. The protagonist does not remember his own home country's history, except for that China during the 21st century became the best country in the world, a paradise of collectivism. Economic development increased the standard of living in China, starting when China opened itself to the world market in 1978 and incorporated capitalism in the socialist government. Repression, fear and ideology as tools of legitimacy were gradually replaced with the promise of prosperity. This trend continued during the twenty-first century, and people quickly rose out of poverty.

During America's decline, China continued to develop to become the world's leading power. China was able to manage the crises that hit the rest of the world because of its foresight and technological development. Science increased the standard of living, technological development and AI focused on strengthening totalitarianism. It appears as though the Chinese population has given up their freedoms and individual identity in return for safety and prosperity. The institution of family is equally deconstructed. The protagonist has been born from a test tube, and has his parents allocated to him by the government (Han, 2012, p. 23). Despite this, class society and income inequality are not eradicated. The protagonist is a superstar Go-player and a trillionaire. Next to that, the protagonist questions whether he will

be able to return to China, and if so, whether China's perfect society will accept him. The AI Armando takes care of all aspects of life. Everything is predetermined by the state so as to be as efficient as possible. This extends to the individual which is kept superficially happy, well fed, and is given a purpose in life. This system controls everything, prevents critical thinking and suppresses emotions. According to the protagonist, only people whose life has no meaning think about the meaning of life. Hence, there is no crime, no divorces, and people live to grow a 120 years old. By that time they selflessly commit euthanasia to alleviate the burden of the nation. People live their lives almost entirely on the internet, which has evolved into a virtual world. This leaves a vision of the real world that is populated by empty husks. Han Song also provides notes of central government meetings. During these meetings, the top government officials attempt to manage the chaos that followed the disaster and Armando's collapse, but the focus lies on helping America. America continually rebuffs the attempts of the Chinese government. As to the effects of Armando's collapse in China, almost no information is provided. There should be a great impact in China as well, because everyone is suddenly disconnected from Armando and has to live in the real world. The effect of Armando's collapse on Tang is that he turns from a gifted Go player to a gifted killer. As Fei Dao (2012, p. 434) explains, Go, as an illusory form of warfare, represents the control that Armando exerted on the people that turned them into stiff robots. Tang's own nature as a killer was suppressed by the game of Go.

When Tang and Susan return to China at the end of the book, the reader gets a glimpse of China after the collapse of Armando. People are all wearing traditional native American clothing, and are calling for Paradise to come. The buildings in Shanghai are 'now outdated'. This suggests that China's development mainly took place in the virtual world. However, at this point in the book, all forms of reality are questioned when Tang wonders if he ever has been to America. This also begs the questions of whether Tang has ever left Armando,

whether Armando ever collapsed and if so, whether or not he is back in Armando when he returns and sees the buildings opposite the Bund.

Chapter 3. The background of social criticism in *Fire star over America*

3.1 Criticizing America: Chinese nationalism in the 1980s and 1990s

After the reforms and opening up of 1978, Chinese intellectuals saw a hopeful future. During the 1980s China's economy had started to quickly develop. Chinese analysts and officials agreed that with China's rise, there would be a shift towards multipolarity that would create balance of power in international relations (Deng, 2001, 346). Communist China would rise to be among these great powers alongside Europe, Japan and Russia, and in this environment would develop a distinctive Chinese identity that would last. In their efforts to advocate for modernization and the creation of a Chinese identity, intellectuals adopted an anti-traditionalist view. This new nationalism was based on the recollections of China's past as a great nation, before it was humiliated by Western powers at the end of the 19th century. It attacked Chinese traditional culture as the reason for its backwardness, and promoted westernization. Arguably, anti-traditionalism was used as a euphemism to attack socialist institutions, since many people were disillusioned with the lack of prosperity that socialism had brought (Zhao, 1997, p.727). Many in the movement also attacked the authoritarian character and lack of democracy by attacking traditional feudalism in China. Anti-traditionalism was not new. It was used at the beginning of the twentieth century, as well as during the Mao era. This movement did not last, however, because it could not combine its cynical view of China's cultural heritage, its adoration of the West and the ideology of Communism into an image of great Chinese identity (Zhao, 1997, p. 730). Anti-traditionalism started to decline after the crackdown of pro-democracy demonstration on Tiananmen square in 1989 (known in China as the June 4 incident 六四事件).

Global developments also contributed to a shift in Chinese nationalism movements.

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 had left America the world's sole superpower. The demise of Communism brought an ideological vacuum that caused an upsurge in nationalist sentiments in Eastern European countries as well as in China (Zhao, 1997, p. 725). Chinese analysts and officials generally agreed that America would remain a superpower in the near future, but that a shift towards a multipolar international community was inevitable. They also argued that a balanced multipolarity of state power was the only way to a peaceful world. However, in the years that followed, they still perceived China to be a backward country and an easy target for aggressive imperialism. These critics pointed to American dominance in major international institutions like the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the United Nations (UN), and the International Olympics Committee (IOC), and how America used its power in these institutions to further strengthen its position on the world stage (Zheng, 1999, p. 3). This concentration of power in the hands of America led it to increasingly act unilaterally and unchecked. During the Cold War, America had already firmly established its political, economical, and military superiority over Europe and Japan. After the Cold War, America had also started to successfully incorporate Russia into its world establishment. China was now the last great communist state in the post-Cold War world, and was seeking development as well as a national identity in order to become an important actor in the international community. In order to spur development, China needed to engage with these international institutions. However, communism as represented by the former Soviet Union was seen as the greatest threat to the Western powers during the Cold War. After the fall of the Soviet Union, many in America saw a strong communist China as the greatest threat. Because Europe and Japan had not strengthened their positions to become poles of their own, and Russia was seen to have been incorporated by America as well, none were able to effectively check America's behaviour. There was a determination among

Chinese intellectuals to resist this American domination, and they rejected the western values that they admired in the preceding decade (Des Forges & Xu, 2001, p. 485).

Policymakers in China generally follow the 'five key principles of peaceful co-existence' when dealing with other states. These principles are "The mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit" (idem, p. 346). America, according to Chinese analysts, appeared to share this view, but used concepts such as human rights to unilaterally overrule any given country's sovereignty, often as a guise for other interests (Deng, 2001, p. 347). Like all countries, China was still militarily inferior to America, and China's domestic and security issues made it susceptible to interference. While China had initially welcomed American hegemony in the Western Pacific to contain Japanese militarization, the monopolization of American power on the international stage made it so that American presence became a threatening instead of a stabilizing factor. America's military support of the nationalist government on Taiwan was a direct threat to Chinese territorial claims, and Chinese officials feared that America would start a rearmament of Japan in order to contain China.

From a Chinese perspective, western-dominated institutions continually scrutinized China's domestic policymaking to report flaws. The western media always seemed to focus on the repression of ethnic minorities, human rights violations, and the autocratic character of the Chinese one-party state as the antagonist of Western-style freedom and democracy. In Chinese intellectual circles there was a theory of containment. This theory stated that there was a milieu, if not an established policy in Western countries that aimed to contain China. China was also quite literally encircled by America's military presence and influence in the Asian-Pacific region (Liu, 2001, p. 209).

In this political atmosphere, many young Chinese had become disillusioned with America. They used to revere America's power and prosperity as an example of what China would soon be reaching as well. However, on the international stage, America appeared to behave

as a dictatorial bully that mainly targeted China in order to retain its own supreme position. This combination of pride and humiliation led to an upsurge in populist nationalism that targeted America. In 1994, there was a survey among readers of China Youth Daily 中国青年报, the official newspaper of the Communist Youth League of China. Of the one hundred thousand respondents, over 80 percent stated that the country that they disliked the most was America (Des Forges & Xu, 2001, p. 486). This provided an opportunity for Chinese publishing companies. After the reforms in 1978, Chinese publishing companies received less government support and needed to be profitable by themselves. Especially after the government crackdown of 1989, censorship during the 1990s was mainly self-imposed. More than the authors themselves, publishing houses were responsible for what entered the market. They were toeing the line between marketability and government restrictions. If a book was deemed problematic, the government could quickly stop its distribution, and occasionally close a publishing house (Oosterhuis, 2013, p. 22). As the surveys showed that there was strong nationalist sentiment among a large group of young people, populist nationalist works had a big potential to be both profitable and government-approved. Two of these books are important for this thesis. The first one is *China can say No* 中国可以说, because it is the earliest, best-selling and most influential. The second is *The Background of the Demonization of China* 妖魔化中国的背后, because Han Song is one of the co-authors.

3.1.1 *China can say no*

In 1996, a group of young Chinese intellectuals published a collection of political treatises that addressed national identity, international relations, the position of America as the world's superpower, and the depiction of China in Western media. The authors were also critical of Chinese liberal intellectuals that they deemed too enamored with the West, and America in particular (Martinsen, 2008). The title of the book is *China can say no*. The title points to

China's position on the world stage. The book argues that China is no longer weak as it was in the preceding century, when it was continually overrun by foreign powers and scrambling to catch up in terms of economy, science, and technology. The book's front cover states that "*China can say no* is not looking for confrontation, but for a more equal dialogue". This book attacks American foreign policy towards China on issues as human rights, Tibet, and Taiwan (Gries, p. 67). The writers point to American history to assert their claim that America is hypocritical and not as great as many Chinese people at the time appeared to think. *China can say no* was the most influential among a number of books that took a critical attitude towards America (Han, 1997, p. 330). 'Say No' became one of the signature phrases of 1996. According to Song Qiang 宋强, the chief editor of the book, the writers aimed to criticize the culture of consumerism, foreigner worship and the mentality of inferiority (Martinsen, 2008). Song Qiang and four other writers and poets wrote the book after two national surveys conducted in 1994 and 1995 revealed that there was strong nationalist sentiment among Chinese youth. In this sense, the writers tapped into the culture of consumerism that they themselves criticized. *China can say no* was an echo chamber for already existing opinions, which also explains its popularity (Des Forges & Xu, 2001, p. 486). The main focus of the book lies in the ways in which American foreign policies attempt to contain China. After the Tiananmen incident of 1989, America had imposed sanctions that again isolated China from the international community. America also continued to provide weapons and support to the nationalist government on Taiwan, invited the Taiwanese president Li Denghui¹⁵ 李登辉 to the White House, successfully lobbied against China's bid to host the 2000 Summer Olympics, and boarded a Chinese vessel on the false suspicion that it was delivering weapons to Iran, known as the Yinhe incident 银河号事件 (Des Forges & Xu, 2001, p. 485). According to critics, these examples showed how America as the world's sole superpower was willing and

¹⁵Usually romanized as Lee Teng-hui, in accordance with the *Wade-Giles* system used on Taiwan.

able to act with disregard for China's interests and sensibilities, and was blocking China from taking its rightful place in the world at every possible turn. The first chapter by Song Qiang is called 'The blue heaven is dying, the yellow heaven is ascending' 苍天当死, 黄天当立 (p. 3). This title is based on a phrase that was used in the context of the Heavenly Mandate, the concept by which China had been ruled since millennia until the last claimants of the Heavenly Mandate, the Qing Dynasty, were defeated in 1911. According to this worldview, the emperor ruled the entire known world, or all-under-heaven 天下, by the grace of Heaven. If an emperor lost that grace, someone else received the mandate to rule. Song uses this ancient Chinese worldview to suggest that America will lose its position as the world's only superpower in favour of China. In his first essay, Song explains how he himself used to suffer from 'pro-America complex' 亲美情结, and how America's recent behaviour towards China had opened his eyes, and made him realise that America was not a role model to follow in order to create a strong Chinese nation. Zhang Zangzang 张藏藏 starts the second chapter with the essay 'I disdain *that type* of Chinese' 我唾弃那种中国人, with which he means the people that seem to worship foreigners, including Taiwanese people. Zhang's chapter is the longest of the book. It consists of thirteen essays, in which he claims that the policy of 'containing China' is America's long-term strategy, in order to remain the world's supreme country. He attacks America's foreign policy (p. 76), describes an international 'Anti-China Club' (p. 83), calls to set Hollywood on fire (p. 122) and predicts that American isolationism will cause it to collapse (p. 151). In the introduction, He Beilin 何蓓琳 states that "This book is not a nationalist manifesto, nor is it a strategic outline to establish China's position in international politics". The scattershot and repetitive style of the angry essays indeed does not suggest a strategic outline. Although the book was written by intellectuals, it is certainly not an academic work. The book, despite being an instant best-seller, has been heavily criticized both in China and abroad (Des Forges & Xu, 2001, Wang, 1997, Martinsen, 2008).

3.1.2 *The Background of the Demonization of China*

Another bestselling nationalist book is Li Xiguang's 李希光 and Liu Kang's 刘康 *Behind the scenes of the demonisation of China*. This book is a critical review of American media and their coverage of China. American media, the writers argue, almost always report on China in terms of corruption, totalitarianism, human rights violation, nuclear proliferation, intellectual property violations, Tibet and Taiwan, etcetera (Li, 1996, p. ii). The book is very reminiscent of *China can say no*. Eight different authors wrote the ten chapters that make up the book. The chapters themselves are in turn made up of several short essays, sharing personal experiences and providing examples that back their criticism of American media. Han Song, himself a journalist for Xinhua News Agency, is one of the co-authors. After he returned from his visit to America, he wrote a chapter titled 'The America complex and Chinese reality' 美国情结与中国现实. It consists of nineteen essays with titles such as 'In America there truly exists paranoia' 在美国确实存在偏执狂 (p. 280), 'Non-Americans are not people' 除了美国人, 别人都不是人 (p. 287) and 'Destroy the American dream' 打破美国梦 (p. 326), in which he criticises various aspects of American society. His criticism mainly focuses on American media and their biased coverage of China. Here we will discuss two essays in which he uses his analysis of American media to argue against American exceptionalism. In the first essay, 'Will a Cultural Revolution take place in America?' 美国会不会发生文革? (p. 275), Han Song attacks the Washington Post for their uninformed and biased coverage of nationalism and anti-American sentiment in China. The article suggested that the Chinese government fanned anti-American sentiment, but despite this the ordinary people still looked positively on the United States. Han Song criticises the article on providing a narrow and one-sided account. The article reported on the anti-American stance of the government and the popularity of *China can say no*. It also mentioned a performance of American music in Beijing in 1996. According to the article, Chinese officials had requested that the concert took a more international form, and that 'The Stars and Stripes Forever' would not be played. However, in

an act of defiance the Chinese audience explicitly requested 'The Stars and Stripes' to be played. Han Song nuances the tone of this article after contacting the people involved in the concert. They state that 'The Stars and Stripes' was not part of the regular program, and that there thus had been no request to remove it. The audience also did not request 'The Stars and Stripes' to be played, but by clapping they requested an encore. 'The Stars and Stripes' was played as an encore. Han argues that The Washington Post provides an image of a government that represses a population that loves America. Through this example, Han Song shows the prevalence of inherently biased language that disregards facts so as to distort China's image in America. It is interesting to note however, that Han's translation of the last sentence of the article may have created the very problem that he addresses. The original article ends with the sentence: "There were only minor alterations, with Sousa's "Stars and Stripes" as an encore" (Mufson, 1996). Han Song broke this sentence in two parts, and translated the last part to Chinese as follows: "索萨的《星条旗永不落》是应听众要求加演的". This sentence, when translated back to English, reads: "Sousa's 'The stars and stripes' was played as an encore in accordance with the audience's request."¹⁶ Han's addition of the characters 应听众要求 'in accordance with the audience request' more than anything in the original article creates the idea of an audience that explicitly requested the American national anthem to be played, which is the main point in his criticism. Taking this into consideration, it appears as though Han himself used the very techniques of language bias and truth distortion that he criticizes American media for.

The second essay, 'Will McCarthyism be resurrected?' 麦卡锡会复活吗? (p. 282) starts out with the statement that the individual Americans that Han Song met were good and industrious people. However, Han reminds the reader that America was the country that introduced the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, a racially based act that halted immigration of

¹⁶ Defoort (1999) also translated this article. In her translation, the sentence is: "Sousa's 'The Stars and Stripes Forever' was added at the audience's request." (Defoort, 1999, 88)

Chinese people. Chinese people were lawfully scorned because of their race, and were forced into lower class jobs. More recently, during the aftermath of the Cold War, McCarthyism gained traction in America. McCarthyism is the name of the movement that targeted American domestic communists. Anyone that was suspected of communist sympathies was targeted without a trial. Because China was the last great communist nation, Chinese people in America were automatically regarded as suspicious. Han compares McCarthyism to the Cultural Revolution, asks whether it would be possible that McCarthyism is resurrected, and answers that under the veil of America's progressiveness and openness, the universal evil of human nature that was there in the history of America still lingers. Han argues that there is a darkness and evil lurking beneath the freedom, prosperity and technological advancement in America. He gives an example of recent incidents of burning black people's churches, states that he fears that someday there will be incidents where Chinese residences are burned, and that if McCarthyism were resurrected, there would certainly be people celebrating in front of the White House.

Han Song uses his personal experiences in America, as well as an analysis of American media to criticize America in the same way that the authors of *China can say no* did. Much the same as *China can say no*, *The background of the demonization of China* received heavy criticism. On Douban, more than half of the 87 people that rated the book did not give it more than two stars. Comments attack the writing style and the subjectivity of the book. They argue that, as the authors are all professors and journalists, they should know the value of objectivity in criticism. This book is similar to the angry voices in *China can say no*. Both these books echo nationalist and anti-American sentiments that were also voiced in the government's mouthpiece *The People's Daily*. Both, when critically assessed, appear to be little more than a collection of fear-mongering hate speech that, although not entirely unfounded, uses speculation, presents a biased and selective view, and treats misinformation as though it were fact. In *Fire star over America*, Han builds on the ideas put

forth in these essays to construct his version of a future United States, a society that has indeed experienced unrest equal to the Cultural Revolution, and has treated Asian peoples and other minorities comparable to the years of McCarthyism.

3.2 Criticizing China: The protagonist and 'Demon China'

In *Fire star over America*, China has claimed its rightful place on the world stage. However, the reader gets glimpses of a society reminiscent of Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1921)¹⁷. On the surface, China in 2066 is the exact opposite of the chaotic America that Han criticizes.

Everyone knows their place in society, and nothing else. However, this seemingly utopian society has produced a protagonist that only has a positive view of his own nation's history, is unable to make sense of anything that happens, and is helpless outside of his familiar environment. The totalitarian society of China in 2066 controls everything, and thereby limits the development of a self-identity. Disconnected from this control, the protagonist displays a great amount of self-centeredness, weakness and naiveté. The protagonist's only goal is to return to China, which, as he repeatedly states, is the best country in the world. After he joins Sam's army, his evil and violent nature that was suppressed in the totalitarian Chinese society emerges. Through the protagonist, Han Song criticizes China's tendency to exert complete control over its subjects to the point where they are designed rather than born. He attacks the moral character that such a system will produce by portraying a weak and insecure person that has no individual identity, and is still inherently evil.

On a deeper level, and present in Han Song's other fiction, lurks the 'Demon China'. Earlier in this thesis Han Song's unique position as a science fiction author in China was discussed. His strange narrative style defies logic and the established laws of reality. This is a type of world building that Fei Dao has dubbed 'Demon China'. Han Song's stories usually take place in

¹⁷ *We* is widely considered to have served as an example and inspiration for George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. It is one of the earlier notable works that defined the genre of dystopian fiction, describing a futuristic totalitarian and gentrified society.

China, and his vision of China's future is always warped in every way. Next to the nationalist, anti-American message that makes *Fire star over America* unique in Han's oeuvre, the 'Demon China' is also present. 'Demon China' is not only the utopian society in which the protagonist grew up, but also an abstract universe that is present in all of Han Song's science fiction. It presents itself through the way in which the protagonist experiences reality, the nonlinearity of time and space, and the way in which language itself is warped. 'Demon China' causes the strange thought processes of the protagonist and the illogical dialogues throughout the story, which are cut short right at the moment when something seems to be explained. 'Demon China' also presents itself when the protagonist feels cold while looking at a boiling red sea in Boston. It is the experience of an unfamiliar and unstable reality. It does not mean anything at that point in the story, but it is always there. Even though it may be unintentional, it allows Han to interchange facts and fiction, history, present and future. It can serve as a tool to obscure social and political criticism and to reflect his anxiety towards society and the way in which he perceives an untrustworthy reality presented by an incomprehensibly vast and frightening universe. On the other hand, 'Demon China' may simply be the product of chaos and sloppiness in Han's craftsmanship, and lack of plot developments. Looking at the prologue of the book in retrospect suggests the latter. For example, the 'New Humanity' is a notion that only returns in the book in the shape of Newman, and arguably the horned Iranian. No mention is made of anyone with mechanical heads. The Spirit Staff is found, but entirely inconsequential to the story. The Kennedybirds appear at the start of the story, but they too serve no purpose at all. The acid-spitting chess pieces are not explained, and they only return in the story when the protagonist smells acid, which is also inconsequential. There are no pet demons at all. There is a pet, which is Tang's dog, but this dog is not a demon. There is no reference to the Bodhi tree that Han mentions in the prologue, although this may serve as a metaphor for the story. After he mentions the Bodhi tree, Han continues that "There is also a dark, universal language that combines

computer language, English and ancient Tibetan”. This is the Aikemaïke language. In the story, Aikemaïke, besides being far from universal except in Sam’s mind, also incorporates the Shanghai dialect after Tang’s arrival. Next to that, the ‘computer language’ is ‘old-style computer language’ in the book. There are weapons that resemble the infrasonic wave guns from the prologue which may explain Tang’s stomach ache during the World Championship, but they do not seem to serve any plot purpose. Next, the second Civil War is fought with mechs and sophisticated robots. People also possess space-traveling technology, nuclear technology, and the ability to construct a self-sustaining environment that houses 5500 people in a future America that is so backward that there are no weapons, and where the people have to “use their hands and feet and once more take up tools made of stone”. Lastly, and in direct contrast with the aforementioned claim, the horned Iranian shoots Newman with a gun.

These discrepancies between the prologue and the story can be attributed to ‘Demon China’ as a sophisticated way of world building that aims to obfuscate. However, the smaller inconsistencies strengthen the claim of sloppiness and hasty writing. It is impossible to draw a definitive conclusion at this point. Disregarding intention, Han’s ‘Demon China’ reflects an anxiety towards society, the impossibility in finding objective truth and the nature of reality.

Chapter 4. Discussion: *Fire star over America* today

Han Song is one of China’s most important science fiction authors. He is also one of the most obscure writers. He experiments with plot, narrative style, social commentary and philosophical themes, the combination of which makes it hard to discern clear meaning from his stories. The story we have discussed here, *Fire Star over America*, is unique in his oeuvre due to its nationalist, anti-American message. America in 2066 experiences chaos, violence and lawlessness reminiscent of China during the Cultural Revolution a century earlier. Han’s account of America’s future history ascribes this deterioration to several factors. The values of

liberalism and free press, he argues, do not prevent a Cultural Revolution from happening in America. On the contrary, the corrupting power of capital works on every level. American media increasingly turn to sensationalism and disregard facts in their chase for views and readership. In this process, media follow the lowest common denominator for success, which presents itself in an oversimplification of coverage. This creates a confused and uninformed public. The coverage of China that Han Song and others criticized in *The Background of the demonization of China* still exists today¹⁸. In the same way, politicians increasingly turn to populism in their chase for votes. Han shows this through an analysis of American media's reporting of China. Ultimately, Han argues that both media and policymakers follow the directions of big industries in their chase for funds. Under these circumstances, the already existing wealth gap increases and the misinformed and confused public's standard of living declines, which leads to social unrest and chaos 亂.

In Chinese domestic politics, the government's main goal is to prevent social unrest through control 治. In Han's account of China's future history, the government has succeeded to an extreme. The Confucian concept of control, or government, extends to every individual knowing their place in society. When everyone knows their place, society is harmonious. Han's account of the future history of China in this book is such a society. The protagonist was born from a test tube, and designed to play the game of Go. It is his place in society and the only thing he knows. Through the virtual network of Armando, the government is able to exert complete control at the expense of the freedom of the individual. Twenty years after writing, the story still proves to be relevant: In the first place there is America today, which displays increasing chaos. The government is divided and focuses on short-term gains so that it lacks long-term direction. Similar to president Parker in the book, the current president campaigned using populist rhetoric, and is currently under investigation for suspected

¹⁸An informed article by Manya Koetse on *What's on Weibo* shows and debunks the oversimplification of reports by mainstream media in the case of China's ban of the Disney movie *Christopher Robin*, of which the main character is Winnie the Pooh (Koetse, 2018).

dealings with foreign adversaries that allegedly helped him gain his seat. The efforts to fight institutional racism and sexism led to reactionary movements that present themselves as victims, and openly claim superiority on a basis of race or gender. Traditional media are divided as well, and both sides accuse each other of biased and untrue reporting. This inevitably leads to bias in reporting that ultimately renders any news untrustworthy in the view of the public.

As for China, there is a centralization of power, and the government increasingly uses technology and AI to exert control. After missing out on the industrial revolution that propelled Western powers to dominance on the world stage, China seeks to be on the forefront of this new revolution in information technology. The State Council has published an outline for the implementation of a far-reaching social credit system 社会信用体系 in 2020 (Guowuyuan 国务院, 2014). Based on the score, this system can essentially banish people from participating in society. The government in China can directly use the newest technologies to exert an unprecedented amount of control, and the president has a mandate for life¹⁹.

The relevance of Han's criticism of extreme control in society is not limited to China. Though not openly and unambiguously restrictive as in China, AI's influence increased in the world compared to twenty years ago²⁰. Internet companies have recently come under attack for using their platforms to harvest and sell their users' data. Using this data, algorithms decide what is the best action to take. AI caters news reports to the individual's already established views, creating a 'news bubble' that decreases the need for critical thinking. Through the inherent positive reinforcement, AI increasingly decides on what is an individual's 'truth' and 'reality' that possibly challenge and divert from objective reality.

¹⁹ The 45th amendment to the Chinese Constitution repeals the term limit of two consecutive 5-year terms for the president. The function of president is largely symbolic, however. Real power lies with the General Secretary of the Party and the Central Military Commission, which the current president also holds. These functions have no term limits. (NPC Observer, 2018)

²⁰ For a more elaborate assessment of the extent to which algorithms and AI decide individual lives, businesses and social institutions, see *Tegenlicht: Verslaafd aan het algoritme* [Tegenlicht: Addicted to the algorithm.] (in Dutch) (Tegenlicht, 2018)

Chapter 6. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to provide insight into one of Han Song's longer novels, *Fire star over America*. Based on the assumption that the novel contained social criticism, it aimed to answer the question of what the social criticism in the book is. In the course of my analysis, I have come across several findings:

- *Fire star over America* reflects Han Song's staunch nationalism and anti-American stance that was a characteristic of China in the 1990s.
- *Fire star over America* satirizes Chinese society through the vision of unbridled technological development and warns of an AI-ruled totalitarian society that produces unfree, weak, uninformed and immoral citizens.
- Through his juxtaposition of chaos and control, combined with his critical essays, Han attacks American media's biased construction of reality.
- Similar to the nationalist essays in *China can say no* and *The background of the demonization of China*, *Fire star over America* addresses a wide range of social themes, but provides no structured argument nor solutions.
- Close examination of his essays have laid bare the journalist Han's own use of bias and distortion of reality in his reporting.
- The 'Demon China' in *Fire star over America* reflects Han's despair brought about by the impossibility of perceiving an objective reality that he appears to experience, criticize, and contribute to all at the same time.

In the course of my analysis, I have discussed the genre of science fiction in China and Han Song's place in it. Next, I provided a summary of the novel *Fire star over America* based on my first-hand reading of the novel. I argued that Han criticizes America using the Confucian

concept 乱 'chaos, confusion', and uses satire to criticize China using the concept 治 'control'. America does not merely serve as a tool to represent 乱 'chaos, confusion'. Han's critical approach to America's future stems from genuine anti-American sentiment that was prevalent among Chinese intellectuals during the 1990s. The background of the nationalist movements and Han Song's part in it corroborate this claim. Next, I showed how I perceive the protagonist to represent the post-2050 generation of a seemingly utopian Chinese society, and how I interpret his weakness and lack of identity to satirize China and criticize both unbridled technological development and totalitarianism. The protagonist's behaviour and his perception of reality are closely connected to Han Song's strange and chaotic style. Using the concept of the recurring 'Demon China' in Han's stories, I discussed the possibility that it is an intentional, sophisticated form of world building and narrative style that criticizes a lack of objective reality in the world. The essays in which he criticizes American media's construction of reality argue in favour of this. However, closer examination of his essays have laid bare Han's own chaotic style, anger, subjectivity, lack of sophistication and disregard for truth. This argues the case that the strangeness and lack of plot development in the novel are merely the result of sloppy craftsmanship, and do not serve to convey a message or criticism. Lastly, I discussed the relevance of the book today. Recent developments in technology, international relations, politics and society show that Han's vision of 2066 is at times uncannily foresighted. Regardless of his intentions, Han's style addresses the issue of distractions from and distortions of reality that we also see today. This lack of an objective perception of reality increasingly leaves the world unable to deal with pressing global issues, and may well lead to a future that is frighteningly similar to Han Song's vision of a world plagued by the devastating effects of totalitarianism, violence, social unrest, and the universal problem of environmental destruction.

It is my hope that this thesis has provided the reader with a clearer view and understanding of one of China's least understood science fiction authors. As the above findings are largely my own interpretation of the work, there is still much room for discussion and future research.

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